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Allies, access and (collective) action: Young refugee women's navigation of gendered educational constraints in Greece
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Abstract
Contrary to popular media tropes of the 'young, lone, male refugee' arriving at Europe's borders, Greece has in fact seen a steady flow of young refugee women arriving since 2015. While many wish to engage in post-compulsory (15+) education, in order to gain valuable skills and enjoy new freedoms, various factors make it difficult to do so. Based on eight months of ethnographic fieldwork – involving semi-structured interviews with refugee youth (aged 15-25) and other stakeholders – this paper details young refugee women's expressions of collective and relational agency as they navigate educational constraints. These constraints primarily stem from tensions in micro-level relationships with family, peers and teachers which result from, or are exacerbated by, the conditions of 'unsettlement'. Young refugee women's navigational tactics involved finding and shaping alternative learning opportunities, educating peers and leveraging collective strength. The paper concludes with implications and recommendations for gender-sensitive educational initiatives.

Introduction

More than one million refugees[1] have entered Greece since 2015; the majority of whom, in the early days of the 'crisis', passed through on their way to Northern and Western Europe (Afouxenidis et al., 2017; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2020a). However, with border closures and other controversial 'migration management' strategies implemented from the end of 2015 – as well as severe delays in processing asylum applications – 168,737 have become trapped in the country (Asylum Information Database, 2020; Stathopoulou, 2019; UNHCR, 2021). Therefore, while often referred to as a 'transit' country (Tsitselikis & Agelopoulos, 2019), it may be better described as a country of 'unsettlement' given that refugees are now staying for years with unsettled asylum cases, limited inclusion policies and an overriding lack of planning and stability. One third of those experiencing this 'unsettlement' are under 18 and one third are women; many of whom are single, pregnant and/or taking care of the elderly (AIDA, 2021; Fernandes, 2019; UNHCR et al., 2016; Women's Refugee Commission, 2016). Most recent arrivals have travelled from Afghanistan, Syria and Pakistan (AIDA, 2021; UNHCR, 2021).

The majority of the literature on their experiences discusses their vulnerabilities during their journeys and in camps after arrival, such as exposure to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and a lack of access to healthcare and psychosocial support (Freedman, 2016; Human Rights Watch, 2019; International Women's Initiative, 2021; Papadimos et al., 2021). It also describes how after being relocated from camps, they may face homelessness, harmful living conditions and discrimination, including in the asylum and family reunification process (Bastaki, 2019; IWI, 2021; Tastsoglou et al., 2021). Such findings have led to calls for more initiatives which support refugee women and girls' security – such as those which promote 'skill acquisition, and methods to assess and mitigate economic vulnerability' (Papadimos et al., 2021, p. 115). As Papadimos and colleagues suggest, supporting them to build skills – via education – is one means of enabling empowerment. Indeed, on paper, young refugee women have access to various post-compulsory (15+) educational opportunities: they are legally entitled to enrol in senior high school (λύκειο) on the same basis as Greek youth; including in evening 'shifts' when they are beyond the standard age of 15-18 (AIDA, 2020; UNHCR, 2020b). However, in a 2017 report on refugee children's educational integration, the Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs noted that girls' participation was a 'special issue' due to vague 'obstacles of a cultural nature' (p. 92). While some recent research has begun to explore the stories behind these low enrolment and attendance rates (Rezaian et al., 2019), there has been little focused inquiry into gendered barriers among youth.

