

SOLIDARITY WITH REFUGEES IN PORTUGAL: A COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH

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The so-called refugee crisis encouraged the expression of different forms of solidarity and activism, opposing increasingly oppressive asylum policies. New solidarity movements and social participation projects were created, stimulated by the relationships established between newcomers and civil society. However, grassroots refugee activism seems to have remained less visible, despite its frontline support in crucial areas such as language interpretation and mediation. Refugee activists are regarded as fundamental sources of support; but they usually assume a secondary role in solidarity projects. Some remain as volunteers for years, despite submitting their own projects and filling important gaps in the institutional support system. This article, a co-production between a researcher in Anthropology and two refugee activists leading an association exclusively formed by refugees (União de Refugiados em Portugal- UREP) reflects about refugees' informal solidarity networks. The three authors will be looking into the solidarity arising between refugee activists and newly arrived refugees, underlining how it emerged from specific problems created by gaps in the institutional support system. In writing collaboratively, the authors expect to shed light on the daily struggles of refugee activists and to enrich the academic debate with the shared reflections that have emerged from a collective community-based work.

Keywords: Refugees, informal solidarity, activism, collaborative research

1. Introduction

Nihil de nobis, sine nobis (nothing about us, without us). This slogan was quoted in the public campaign 'Your Vote, Our Future'¹, where UREP (*União de Refugiados em Portugal*) participated as member of the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE). The campaign was launched to call the attention of European voters to the importance of European Parliament candidates' views on migration and asylum.

Before 2015, little was known about refugees in Portugal, and most Portuguese were unaware of the existence of refugees in the country (Vacchiano, 2018; Costa & Sousa, 2017). Over the last

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¹ <https://www.infomigrants.net/fr/post/16227/a-vote-on-the-future-for-europe-s-refugees>

40 years, between 1975 and 2015, Portugal received 17,769 asylum applications (including families), granting 1,605 people refugee status and humanitarian protection (Costa & Sousa, 2017). As of 2015, the entry of more asylum seekers in Europe, particularly through Greece and Italy, raised awareness about their situation and prompted the engagement of civil society and institutions. The European Commission set up a new “European Agenda on Migration” which, in spite of its largely dissuasive nature (Vacchiano, 2015) established a specific measure aimed at relocating 40,000 asylum seekers hosted in Italy and Greece into other European countries (Vacchiano, 2015). The relocation program created by the European Union in May 2015 had the purpose of “sharing the burden” (which translated into refugees’ admission) between Member-States and through it, Portugal offered to receive 10,000 refugees (Vacchiano, 2018). Although visibility and economic self-interest could have been the underlying motivations for this generosity (Vacchiano, 2018), a genuine surge of solidarity and ethical participation was key to this political measure. While announcements of upcoming arrivals multiplied, Portugal was able to show (even if modest) willingness to keep receiving refugees. Be it at institutional or civil society level, the public position assumed by Portugal contrasts with that of countries like Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic or Bulgaria, which have shown great hostility from the onset of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’. So far, in Portugal, the reception of refugees is object of both political and social consensus, with very marginal contestation in public opinion, even amidst the rise of extreme right parties in neighbour countries. ‘It is true that Portugal has been on the right side of history, but the good intentions and the constant good ‘publicity’ shared by governmental institutions dealing with refugees is actually masking the bureaucratic complications which Portugal still needs to deal with, in integration policies’ (Mubarak Hussein, UREP).

According to the European Social Survey (ESS)² concerning the degree of openness to refugees, Portugal is one of the countries whose population most agrees with the statement that “the government should be considerate in the assessment of applications for refugee status”. ESS data show that European publics became significantly more negative towards refugees after the so-called crisis, the overall percentage favouring generosity falling from 41% in 2014/15 to 35% in 2016/17; while four countries – Ireland, Portugal, Lithuania and the UK – became more positive.

