

Migrants' Challenges and Psycho-Social Support among Urban Refugees in Nairobi County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Human migration has become a societal phenomenon. There is a notable increase in the prevalence of both voluntary and forced migration. The purpose of this research was to assess the challenges encountered by urban refugees and to identify the psychosocial support systems. The study was guided by Reason Action Theory and the Resilience Theory. The study utilized a mixed method with an embedded research design. The sample size was 398 respondents based on the Yamane formula. Data was collected using self-constructed questionnaires. Qualitative data were analyzed using the content thematic analysis. Descriptive and inferential statistics were applied to quantitative data. The findings indicated that the most challenging aspects encountered by Refugees were the lack of freedom of movement (Mean 3.30), housing (Mean 3.04), language barriers (Mean 3.04) as well as no access to financial services (Mean 2.64). These challenges were coupled with stigmatization, humiliation, and bullying. The findings also showed that networking with family members, churches/mosques, and NGOs were among the most available and used psychosocial support systems. The study therefore recommends that Government should reconsider policies related to the matter of freedom of movement and housing. It is valuable for NGO's, Churches/Mosques to continue playing their supportive roles of welcoming refugees, working for their dignity, and wellbeing.

Keywords: Immigrants, Refugees, Resilience, Linguistic barriers, Stigmatization.

INTRODUCTION

Migration, both voluntary and forced, is a phenomenon that shapes societies and cultures across the globe, introducing new dynamics and challenges wherever it occurs. Urban refugees face a complex landscape of adversity and opportunity as they seek safety and stability in host cities. Nairobi County, Kenya, serves as a microcosm of these broader global trends, hosting thousands of refugees from neighboring countries and beyond. This article provides a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted challenges encountered by urban refugees in Nairobi and the psycho-social support systems that sustain their resilience.

This literature review explores the key issues related to cultural integration in the sense of adapting to new cultural norms. It is also focusing on the struggle to establish a new identity and barriers in accessing essential services encountered by refugees in various living environments. The struggle of refugees for maintaining their identity is a compelling and significant theme in our globalized world. As people are uprooted from their homelands due to conflict, persecution, or economic hardship, they often face the daunting task of preserving their cultural heritage and personal identity in foreign environments. This struggle encompasses many dimensions, including the preservation of language, traditions, beliefs, and social bonds.

Challenges Encountered by Urban Refugees

The experience of adapting to new cultural norms is not unique to refugees in Europe or Africa. But it is also prevalent among refugees who resettle in the United States and other places across the globe. According to Noor and Tofighi (2024) who conducted a study in the United States of America, despite its cultural diversity, refugees face significant challenges in assimilating into this vast melting pot. Refugees often encounter difficulties in navigating the American social and cultural landscape, which includes understanding new social

norms, adapting to different communication styles, and overcoming linguistic barriers. In the United States, the findings of the study by Rizek, Taubman and Issa (2024) revealed that refugees often encounter discrimination and challenges due to language, culture, and religious practices. A lack of knowledge about cultural diversity can lead to misunderstanding, which may result in refugees being subjected to harmful stereotypes and discrimination due to their cultural backgrounds and different values and lifestyles. The Authors showed how the lack of understanding English could make it difficult for refugees to find suitable employment. According to research from Silva et al. (2022) in Brazil different difficulties faced by refugees became evident. Two significant factors which contribute to refugee employment barriers, namely language problems and skill adaptation issues, strongly affect their opportunity to find work in organizations.

In Asia, Nam, Han, and Hong (2024) explained some of the challenges encountered by North Korean refugee women in South Korea. The findings indicated when individuals are highly attached to their in-group, it can hinder their social and economic integration into the new society. In Australia, the findings of Weng et al. (2021) indicated the willingness for some refugees to keep their identity. One African Australian Christian leader explained that while he believed that people of diverse cultures ought to be able to worship together, his ethnic African community preferred to have 'their own congregation, their own ethnic group, their own tribe, almost to the extent of doing nothing with the others. In terms of barriers that refugees might encounter, Garrow (2019) described that in Australia, certain services are less accessible to people of some ethnic backgrounds. Particularly, African migrants felt services were 'not made readily available' and that interpretation services for African languages were not appropriate.

