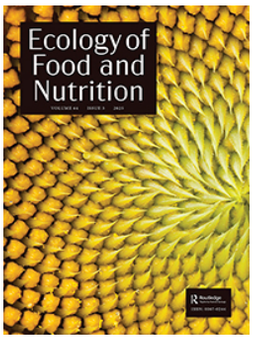

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The Unifying Role of Food for Forced Migrants' Entrepreneurial Activities and Their Settlement in London

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates an understudied area within the context of the role of food in migrant settlement, focusing on forced migrants'[1] adaptation to the London urban food industry through engagement in cookery classes, targeted to support migrant/refugee communities in their entrepreneurship journeys. Through analysis of interviews with 10 migrants and ethnographic observations of 7 cookery classes, this research examines how professional cooking and being part of a food network can be catalysts for entrepreneurial activities and provide pathways to independence. The findings reveal that migrants' work experience in cookery classes and training enable them to develop strong leadership skills and exercise micro-power practices challenging negative stereotypes such as migrants-as-vulnerable. This research contributes to the literature by enhancing understanding of a unique power dynamic in the context of food organizations and training programs that empower forced migrants in their entrepreneurial journey in the London food community.

KEYWORDS

Cookery classes; cooking; cultural identity; entrepreneur; food; forced migrants; network; settlement

Introduction and background literature

Across the UK, London continues to be a multinational region with the largest non-UK born (37%) and non-British (21%) population in 2021 (Office for National Statistics 2021). The multicultural nature of this metropolis is reflected in a vibrant food scene and hospitality industry that is dominated by restaurants, ethnic-specific grocery stores or other food-related businesses run by people with migration backgrounds. This is reflected in the fact that in London's hospitality sector 72% of the workers were foreign-born in 2017 compared to 28% who were born in the UK (Migration Observatory 2018). It is therefore not surprising that there is a public "appetite" and demand among residents and visitors in London for food from countries across the world. Extant research underlines that since the so-called "European migration crisis" in 2015–16, cities across Europe such as London have gained a more

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prominent role in receiving forced migrants at the local level (Oliver et al. 2020). Urban networks of local actors and urban initiatives were found to have the capacity to overcome social divisions between forced migrants and local residents and provide intercultural opportunities for inhabitants to develop new identities. Murphy (2018) emphasizes that especially local food-related projects can provide an effective collective experience for migrants and host communities to connect at a social and cultural level.

Navigating a new food environment

Food represents one's culture and identity. Food habits are influenced by the norms and/or religion prevalent in a society, availability of certain ingredients, personal taste preferences and experiences (Gingell et al. 2022). Theoretical concepts of "food," "identity" and "integration" have been widely used across disciplines to explain the critical role food plays for people with migration backgrounds and their settlement into host societies (Elshahat and Moffat 2020; Gingell et al. 2022; Harris, Minniss, and Somerset 2014; Kavian et al. 2020). The authors acknowledge broader debates about the problematic concept of integration and its replacement terms (Favell 2019), proposing that in the context of this paper, settlement represents an appropriate alternative.

The experience of migration and adapting to a new culture are essential factors that can influence an individual's eating habits and food choices. In particular, for those who were forced to migrate to a new country, being able to consume their cultural foods, that is culturally appropriate foods, is instrumental to their settlement in order to develop a sense of belonging and building connections in the destination country (Gingell et al. 2022). Previous research highlights challenges refugee families experienced in accessing traditional ingredients or appropriate foods such as halal meat and consequent struggles to maintain the provision of their cultural food, particularly in Western societies (Kavian et al. 2020). Lack of access to traditional, wholesome ingredients coupled with limited income can eventually lead to refugees changing their food consumption patterns and turning to more processed Western food products. For instance, refugee women who join the workforce for the first time might use more ready-made foods due to time constraints.

Notably, refugee populations migrating from predominantly agricultural economies and less industrialized countries upon their initial arrival tend to have better health status than people in the host society (Burns 2004; Harris, Minniss, and Somerset 2014). However, newly adapted eating habits are further linked to economic and social changes which influence refugees' ability to have food choices and consumption different from the culture of their country of origin (Burns 2004; Gingell et al. 2022). These dietary changes can then be associated with negative health outcomes such as obesity or chronic

disease. Harris, Minniss, and Somerset (2014) point out the so-called "healthy migration paradox" which suggests that migrants' health paradoxically, that is against expectations, tends to deteriorate because of migration-related challenges that negatively affect their food consumption.

Gingell et al. (2022) argue that despite the sense of uncertainty among refugees about different tastes and foreign food products available in the host country, they were able to re-learn how to use unfamiliar ingredients to continue to prepare their ethnic foods. This process is also known as "dietary acculturation" which describes the ability of migrants to adapt to a new food environment and eating patterns. In addition, refugees used different methods to find their cultural foods by using social media, or by turning to social support networks to locate specific cultural foods, including traveling long distances to ethnic shops or growing certain ingredients themselves. These findings indicate that migrants can effectively navigate new cultural food environments and overcome difficulties imposed by the forced migration process, developing adaption and resilience skills to maintain core foods and eating habits from their country of origin. The following section discusses challenges related to the economic settlement process of forced migrants and barriers they face in the labor market which lead to many resorting to self-employment as a means to earn a living and using food-related skills to share their culture.