Literature from around the world suggests that young refugee women are less likely than men to participate in (post-)secondary education for myriad gendered reasons: including early and forced marriage, pregnancy, care and domestic work, the increased risk of trafficking and SGBV, and 'cultural barriers' such as stigma, 'othering' and families' views on girls' education (Akua-Sakyiwah, 2015; Bajwa et al., 2018; Hatoss & Huijser, 2010; Rana et al., 2011; Ruzibiza, 2021; Wagner et al., 2018; Watkins et al., 2012). This paper aims to contribute towards filling two distinct gaps in this scholarship. Firstly, it addresses the European context and the contextualised impacts of protracted displacement amid the ongoing 'refugee crisis', while the majority of the available literature tends to focus on women in low- and middle-income contexts in the Global South (followed by North America and Australia). Secondly, the paper contributes much-needed stories of how and why young refugee women either resist education or navigate constraints themselves, to build on conversations around refugee women's agency (Asaf, 2017; Dahya et al., 2019; Greene, 2020; Ibesh et al., 2021; Rezaian et al., 2019). Their expressions of agency are conceptualised here as forms of 'social navigation' (Vigh, 2009; 2010): an analytical lens which illuminates

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[1] In this article, for brevity, the term 'refugee' refers to both those who have been granted protection under the 1951 Refugee Convention and those who have applied for it.

how migrants constantly re-adapt their praxis to 'get by' in contexts of ever-shifting insecurity. In line with this framing, it is understood here that young refugee women's 'tactics' are shaped by emerging opportunities, barriers and constant (re-)evaluations of the social-political environment. In addition, however, this paper views family and other everyday social relations as fundamental influences on these tactics; and as such, it follows Daniel and colleagues (2020) in understanding social navigation as both a highly relational and potentially collective feat.

In terms of structure, firstly the background, literature and concepts framing the paper are presented. Following this, the methodology of the wider doctoral project is detailed, before the findings are discussed: namely, the key educational constraints for young refugee women identified during the study. The paper then discusses examples of how those who wish to participate navigate these constraints. It concludes with recommendations for gender-sensitive initiatives which can support young refugee women to continue their education. Overall, it responds to calls for greater, more contextualised understandings of refugee women's needs when developing 'durable solutions' to displacement (Diamond, 2019; Hatoss & Huijser, 2010). Such solutions are direly needed to help refugee women enjoy the benefits of post-compulsory learning[2]: such as more employment opportunities, better health outcomes, new support networks, 'safe spaces' to rebuild aspirations and renegotiate hierarchies, increased mobility and the chance to claim ownership of otherwise male-dominated space (El Jack, 2010; Iraklis, 2021; Rezaian et al., 2019; UNHCR, 2016; 2020c).

Methodology

The data on which this paper is based was generated between October 2019 and June 2020 during ethnographic fieldwork with refugees in Thessaloniki, Northern Greece. This involved participant observation as a volunteer English teacher (including at a women's centre), and individual and pair semi-structured interviews with 38 educational 'stakeholders' (such as parents, educators, coordinators and assistants) and 12 refugee and asylum-seeking youth aged 15-25 (9 young men, 3 young women). The participants – who identified as Greek, Afghan, Syrian, Iraqi, Iranian, British, Albanian, Palestinian, Kurdish, Congolese (Kinshasa) and American – were recruited via convenience and snowball sampling. This meant that initial participants were identified in non-formal education[3] (NFE) settings and selected as those with knowledge related to the phenomenon of interest, and were then asked for recommendations for further participants – thus facilitating access to the population with target characteristics (Parker et al., 2019; Patton, 2002). The criteria for inclusion of youth participants was that they had a refugee- or asylum-seeking background; were aged 15-25; had arrived in Greece during or since the 'peak' of the 'refugee crisis' in 2015; and were attending at least one educational activity per week (to explore what supported them to attend). The criteria for stakeholders was that they had first-hand knowledge of young refugees' (educational) experiences and were delivering, coordinating or otherwise supporting educational programmes (for example, by arranging access). This group included teachers, educational assistants and coordinators, social workers and cultural mediators from both the public and non-state sectors. Ethical approval was granted by the Social Sciences and Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford. To protect participants' identities, all names used here are pseudonyms, and the names of organisations are omitted.

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[2] The term 'learning' throughout this article refers to the development of knowledge and skills in either formal contexts, such as schools, or non-formal contexts, such as free educational provision in community centres.

[3] The Council of Europe (2019) defines formal education as that which takes place in educational systems, follows a syllabus and involves assessments; while non-formal education (NFE) – despite also being organised and intentional – mostly takes place outside of the formal system and does not result in accreditation. It may be more focused on particular activities, skills or areas of knowledge and take place in community settings such as NGOs.