The percentage of refugees who remain in Portugal after their initial admission is, however, low when compared to other EU countries (about 45% in 2017; according to the High Commissioner for Migration)³; that is, many chose to leave the country (Santinho, 2017). One of the explanations given by resident refugees is the precarious living conditions associated to the country’s support programs⁴. During the 18 months granted by the Portuguese Government for new coming refugees to “integrate”, there are several practical barriers and hardships in accessing basic rights. Some of the obstacles have to do with an objective lack of resources (including, very few job opportunities, housing crisis in Portuguese cities, limited support staff available in state institutions, healthcare services’ gaps, lack of interpreters and cultural mediators) (Santinho, 2017; Ribeiro, 2017). Other issues concern the coordination between agencies (public services are poorly linked to each other and do not offer a holistic follow-up of refugees and asylum seekers) (Ribeiro, 2017). As a result, many feel unsupported and do not receive the services they are entitled to (for

² <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/> (2018)

³ https://www.acm.gov.pt/documents/10181/27754/Relatorio_Acolhimento+Pessoas+Refugiadas_Dez.2017.pdf/d21546b3-7588-483d-92a3-fa8185d61b5b

⁴ <https://www.newsdeeply.com/refugees/articles/2017/09/01/portugal-offers-refugees-a-warm-welcome-but-cant-get-them-to-stay>

example, very few refugees and asylum seekers are engaged in regular Portuguese language courses) (Ribeiro, 2017). These difficulties have implications in refugees' integration, well-being, autonomy, agency and control over their lives (Santinho, 2017; Ribeiro, 2017). When looking into official statistics and national reports published by the High Commissioner for Migration (ACM), since 2015 up to now; and contrasting them with the observations of voluntary workers and researchers in Portugal (Santinho, 2017; Vacchiano, 2015; Vacchiano, 2018; Ribeiro, 2017; Costa & Sousa, 2017); we realized that part of the refugees who are officially registered as 'integrated' in Portugal⁵ are actually in situations of precarious employment (temporary jobs or part-time contracts); precarious accommodation (substandard rooms, searching for apartment, struggling to keep the current accommodation) and/or facing other practical difficulties. Furthermore, most employed refugees in Portugal are engaged in non-specialized work, even if they attended higher education before or had previous professional careers (Santinho, 2017).

With the conclusion of the relocation program in 2018, Portugal continued to admit refugee families under the UNHCR's resettlement program in Egypt and Turkey. These families arrived to Portugal with a prearranged legal status and were then granted 18 months of social support and follow-up by host institutions⁶. Some of these families, particularly those who are placed in less populated areas of the country, find it hard to communicate about their problems, to find means of subsistence, to rent a suitable house, to access healthcare and education. 'The difficulties and misunderstandings come up in their everyday routines: when they try to access medical care; when their children are unable to attend school because 'it's the middle of the schools' term' year' or 'there are no vacancies nearby'; when they can't develop their Portuguese skills because 'there are no available classes after beginners' level' or 'the teaching method is not efficient'; when they search for mental healthcare but "there isn't any provider available', or 'there are no interpreters'; when their monthly budget runs out and there is no one to help them get through the end of the month, etc' (Ahmed Abdullah, UREP).

UREP is a non-profit association formed exclusively by refugees and former refugees in 2013, with the goal of improving their inclusion and integration in Portugal. UREP works through informal and voluntary solidarity ('refugees helping refugees' is their motto). They support asylum seekers and refugees that have recently arrived in Portugal and are in need of information, guidance, mentoring, interpretation, referral to specialized assistance and many other needs. Since 2018, UREP has also been a part of *Fórum Refúgio*, a platform that gathers five refugee support associations in a common working space. The goal of *Fórum Refúgio* is to increase representation and coordination between grassroots' organizers, to engage in common projects, and to share available resources. Ahmed Abdullah, co-author of the present article, has been the President of UREP since its onset in 2013. He is a Portuguese citizen and a former refugee who became an example for the refugee community in Portugal. Mubarak Hussein is also a Portuguese citizen and former refugee. He has become a representative of the refugee community at UREP through the coordination of several projects at the national and international levels. Dora Rebelo is a Portuguese systemic psychologist, currently a PhD candidate in Anthropology at ISCTE-IUL in

⁵ Official integration indicators measured by the High Commissioner for Migration (ACM) are: access to healthcare, access to Portuguese language classes, access to education, access to documentation, number of births in national territory, number of people who are employed or attending professional training and number people with Social Security number (NISS) and fiscal number (NIF).