Forced migration and the journey of becoming entrepreneurs

Research on entrepreneurship among immigrant populations is vast and has been mainly located in the field of management (Heilbrunn and Iannone 2020). There is growing academic interest in how refugees, asylum seekers and migrants more generally overcome challenges in the labor market of the host societies and engage in entrepreneurial activities to become self-employed.

The discrimination and disadvantage theories postulate that migrant and refugee populations frequently experience discrimination and prejudice in the labor market during job searching activities (Alrawadieh, Karayilan, and Cetin 2019; Heilbrunn and Iannone 2020; Mawson and Kasem 2019). Host governments tend to be primarily concerned with guarding their national borders and appearing tough on immigration (Oliver et al. 2020). Therefore, providing asylum to forced migrants remains at the most basic standards and the lowest costs in most host countries. With asylum applications protracted and restricted work opportunities for asylum seekers, the reasons for disadvantages in the labor market are manifold. For example, both migrant and refugee populations face difficulties in having their formal qualifications recognized by institutions in the destination country or deterioration of their skills due to periods of inactivity. These challenges, coupled with limited work possibilities,

ultimately push migrant and refugee populations toward entrepreneurial options and encourages them to become self-employed and start their own business (Cifci and Atsız 2021).

Meister and Mauer (2018) propose that migrating to another country reflects a general willingness among forced migrants to take risks, which is also a key characteristic for successful entrepreneurs. Thus, migrant populations are more likely to participate in entrepreneurship activities than non-migration populations in the host society. Entrepreneurs can be understood as business people who make use of opportunities, are innovative, create new goods and service, and in doing so demonstrate a positive attitude to risk (Kachkar 2019). This view is supported by existing literature arguing that personal skills such as willingness to take initiative, confidence in one's own abilities, perseverance and flexibility are key characteristics that shape entrepreneurial intentions (Obschonka, Hahn, and Bajwa 2018). Entrepreneurs are therefore crucial for driving economic growth in a country.

Whilst much scholarly attention has been paid to entrepreneurship among migrants in general, studies focusing particularly on refugees and asylum seekers who undertake entrepreneurship have so far remained on the periphery (Heilbrunn and Iannone 2020; Kachkar 2019; Shneikat and Alrawadieh 2019). Compared to migrant entrepreneurs, refugees are more likely to have experienced trauma due to their forced migratory experience which makes their social and economic settlement more difficult. Kachkar (2019) further points out that refugees have limited business opportunities as they usually lack financial assets recognized by financial institutions, have limited social connections and often live under poor conditions with an uncertain future. These features make it not only difficult for them to be considered for traditional microfinancing schemes, but refugee entrepreneurs also need to overcome nontraditional difficulties that are specific for their migration situation such as language barriers and lack of cultural and legal knowledge (Meister and Mauer 2018).

Despite these challenges, entrepreneurship has been found to be a crucial pathway for displaced populations and their long-term settlement in host societies (Alrawadieh, Karayilan, and Cetin 2019). Previous research indicates that refugees' businesses show higher growth in household income compared to other immigrant populations (Heilbrunn and Iannone 2020). This observation emphasizes the potentially positive impact and distinctive features of refugee entrepreneurship on the economic and societal level in receiving countries.

Research highlighting the role of refugee entrepreneurship for their social and economic settlement is limited. One example from Shneikat and Alrawadieh (2019) identifies the hospitality industry as one of the most appealing industries for refugees in which to become self-employed due to the low capital and know-how required to start a business in the new country

of residence. Another study on refugee entrepreneurship questions the "push" approach mentioned above and instead underlines the importance of forced migrants' individual motivations, ambitions and personality which are strong drivers for them to become self-employed (Mawson and Kasem 2019). For instance, entrepreneurial intentions among refugees are strongly impacted by their lived migration experiences such as culture shock or the establishment of new social support networks. Refugee entrepreneurs' performance can be strongly enhanced by organizations that provide them with specific business training, services, resources, mentoring as well as access to networks. This variety of support can be crucial in increasing the survival rate and accelerating the development of refugees' start-up businesses (Meister and Mauer 2018).

Although these studies contribute to the understanding of factors that shape refugees' entrepreneurial intentions and challenges in relation to their forced migration experience, there remain numerous gaps in the extant literature on the role of entrepreneurship for forced migrants' settlement (Cifci and Atsız 2021). In particular, qualitative studies considering the personal viewpoints of refugees are scant (Mawson and Kasem 2019) as well as research looking at the hospitality sector (Shneikat and Alrawadieh 2019). Against this background, this study investigates the role of entrepreneurship motives and experiences among asylum seekers and refugees' settlement in London within the food industry. It makes a theoretical contribution to the literature on refugees and asylum seekers' leadership and entrepreneurial skills by focusing on the power of food to create a sense of belonging in the context of professional cooking. It will cast new light on leadership practices and entrepreneurial activities developed and demonstrated in public cookery classes led by chefs with lived forced migration experience. This study argues that refugee entrepreneurship in the food sector is an active business segment that serves as an inspiring and stimulating area for forced migrants' independence and is instrumental to their long-term settlement.

