



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Entrepreneurial identity and business success: Former refugee women's navigation of (in)visibility paradoxes

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## Abstract

Former refugee women's entrepreneurial journeys are embedded in social, cultural, and legal environments in their home, transition, and host countries. Their multiple context embeddedness creates contradictions and identity issues. Thus, women adopt behaviours that make them visible or invisible simultaneously when navigating these contradictions. Using intersectionality and translocational positionality lenses, this study explored this phenomenon. We collected narrative data using semi-structured interviews from refugee women resettled in New Zealand. The findings illustrate that multi-country social processes, that is, 'translocational' experiences, create (in)visibility paradoxes for women entrepreneurs. Women dynamically create visibility for themselves through reliance on or defiance of ethnic, cultural or refugee identities in their ventures and by creating a business identity aligning with the host country's values. In contrast, cultural conformity and playing a role behind the 'shopfront' make women invisible. This study synthesises these paradoxical entrepreneurial strategies, develops a conceptual framework and contributes to women's entrepreneurial identity studies.

**Keywords:** refugee entrepreneurs; intersectionality; former refugees; refugee women; visibility versus invisibility; entrepreneurial identity; New Zealand

## Introduction

Of the around 37.6 million refugees worldwide, approximately 48% are women (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees: UNHCR, 2022, 2024). Forced displacement often drives women into a breadwinner role, beyond their intergenerational care roles, due to their husbands being detained, missing, or remaining behind in their home countries (UNHCR, 2014). For refugee women, entrepreneurship provides a means to manage their multiple identities as breadwinners, caregivers, and mothers, navigate power relationships during the asylum-seeking and resettlement process (Adeeko & Treanor, 2022; Al-Dajani, Akbar, Carter, & Shaw, 2019; Huq & Venugopal, 2021), and express their unique self and identity by meeting their needs for distinctiveness and autonomy (Shepherd & Haynie, 2009; Shepherd & Patzelt, 2018). Entrepreneurship is also a means for navigating tensions and power imbalances resulting from institutional norms at the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and migration status (e.g., Brodin & Peterson, 2019; Knight, 2016).

That said, refugee journey-related social structures and power relations can have contradictory or paradoxical effects on entrepreneurship (Adeeko & Treanor, 2022; Heilbrunn, 2021). For example, entrepreneurial activities challenge the existing cultural norms while at the same time, they can be used to further conform to cultural norms (Heilbrunn, 2021; Huq & Venugopal, 2021).

Similarly, women who are stigmatised due to their ‘refugeeness’ use entrepreneurship as a way to foster a positive identity. Nonetheless, engaging in entrepreneurial activity engenders greater exposure to biases, stigma, and prejudice (Adeeko & Treanor, 2022). Another paradox, less explored in refugee entrepreneurship literature, is visibility versus invisibility. It explains simultaneously being ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’ to different social groups due to racial, gender, or other identity ascriptions in different social, cultural, or organisational settings (Faulkner, 2009; Heilbrunn, 2021; Nason, Vedula, Bothello, Bacq, & Charman, 2024; Settles, Buchanan, & Dotson, 2019; Smith, Watkins, Ladge, & Carlton, 2019; van den Brink & Stobbe, 2009). For example, certain entrepreneur groups, such as refugees who operate businesses in transition countries, need to be visible to attract their customers and suppliers while at the same time be invisible from legal or regulatory authorities. Beyond legal, regulatory, tax, or political reasons (e.g., Délano & Nienass, 2014; de Vries, 2016; Nason et al., 2024), there is very limited understanding of the social reasons for (in)visibility paradoxes within refugee entrepreneurship. Specifically, the complexities associated with refugee women’s translocational positionality and intersectional identities create (in)visibility conditions when women conduct their business (Heilbrunn, 2021; Steinfield et al., 2019). Yet, refugee entrepreneurship literature has not given much attention to how women entrepreneurs navigate these (in)visibility paradoxes.

This study aims to address this research gap and examines how women refugees, resettled in the host country of New Zealand (termed as former refugees here), experience (in)visibility paradoxes. In particular, this study seeks to answer the research questions: How do societal structures and power relations shape the visibility versus invisibility of former refugee women entrepreneurs? How do women strategically navigate visibility versus invisibility paradoxes in creating their entrepreneurial identities? We collected narratives and lived experiences of seven former refugee women in New Zealand and drew on two bodies of research: intersectionality (Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991, 1995) and translocational positionality (Anthias, 2001a, 2001b, 2009). We contribute to the literature on female entrepreneurship and intersectionality identity studies by developing a framework that illustrates how former refugee women strategically and dynamically transfer between being visible and invisible in conducting business. The conceptual framework contributes to refugee entrepreneurship literature and demonstrates how home, transition, or host country societal structures shape women entrepreneurs’ (in)visibility paradoxes. Former refugee women conduct business by using dynamic visibility/invisibility strategies and navigate these structures by reconciling multi-country social processes, that is, ‘translocational’ experiences. Thus, we additionally contribute to the literature on ‘intentional’ visibility/invisibility.

## Theory and literature review

Contemporary scholarship on women’s entrepreneurship questions the neo-liberal assumption that entrepreneurship is a meritocratic, non-contextual, and neutral activity where personal effort alone determines reward and status (Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Marlow, 2014; Martinez Dy, Marlow & Martin, 2017). Women’s entrepreneurial activities and experiences are influenced by intersecting characteristics associated with women (e.g., gender, race, class, and ethnicity); these determinants generate differential matrices of disadvantage (Marlow, 2014). These disadvantages persist and are reinforced by existing social hierarchies or a person’s social location within a particular context (Martinez Dy et al., 2017). Hence, we employ both intersectionality and translocational positionality as analytical lenses.