⁶<https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2018/12/5c1a0d624/first-resettled-refugees-arrive-portugal-under-new-scheme.html>

Lisbon. She is doing research on informal solidarity networks with refugees and asylum seekers in Portugal. During her first two years of research, she volunteered with different associations responsible for hosting and promoting the integration of refugees in Lisbon. In the process, she met Mubarak Hussein and Ahmed Abdullah, who helped her understand the dynamics of refugee support in the city. UREP had just started a partnership with a local association of volunteers to develop ‘*Ayamuna - Our Day*’, a project through which refugees from different countries organize intercultural events to show their traditional heritage through food, music and dance. The three co-authors have been doing collaborative work ever since. A formal working relationship was established in November 2018, aimed at reflecting on the everyday practices of informal solidarity and advocacy offered through UREP and this is their first joint paper. The collaborative work is sustained by an idea of reciprocity that was established from the onset: the authors are interested in exchanging experiences and knowledge, as well as in reflecting together about solidarity in Portugal.

‘Reciprocity describes the respectful nature of good research relationships and exchanges that are essential in participatory and other types of research’ (Maiter, Simich, Jacobson, & Wise, 2008, p. 307). To implement a participatory research based on reciprocity, the authors established an agreement (MOU-memorandum of understanding) based on their mutual trust and a common belief on civic engagement and solidarity. The authors also reflected on their different positionings, responsibilities and roles in the collaborative research, sharing personal interests and collective goals. Dora Rebelo is interested in merging academic knowledge with activist engagement, assuming herself as an ally in the struggle of refugee activists. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (1999) called attention to what he believed has become a *crisis of legitimacy* in universities. He pointed out that academic works in social sciences were responding to non-fundamental problems and disconnecting academia from the ‘real world’. To counteract this generalized tendency, he proposed a few essential measures: 1) the need to break away from hegemonic scientific knowledge, including more community-based wisdom in research; 2) the need to democratize university through a transformation in the structures of power, and through the creation of diverse communities who can interpret scientific knowledge and link it to common-sense thinking, thus leading to a more confrontational approach to social problems at the local, national and international levels (Santos, 1999). The goals of this particular research are not as ambitious as those stated by Santos, but the authors have been inspired by this urge to democratize knowledge and to promote a dialogue between the academia and civil society.

Ahmed Abdullah and Mubarak Hussein, both participating in this endeavour as UREP representatives, want to find new ways to voice the concerns of refugees in Portugal, engaging civil society and the academia in the process. In fact, UREP and *Fórum Refugio* have been promoting debates with Portuguese academia since the beginning of their activism. On the launching of *Fórum Refugio* in December 2018, a new initiative called *Academias na Mesa* (Academia at the table) was introduced to Portuguese civil society by inviting scholars, researchers and academics to reflect on the subject of solidarity with refugees.

The authors situate their collaborative work in the intersection between community-based psychology, anthropology and empirical knowledge. Drawing from anthropology and community-based psychology, it is indisputable that the questioning of the researchers’ own motives (be they social scientists or activists) is a key starting point to any critical collaborative research. When a research aims to bring visibility, political incidence or critical consciousness to a subject where there are unequal powers and unequal access to social rights, the obligation to create mutual respect and dignity demands looking at each other with genuine interest, without unrealistic expectations

or control over the process. Establishing a collaborative research as a framework to achieve shared interpretations of knowledge implies a permanent questioning of ethics, politics and relationships between collaborators, inviting formerly-called ‘informants’ to become co-producers of a newly-formed, shared knowledge. The field from which we engage in this collaborative work can be defined as ‘translocality’, that is, a place characterized by the fact that people move through it, rather than residing in it (Appadurai, 1996). This term envisions the contemporary relations between people, place and community, which are shaped by desires, aspirations, agency and cosmopolitan possibilities, as well as participation in imagined communities of sentiment (Appadurai, 1995; 1996).