Methods

Based on a qualitative research strategy, the study centered on London, UK, given that most foreign-owned local businesses are based in London (Office for National Statistics 2020). The central aim of the research was to critically examine the work experience of forced migrants in the food industry in London and to give prominence to the individual experiences of the study participants by using their voices. The intention of this study was twofold. First, it sought to understand what role food and professional cooking play for forced migrants working in the London culinary scene. Second, the study aimed to shed light on the ambitions and challenges these individuals face in their food-related entrepreneurship activities. Considering these objectives,

this research utilized an exploratory approach. The analysis was guided by the following two research questions:

(1) What kind of importance do forced migrants attach to food-related practices and how can professional cooking be an essential medium to the experience of belonging?
(2) How do those working in the food industry position themselves in the London food community?

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews ($n = 8$) and ethnographic observations ($n = 7$). This triangular approach was adopted to maximize the breath of data obtained by including forced migrants' perspectives on their food-related entrepreneurial practices and to gain a deeper understanding of social meanings of micro culinary practices in a local food industry (Mescoli 2020; Dhaliwal 2008).

Qualitative semi-structured interviews allowed each respondent considerable time to tell their story (Shepherd, Saade, and Wincent 2020). In the interviews, rich descriptions of the personal experience of migrants becoming professionals in the food sector allowed us to tease out the distinctiveness of the specific experiences of forced migrant entrepreneurs (Allport et al. 2019). In total, 8 interviews with 10 migrants took place involving six individual interviews and two joint interviews with two couples. Interviews took place between July and November 2023, two in-person, one on the phone, and the remainder ($n = 5$) were online via zoom. Participants were individuals with lived migration experience, that included mostly refugees, asylum seekers and one economic migrant, who work in a food-related business in London, UK. Participants were provided with a research information sheet describing the study, their right to withdraw and the use of anonymized data in publications. Consent was obtained from all participants including consent for the interviews to be audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Full ethical approval for the study was granted by St. Mary's University, Twickenham, UK

Interviewees were asked to explain their motivation for cooking and their journey of becoming a professional working in the food industry in London. To identify key themes for entrepreneurship in migrants' settlement, further questions were particularly related to their experience of planning or establishing their own businesses and the successes and challenges they faced in becoming an entrepreneur. To gain better insights into their settlement in London, interviewees were also asked to share their individual migration stories and challenges faced during their settlement into the London community.

In terms of recruitment of participants, the study population is recognizably "hard-to-reach" as they work in various types of businesses which include having multiple jobs, working long hours and various shifts. Furthermore,

forced migrants have complex lives as they might deal with psychological problems resulting from separation from family members, impoverished living conditions and/or having multiple responsibilities (Allport et al. 2019; Heilbrunn and Iannone 2020). Moreover, forced migrants might not feel comfortable taking part in the study. To mitigate these challenges, a purposive sampling approach was utilized to gain access to participants. Several food organizations that specifically support forced migrants were contacted and asked to facilitate research access with refugee and asylum seeker communities who are engaged in some kind of entrepreneurial activities. Additionally, interview participants were recruited by either directly approaching migrants who run food stalls at migration-specific events, such as the annual global *Refugee Week* in London, or through known networks with organizations who support migrants working in London's food sector.

Ethnographic observations were used to triangulate and provide additional content to the interviews. *Globalfood*,[2] a social enterprise offering public online and in-person cookery classes in London, Bristol and Kent, facilitated the ethnographic observations conducted as part of the data collection. In total, observations of 7 cookery classes were carried out between October 2023 and March 2024. All observations took place at *Globalfood* premises in London with the primary investigator acting as a volunteer at the cookery classes which included preparing cooking stations, dishwashing and other cleaning responsibilities. *Globalfood* was first set up in London and originally aimed to support refugee women into employment using their cooking skills, although now also supports male chefs. Most of these women were unemployed due to legal barriers, lack of English language and qualifications from their home countries not being recognized in the UK. *Globalfood* offers training to refugees, asylum seekers and migrants to become chefs of its cookery classes for a certain period of time (Stevens et al. 2023). Each class specializes in the cuisine specific to the country of origin of the chef and is led by a chef with lived migration experience.

Both interview data and ethnographic observations were analyzed using thematic analysis which is suitable to identify key patterns and themes in the data (Meister and Mauer 2018). The analysis was conducted from an interpretative phenomenological epistemology approach by exploring the meaning and identifying interconnection of themes based on participants' personal life experience (Allport et al. 2019). The data analysis was carried out following Braun and Clarke's six analytical steps (Braun and Clarke 2006): the researchers familiarized themselves with the data by reading each transcript at least three times to identify key themes (1). Whilst the first round of reading generated general thoughts and an overview of topic patterns, the second reading process was descriptive and included the annotation of specific text sections with initial codes (2). The third round of reading allowed the identification of central codes which were collated into potential themes (3). The

next step consisted of reviewing the broader themes and checking if they make sense in relation to the overall dataset (4). The themes were then defined and named considering an overall narrative of the analysis (5). Lastly, the overarching key themes and relevant extracts were identified, interpreted and discussed in light of existing literature (6). NVivo qualitative data analysis software aided the analysis by collating annotated codes under the same themes.