### *Intersectionality and translocational positionality*

Intersectionality is explained as ‘the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities’ (Collins, 2015, p. 2); and has been employed across such disciplines as sociology, philosophy, and anthropology as well as in fields of

feminist studies, ethnic studies, queer studies, and legal studies (Cho, Crenshaw & McCall, 2013). Grounded on racial formation theory, the early work on intersectionality concentrated on racial inequalities and historical societal structures that reinforce power relations (Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991). Beyond race studies, intersectionality is used to analyse social problems by elaborating on social formations of patriarchy, capitalism, or heterosexism that shape power relations within organisations and society (Acker, 2006; Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991; Walby, Armstrong, & Strid, 2012). Currently, intersectionality issues such as ethnicity, culture, and gender have arisen across varying studies of resettled refugee minorities, as in Belgium (Wauters & Lambrecht, 2008), New Zealand (Ranabahu, de Vries, & Basharati, 2023), Germany (Abebe & Moog, 2019), and UK (Adeeko & Treanor, 2022).

The work on translocational positionality (Anthias, 2001a, 2001b) complements our intersectionality explanations in this study. According to Anthias ‘...“identities” such as “ethnicity/race” (as well as gender and class) entail categories of difference and identity (boundaries)’ (2001b, p. 634). Furthermore, they ‘construct social positions (hierarchies) [which] involve the allocation of power and other resources’ (2001b, p. 634). These unequal allocations of resources relate to an individual’s access to economic, political, symbolic, and cultural resources (Anthias, 2001a, 2001b). The migration process itself, whether it is forced or not, increases flows of people, commodities, cultures, and economic and political interests. Anthias (2009) identifies these social processes broadly as ‘translocational.’ To put it another way, migration not only affects people who move from one country to another or one location to another, but also the locals and resources in those localities (Anthias, 2009). Intersections also construct multiple and uneven social patterns or hierarchies of domination and subordination, where an individual can occupy a position of dominance and subordination simultaneously, at different times, or in different spaces (Anthias, 2009). In the case of refugees, for example, a person may occupy a position of domination due to their sub-culture or class within the diasporic community, while also occupying a position of subordination due to their refugee status in the host country. Hence, translocational processes allow us to analyse ‘relocations’: ‘the multiplicity of locations involved in time and space’ and ‘connections between the past, the present and the future’ (Anthias, 2009, p. 15). Hence, translocational positionality can be used to move beyond essentialisation and taken-for-granted categories of social analysis (Anthias, 2009). This theory also helps to explain the fluidity of identities and elaborates on entrepreneurial advantages and disadvantages in more nuanced ways (Martinez Dy et al., 2017).

### *Intersectionality and translocational positionality: Female refugees and entrepreneurship*

Refugees’ lived experiences, more specifically their home country, transitional country experiences in asylum seeking or displacement, and host country links differ from those of other immigrants (de Vries, Ranabahu, & Basharati, 2021). Unlike other immigrants, such as skilled migrants or expatriates who opt to migrate, refugees due to race, nationality, religion, membership of a social group, or political or environmental turmoil are forced to flee from their home country (Schellerer, 2023). They have experienced persecution, violence, and high levels of trauma (Moore & Shellman, 2004; Shacknove, 1985). As a result of the forced migration, they have limited resources and leave much of their previous lives, material belongings, and social connections behind (Abebe, 2023). The routes they take to arrive at a particular host country are not planned and such journeys often involve spending prolonged periods in transition countries or refugee camps (Abebe, 2023; de Vries et al., 2021). The dire conditions and resource deprivation, form, reinforce, and/or lead them to reject who they are (Gemignani, 2011). They also shape the formation of their identities, their experiences, and the ways they navigate societal structures and power relations (Gemignani, 2011). For example, studies in health, education, and gender-based violence routinely explain how refugee women’s experiences are shaped by cultural biases of support services, experiences of a lack of institutional trust, racism, shame, and the silence and secrecy associated with the dominant cultural and religious norms (Rees & Pease, 2007; Ussher et al., 2017).

Former refugees, whether they are men or women, face skill, information, and resource challenges when engaging in entrepreneurship in host countries (Abebe, 2023; Heilbrunn & Iannone, 2020; Newman, Macaulay, & Dunwoodie, 2024). These include not having previous business experience, lack of assets or resources, limited language proficiencies, and other barriers associated with social, cultural or institutional differences (Abebe, 2023; Heilbrunn & Iannone, 2020; Newman et al., 2024). These challenges are much more pronounced for women, due to their intersectional identities (de Vries, Rajapakshe, Ranabahu, Samujh, & Wellalage, 2023; Huq & Venugopal, 2021; Ranabahu, de Vries, & Basharati, 2021). Hence it is argued that refugee women's vocational training and development of self-confidence and self-esteem should start at the refugee camp stage. Such actions can facilitate changing the mindsets or deconstruction of traditional gender roles preparing them for the host country's economic activities (Jabbar & Zaza, 2016). However, establishing a business requires refugee women to reconstruct self, use social capital, and build on their existing resilience (Huq & Venugopal, 2021). Their self-confidence, adaptability, resourcefulness, and active learning attributes help in this process (Ranabahu, de Vries, & Basharati, 2024). However, this can lead to paradoxical behaviours as refugee journey-related social structures are not always compatible. Examples include visibility versus invisibility, challenging the existing cultural norms versus conforming to cultural norms, and combatting stigma versus experiencing stigma (e.g., Adeeko & Treanor, 2022; Heilbrunn, 2021).