Despite being reminded that interviews could be carried out in the language of their choosing with their own choice of interpreter assisting, all participants decided to proceed in English. Interviews focused on educational aspirations after the age of 15 and constraints and enablers among both young men and women, with particular attention to the role of micro-level[4] social relationships. Due to restrictions following the outbreak of COVID-19, all teaching and research activities moved online (to Skype, Zoom, Viber and WhatsApp) from March to June 2020. In order to minimise the effects of this change in approach on the results, the same semi-structured schedule was used for both in-person and online interviews.

After being entered into NVivo, interview transcripts and field notes were analysed according to the principles of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). As such, the data was immediately coded by the author using an open coding technique, followed by axial coding to explore the relationship between the initial codes and to create categories which were then organised into themes. Data was generated and analysed iteratively until theoretical saturation was reached; meaning that both interviews and analysis were ongoing. This paper focuses primarily on participants' references to gendered constraints and supports. Due to the sample size and design, the findings are not generalisable; however, they contribute a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) of the realities of one group in one local context and offer themes for further exploration.

The social constructivist foundations of the study necessitated an examination of the values which led the author to this research and the influence of identity on the research process (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; May & Perry, 2014). Having a background in teaching highly aspirational refugee youth in different contexts undoubtedly led the author to advocate for educational opportunities for displaced populations; thus providing the impetus for the study. However, being a young, white, British, female doctoral student from Oxford meant holding a privileged, outsider position which may have affected the answers participants gave. To mitigate these factors, the author engaged in constant, critical acknowledgement of the inevitable political positions brought to the research process (Griffiths, 1998; Itani, 2019); conducted a pilot study to gain as much understanding of the participants and context as possible (Gateley, 2014); and sought to reciprocate their participation and build trusting relationships by volunteering as a language teacher and assistant throughout the fieldwork.

Findings and discussion

Educational constraints for young refugee women
There is an agreement in research from around the world that parents – and especially their socioeconomic background, level of support, beliefs about education and priorities – can play a key role in refugee girls' attendance and learning (e.g. Boit et al., 2020; Ndijuye & Rawat, 2019; Watkins et al., 2012; Sieverding et al., 2018). This study also found that many young women did not attend educational activities because their parents – and fathers in particular – would not allow it, due to the family's religious and/or cultural beliefs about girls' education, gender roles and what constitutes youth and adulthood. Girls and young women could, for example, be responsible for tasks such as cooking, shopping, cleaning and childcare, which increased with age. This meant that even if they had completed lower levels of education, they were less likely to make the transition to senior high school at the age of 15. Teachers reported that fathers would tell them: 'she's a girl. I don't want her to go to the secondary reception classes … I want her to have this good marriage and succeed in her private life'. With both non-formal education (NFE) and senior high school being optional in Greece, there are no legal frameworks compelling parents to enrol their children. Social workers interviewed also reported cases of girls themselves prioritising other goals or activities over attending school.

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[4] In this article, 'micro-level' refers to close, everyday relationships with family, teachers, peers and other educational actors in young people's immediate environment (following Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Beyond questions of priorities, it was reported that some families also refused to allow their daughters to attend due to issues of protection and trust. Attending school or NFE could mean travelling on several public buses alone, for example, or entering male-dominated spaces in the city – such as one programme in Thessaloniki which took place in a 'traditionally' male-dominated community kitchen. This, the teachers suggested, made young women fearful of participating. In addition, there was mistrust of unknown organisations and educators. In a country which treats arrivals in increasingly inhumane ways (Amnesty International, 2018) – with particularly acute threats for young women (Freedman, 2016; Kofman, 2018; UNHCR et al., 2016) – it is understandable that the refugee community would be reluctant to send their daughters alone to state-run activities (or indeed, any activities run by Greek or other international staff). This issue of mistrust has also been reported by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2020) as a factor limiting all young refugees' access to education in Greece.