Results and discussion

In this section, results from the interpretive analysis of both the interviewees' accounts of their work experience in the London food sector and ethnographic observations of cookery classes are presented. Through the theoretical lens of the concepts of entrepreneurship and settlement, the conclusions highlight entrepreneurial features and leadership skills that chefs with forced migration experience demonstrated during these classes and in their interview responses. The study findings illuminate how professional cooking can play a vital role in stimulating entrepreneurial activities and enabling forced migrants' transition from dependency to self-reliance through specific support networks (Oliver et al. 2020).

Table 1 provides some background information about the interviewees regarding their origin, length of stay in the UK, qualifications and the stage of setting up their own business. Most respondents were women, have lived in the UK for more than 6 years, attained qualifications at least at professional or A-level and were in the early stage of their entrepreneurship journey, e.g. by occasionally running a food stall.

The following key themes were identified in the analysis and are discussed below with examples from the data: Meaning of food and cooking – sharing culture, community and connectedness; hosting cookery classes – becoming leaders and entrepreneurs; becoming an entrepreneur as part of a business community.

Table 1. Profile of interviewees.

Name[3]	Gender	Years lived in the UK	Country of origin	Educational attainment	Stage of entrepreneurship
Amina	Female	1–5	Palestine	Professional qualification	Planning
Bevan	Male	>11	Bangladesh	'O' levels or below	Early starters
Fatima	Female	1–5	Palestine	Bachelor's degree	Early starters
Maftuna	Female	>11	Uzbekistan	'A' levels or above	Early starters
Mahi	Female	>11	Bangladesh	'O' levels or below	Early starters
Portia	Female	6–10	Ghana	'A' levels or above	Planning
Precious	Female	6–10	Nigeria	'O' levels or below	Early starters
Rehan	Male	1–5	Sri Lanka	Professional qualification	No concrete planning
Sameed	Male	6–10	Lebanon	Master's degree	Early starters
Umar	Male	>11	Uzbekistan	Bachelor's degree	Early starters

Meaning of food and cooking – shared happiness

The most common motivation for interviewees to start cooking professionally was because they repeatedly received positive feedback from family, friends or people who ate their dishes at community events where they cooked. This appreciation promoted personal self-confidence and encouraged them to consider cooking professionally. Interviewees strongly associated the process of cooking and teaching others how to cook with a sense of happiness and belonging (Stevens et al. 2023). Sameed reported that he "just loves to cook like I am happy when I'm cooking. I don't know, I'm just happy and I feel happiness while teaching people how to cook."[4] Similarly, the following testimony demonstrates the joy Precious feels when cooking for others:

> Cooking makes me very happy. I also love for people to be happy like I said. Yeah, I think I reflected on my life and what I need to do. I like to cook with friends and I knew I wanted to do cooking because it makes people happy and it makes me happy.

Stevens et al. (2023) contend that food is not only essential for survival, but carries a social dimension by connecting individuals to their past, emphasizing distinctive culinary traditions and revealing how people share their lives with others. A prevailing sentiment among chefs at *Globalfood* was their recognition that cooking certain dishes reminded them of personal food-related memories from the past. Being able to teach how to cook meals that the chefs know from childhood or from relatives is a means for them to share their food-related knowledge of their country of origin and celebrate the diversity and tastefulness of their cultural dishes. Observations of cookery classes reveal that the collective experience in the classroom provides a supportive environment for the chefs to showcase and express pride about popular dishes from their native cuisine.

Closely related to the concept of food as a means of social experience, some interviewees noted that acquiring cooking skills was essential for them growing up in poor conditions in their country of origin as it enabled them to feed themselves and their families. These findings suggest that food and cooking represent identity markers for the respondents' upbringing and how food-related childhood experiences influenced their identity growing up in a certain socio-economic environment. Being forced to leave the country of origin and the resulting experience of being uprooted made the following interviewee particularly aware of the role of food in maintaining one's own cultural background as she shared in the following:

> Our parents were refugees in Syria. [] We took a lot of their tradition and culture mixing in with our culture and the tradition. Because our parents don't want us to lose any of our culture. So from the food, from the costumes and from the habits. [] So I don't want

> my children to lose everything related to our nation, you see. So I start to make something feeling that they have their own culture. They have own food. I want people to know their food and their culture. (Fatima)

One related common theme that emerged among the interviewees is the importance of maintaining eating habits from their own culture such as "breaking the bread" together at the table. The following quotes highlight the respondents' dedication to collective eating and sharing food as a common eating habit:

> If someone is invited, they say yeah "welcome" and invite you to the table to sit down. [] They always asking you "you feeling good?" or "you need anything else?." Yeah, people need to share something and be friendly. (Maftuna)

> I always say to my kids, because here everyone has his own plate and the fork and the knife. So no one shares the dish together. In our older days always the food, we don't put a plate for each member of in the table. So for example if we have eight persons that will be at the table, we put four plates, so we are sharing the food together in the same plate. (Fatima)