This article is a concrete output of this collaborative endeavour. The three authors will be looking into the solidarity arising between refugee activists and newly arrived refugees, underlining how it emerged from specific problems created by gaps in the institutional support system. In doing so, they will present two case examples to illuminate the main issues at stake. The final aim of this collaborative writing experience is to shed light on the daily struggles of refugee activists and to enrich the academic debate with the shared reflections emerging from a collective community-based work.

2. A transdisciplinary community psychology approach to collaborative research

Stark (2019) argues that, if community psychology wants to play an important role in shaping the future of our societies, the field needs to readjust from a traditional model of psychological discipline to a systemic and transdisciplinary social science. This includes moving towards social networks within civil society (citizen groups, local and global coalitions and alliances) at the local level and beyond (Stark, 2019). Empowerment is a ‘tired’ concept that has been guiding researchers in community psychology throughout the years, not only to promote inclusion, but to guarantee that communities are active participants in academic research. Originally, Rappaport (1985) established that empowerment is a process by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their affairs. Consequently, empowerment will look different for different people, organizations, and contexts. This idea underlines the need to displace the research from the researcher; that is, to whatever extent possible, presuppositions are to be shared openly between researcher, intervener, target of the intervention and the readers (Rappaport, 1977). Applying an empowerment perspective means that the people of concern are to be treated as collaborators; and at the same time, the researcher may be thought of as a participant, legitimately involved with the people he/she is studying. The researcher, in this way, may be more like an anthropologist and action researcher (Rappaport, 1985; Rappaport, 1987).

Collective methodologies and attempts to break with academic hegemonic thought, bureaucratic hierarchies and divisions caused by different ‘specializations’ resulted in community-led critical methodologies. Conceptually, community psychology has always oriented itself towards a systemic view of social dynamics in the world by integrating community, organizational and societal levels of analysis (Trickett, 2009; Trickett & Beehler, 2013). Because the idea of community psychology is transdisciplinary by nature, its identity – especially in Europe – bears a wide variety of regional and individual scholarly stories and tries to integrate personal value

systems and scientifically-based interdisciplinary research and practice within its boundaries (Stark, 2019).

Social networks, families, local communities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) already are and will be challenged by: a) continuing global migration processes and their effects on local communities, b) the (psycho)social consequences of (man-made) environmental crises, c) the need to adjust to considerable demographic changes, and d) the quest for new social justice in the world (Stark, 2019). Collaborative interventions provide an opportunity to increase citizen involvement and community betterment, the development of new norms regarding how problems should be approached, increase the resource value of interpersonal networks and create conditions for multiple voices, fresh perspectives and political participation (Trickett, 2009).

The ecological perspective reflects the interconnectedness of different components of a collaborative system, which call for multiple levels of analysis (Trickett & Beehler, 2013). As Richard, Gauvin, and Raine (2011; Trickett & Beehler, 2013) pointed out: ‘what matters here is the construction that participants, including observers and those being observed, make of their own contexts’ (p. 311). This perspective underlines the importance of diverse perspectives, from different community representatives, and challenges researchers to appreciate different stances in the identification of local causes and manifestations of inequities (Richard et al, 2011; Trickett & Beehler, 2013). The ecological perspective also understands that the relationships established during community-based interventions are themselves influential aspects through their effects on both intervention processes and outcomes (Hawe, Shiell, & Riley, 2009; Trickett & Beehler, 2013).