Refugees encounter challenges in different places where they are found. In Tunisia, Garbout (2021) conducted a study on the struggles faced by Sub-Saharan women refugees and asylum seekers. The study found that culture and linguistic barriers were among the main challenging factors. Most sub-Saharan women refugees and asylum seekers can't speak Arabic or French. When it comes to the issue related to identity, Akef (2024) reported that some participants reported an ability to balance both cultures and adapt to the new society, others reported that they completely assimilated into the new culture. In addition to the struggle of identity status, refugees face barriers to accessing services. In South Africa, Kudzayi and Sadhana (2020) described how xenophobia was a barrier for refugees accessing services.

According to Onyema (2024), it might be difficult for migrants and refugees to uphold their cultural customs in a foreign setting. Their individual cultural identity may slowly erode as a result of pressure to adapt into the mainstream culture. The study conducted in Uganda by Kobusingye, Luwembo and Muyengo (2025) highlighted the fact that challenges encountered by refugees could be explained by the difference in beliefs, cultural practices between refugees and host communities. It appeared that beliefs helped people to forge their identity through dress code, practices, and names. In Kenya, a study carried out by Bol (2024) noticed that some refugees were not ready to change their inner identity and embrace the new way of living in the new environment of refugee life. In Kenya, the findings in Hang's work (2021) indicated that the language was among the challenges faced by young refugees in the education system.

Adapting to new cultural norms remains a complex and multifaceted challenge for refugees. Studies consistently show that cultural and linguistic barriers, social isolation, and discrimination are significant obstacles that impede successful integration.

Psycho-social Support Systems Used by Urban Refugees

Urban refugees face a complex array of challenges as they attempt to rebuild their lives in unfamiliar environments. Beyond the immediate necessity of healthcare, education, and employment, psycho-social support systems play a vital role in fostering resilience and well-being. These support structures, ranging from community networks to faith-based organizations, help refugees navigate social isolation, discrimination, and cultural adaptation, offering pathways to integration and personal growth.

Muruthi et al. (2020) while conducting a study on resettled Karen refugees in the United States, arrived at a conclusion that participants saw religion as a means of adaptation. They stated that, by coming together around common ideas and ideals, and by forging bonds via spiritual and transcendental means, it encouraged the development of constructive tactics. In South Korea, there was in place a psychological accompaniment of

refugees. Research on the efficacy of that post-traumatic development program among North Korean refugees was carried out by Chang, Kim, and Kim (2024). The results demonstrated that the training successfully reduced levels of anxiety, despair, and cortisol while considerably enhancing post-traumatic development. Zanfrini (2020) detailed the ways in which religious communities in West Africa comfort migrants and those seeking asylum via prayer. Mukafuku (2021) performed research in South Africa and found that although the churches of the migrants seemed to be more active in helping refugees, the results reveal that both local South African churches and migrant churches' participants acknowledged the church's involvement in this matter.

The support from humanitarian organization was really acknowledged by some refugees as reported by Buchana (2019). The findings stated that many of the women who had just come back to Akobo or who had recently moved there said that the livelihood training they had gotten while they were away (in the hairdressing and tailoring industries) had given them the tools they needed to settle back in, make a living, and even help out their fellow women. Networking plays a significant role in the survival of refugees in urban settings. In Uganda, a study conducted by Mejia Mantilla et al. (2019) found that assistance accounted for 54% of the income for refugees. Most Kampala refugees rely on money sent back by family and friends abroad. According to Schuettler and Caron (2020), in Ethiopia, assistance became the primary means of subsistence for more than 80% of refugees after displacement. Help might be provided by those they meet immediately or by friends and family. For refugees to survive in their new surroundings, they need to form and sustain relationships with others. In Kenya, Munyao (2021) described how churches bring hope and sometimes stress to refugees. He stated that the mission to the refugee population in Kenya is, firstly, not one-directional, as the refugee settlers also have their religion that they would like to live out and share for others to experience. As part of their survival, refugees become creative. Wachu (2021) reports that Kenyan refugees and displaced people develop different survival methods to support themselves in the country. The respondents derived their incomes through employment, farming activities and business ownership.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A mixed method embedded research design was employed in this study. An embedded method allows both quantitative and qualitative dimensions of refugee life in Nairobi.

Sample size

The study used a sample size of 398 respondents. The study employed the Taro Yamane formula (1967), with a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5%. This is formula which was:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

In this formula, n represents the sample size. N represents the population. The e into bracket (e) represents the margin of error. In the sample, there was 45.18 % of male respondents and 54.82% of female respondents.

Sampling method

The study used a stratified sampling which is among the probability sampling methods. As the population was coming from different strata, a stratified sampling method enabled the distribution of participants based on the dimensions of their stratum groups. Each stratum was represented proportionately. For the qualitative approach, a convenient sampling method was utilized.