These findings add to our understanding of cultural eating patterns interlinked with people's collective identity and how important it is for forced migrants to maintain eating habits from their country of origin after migrating to a new country. What is important to note here is that there is a tangible sense of "togetherness" that the respondents underscore regarding food and eating as part of a community. In *Globalfood* classes, this sentiment was echoed by the fact that participants not only prepare the meals together but also eat together sitting around a large table at the end of each class. These communal settings help foster connections between participants and the chef in an intimate physical space with participants sharing personal stories related to food (Stevens et al. 2023). Beyond this, several chefs asked participants from the outset to share their cultural background and favorite dishes. This ice-breaking exercise allowed participants to share their personal food preference or relationship with cooking. This was an effective way for chefs to connect with the class participants and build a relationship based on some common grounds.

Hosting cookery classes – becoming leaders and entrepreneurs

The notion of "host society" in the forced migration context is usually associated with the expectation of migrants to adhere to certain rules and laws in their destination country (Murphy 2018). Underpinning this understanding is often a portrayal of migrants as powerless "victims" subordinated to a powerful, restricting host state apparatus. The findings of this study, in contrast to this, offer a different power dynamic.

The ethnographic observations of the cookery classes reveal that the class environment enables migrants to become "hosts" themselves. Each class is considered "their" class in which migrants showcase selected dishes from their country which represent their distinctive cultural cuisine. The chefs lead the classes and supervise facilitators as well as several volunteers who assist with the smooth running and operation of the classes. The chefs are thus the experts who retain control and agency whilst class participants occupy the role of students who are there to learn. These findings corroborate what Stevens et al. (2023, 8) call "micro-power" exercised by *Globalfood* chefs through teaching others how to prepare their cultural food.

Positive interactions with participants including telling stories of their country of origin, dispel misconceptions about migrants as criminals or vulnerable victims. This notion of empowerment through refugee-led food projects validates previous research by Murphy (2018) who underscores that refugee food entrepreneurship projects offer the opportunity for new types of activism and spaces of solidarity with forced migrants. These food projects and entrepreneurship initiatives focus on a different type of solidarity, that is, action and protest, which counteracts dominant narratives of forced migrants being viewed as vulnerable by the host community. Instead, these food-related projects celebrate the shared commonalities between migrants and the host community and stress the contributions of forced migrants to the host society.

Further observations reveal that the cookery classes give chefs a unique opportunity to develop leadership skills or demonstrate existing ones. The present study follows Migdad, Joma, and Arvisais (2021) definition of leadership skills, that is, the ability to influence other people with the intention to achieve a shared goal. According to this conceptualization, leadership skills encompass *inter alia* "project planning, communication skills, problem solving, decision making, self-confidence, presentation skills, time management, teamwork, personal effectiveness skills" (Migdad, Joma, and Arvisais 2021, 6).

The observations show that *Globalfood* chefs exhibited many of these skills during their cookery classes. For example, one interviewee pointed out that she grew up in an entrepreneurial family environment with each parent running their own separate business. Hence, she knew first-hand what leadership looked like and saw her future in the UK in a management role, for example by leading a restaurant and employing a cook one day. She explicitly referred to leadership skills she developed in her childhood, mentioning that she was chosen as a class leader by her school teacher who recognized and nurtured her leadership qualities from an early age.

Time management and planning were observed as notable leadership skills among the chefs to ensure smooth running of the cookery classes. Most of the chefs arrived at least one to three hours prior to the commencement of classes to oversee and help prepare setting up the individual cooking stations. In this phase, some chefs gave clear instructions to volunteers by for example

explaining how they wish certain dishes to be prepared in advance or which cleaning task they want volunteers to complete after which exact stage of the cookery session (Migdad, Joma, and Arvisais 2021). One chef, for example, used a tough communication style by repeating that she expects volunteers to constantly check each station during the class and keep them clean throughout. Through this precise time management and clear communication in advance, the chef ensured that the given time was accurately allocated to specific tasks, and the class did not run overtime.

Personal effectiveness skills were also noticeable among chefs who actively articulated to class participants what they expected of them and encouraged them to do the cooking themselves. For example, one chef led a group of secondary school students and at the beginning of the session underlined that she would only guide the students during the class. She stressed that they would cook the dishes and are therefore in charge of the food. In this way, she conveyed trust to the students and expressed her confidence that they have a key role in contributing to the success of the dishes and encouraged them to develop cooking skills. Teaching school pupils requires different skills and high attention as one of the interviewees explained in the following:

> And they were different, you know, in the interaction compared to the general public, who come to you, because it was harder. Because you couldn't push them. You need to give them their time. They have knives in their hands. It is like: "okay, guys, you do this slowly. Take your time. We're not in a rush." Yeah, that was one of the hardest point to me, to be honest. (Sameed)

It must also be noted, however, that some chefs were less confident and had to learn to develop leadership skills gradually in each session. One chef with extensive cooking experience for high-end restaurants in Dubai was not experienced in public speaking and used printouts of notes for his opening lines during his class introduction. This indicates that he cared about his performance and how he might be perceived by the class participants. Although his English language skills were more advanced than other chefs, he had less confidence in his presentation skills. However, over the course of the class, he demonstrated strong self-confidence by communicating clearly various cooking steps and tasks to the participants and by doing so created a friendly teamwork spirit without being authoritative.