Various participants reported the related issue that formal education – and most NFE – was mixed-gender. One public school teacher, Maria, noted how on several occasions, 'when the father realised that there were boys at school, he didn't want her to continue'. Nadia, a cultural mediator, explained that families may have 'no gender problem in learning' but simply prefer separate classes for boys and girls. In addition, they may find activities such as drama and certain sports inappropriate. Alex, a coordinator of NFE programmes for youth, recalled an incident in which a young woman – who 'wasn't a minor', he noted – had been coming to their theatre club without telling her father. After finding out that she had played the part of another participant's wife, he had immediately stopped her continuing. This aligns with other recent research from Greece which documents parents' concerns about sending their daughters to mixed settings (Sarikoudi & Apostolidou, 2020). Other participants in this study reported mixed classes as the reason why girls themselves were refusing to come to school.

As well as protecting them from harm, this resistance could also be an attempt to protect young women from stigma. Particularly when they were living in camps, in close proximity to many people of the same background, departing from community expectations could result in young women being ostracised. As Katerina, a teacher, explained: 'if the community sees that you send your child to the school, then they're gonna think that this kid is not appropriate for their boys, or ... for her to make a family'. However, very few appropriate, single-gender opportunities existed. Women-only spaces were limited and often reliant upon financial donations and volunteer support; meaning that programmes may not have been consistent or long-term. In Thessaloniki, the one dedicated women's centre had had to cap its number of registrations due to its popularity.

As well as being daughters, many young women in the 15-25 age group were wives and/or mothers with caring responsibilities. Having children was reported as a significant factor determining young women's attendance. With responsibilities in the home and husbands typically out working or looking for work, they had little free time and no support network to help care for their child(ren); and therefore, even if they had completed primary education elsewhere, they could not continue participating. Older mothers could also delegate childcare responsibilities to their daughters, meaning that their daughters could not attend either. This is not to say that these young women were forced to stay at home, however; as Melina, a teacher, noted, many girls she had met 'wanted to be inside the house … they thought that they have a role to the family'. Others could be the head of their household, due to male partners and fathers travelling separately to Northern or Western Europe. Others felt the weight of responsibility after losing family members, and prioritised caring for the remaining family over all else. Melissa, the coordinator of the women's centre, recalled one such incident when a young woman gave up a scholarship: 'she was a very, very talented student, but after a loss of an additional family member and feeling the weight of responsibility in the home, she dropped out'.

For the many young mothers who *did* register for NFE and regularly participated in educational activities, their roles and responsibilities could still affect their ability to continue attending, to attend consistently or to otherwise benefit fully from the experience. Those with babies could feel uncomfortable breastfeeding in a public place; and when childcare facilities were not available, having their own or others' small children in classrooms could be disruptive. Community centres were not often able to offer childcare and tailored, alternative education for women consistently throughout the week; especially if this did not fit their donor-dictated remit. Mothers could also find it difficult keeping to centres' schedules – especially when having to take children to nurseries, schools or medical appointments – and struggled to spare the time for homework or further study alongside domestic tasks and childcare. This 'second shift' – also known as women's 'double burden' – has been reported as a challenge for refugee women's inclusion in education and the workforce around the world; especially when they are single mothers or the head of a household (European Parliament, 2016; Holloway et al., 2019).

Beyond childcare challenges, some participants reported instances of domestic abuse and husbands forbidding young women to attend work or education. Girls and young women who were engaged in forced or 'strategic' marriages at a young age – for what they perceived as security – were at an especially significant risk. Melissa, for example, reported that she had seen a number of such cases at her centre. While recent research has suggested that refugee women's decisions to marry are agentic and empowering acts (Taha, 2020), there is also a body of research which documents how early marriage, as a coping mechanism, can result in abuse and the limiting of freedoms such as attending school (e.g. DeJong et al., 2017; Hattar-Pollara, 2019; UNHCR, 2016).