Research instruments

The study was done using self-constructed instruments for this study. Quantitative data was collected by administering a questionnaire and the qualitative data by using an interview guide. These instruments were pilot tested before their use in this research.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS version 26 for producing descriptive and inferential statistics while qualitative data analysis underwent thematic content analysis with the aid of NVIVO version 11.

Ethical issues

This study followed the academic guidelines in terms of ethical considerations. The permission from the university was obtained before conducting the study. Participants consented freely to participate in the study. Confidentiality as well as anonymity were observed during the all process.

Ethical clearance

A research permit was obtained from the Kenyan National Commission for Science, Technology & Innovation (NACOSTI, Ref No: 771599) before conducting this research.

FINDINGS

Challenges Encountered by Urban Refugees in Nairobi County, Kenya

Table 1 Challenges Encountered by Refugees

		The registration process as a refugee was challenging	Access to formal financial services remains limited	I was denied renting a house because I am a refugee	Lack of knowledge of local language reduced work opportunity	My freedom of movement was restricted
N		332	332	332	332	332
Mean		2.79	2.64	3.04	3.04	3.30
Std. Deviation		1.056	1.230	1.109	1.112	1.063

From the qualitative data analysis, a few themes emerged, such as adaptation to challenges, financial constraints, language barriers, stigmatization and discrimination, housing difficulties, and education. The results from the interviews showed that a section of the respondents experienced difficulty adapting to urban life due to the unfamiliar environment, culture, and systems. This is how the situation was described by the people interviewed:

"I am coming from a rural area where I used to take care of my small animals, a farm and other activities. Adapting to a new city like Nairobi is very challenging. We need to buy everything, even vegetables we used to get from our garden. Anyway, we are making it slowly" (Respondent 1, 29).

From the interview's results, different responses were provided by the participants. Some of the respondents reported financial challenges, others mentioned difficulties related to unemployment, underpayment, and reliance on informal jobs (e.g., gardening, and cleaning). Another respondent stated the following:

"Life is very difficult here. I have a family. I need to look after them. I have the energy to work and gain a bit of money, but it is impossible to get a job. We face financial constraints as we cannot get jobs easily. I continue searching with hope that something good will happen" (Respondent 2, 30).

The results indicate that some respondents struggled with communication due to language differences, which affected their daily interactions, job prospects, and education. In Nairobi, the most common spoken and official languages are Kiswahili and English. When considering the language, this is what a respondent had to say:

"I come from a French-speaking country. Back at home, I was communicating in our language. When I arrived here, all over it is English or Kiswahili. Even though I had some knowledge of Kiswahili, I discovered this one was totally different from what I knew. I had to work hard to learn Kiswahili" (Respondent 3, 30).

When talking of stigmatization and discrimination, some respondents experienced discrimination based on nationality, leading to feelings of inferiority, isolation, and shame. This is how a respondent explained:

"People think refugees are criminals or terrorists. When you hear people's comments, you feel sad. You can see that when entering a supermarket, security screening is more on you than other people. It makes me prefer staying at home" (Respondent 4, 27).

Among the people interviewed concerning housing difficulties, reported challenges with finding affordable, secure housing and often lived in remote areas due to high costs. This is the testimony from a respondent:

"When I arrived here, I was welcomed by a fellow refugee who I knew back home. A few days later, I had to look for a house as I have a family. I found that you have to leave on your own not like the way it was back home. It was very difficult to settle. Whenever I was asking for renting a house many questions were coming, such as how people, where are going to get the money for rent... it was difficult to find accommodation" (Respondent 5, 35).

Some respondents reported facing challenges related to education. A section of the participants highlighted difficulties in accessing education for their children, citing financial limitations and language barriers as stated by one of them:

"Our journey started a long time ago when we ran away from our country due to armed conflict. We transit through some countries before reaching Nairobi. We had to wait for months in order to be registered as refugees. It was not possible to send immediately children to school because of lack of resources and children did not learn the local language. Children lost a few months before starting school because of the language barrier" (Respondent 6, 40).