Another factor affecting people's confidence was their legal status. Uncertain immigration status is one of the key reasons that negatively influences migrants' future planning. This is corroborated by Heilbrunn and Iannone (2020) and Kachkar (2019) who argue that one of the greatest challenges that forced migrants face is the uncertainty of their legal status which influences their willingness to establish their own business and makes them less confident as entrepreneurs in light of limited access to capital or lack of business knowledge. Indeed, interviewees with confirmed legal status

expressed a stronger sense of belonging and had a more positive future perspective. In addition, these migrants have been living in the UK for at least five years and established connections with their ethnic communities as well as other social networks that helped them to familiarize themselves with the London food industry and acquire relevant skills.

In contrast, those still awaiting an asylum application decision tended not to engage in entrepreneurial activities compared to those with secure refugee status. One participant describes on the one hand the fears faces by the migrant resulting from their uncertain status, but also shows his resilience and strong ambition to plan for a future life in the UK:

> Because I was an asylum seeker for six years. It was uncontrollable, I'd be having a panic from everything. [] I've been thinking and preparing things. I need to do so. Okay. Hopefully I've got my status to do this, I want to do this or do this. So, now when I got my status, it was really a kick off.

Becoming an entrepreneur as part of a business community

Building a positive reputation and marketing skills

One key finding of this study is that the cookery classes represent an enabling environment that helps the chefs to position themselves in the London food community more broadly. Most chefs expressed an awareness of the need to market their performance, especially by developing a favorable online reputation such as encouraging class participants to comment on their cooking positively. One chef repeatedly asked participants to follow her social media account and give her feedback on her dishes and performance in class. In doing so, she exhibited strong entrepreneurial skills by making sure that she receives positive feedback for her classes and proactively asking participants to connect with her on social media. It is important to note here that this chef is already an entrepreneur with her own catering service and regularly uses social media to advertise her professional cooking.

Similarly, another chef sold her own-branded and created chili sauces during the class with printed-on contact and social media account details. This finding further indicates that the chefs are cognizant of the need to market themselves and are engaged in marketing their products and establishing a positive reputation as entrepreneurs. This supports observations from previous research suggesting that feedback from customers on social media plays an important role for growing refugee entrepreneurs' businesses, expanding their social network and finding new customers (Shneikat and Alrawadieh 2019). In general, it is notable that most interviewees are active in using social media to advertise their emerging or existing business and make clear efforts to build up a visible online presence as articulated by one interviewee:

> I know somebody who is active on social media, they will make a website for me or something. [] Yeah, but I am not active on social media and I don't know how to use it and you need to be always on social media and try to follow up every day. (Amina)

As shown in the case above, interviewees emphasized that they were willing to reach out to gain support from others to help them establish their business and increase its success. For those interviewees who were not proficient in using social media or online marketing, they knew somebody, often from their diasporic community or food-related network, to assist them with this. The importance of networking in setting up a business is another crucial factor in positively shaping migrants' entrepreneurial activities and is discussed in the next section.

Networking

One common feature among at least half of the interviewees is that they had started on a journey toward entrepreneurship in the food industry in London. All of the *Globalfood* chefs were to some degree part of a professional migration food network that supported them setting up their planned business. Besides *Globalfood*, two key organizations named by the respondents were *The Entrepreneurial Refugee Network* (TERN 2024) and KERB[5] that offer specific training programs and run events for forced migrants and other migrant groups to help them establish food businesses in the London food scene. Meister and Mauer (2018) underline the importance of such organizations as they offer specific business support for refugee entrepreneurs through education in the food industry, leadership training on refugee-related difficulties, networks of experts, mentoring and funding advice.

At least half of the interviewees and half of those migrants working for *Globalfood* successfully graduated from various food-specific both online and in-person training programs run by TERN or KERB. Fatima told us that she "was with them in the food empowering program. So, how to set your business, how to start, what things you have to do." She emphasized that she "was with them at the beginning." Sameed further detailed what type of entrepreneurial skills he acquired from these programs: "It's everything from building their own product, doing their own logo, how to deliver all this. But like most of these, I have done a Logo. I have it on my company page." The following quote also shows the benefits Umar gained from working with these organizations:

> I have no knowledge in business and we got the TERN training program. [] This organization they support you if you have any good idea about food. [] The KERB people do things like the food stall. Before you join them they've got certain process of the courses. Yeah, go through the course and start doing street food on a market okay. They are happy to do everything but we have to follow their rules.