When young women participated, the fact that they were entering a new social environment could also create challenges. As well as being initially uncomfortable with mixed-gender classrooms, for example, they could also face gendered issues in their interactions with – or isolation from – Greek peers. This was especially true in Greek public high schools. While it is often reported that refugee women and girls are made invisible or silent (e.g. El Jack, 2010), the opposite issue was found during fieldwork: that of being 'hypervisible'. For hijabi girls, their 'hypervisibility' as a female, Muslim, racialised 'other' in predominantly white, Orthodox Christian schools could draw unwanted attention and racist remarks. Hala, a 15-year-old from Syria, had faced such issues. She said that at school, she was asked 'why you are here if you like to wear hijab? ... Just take it off, you don't have to have it'. She said that in the beginning, 'they was looking … They think that we don't go to school'. Other research has also described how peers at school can limit refugees' agency and positioning by categorising them according to their race, nationality and gender (Hummelstedt et al., 2021). For Hala, this had reduced her sense of belonging and desire to participate, and put her at risk of dropping out.

On the other hand, challenges could also arise when young women *did* form new relationships with peers and teachers from Greece and elsewhere. For example, due to the instability of refugees' accommodation – and the short-term nature of funding and volunteer arrangements in NFE in particular – either the teacher or learner could leave abruptly. This meant that trusting relationships built up over weeks, months or years, which encouraged girls to continue attending, could be cut off. The other issue was that when these peers and teachers came from different linguistic, cultural and religious backgrounds, they could influence young women's appearance, behaviour and attitudes; which, while not necessarily an issue in itself, could lead to 'symbolic distance' between themselves and their family. Irina, an NFE teacher, explained that many teenage girls 'integrate fast', adopting 'this different style, this European style … and the parents are a little bit stressful about that!' Establishing relationships in educational settings – from both within and outside their national or cultural community – was found to be crucial for girls' motivation to continue attending. However, if they led to tensions within the family, they could potentially

destabilise their home life and threaten the family's support for their participation in education.

Navigating constraints: (collective) action, allies and alternative spaces
Despite these constraints, many young refugee women participated in post-compulsory education; whether for work opportunities or the chance for further study, independence, friendships or having 'something different' to do during a period of enforced waiting. To achieve their educational goals, they often took matters into their own hands to eliminate or navigate constraints. To address social issues in public high schools, for example, they took steps to 'fit in' by proactively building their Greek proficiency and educating their new peers. Vera, a Refugee Education Coordinator[5] (REC), mentioned one girl who had refused to speak anything other than Greek with her fellow high school students, and consequently had progressed easily through the system. Similarly, Hala – who, as mentioned above, had had to deal with racist remarks at school – recalled how she had requested assistance from English speakers to correct peers' and teachers' misconceptions about what it means to be Syrian, Muslim and/or a refugee. As such, she had directly tackled their exclusionary 'othering' practices. Others addressed the inappropriacy of mixed-gender offers by actively seeking out alternative spaces[6] in which they felt comfortable and welcome. This often meant somewhere they could bring their children (either into the classroom, or to simultaneous children's activities) and breastfeed. This, of course, would not be possible in a public school.

If the learning opportunity did not fit their needs, some young women sought out other ways of gaining certificates, language skills and work experience; such as through volunteering as teaching assistants or interpreters. Others, either alone or collectively, created and shaped their own learning offers; for example, by requesting female-only spaces or adapting opportunities to allow them to share childcare. Alexandra, an NFE teacher, recalled one such example in a camp setting:

> What happened after one or two months … is that the youth zone, let's say, was like a women's zone, and the adults' zone was like a men's zone … They made it in a way that it was gender... 'slots', and not age slots … because also a lot of these couples, they have younger children, so one of them should stay at home.

Young women also attended mixed-gender settings as a group – bringing siblings, friends or parents for 'strength in numbers', to 'legitimise' the space or simply to enable others to enjoy its benefits. Beyond negotiating access, young women also requested particular content – or more lessons in general – and taught one another skills such as languages, cooking, sewing and crafts. This allowed them to fulfil their needs and make the best use of their time, rather than joining Second Chance schools or high schools and struggling to catch up – due to starting late, or because of the Greek language barrier.