Psycho-Social Support Systems Used by Urban Refugees in Nairobi County, Kenya

Table 2 Psycho Social Supports

	Prayers from my church members provided relief to me	Church donations were a source of rebuilding my life	NGO's supports were bringing back my dignity as human being	Refugees identification card provides more safety to me	Becoming a church member creates a sense of belonging	Networking with family members offers me a moral comfort
N	332	332	332	332	332	332
Mean	2.67	2.80	2.83	3.10	3.30	3.57
Std. Deviation	1.074	1.151	1.037	1.113	1.090	1.054

These are the identified emerging themes in this section namely churches, NGOs, diaspora Networks, cultural communities, and well-wishers. This is how some respondents expressed themselves regarding the different

themes. Some of the respondents who were interviewed stated relying on churches for their emotional and material support.

"I go to church every Sunday and some on weekdays. It is a safe place. I consider it as a home. Fellow believers pay attention to our presence and are concerned about our lives. Our Churches provides food, some material, and spiritual services" (Jacques, 35 years old).

Another section of respondents mentioned NGOs as a critical support system for basic needs and education.

"There are some non-government organizations around our area. They provide different services to refugees. I am grateful because one NGO gave me a scholarship. Other NGOs are helping us with medical support and sometimes assistance with funds for rent" (Martin, 28 years old).

DISCUSSION

In relation to challenges faced by refugees, the study arrived at the findings indicating that freedom of movement, housing, language barriers were among their most crucial issues. In terms of psychosocial supports, the study identified networking, churches, humanitarian organization works among the most supportive systems for refugee life.

These results are supported by the findings of Hilbig and Riaz (2022) who indicated that, in Germany, restricting freedom of movement had pronounced negative effects on refugees' sense of belonging. The findings echoed with the conclusion of Pijnenburg and Rijken (2020) who stated that mobility is a key aspect of the rights of people on the move. In fact, the mobility of migrants is often affected when State attempts to regulate or restrict mixed migratory flows. The results of this study on freedom of movement is in disagreement with the findings of other scholars. The results of the research by Mossaad et al. (2020) demonstrated that refugees in the US have such mobility flexibility. During the period under consideration, 17% of refugees had already moved away from their original state of immigration when they requested for LPR status. Compared to the population of noncitizens in the US with about 1 year of residency, this level of mobility from state to state is substantially higher. Among this group, only 3.4% reported moving to a new state within the last year (ACS 5-year sample, 2008–2012).

Language was identified as a barrier in refugees' life. The findings are consistent with those of research in Brazil and Tunisia. Both Silva et al. (2022) and Garbout (2021) stated that language barriers, and difficulty in skill transfer were among the difficulties faced by refugees. Other studies looked at the plight of Arab migrants also noted the problem of language. Foreign languages are taught in Arab world nations' schools, according to Alrawashdeh and Kunt (2022). Consider the following countries: Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria (at some schools), and Morocco, all of which utilize French as a foreign language. As a result, some refugees acquire French as a second language; while in shelter, it often becomes English. Because of this, refugee students' academic performance suffered. Because of their unfamiliarity with the language taught in their new setting, some refugees who arrive with distinct foreign languages have linguistic issues.

The issues related to housing was among the key findings of this study. These results on the frequency of housing problems are like those obtained in Ontario (Canada) by Preisler (2021). Segregation in urban housing became more pronounced because of persistent financial difficulties, cultural differences, and prejudice on the part of landowners and realty agents. Shafiq, Intizar, and Abbas (2025) support the finding on housing. According to their claims, refugees are already marginalized by society due to cultural differences, but they are much more so as a result of identity-based discrimination and racialization with limited job options, substandard housing, among others. In the study conducted by Praygod's (2019) in Tanzanian, the results stated that the most challenging fact was the acquiring of a work permit. On the other hand, there were some opportunities that refugees could benefit. Despite the many difficulties that refugees face, research by Saaida (2023) found that there are also some bright spots. The ability to send money back home was a reality for many immigrants who were relocated in North America. The value of this money-sending activity was emphasized by the refugees.

Psychosocial Support Systems Used by Urban Refugees in Nairobi County, Kenya

The findings of this study indicate that networking, churches/mosques, NGO's are among the most supportive psychosocial systems for refugees in urban area. These findings are in agreement with conclusion of other studies. According to Dagnelie et al. (2019) refugees who have business owners in their network increase their chances of employment within 90 days but having employees in their network reduces these opportunities. We generated a network variable which shows whether refugees entered the host country without any relations. The results reveal that refugees without network experience reduced job opportunities and decreased earnings even more significantly when their mental health conditions improve. The results are consistent with existing literature. Rousou et al. (2025) explained that despite many challenges, some parents in our study managed to stay positive and use their coping skills effectively. They found that building connections through community, family, and friends was crucial for adapting to their new life. It helps them to teach their children cultural stories and songs. According to Nwosu (2024), refugees arriving in their host countries face a complex web of opportunities and challenges as they navigate their new lives. They have access to networks that play crucial roles in their resettlement process. The formal networks are recognized bodies that are more organized and official in nature; their main task is to systematically support refugees.