### *The (in)visibility paradoxes at the intersection of gender, refugeehood, and entrepreneurship*

In employment literature, there are different forms of visibilities and invisibilities. In some cases, invisibility results from the labour logic associated with functional aspects of a profession (e.g., interpreters) or the nature of work (e.g., unpaid care) (Giustini, 2023). Our focus is not on the invisible work; that is, we do not focus on the labour that is economically devalued through intersecting cultural, legal, and spatial sociological mechanisms (Hatton, 2017). The (in)visibility paradox explains simultaneously being 'visible' and 'invisible' due to racial, gender, or other identity ascriptions in different social settings (e.g., Faulkner, 2009; Settles et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2019; van den Brink & Stobbe, 2009). Such (in)visibility implications are discussed in both employment and entrepreneurship literature (e.g., Correll & Mackenzie, 2016; Faulkner, 2009; Lewis, 2006; Nason et al., 2024; Settles et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2019; van den Brink & Stobbe, 2009).

There are numerous implications of (in)visibility at organisational settings. For example, women engineers are highly visible as 'women,' yet they are invisible as engineers and have to exert greater efforts to be taken seriously as 'real engineers' (Faulkner, 2009). African-American women are physically visible in organisations but easily overlooked or disregarded as authority figures or for leadership positions; hence, invisible (Settles et al., 2019). In the tech industry, gendered dynamics systematically disadvantage women in achieving visibility (Correll & Mackenzie, 2016). For promotions and career advancements, women tech workers need to be assigned to high profile projects, yet they are less likely than their male counterparts to be assigned to such projects (Correll & Mackenzie, 2016). For some career women invisibility is an intentional choice. When women experience unequal household responsibilities or gender-biased policies, Ballakrishnen, Fielding-Singh, and Magliozzi (2019) found that professional women intentionally remain behind the scenes. This intentional invisibility helped them to avoid conflict within their organisations, when the work context is gender-biased (Ballakrishnen et al., 2019). It also helped women to reconcile their personal versus work identities and quietly pursue work aspirations by also addressing family demands and responsibilities.

Entrepreneurs from intersecting minority groups such as women or refugees, and informal business owners also experience (in)visibility paradoxes. For example, women entrepreneurs intentionally try to embrace masculine norms of entrepreneurship and seek to be like male entrepreneurs (Lewis, 2006). Nason et al.'s (2024) findings among informal entrepreneurs in the township of Delft in Cape Town, South Africa demonstrate informal businesses have 'selective visibility.' That is, they need to be visible to certain groups such as their customers but not to others such as regulators.

Extant migrant and refugee studies discuss (in)visibility paradoxes associated with immigration policies and regulations (Délano & Nienass, 2014; de Vries, 2016). For example, undocumented migrants and refugees fear visibility due to their lack of trust in government agencies or legal systems (Délano & Nienass, 2014). They remain invisible due to the risk of arrest, detention, violence, and abuse (de Vries, 2016). Furthermore, institutional policies (or silencing) create invisibility in situations where ‘visibility or acknowledgement has the potential to disrupt existing structures’ (Mahn, Milne, Guzman, & Ahmed, 2021, p. 1476). Taking the case of migrant women of different religious faiths or cultures, in the Netherlands, Ghorashi (2010) points out (in)visibility creates additional challenges as they are seen as problematic and passive, and not considered people with skills and competencies. They are also typically excluded from decision-making related to policies that impact them; this leads to further invisibility as their views are not considered in policy formation. In contrast, hyper-visibility has also downsides as culturally based visibility practices can portray migrant Muslim women as groups with societal and cultural ‘shortcomings’ (Ghorashi, 2010, p. 82). These can have negative consequences such as ‘othering,’ attracting more stigma, or backlash from communities (de Vries, 2016; Ghorashi, 2010).

Among migrant/refugee women entrepreneurs, (in)visibility paradoxes are rarely studied. Heilbrunn (2021) explains that within the asylum-seeking community female entrepreneurs were ‘invisible’ despite their businesses being visible to the community. That is, all were African-origin or seeking asylum hence all looked the same or were in the same situation (i.e., invisible), but those who owned businesses were known by others in the community (i.e., visible). In contrast, within the local host community, their businesses must be invisible as these ventures are informal and thus considered illegal. Steinfeld et al. (2019) point out that it is not the social identity categories that are problematic but the structures that (re)produce (in)visibility by creating social injustice or inequality. Thus, we use intersectional and translocational positionality scholarship to study the visibility versus invisibility paradoxes in women’s entrepreneurship among refugees who are resettled in a host country.

### Context: Former refugees in New Zealand

We focused on refugee women who are now settled in New Zealand, describing them as resettled refugees (or former refugees). We chose this terminology as once an individual’s refugee status is determined and they are accepted for resettlement in New Zealand, they are granted permanent residency. The most common way refugees are resettled in New Zealand is via the refugee quota system (Immigration New Zealand: INZ, 2022). Annually, there are approximately 1,000 to 1,500 refugees resettled via this pathway (INZ, 2022).