From this viewpoint, the development of a cognitive map of the ecological systems in which the participatory intervention occurs can help to identify internal influences. Working in grassroots organizations and community-based associations has the advantage of helping collect what Nora Bateson refers to as ‘warm data’ (Bateson, 2017). The idea of warm data is to co-create ‘cultural-epistemological responsibility’ (Bateson, 2017), that is, in understanding that science and culture are entwined, we could develop useful input by keeping our observers’ frames relevant. Statistics and general data from social sciences are based on an ‘extraction’ of individuals from their contexts: to analyse and make interpretations, social scientists decontextualize the everyday lives of individuals in their inter-relational spaces. Warm data, as described by Bateson (2017), situates themselves within a transcontextual research methodology, bringing multiple contexts into the analysis. In order to interface with a complex system without disrupting the cohesion of interdependencies that give it integrity, Bateson invites researchers to focus on the relationships that create the system and look for “the pattern that connects” (Bateson, 2017).

2.1 Methodology

The relationship between Dora Rebelo – an outsider to the system but also an engaged researcher, Ahmed Abdullah and Mubarak Hussein – insiders and ‘local collaborators’, is part of an ecology that will be affecting the collective reflection and the outcomes written in this paper. Dora Rebelo has the role of ‘voluntary worker’ when it comes to community intervention, following the requests and problem-prioritization identified by Ahmed Abdullah and Mubarak Hussein (as community representatives). Her role changes to ‘researcher’ when it comes to writing and describing the shared opinions and points of view, while Ahmed Abdullah and Mubarak Hussein contribute to the written reflections and become co-producers by reviewing all the notes.

Dora Rebelo takes the lead in transforming the conversations into writing material that could be of interest for the academia, while Ahmed Abdullah and Mubarak Hussein choose the topics that better connect to their everyday struggles. These ecological dynamics share a number of commitments that are common to the model of participatory research (Trickett and Beehler, 2017). In participatory action research (PAR) there is a concern to present a transparent and democratic inquiry (Guishard, 2009). PAR calls for a community-based research process, which puts citizens in an active role as researchers of their local and regional environment (Stark, 2019). In order to reach a balanced and equitable methodology, participatory research needs to map its own ‘community footprints’ (Trickett & Beehler, 2017). Co-creating reflections on identified community problems can help to develop resources for present and future problem-solving, thus influencing positive change (Trickett, 2009).

According to this approach, the research method that was drafted for this collaboration combines ethnography and community-based intervention. As an anthropology researcher, Dora Rebelo committed herself to the role of recording the shared moments of reflection and community work, while describing in detail the different positionings and points of view held by each participant. Shared knowledge, ongoing reflection and community-based interventions are under the responsibility of the three authors, although Mubarak Hussein and Ahmed Abdullah, as UREP representatives, are the ones in the front line of all community-based work and, therefore, the ones contributing with the most relevant empirical knowledge. In this paper the authors present two case examples that reflect this methodology.

2.2. Integrating empirical knowledge and theoretical choices

Our first conversation about collaborative work reflected on personal views and experiences in systems of solidarity with refugees. Ahmed Abdullah explained the history of UREP association, his struggle to keep the association alive over the past years, and UREP’s collective vision for the future. ‘We were created as a network of refugees who want to help other refugees, and we want to always stay that way’ (Ahmed Abdullah). Before this talk, Mubarak Hussein had been in Serbia, where he came across a local association that owned a centre run by a collective of Serbian and refugee youth. This model inspired him to envision something similar for Portugal, which would involve civil society, activists who support refugees, and the community of asylum seekers and refugees residing in the country. Dora Rebelo discussed her interest in informal solidarity networks as an alternative to previous experiences in the humanitarian world, where she felt a double bind in the relationship with refugees: humanitarian organizations place impossible expectations on the capacity of aid workers to embody neutrality. Refugees are expected to be cared for, as individuals, while humanitarian policies address them as faceless, suffering bodies, deprived of socio-political agency.