At the end of each program participants receive a certificate recognizing the skills and knowledge gained from the course. These official graduation documents not only corroborate the professional cooking skills of the migrants but also instill in them a sense of pride as well as belonging to a certain professional community. During online interviews, for example, several migrants showed their certificates to the camera to stress their pride in these achievements. Although some interviewees mentioned that they relied on informal support systems upon their arrival in the UK, e.g. diasporic community or relatives, there is also a considerable awareness amongst most respondents that professional networking is essential for starting and maintaining a successful business. Business mentoring and support either from other refugee entrepreneurs or professional food-related communities are beneficial for migrants, especially those who have language or financial difficulties (Mawson and Kasem 2019). In addition, wider social networks help refugee entrepreneurs build contacts and establish access to information, products and services outside their ethnic circles (Shneikat and Alrawadieh 2019). Two respondents highlight the advantages of making use of such networks for the interviewees: "Because with TERN a lot of the network, they like to support refugee people. So they want their catering to be from the refugees." (Fatima). Mahi underlined what she learned from *Globalfood* during her training with them stating that "they show me how to measure and then they show me how to, you know, do the recipe, the writing." To improve their entrepreneurial activities, some respondents could further strengthen the skills they acquired in the cookery classes in additional training programs such as in the form of designing their own cookery classes. This is evidenced in the case of one interviewee who graduated from *Globalfood* and now runs his own cookery classes online and at different venues in collaboration with various organizations in London. In addition, some interviewees were able to take part in food stall competitions run by TERN and KERB and won prizes in the form of cash up to £10,000 or rent contracts paid for several months in popular food stall locations in London:

> Yeah, I'm working with them until now. So this £10,000 to set up our business to buy all equipment and everything you needed and to start with KERB as well in their street food markets . . . in many locations in London. (Fatima)

This finding is in alignment with previous studies that underscore the importance of food festivals and business programs and how they can be transformative for refugee entrepreneurs (Meister and Mauer 2018; Murphy 2018). Such programs can drive early stages of entrepreneurial development and business performance via enhanced networking and the creation of relationships in the respective industry. Food start-up community events run by these organizations not only equip forced migrants with training for the food

industry, but they also provide a platform to showcase refugees' talent and by doing so challenge negative portrayals of forced migrants more generally (Murphy 2018).

In contrast to this, lack of business knowledge turned out to be considerably challenging for a respondent who was not part of the professional food network. She collaborated with one independent grocery shop with a similar cultural background in West London in which she offered some home-made snacks. Without prior marketing or free samples for customers to try the newly offered products, none of these snacks were sold and were no longer fresh after a few days. The interviewee did not have any experience in food-related entrepreneurship and did not take crucial preparation steps such as carrying out a market analysis of the preferences of potential customers or existing suppliers in this area. Related to this, Kachkar (2019) identifies market access or the lack thereof as one of the key difficulties for new entrepreneurs in general but for refugees in particular as they lack experience and are in intense competition with local enterprises. Inadequate knowledge of the business environment and lack of professional networks in the host society as shown in the example above can also curtail refugees' entrepreneurial success (Meister and Mauer 2018).

In the entrepreneurship context, there is a significant need to be flexible and responsive toward the demands and needs of customers to be successful. Most of the interviewees were aware of this and were generally open to experimenting and being innovative in their cooking. The following testimony demonstrates that the respondent not only wished to open a restaurant but also imagined such a business to offer cultural gatherings and a place of social cohesion for customers and people from all walks of life:

> My idea is, we can open a place for people to come not only to eat food but they make master classes for demonstration some of their food. We can learn about other food, yes music, some histories. Yes, make some place that is not only a restaurant but like library, music place where everything is mixed together. (Maftuna)

This suggests that migrants have concrete and innovative entrepreneurial ambitions for their future careers. Furthermore, interviewees were also open to adapting their dishes to appeal to the tastes of a London-based community. Cultural food is no longer confined to the home environment, but migrants engage with various food-related sources to improve their cooking skills given that they are exposed to many more food and ingredient choices. This awareness can be seen as part of a modern lifestyle that is characterized by being exposed to cuisines other than their own since they live in London, a multicultural city. For instance, in *Globalfood's* cookery classes chefs learned to adapt to special diets by modifying their cultural dishes with respective plant-based substitutes and making sure to include vegan dishes when at least one volunteer or customer required this.

Female entrepreneurship

The importance of "female entrepreneurship" was another recurring topic particularly among the female interviewees. Most female interviewees explained that girls tend to learn cooking earlier by simply observing their mothers growing up instead of being told to actively make an effort to gain such skills in their daily lives. One interviewee explained that whilst her own mother used to be mainly responsible for culinary practices in their household, in contemporary times women have their own careers and boys and men are therefore required to learn to cook as well. Evidence of this cultural shift in gender roles was highlighted by several interviewees:

> It's mixed. Men cook, women cook. [] And also people go to university, they don't even probably have to cook.

> But now, young generation, everything is changing. Because my two years older brother, he is doing everything now. He is helping my sister in-law, everything. It's a surprise because my older brother before he didn't help my sister in-law and now he's changing.

This finding implies that there is a noticeable social shift among migrant families and the need for gender roles to adapt to women and mothers engaging in entrepreneurial activities.

One respondent, Mahi, showed particularly strong entrepreneurial ambitions and explicitly outlined that she would lead the food business whilst her husband assisted her where needed. Although her brother owns a restaurant in London, she made clear that she would prefer a business of her own and run by women, by asking her sister-in-law or best friend to become partners. She emphasized the independence of women in her country by noting that "because in our country back home, people going to say, woman going to do anything. We are improving." Her husband, Bevan, strongly supported her in this view and held the view that she can be the breadwinner of the family and said that "women can go further. Women are just not housewives. She is already the boss, everything. Yeah. If she says 'you can retire now.' I say, 'okay, I retire today.'"