The findings revealed the importance of religion (church) in the psychosocial system support. These findings are supported by Muruthi et al. (2020) who conducted research on resettled Karen refugees. The findings indicated that for the participants, churches (religion) played a significant role. The same conclusion was found in Mukafuku (2021) who conducted in South Africa. The findings show that participants belonging to local South African churches and those from migrant churches all confirmed the role of the church in assisting refugees, although the migrants' churches appeared more active in this regard. In Kenya, Munyao (2021) described how churches bring hope and sometimes stress to refugees. He stated that the mission to the refugee population in Kenya is, firstly, not one-directional, as the refugee settlers also have their religion that they would like to live out and share for others to experience.

According to Nwosu (2024), there are formal networks (Governments and non-government organizations) and informal networks. The later seems to be more impactful as the informal networks are not very rigid and are generally developed in communities at a given instance in time. They include relationships that resulted from family contacts, social events, church, and other ethnic organizations.

This study's results shed light on the important role that non-governmental organizations play in helping refugees recover from post-traumatic stress disorders. According to Adebayo et al. (2024), the same findings have been recognized. Many refugees believe that aid from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is easier to get and more suited to their urgent needs. This view is based on several things, one of which being the fact that NGOs are known to be very adaptable and fast to adjust to new situations. Many reasons contribute to the high level of satisfaction with NGO services among refugees. One of them is the trust and understanding that is fostered by their closeness and visibility. The importance of trust and cultural familiarity in influencing how refugees perceive support networks cannot be overstated. Many Afghan refugees in Iran preferred non-governmental organizations (NGOs) run by Afghans or people with strong cultural knowledge over government institutions that they saw as less culturally sensitive, according to ethnographic studies. A lot of immigrants took solace in the fact that they were able to communicate better and share experiences with others because of this cultural connection.

According to Nwosu (2024), linguistic and cultural barriers could be problematic in formal social networks. According to the author, while social networks do provide important assistance, the problems mentioned by the study's participants are in line with what is already known about the difficulties migrants encounter. The interviewees all agreed that communicating across languages was the biggest obstacle. For example, many migrants in the Netherlands have a hard time getting the level of Dutch competence needed for college or a skilled job, even if there are language classes available. Another big problem is cultural differences. Unfamiliar social conventions, practices, and expectations may be a challenge for refugees. Isolation and a lack of belonging might result from these cultural misconceptions.

The study addressed all the research questions in this section. Language hurdles, unemployment, and a lack of access to financial institutions are among the difficulties that refugees reportedly face. As a result of their refugee status, the participants have experienced stigmatization, exclusion, and other forms of oppression. Among the best supports highlighted by respondents were networking and churches/mosques.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study illuminates the multifaceted realities faced by urban refugees, drawing on a range of perspectives, empirical evidence, and theoretical frameworks. The study identifies critical barriers, such as housing discrimination, challenges with work permits, cultural and linguistic obstacles, and limited access to formal financial and social institutions that shape the lives of displaced people as they navigate new urban landscapes. These barriers are not merely bureaucratic or logistical; they intertwine with deeply rooted societal attitudes and structures, manifesting in prejudice, exclusion, and often a sense of isolation among refugees.

Yet, amidst these formidable challenges, the research also highlights the resilience and resourcefulness that characterize many refugee experiences. The role of psychosocial support networks, both formal and informal, emerges as a crucial theme. Community connections, religious institutions, and non-governmental organizations are shown to provide not only material assistance but also a sense of belonging and hope. The trust and cultural familiarity embedded in these networks often determine the degree of support and satisfaction refugees' experience, underscoring the importance of culturally sensitive approaches in resettlement and aid programs.

Furthermore, financial remittances serve as vital lifelines, not only for the refugees themselves but also for their families and home countries. By contributing to economic stability and development, these flows of support demonstrate the broader impact of migration beyond the immediate sphere of displacement. Thus, this study underscores the necessity of comprehensive, ethically grounded, and culturally attuned policies to support meaningful integration and well-being for urban refugees. The findings call for continued research, advocacy, and collaboration to address systemic barriers while fostering environments where refugees not only survive but also thrive.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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