Prior to this collaboration, UREP had been developing several partnerships with civil society individuals and collectives for many years. One of the barriers that Ahmed Abdullah identifies as the main hindrance to achieving collective goals is the lack of autonomy in the control of resources. UREP’s partnerships with several individuals and organizations, some of which are still active to this day, lack the necessary independence for UREP to implement the projects they envision, as a collective. ‘We don’t want refugees to be utilized; we want them to have the autonomy and independence to decide what they want to do by themselves’ (Mubarak Hussein). The world of refugee activists is lived between two parallel realities, as reflected by Ahmed Abdullah and

Mubarak Hussein: ‘On the one hand, we are community representatives, we know all institutions and organizations that play a role in the management of refugees’ lives. On the other hand, we are activists. We hear several complaints, difficulties and problems (some of which are generated by institutions we’ve partnered with) first-hand and on a daily basis’. As refugee activists, they find themselves challenged by the fine lines that separate representation, mediation, and activism.

With these and other identified community challenges in mind, the three of us decided that our collaborative research would be based in observing and registering the everyday practices of informal support at UREP, while working together in matters that required collective support (mediation, advocacy and intervention). Our routine activity included meeting every week with two objectives in mind: 1) update and develop ongoing solidarity initiatives, and 2) reflect together on the current status of UREP as informal solidarity provider, caught between representation, mediation and activism. We kept a diary of ‘field notes’, which includes both a description of all our initiatives and the shared reflections produced during weekly meetings. We kept record of the cases under regular support, describing the obstacles that were found in accessing services, the everyday barriers and problems addressed and the relationships established to find solutions. We describe two case examples that were retrieved from these field notes, and that we consider particularly relevant for the evidence they provide.

3. Results

3.1 Case Example I: Lisa

Lisa (fictional name) is a thirty-two-year-old performer seeking asylum in Portugal since November 2018. Her first interactions with the Employment Office exemplify some of the Portuguese bureaucratic contradictions. Lisa, who has worked as an artist all her life, was offered a training program in a cleaning company, which would give her the opportunity to have a job within three months. She expressed that she had no interest in cleaning, nor had she ever worked as a cleaner; however, she had more than 10 years of experience as an artist and a performer. The Employment Officer dismissed her CV and told her that working as an artist in Portugal would be extremely hard, but that she could use her regular knowledge on domestic chores to get a ‘real job’ and pay for her expenses. Lisa said that she did not usually perform any domestic chores at home and had no interest in following this suggestion. The Employment Officer expressed that her refusal demonstrated unwillingness to comply with her duties as an asylum seeker. This event set up ‘a sentiment of distrust and frustration’ in the Portuguese institutions, as expressed by Lisa.

Fast forward to six months later, Lisa was granted temporary visa to stay in Portugal and was informed that from then on, she would be ‘under the responsibility’ of ISS (*Instituto de Segurança Social*- a.k.a. social services). She had no official meeting with her assigned social worker, but she was informed by letter that she was expected to find a job and a house, having the right to receive a monthly stipend of 273€ until she could support herself. At that time, Lisa was finishing a training course through which she met other refugees and volunteers that helped her start an artistic project. When she was preparing her first public performances, she was notified that, within three days, she was to be transferred to a small village in southern Portugal. Lisa tried to reverse this situation with the social worker, but the official answer from ISS was that she signed a consent form, eight months before, stating that ‘she accepted, if granted permission to stay in the country, a relocation

to a different region'. Lisa did not speak any Portuguese at that time, nor was she aware of her right to refuse signing such paper (she assumed that she had to sign every paper proposed by the Portuguese social services, to keep her support active). In despair, she contacted her informal network.