This finding provides new insights into female entrepreneurship and refutes previous research e.g. by Shneikat and Alrawadieh (2019) who suggest that refugee women are less involved or likely to engage in entrepreneurial activities. The above testimonies underscore a strong entrepreneurial spirit among the female respondents and their desire to ensure a source of income for themselves and become financially independent. Similarly, Nancheva (2024) found that women ethnic food entrepreneurs often challenge the "logic of the market," reflecting multiple reasons for engagement that have to do with their identity as women and professionals, to celebrate their ethnic heritage, their need to contribute within "a realm of inspiration, community engagement and female-led innovation" (277).

Conclusion

This article focused on forced migrants' experience as emerging food entrepreneurs in their early-stage entrepreneurial activities in the London culinary scene. Our study makes several contributions to the refugee settlement and entrepreneurship literature by highlighting the critical role of food-specific networks and training programs in the establishment of refugee-led businesses in host communities.

Leading cooking classes and/or establishing their own food businesses indicates the enormous potential of forced migrants to gain new autonomy and shape the food culture outside their countries in new ways. The evidence of this study demonstrates how professional cooking for the "Western other" is experienced by chefs in the context of cookery classes and highlights that cooking acts as a point of connection and source of confidence in the settlement process of forced migrants. The classes offer an enabling environment in which chefs can talk about their own culture and reiterate their cooking expertise using food-related aspects. In this way they can differentiate themselves from a stereotypical image of a certain migrant, e.g. being vulnerable, and in doing so exercise a different power dynamic. In the role of chefs, migrants find themselves in a new micro-power relationship as they take on the role of the class leader who "sets the tone" by hosting the class, supervising volunteers and showcasing dishes from their cultural cuisine. A sense of "togetherness" was found to be essential for interviewees both in their daily eating habits and when cooking for others, as they associate food as a collective experience and being part of a certain cultural community.

These findings offer a new interpretation of migrants as leaders in contrast to existing negative connotations associated with their diasporas. In particular, the descriptions concerning female entrepreneurs in this study refute the stereotyped images of migrant women as primarily stay-at-home mothers. Overall, the cooking class environment offers novel ways for forced migrants to reframe their personal agency by valuing their own perspectives and using food as a means of breaking down social barriers and fostering a sense of belonging between them and members of the host society.

The study further suggests that support from organizations that provide a professional network and food-related training as well as mentoring, is significant for forced migrants' early entrepreneurial activities and helps them prepare for and sustain participation in the food-specific landscape of business owners in London. These findings enhance understanding of new ways of community building between migrants and British citizens and add empirical evidence to the willingness of forced migrants to contribute economically to the welfare of themselves and the host communities. The findings therefore refute the typical stereotype of displaced people as a population dependent on aid and relief that constitutes a burden on host countries.

Limitations identified in this study include the small sample size, with the majority being supported by one organization - *GlobalFood*. Consequently, the narratives discussed in this study cannot represent the diverse range of forced migrants and their food-related entrepreneurial experience across the UK. However, the small sample size is typical for an interpretative approach and there are no claims made for generalizability.

Despite these limitations, several key points are proposed as evidence for the usefulness of the study to understanding the benefits of entrepreneurship in the food industry for creating a sense of belonging and purpose for forced migrants. The conclusions of the interviews and ethnographic observations present a coherent and convincing interpretation of the experience of chefs with forced migration experience leading cookery classes and setting up their own businesses. These analyses offer vivid descriptions and useful points for understanding the distinctive experiences of refugees in the early stages of entrepreneurship, and a snapshot of the experiences of forced migrants working in the urban London food sector. Overall, the analysis reveals that professional cooking embedded in a refugee-specific network acts as a universalizing connection point for forced migrants and a means to foster solidarity between them and the host community. We believe that these findings help make sense of the increasing evidence of refugee entrepreneurs and their independence as well as the potential to overcome cultural divides and stereotypes through food.

The study argues for the need for further research on refugee entrepreneurship in other towns and countries to identify and compare experiences of successes and failure. Policymakers and local governments in host countries should do more to support food-related organizations and networks and help emerging refugee entrepreneurs economically benefit the local communities and foster their own long-term settlement.

Notes

1. The expression "forced migrants" is used here interchangeably with "asylum seekers" and "refugees" as these populations refer to individuals who were forced to leave their country of origin for reasons such as conflict, and are no longer protected by their country of origin.
2. A pseudonym is used for this social enterprise to protect the identity of the chefs and interviewees.
3. Pseudonyms are used for the research participants to protect their identity.
4. The selected quotes are presented as they were recorded in the interviews and thus might.
   include grammatical or other phrasing errors.
5. The name KERB is based on the founder's initial idea to bring together previously unorganized.

street food stalls in London and promote the vision to enjoy delicious food on the "kerbs"/streets of London (KERB 2024).

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