New Zealand’s refugee settlement support services focus on self-sufficiency, participation, health and well-being, education, and housing (Immigration New Zealand, 2022). Despite having clear strategic support systems in place, former refugees have reported that they feel underemployed, isolated, or disconnected from the wider New Zealand society (de Vries et al., 2023). A study conducted by the Refugee Orientation Centre Trust found that former refugees want to move away from being recipients of unemployment benefits, but their skills, networks, and knowledge do not align with New Zealand’s employment market, nor they are appreciated by the employers (de Vries et al., 2023). For women, this disconnect tends to be associated with language difficulties, cultural differences, traditional dress, the ethnic role of women, or their lack of confidence to take public transport, drive, or own a car (de Vries et al., 2023; Labour and Immigration Research Centre, 2012).

Within this context, former refugees use self-employment to enable economic and social integration (de Vries et al., 2021; Ranabahu et al., 2021). Their businesses provide a way for the former refugees to develop their hybrid identities by acknowledging their home country’s embeddedness, transition country experiences, and host country resettlement experiences (de Vries et al., 2021). The businesses also provide a ‘place’ for interaction for former refugees (Ranabahu et al., 2023). In fact, once resettled refugees start a business, they contribute to their society by generating economic,

**Table 1.** Interviewee details

Interviewee <sup>a</sup>	Home country	Number and business type	Business ownership
Yasmin	Afghanistan	1 business: Catering	Sole owner
Jenny	Kurdistan	1 business: Marketing services	Sole owner
Afsana	Kurdistan	1 business: Food and related products	Joint owner
Nilar	Myanmar	2 businesses: a) Retail business – selling ethical, luxury products; b) consultancy	Sole owner
Maiah	Myanmar	2 businesses: a) Retail business selling home country products; b) food related services	Sole owner
Kejal	Kurdistan	1 business: Personal care service	Joint owner
Rabina	Afghanistan	1 business: Food and related products	Sole owner

<sup>a</sup>Pseudonyms.

social, and cultural value (Ranabahu et al., 2023). These align with, Māori – the indigenous people of New Zealand – cultural values, such as Whanaungatanga (belonging, kinship, and relationship development), Kaitiakitanga (the guardianship of natural resources), or Manaakitanga (care for people, generosity, and hospitality) (Mrabure, Ruwhiu, & Gray, 2021; Puriri & McIntosh, 2019). Therefore, among resettled refugee women in New Zealand, understanding visibility and invisibility within the intersecting ascriptions of gender, refugee status, and so on and how these are shaped by translocational positionality, in relation to agency and resources, will further enhance the development of entrepreneurship theory, policy, and practice.

## Methods

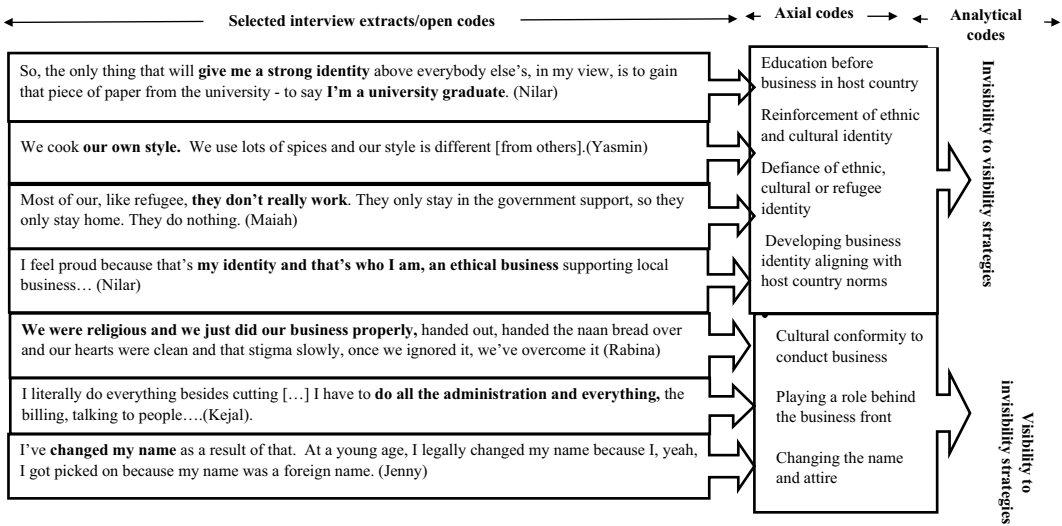
In this study, we used narrative data from a project on former refugees' economic integration through self-employment in New Zealand. The project comprised of studying former refugees who owned businesses. In analysing the project's data, we noted that female participants spoke of multiple societal structures and power relationships and described how they (had) navigated them. Although male participants in the same project highlighted structural barriers and challenges in gaining employment or becoming self-employed, their narratives did not highlight their liminal identity. We found this intriguing and felt it was important to explore the sample of women in its own right seen through their own eyes (Henry & Lewis, 2023). In this study, we used only the data gathered from the seven former refugee women. This small number reflects the reality of fewer former refugee women engaging in entrepreneurship as the New Zealand context is different from some other countries. That is to say, former refugees receive permanent residency status and are therefore eligible for social welfare support from the New Zealand government (Rafferty, Burgin, & Anderson, 2020). Therefore, the nature of necessity and the motivations for starting a business are not as same as we see in the extant literature (de Vries et al., 2021).

## Data collection

We used semi-structured interviews to collect data. One of the authors of this paper is a former refugee and she works with migrant communities. She approached potential participants, provided the research information sheet and consent form, and explained the project if needed, before setting up a date or time for the interview. This approach helped in rapport building. In fact, even the first author of this paper is female and a migrant to New Zealand and that led women interviewees to talk in a more relaxed manner.

Participants were from different locations in New Zealand and had fled from countries affected by conflict or political unrest (Table 1).