A letter was drafted to the social worker, explaining Lisa's pathway and professional interests. The letter described how she was just starting to establish a social and artistic network in Lisbon and called the attention of ISS to the fact that her departure into a small village would be detrimental, not only to her professional future, but to her personal well-being. The social worker replied in purely legal terms: as per the legal obligations of ISS with Lisa, as soon as she signed a consent to be moved, she accepted the transference. The only 'loophole' that the social worker accepted, temporarily, was the fact that Lisa had a job interview scheduled for the next day. Under the agreement between asylum seekers and social security services, if they can find a job and support themselves, they can decide where to live (as long as they find accommodation). However, refugees in Portugal are exposed to a contextual economic crisis, including a recent 'housing crisis' in Lisbon's metropolitan area. After the economic crisis of 2008, Portugal has been slowly recovering from its debt to the International Monetary Fund, relying strongly on the exponential growth of tourism. Renting houses to tourists and rebuilding city-centre apartments into small hostels and short-term rentals has become the main source of income for many landlords. In Lisbon and Porto, many foreigners have been investing in real estate and buying residential apartments, contributing to an overall increase in leases, rentals and real estate value. Refugees have been caught in the middle, and many are struggling to rent their own home, while solidarity institutions seem unable to find sustainable solutions. Reception centres, where most refugees stay upon arrival, are inappropriate for longer stays as facilities were designed for only short periods of residence; however refugees sometimes stay for more than 18 months, unable to find alternative housing. Aside from the expected difficulties in find a house, once an appropriate place is actually identified, it's still hard to guarantee a contract, as landlords usually demand a guarantor, two to three months' worth of advance payment, and evidence of a stable job through the presentation of a legal contract, or recommendation letters from previous landlords.

Once again recurring to her own informal networks, Lisa found a room that she was able to afford, using the monthly stipend set by social services. Through her own social networks, she continued to write letters to the social worker, updating her situation and showing that she had clear and realistic goals for her career, which were only feasible if she stayed in Lisbon. After two weeks of 'insistence', her request to stay in Lisbon was formally accepted by the Social Services.

Lisa's situation demonstrates how sometimes refugees achieve their goals *despite* the obstacles posed by the system; rather than being supported by the system. While reflecting upon this case example, we realized that some of the most 'mediatic' refugees in Portugal established their own businesses or entered university using their own resources and merit; yet their success is often pointed out as a 'national example' of how effective integration in Portugal really is. Refugees with success stories tend to be 'portrayed' at multiple public events, not to share their points of view or critical perspectives on the situations they've been through, but to share their 'final outcomes' and show gratefulness in public. Mubarak Hussein and Ahmed Abdullah reflect about multiple occasions where they were invited to be a part of a congress or a debate, expecting to talk about their struggle and activism; ending up being solicited to speak out as 'integrated refugees'. 'It's as if we're seen first and foremost as a 'category' and our other individual roles as citizens, as activists and representatives, remains invisible'. By requesting refugees to present their bodies as a 'public story of integration', institutions (sometimes well-intended) essentialise refugees'

identities. The excessive focus on ‘success stories’ seems to purposefully ignore the struggle of the majority of refugees, dealing with adaptation problems, power imbalance and structural violence.

Lisa’s situation showed us how refugees and asylum seekers’ identity, personality and agency are overlooked by the normative institutional support system. By choosing to ‘inform’ rather than propose alternative solutions for refugees’ lives, institutions keep the *status quo* of power imbalance. Once they are granted a status, most refugees try to move on with their lives, focus on their personal goals, engage in professional careers and contribute to the society that has taken them in. But institutional practices seem to ignore the challenges of adjusting to a completely new context. Support workers pressure refugees to find jobs, but they seldom make the necessary efforts to help them look for a job, according to refugees’ interests, experience and/or personal abilities. Ahmed Abdullah and Mubarak Hussein witnessed situations where refugees were suddenly ‘presented’ with a job offer by support workers that had never spoken to them. ‘Some refugees called us saying they were expected to start a job earning 120 euros per month, working in agriculture, and they did know whether they had the option to refuse it’. Institutions seem not only to ignore refugees’ own wishes and priorities, but to pose them obstacles. In Lisa’s case, after so many years deprived of using her skills and pursuing her aspirations, it was exactly at the moment when she was finally restarting her artistic life that institutions “reminded” her of the subaltern position she occupied in the system.