Several key, micro-level actors and factors supported young women in this navigation of their constraints. In terms of actors, girls benefited from having (primarily female) advocates and allies around them who enabled and promoted their participation in education. Some parents, for example, wanted their children to enjoy opportunities they had never had, and as such encouraged all of their children to attend; with some fathers claiming that 'all children must finish school, and this is a law in our family!' Such parents often had an educational background themselves, as has been found elsewhere (e.g. Beydoun et al.,

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[5] 'Refugee Education Coordinators' are teachers from the public system who have been seconded to liaise between schools, refugee families, NGOs and other stakeholders to support and encourage public school enrolment (OECD, 2018).
[6] 'Alternative learning spaces' refers to community centres and other non-state-run sites in which non-formal educational offers are provided by intergovernmental organisations (such as UNICEF), (international) non-governmental organisations (such as IsraAID) and local volunteer networks.

2021). Some supported their daughters' education more than their sons', due to believing that boys are more 'useful' for earning an income. In some families, as one teacher put it, there could be a 'really strong mother figure' who advocated for her daughter(s) to attend. If families supported girls' education but were fearful of risks, these mothers or other family members – including their much younger brothers – could accompany them. Young women also often chose to attend in pairs or groups, in acts of what one teacher called 'female solidarity'. While these collective tactics may not be viable in formal settings, it enables greater participation in NFE, while protecting young women from stigmatisation and harm. A side effect of this tactic is that different generations of women encouraged one another to engage with education. Melissa, for example, spoke of how young women would bring their mothers to her centre (and vice versa) or other family members would come along out of curiosity; thus multiplying women's engagement.

Outside of families, every educational actor interviewed communicated their strong support for girls' education. As such, young women were surrounded by educational advocates – such as teachers, RECs and non-governmental organisation (NGO) staff – who often mediated the relationship between the family and the educational provider. This was done through community meetings and awareness raising among parents, or through what one teacher called 'fighting by words': to 'explain, and explain, and again explain … to find … some way to *press* them'. These advocates also encouraged young women themselves to value education and raise their aspirations. One teacher, Charissa, recalled one such incident while working on the verb 'I can': 'one girl says, "we can only cook" ... and she was so upset about it … And I was like, "no, this is what you know, this is not what you *can* do … Right now, you think you can only cook, but this is what you know"'. This exchange demonstrates the direct impact teachers can have on refugee learners' aspirations. Charissa was explicitly trying to inspire the young women to pursue academic or employment routes they may not have previously considered, or which they may not have considered suitable.

Most participants emphasised such supportive relationships with teachers as a key factor determining whether young women chose to continue attending. In both formal and non-formal settings, teachers were said to often go 'above and beyond', providing advice and psychological support. It was also reported that girls tended to open up more with their female teachers than their parents, due to feeling 'less distance' between them. As one teacher put it, 'you are not just a teacher to them ... you're needed so much more'. Marmaridou (2019, p. 50) also found that teachers in Greece 'crossed the limits they would otherwise set' by discussing 'personal matters' with refugee girls and generally being 'friendlier'. Several participants described them as becoming role models, as they represented new forms of female authority and possibility; what one participant called 'a vision of what their life could be'.

Alternative learning spaces were also vital for young refugee women, as they provided both an accessible and 'appropriate' place to learn and the chance to rebuild a support network. They were more accessible for young mothers, in particular, as childcare or simultaneous children's activities were often provided; and in addition, the timetable could be more flexible and short-term than in formal education. Women-only spaces were also considered more 'appropriate', as they were single-gender, and thus avoided the concerns associated with mixed-gender settings. Melissa described her centre as a 'legitimate' place to spend time; as both a female-only space, and somewhere where women could learn valuable language skills for employment. As such, according to Melissa, participating 'might be considered something productive that could bring something back to the family'. This was especially true for young women caught in abusive situations, or in a family which had other priorities. When girls and their mothers or other family members attended together, this gave it even more weight, as they legitimised the space for one another.