**Figure 1.** A sample of the coding tree.

All the participants arrived as refugees and have lived in New Zealand for between 15 – 25 years. All were first-generation refugees, though some were resettled as children or teenagers in the country. They identified themselves as former refugees and linked with their refugeeeness in explaining the structural challenges they faced in New Zealand. Some had been in education and/or employment before venturing into business. At the time of the interviews, all had owned and operated their businesses for a period of between 1-6 years.

During the interviews we asked about their home countries, asylum-seeking journeys, settling in, and their business start-up and development experiences. The interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via phone. All the participants had conversational level English. In one instance Rabina (pseudonym), who fled from Afghanistan, was accompanied by her adult daughter who translated one or two questions into her native language. The interviewee then answered the questions in English. Each recorded interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. Interviews were transcribed, validated by participants, and were assigned pseudonyms before data analysis.

### Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed and coded using NVivo. We coded the interviews and referred to both intersectionality and translocational positionality literature. We followed the analytical procedure of creating open codes, categorising them into axial codes, and then forming analytical codes to ensure rigour (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). During this process, we identified visibility and invisibility strategies for women. This led us to focus on (in)visibility paradoxes and embed them within intersectionality and translocational positionality literature. See Fig. 1 for a sample of the coding tree.

The analysis revealed that refugee women entrepreneurs experience contradictions as their behaviours are simultaneously embedded in social structures and power relations in the home, transition, and host countries. Women navigated these by being visible and invisible. These findings led us to develop a conceptual framework to explain refugee women's entrepreneurial identity and their strategies for navigating their (in)visibility paradoxes.

## Findings

Our findings illustrate that establishing an entrepreneurial identity required former refugee women to be visible (and sometimes invisible) to either their ethnic community or the host country's local community. Forced migration brought multi-country social processes, that is, 'translocational' experiences into the forefront. Women reconciled their multiple identities in doing entrepreneurial tasks associated with their visibility/invisibility paradoxes. We explain these findings in detail here.

### *From invisibility to visibility*

#### *Education before business start-up in the host country*

In host countries, former refugees are often overlooked in employment and even self-employment support due to their translocational experiences. Elaborating on this, Nilar, a former refugee from Myanmar, explained that her intersectional identity created multiple challenges related to exercising agency in the host country as she had to start from 'zero':

Firstly, you are looked down [...] because you are a refugee. Secondly, you have to start from zero. You've got nothing to back you up on who you are and even your qualifications and thirdly, you're a woman. You know, you're a woman with English as your second language. (Nilar)

Nilar's quote here illustrates the experience of women at the intersection of gender and (former) refugee status. Her use of the words 'looked down' suggests that refugee/former refugee status is undesirable and she occupied a position of subordination within the intersection at the host country. This was worsened as she was also prohibited from attending school in transition country. Therefore, she sought to reinstate her social position and personal identity by breaking the intersectional barriers, before self-employment, by gaining visibility using a university education in New Zealand:

So, the only thing that will give me a strong identity above everybody else's, in my view, is to gain that piece of paper from the university - to say I'm a university graduate. (Nilar)

Unlike Nilar, Jenny (Kurdistan) who also completed higher education was visible due to having a foreign name, initially not speaking English, and dressing differently. Later, even though she completed her higher education, she never felt accepted:

I never felt accepted at XXX [University name] and it was probably because, and I don't want to be the typical, ohh because I'm Muslim or ohh because I'm, I'm Middle Eastern, I don't want to sound like that but I can honestly tell you that there was, there was that sense [of not being accepted]. (Jenny)

This led her to venture into self-employment where she can be 'herself'. However, as we later explain self-employment compelled her to be invisible in the host community.

### *Reinforcement of ethnic and cultural identity*

Yasmin, Afsana, Maiah, and Rabina's experiences reflect the multi-country level interactions associated with translocational positionality and how ethnic and cultural identity can be used to create visibility for their entrepreneurial work in the host country. As a case in point, among the host communities, their ethnic and cultural cooking skills helped them to deliver authentic culinary experiences. This is because gendered norms in ethnic communities value women having cooking expertise: '*how to cook, clean, and make naan bread*' (Rabina). Hence, their home country backgrounds provided them with a way to differentiate their business and be visible to the locals:

We cook our own style. We use lots of spices and our style is different [from others]. Lots of people when they eat my food, they love it. (Yasmin)



Similarly, Maiah used her home country networks and sold products sourced from Myanmar. This gave her a strong business identity and visibility among the ethnic community as well. Such experiences led Rabina to explain that their ethnic and cultural expertise helped her, and they were not a hindrance, but a strength:

[...] my culture, [...] we've used that as our strength because it's something we know and we do and we're proud of it. It's not that we're ashamed of it and we use that as our strength and work with it. (Rabina)

Hence, migration-associated translocational processes allowed Rabina to leverage her home country identity.

Yet, those who settled in New Zealand when they were children did not have a strong home country identity. In the case of Nilar, she was only able to develop her home country identity after rediscovering her ethnic and cultural roots. This reflects the role of translocation processes in shaping entrepreneurial identity. As Nilar explained, a trip to her home country enabled her to reconnect with ethnic and cultural values:

Then I went back home, to rediscover my identity because I was going through this stage in my life where I feel, you know I really wanted to know who I am and what makes me who I am and why I have such strong personality and why I'm so much only striving for success and not chilled like the rest of New Zealanders, or just take life easy. So, I went back home and to rediscover our culture, our religion, you know everything about Myanmar and I became a much stronger person at the end of that journey. (Nilar)

Returning to her homeland and the ensuing rediscovery process led Nila to start an import business using her homeland contacts.

#### *Defiance of ethnic, cultural, or refugee identity*

Alongside reinforcement, women also use defiance of their ethnic/cultural or former refugee identity. Rabina, for example, created her business because she wanted to move beyond stereotypical gender roles: '*do something different, apart from just sitting there*,' achieve '*self-worth*,' '*independence*' and '*something else [...] instead of taking care of kids and doing stuff*.' This made her visible among the ethnic community. Maiah, from Myanmar, did not want to be an unemployed beneficiary like most other former refugees:

Most of our, like refugee, they don't really work. They only stay in the government support, so they only stay home. They do nothing. (Maiah)

She wanted to distance herself from her former refugee identity; Maiah's quote also illustrates that 'not working' and relying on benefits is stigmatised. These indicate that women wanted to differentiate themselves through their entrepreneurial work from others in the ethnic community. At the same time, the paradox is that both Maiah and Rabina employed their ethnic and cultural resources to build a strong business identity while at the same time distancing themselves from other refugees in the wider community or certain aspects of their home country's cultural norms.

#### *Developing business identity aligning with host country norms*

Nilar talked of the host country's values, and how they shaped her business identity. Nilar pointed out that growing concerns in the New Zealand market related to products being '*fair trade*,' '*ethically sourced*,' or '*environmentally friendly*,' along with a desire for '*health and wellbeing*' and '*environmental sustainability*.' Nilar adhered to these values in her business:

I feel proud because that's my identity and that's who I am, an ethical business supporting local business and we empower together as small business owners and we will move together as one. (Nilar)

Similarly, Nilar used her translocational experiences of being a former refugee and a member of a minority group and created a venture to empower former refugees and ethnic communities. Although Nilar explained that there is very little visible racism in New Zealand, she noted that there are critical issues associated with the non-recognition of former refugees or minority groups in work settings:

New Zealand, I would say we don't have many visible racism or discrimination as such, but I think a lot of the refugee and migrant communities have some barrier, one way or another, [to] gaining a professional career or being recognised for their work. (Nilar)

Recognising such issues led Nilar to develop her consultancy business which provides services designed to provide visibility and 'empower' minority communities.

### *From visible to invisible*

#### *Cultural conformity to conduct business*

Identity-building issues are further complicated by ethnic and cultural norms as women earning an income is frowned upon in certain communities; hence, they are viewed as having a subordination position according to cultural standards. This is a result of the translocational processes associated with home and host country cultures. Rabina mentioned that contravening ethnic/cultural norms and crafting an entrepreneurial identity led to stigma and discrimination within her community:

Challenges include community stigma and discrimination. [...] Earning money is a man's job and if a woman earns money, it's considered dirty money. (Rabina)

Furthermore, as Rabina revealed, she and her daughter were stigmatised because male customers came to buy their products:

"Ohh so and so's daughter's doing this. Did you hear? So and so's wife is doing this. Did you hear?" We had people from the community that came to pick up naan bread, if there were males, it was also very stigma, stigmatised that, ohh the male came, so and so's cooking for this male. (Rabina)

This stigmatisation included questioning of her husband's ability to provide for their family:

Also, men should earn money and people said, 'oh, so and so can't take care of his wife or his children because their wife has to work to earn money'. (Rabina)

In creating their entrepreneurial identity, Rabina and her daughter chose to ignore such comments; however, they were very careful to position their behaviours when operating their business within cultural norms:

[...] we overcame it [stigma] and we had our scarf on and the men never saw us. We did our own cooking separately. We were proper[ly] covered. We had our scarf on.

Rabina and her daughter wore headscarves when interacting with male customers to indicate that they were religious people: *We were religious and we just did our business properly*. In this way, Rabina was able to transverse the intersection of ethnic/cultural, religious and business identities by navigating multi-country power structures.

### Playing a role behind the 'shopfront'

In joint-owned businesses, as in the case of Kejal from Kurdistan, she played a vital role behind the scenes. In their personal care business, her husband managed the haircutting. All other activities were conducted by Kejal:

I literally do everything besides cutting [...] I have to do all the administration and everything, the billing, talking to people, trying to um, security, insurance, anything, you name it, I do it. (Kejal).

Yet, Kejal is at home and doing the business work and she is invisible to wider customer base. By doing so, she is invisible to both ethnic and local host communities.

### Changing the name and attire

As explained above, Jenny was bullied at school due to having a foreign name, initially not speaking English, and dressing differently. This led Jenny to change her name at a young age. When she ventured into entrepreneurship, she did not wear a headscarf as it made her stand out:

[.] It wasn't as comforting as it was when I back home for three months and I wore it [headscarf] there. You know, back home, it's different. Everybody accepts, everybody knows it's normal. Over here, it wasn't normal and it, because yeah, it, it's just different. (Jenny)

Hence, she navigated her identity at the intersection by not being different. This decision meant that in the business context at least, her clients did not know about her ethnicity or religious identity:

My name is XXX and a lot of them don't think that I am of a different ethnic background. I don't carry anything with me that identifies me with a different ethnic background or culture. (Jenny)