The other advantages of attending lessons in alternative spaces such as women's centres were that learners could establish relationships with others from different backgrounds, with shared experiences, and benefit from the further social and pastoral

support available. Beyond community building, members could access other services (such as legal advice and accommodation assistance) from both staff and other members, as well as help with communicating with healthcare services and their children's schools. Therefore, attending women-only activities and spaces was, according to Melissa, much more than 'the final result of taking a diploma'. They provided a familiar, safe place of ownership and belonging in which young women could immediately continue learning, while also addressing wider social constraints. Other studies in Greece have also noted the many benefits of community-led, women-friendly initiatives for not only enabling learning, but also for accessing information, feeling safe and contesting power by reclaiming and shaping space (Amnesty International, 2018; Arahova, 2017; Rezaian et al., 2019).

Conclusion: promoting young refugee women's educational participation
This paper has described the (predominantly micro-level, social) constraints which limited young refugee women's participation in post-compulsory education in Greece and the actions, actors and other factors involved in their navigation of these constraints. The constraints mostly related to tensions and responsibilities in their relationships with family, peers and teachers; all of which were exacerbated by, or resulted from, the conditions of 'unsettlement'. For the most part, these findings align with research from other contexts. What this paper adds is how – due to a desire for independence, an income or a more fruitful way to spend time during a period of enforced waiting – young women found ways to navigate these constraints. For example, they made efforts to fit in with and educate their peers; they requested and shaped learning offers to fit their needs; they engaged in 'appropriate', alternative learning opportunities which mitigated their family's protection concerns and/or better suited their situation; and they drew upon the support of advocates and allies to build strong, encouraging relationships and continue learning.

The findings reiterate the need to listen to and work with (young) refugee women when designing and implementing educational provision or other support (Ibesh et al., 2021). Their needs, as seen in Greece, often included having childcare provided (either in the centre itself, or elsewhere in the city), private spaces for breastfeeding or simultaneous provision for young children. Beyond this, having safe spaces – where they feel welcome, part of the community and comfortable to express themselves – is crucial. As women request such places, and often become engaged in shaping them themselves, it is a natural point of departure for encouraging more women to learn. Starting with low-stakes offers based around their hobbies increases the likelihood of them continuing to attend; and, perhaps, later building enough confidence to continue down other (formal) educational paths. To envision and start making steps down these paths, having role models who can discuss and advise on possibilities is key. As seen above, when these role models are 'new' female figures of authority and possibility – from different cultural and religious backgrounds – this guidance should be provided with tact and sensitivity to avoid deepening rifts between young women and their families.

The findings also demonstrate not only refugee women's individual educational agency, but also align with other accounts of how they have collectively 'created and actioned opportunities for resistance or change' to overcome 'social, political, gendered and familial constraints' (McPherson, 2015, p. 128). The paper contributes examples of such collective acts, and the importance of relationships in shaping individual agency. For example, it demonstrates that when young refugee women are enabled and supported to participate in education, their friends and family members are also encouraged to attend; multiplying the benefits across their networks. A clear understanding of these relational influences would lead to appropriate, holistic, gender-sensitive support tailored for young women's situations and needs. This is crucial for supporting their existing strategies and enabling them to experience the benefits of education after the age of 15.

Overall, support should aim to centre these strengths, needs and interests, while recognising what young women can bring to educational settings and initiatives themselves.

At the same time, NGOs and governments must appreciate their parents' viewpoints and not try to override or disqualify their decisions. This means recognising, as one Greek participant put it:

> the other realities, like how good parents they are, how strong the bonds of family are, more than the European ones ... It's very, very difficult to just get rid of the stereotypes, and the fear, all these things, and just explore what's different. Behind those borders. The linguistic ones, the geographical ones.

Thinking beyond borders, to better understand new populations, is the basis of successfully welcoming more young refugee women in educational spaces.

Conflict of interest
The author declares no conflict of interest.

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