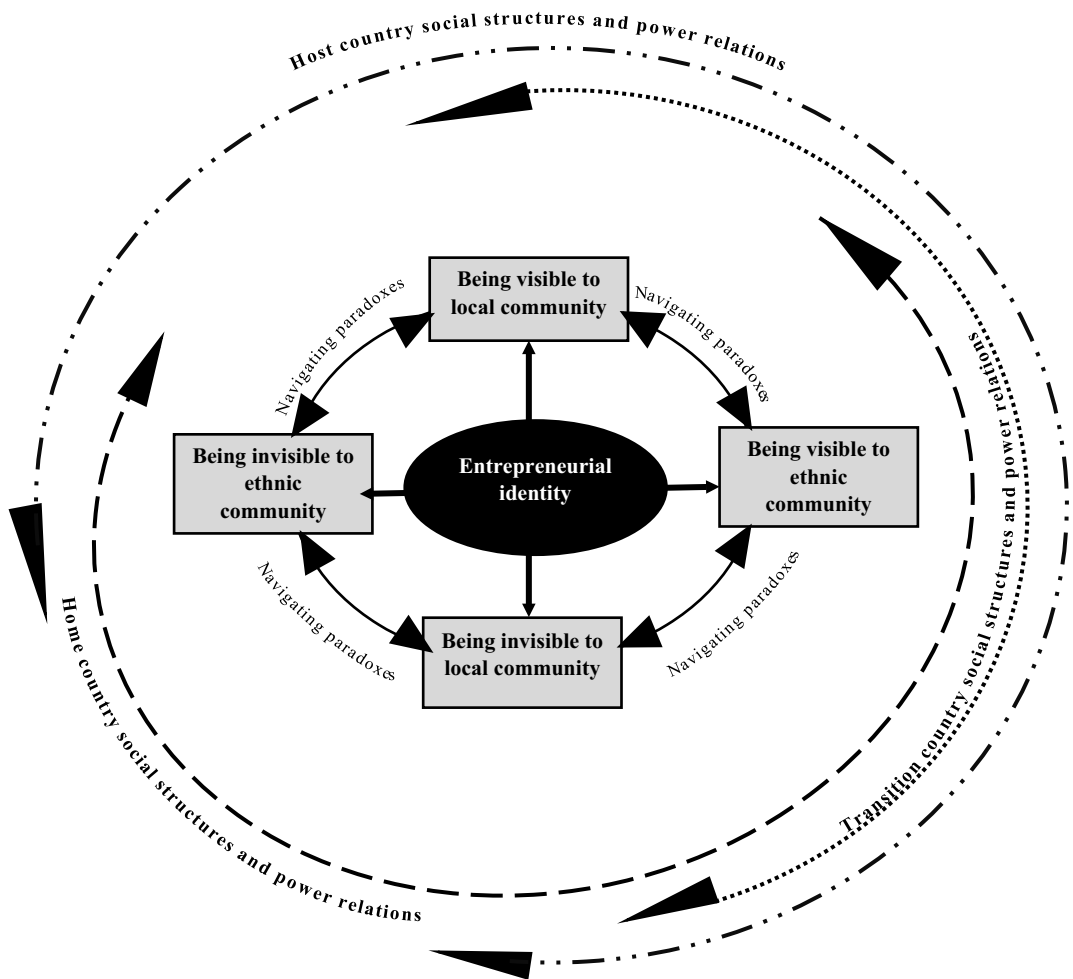
Jenny also mentioned that if her clients knew that she was from another religious faith, her customer interactions would have been different:

I used to wear a headscarf and I took it off; but if I did wear a headscarf, it would've made a huge difference [...] because I could tell, the behaviours of other people towards me with and without and I think it would've been very difficult in a business situation or entrepreneurship situation like this. (Jenny)

As a result of these, she became invisible as she 'looked' the same as other New Zealand women; yet, she is now visible within the ethnic community as she started a business unlike others who are in employment: *They [her family and ethnic community] don't understand that [owning business] because that's not what we grew up with.* Thus, in Jenny's case, she intentionally managed translocational processes and intersecting identities.

## Discussion

In this study, we have explored the research questions: How do societal structures and power relations shape the visibility versus invisibility of former refugee women entrepreneurs? How do women strategically navigate the visibility versus invisibility paradoxes to create their entrepreneurial identities? In answering these research questions, our findings reveal that (a) contradictory home, transition, and host country social structures and power relations create the need for women to be (in)visible; (b) creating entrepreneurial identity requires navigating (in)visibility paradoxes; (c) and women use dynamic strategies and become visible or invisible according to the communities that they are embedded in. We demonstrate our synthesis as a conceptual framework in Fig. 2.



**Figure 2.** Conceptual framework: Former refugee women’s navigation of visibility–invisibility paradoxes.

First, Fig. 2 illustrates the multi-layered home, transition, and host country space with the three circular lines: the dashed line represents the women’s home country, the dotted line represents the transition country, and the dashed line with two dots represents the host country. Aligning with translocational positionality (Anthias, 2001a, 2001b, 2009), this multi-layered space creates contradictions and incompatibilities. For example, some home country cultural norms discourage women of certain ethnic backgrounds from earning an income, either via paid employment or through business ownership. In contrast, host country norms encourage financial independence (e.g., as in the case of Rabina). Similarly, Māori cultural values led them to take into account environmental and social values in their business. These ‘incompatibilities’ create the need to be visible or invisible to different communities. This somewhat reflects ‘selective visibility’ as explained in Nason et al. (2024).

Next, resettled refugee women strive to construct their entrepreneurial identities by navigating social structures and power relationships. In Fig. 2, we demonstrate this using the oval labelled entrepreneurial identity. Entrepreneurship allows a person to express their ‘unique self and identity’ by meeting their needs for distinctiveness and autonomy (Shepherd & Haynie, 2009; Shepherd & Patzelt, 2018). Aligning with intersectionality (Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991), women navigate their intersecting ascriptions (e.g., refugee status, ethnicity/culture, business identity) when starting and

operating their businesses. Women craft new identities as income earners, [re]position themselves within host-home societal structures, and [re]discover themselves through entrepreneurship. This process requires them to be visible and sometimes invisible to manage their cultural and ethnic identity and navigate the stigma associated with refugee identity/self-employment (Adeeko & Treanor, 2022; Al-Dajani et al., 2019; Huq & Venugopal, 2021; Ranabahu et al., 2021).

Finally, we demonstrate the dynamic nature of transversing between visibility and invisibility using the framework in Fig. 2. Due to the multi-layered nature of societal structures and power relationships, some need to be (in)visible for local or ethnic communities. Women reaffirmed their ethnic/cultural identity or differentiated from the rest of the ethnic community. Others used defiance of cultural, ethnic, or refugee identity norms as a strategy. A few gained host country education and developed a strong business identity which locals can relate to or changed their attire or their names to be 'more like' women from the host country. Out of these strategies, Al-Dajani et al.'s (2019) work highlights women's defiance of cultural norms in entrepreneurship. In our study, we go beyond that to show other strategies former refugee women use when navigating (in)visibility paradoxes. In addition, these strategies were not static, and the same person moved dynamically between being visible and invisible.

### *Contributions and implications*

We make several theoretical and empirical contributions to entrepreneurship and refugee literature. Our main theoretical contribution is the conceptual framework derived from the findings (Fig. 2). This framework explains the dynamic links of how former refugee women navigate visibility versus invisibility in creating their entrepreneurial identity. The framework also contributes by outlining the multi-layered translocational positionality of former refugee women and the interconnections between entrepreneurial identity and the visibility–invisibility paradoxes that they experience. Using the framework, we contribute by demonstrating that legal or political reasons (e.g., Délano & Nienass, 2014; de Vries, 2016) are not the only conditions which create the visibility versus invisibility paradoxes. Ethnic and cultural reasons, business needs, and host country values also create the need for women to be more visible or invisible.

We also contribute to the literature on the strategic intentionality associated with visibility/invisibility. Ballakrishnen et al. (2019) and Lewis (2006) describe that women intentionally try to be invisible in both entrepreneurial and employment settings. We contribute to this stream of literature by outlining that former refugee women use both intentional visibility and invisibility, but their choice depends on the communities which they associate themselves. Rather than legal reasons, in our study visibility/invisibility reasoning was associated with social, cultural and business-related factors. In particular, we demonstrate the close links between (in)visibility paradoxes with stigma. However, unlike stigma from the host community, as in the case of Adeeko & Treanor (2022), the stigma of being self-employed can come from ethnic communities. Hence, we also extend the existing work on stigmatised refugee identity to show different origins of stigma experienced by women.

Empirically, this conceptual framework can be used to explain former refugee women's identities at the intersection and how women utilise entrepreneurship to navigate the disadvantages created at the intersection. We also contribute to identity literature by outlining the strategies which women use to develop their entrepreneurial identities. These strategies enable women to navigate power imbalances in subtle ways by being (in)visible in ethnic or local communities. Addressing the lack of contextualised studies among refugee women (Al-Dajani, 2022), we also contribute by outlining former refugee women's entrepreneurial experiences in New Zealand.

We suggest that refugee support organisations that promote entrepreneurship take these findings into consideration in their operations. Former refugee women's support programmes should demonstrate ways to navigate multi-layered societal structures and power relations and an appreciation of strategies women use to navigate visibility–invisibility paradoxes. Thus, the policies that

support refugee/former refugee women in entrepreneurship need to go beyond developing general guidelines and provide tailored or specific interventions which address or mitigate issues at the intersection.

### *Limitations and future research*

While the study produced rich data related to the entrepreneurial experiences of former refugee women, we concede that the study had a small sample with only seven participants. The small number of participants was partly due to the limited number of refugee women who are starting or who operate businesses in New Zealand. Although we were able to explain the nuances and experiences of each of the women, we were not able to assess whether each theme achieved theoretical saturation. Having a larger sample of female refugee entrepreneurs would help to strengthen our findings and the conceptual framework we developed. Second, we acknowledge that New Zealand's societal structures and power relationships are different from other nations. For example, immigration rules and policies vary in different countries. Hence, in other nations, societal structures and power relationships that shape female refugees' entrepreneurial identity could and will differ from those in New Zealand. Hence, the framework we propose needs to be validated before broader application.

We also see several future research which can be conducted based on the proposed framework. In particular, we invite future researchers to develop propositions on how refugees navigate multi-layered paradoxes and explore them in detail. It may be of interest to study how refugees navigate paradoxes in transition countries or refugee camps. Furthermore, intentional invisibility and visibility and selective visibility and invisibility practices are still relatively underexplored areas in migrant/refugee entrepreneurship literature. Exploring these practices could provide more nuanced understanding of different groups of refugees.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, we extend the extant scholarship on (in)visibility paradoxes by using a sample of former refugee women entrepreneurs in New Zealand. Our use of intersectionality and translocational positionality lenses illustrate former refugees' experiences in more nuanced and detailed ways. We also elaborate on ways in which former refugee women navigate between visibility and invisibility within ethnic and local communities. Our conceptual framework helps to better explain former refugee women's entrepreneurial identities and visibility/invisibility navigation strategies. This conceptual framework and key findings provide avenues to advance our knowledge and facilitate future research, practices and policies in improving the social and economic integration of former refugee women business owners.

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