3.2. Case example II: Ali

In January 2019 Ahmed Abdullah received a phone call from a refugee we shall call *Ali* (fictional name), settled in a city in northern Portugal. Ali called UREP after trying to work out his situation with his social worker, the institutional representative responsible for Ali’s integration plan. The following description is based on our common understanding of Ali’s situation, after debate and discussion of the case, as well as after listening to his social worker’s perspective over the phone. We admit that our shared views might not be seen as fair or complete by other people involved in the case. Nonetheless, we dare to expose them, underlining the importance of amplifying the voice of the people with less opportunities to express themselves.

Ali is under the category of “Returnee” (a designation given to refugees who are obliged to return to the first host country after fleeing to another European country, as per the Dublin Regulation). Ali was initially relocated to Portugal from Greece, with his wife and four children, back in 2015. Due to several difficulties adjusting to their new life in Portugal, Ali and his family fled to Germany in 2016, where they stayed for a few months. Ali ended up divorcing his wife and decided to bring his four children back to Portugal in 2018. As a recently divorced father, responsible for four children, Ali struggled with his re-adaptation to Portugal, describing many daily hurdles in simple routine tasks, like grocery shopping (shopping with four children was hard, and leaving the house with small unattended children was unthinkable). As a full-time caretaker with no previous experience, and still adjusting to a recent separation, he found it almost impossible to find a compatible job. His daily struggles with the social worker involved many bureaucratic details and routine disputes, such as the amount of money he spent on utilities. Ali’s family was settled in an apartment which was under the responsibility and management of the host institution. Holding a clear position of power over Ali, his utility bills were found to be ‘too expensive’ by his social worker. Initially, Ali was verbally warned by the social worker that he

would have to cut down his utility expenses, by trying to save energy. Ali claims he couldn't change his daily routine, with four children in the house, daily baths, daily cooking, taking care of the regular domestic chores, morning through night, etc. As the invoices kept coming with perceived excessive costs for the institution, the social worker claimed he was instructed by his supervisors to have Ali pay for the bills himself. As Ali did not have a job, the only way he could do that would be to discount on his social benefits. The social worker tried to make an informal agreement with Ali, asking him to pay for all his past utility bills over the next three months through regular deductions from his social benefits. Ali refused to sign such agreement, and in great distress called UREP to help him sort out the problem.

Without any available translator to help him communicate with the Portuguese institutions, Ali saw himself helpless and under pressure to comply with rules that he could not comprehend. At UREP, Ahmed Abdullah was the interlocutor receiving the complaint, later sharing the situation with Dora Rebelo and Mubarak Hussein. We decided to intervene together; first by calling the social worker. Dora Rebelo called the social worker in the presence of Ahmed Abdullah and Mubarak Hussein, lending her native Portuguese language skills to clarify the position stated by Ali and to hear out the position held by the host institution. The phone call was revealing in many different aspects, the most significant being the positions of privilege and power held by the social worker. His personal opinion was at times used as reference to justify decisions that were taken under the institutional guise. For instance, the social worker stated that he believed 'Ali was not making an effort to integrate' and was 'purposefully spending all the electricity he could, because he saw him with the window open and the heating on many times'. His justifications were in the lines of 'we have been trying to educate him about this, but he refuses to change'. The moral views of the social worker, he claimed, were shared by the whole host institution's administration. They 'all' perceived Ali as a 'difficult case' ever since he came back to Portugal, as a divorced father of four minors. Dora Rebelo asked the social worker about the available psychosocial support to the family, thinking about Ali's recent separation and his new role as the sole caretaker of 4 children. According to the social worker, a psychologist offered Ali her support, but he told her that he 'didn't want any support'. When asked if the psychologist had any interpreter available to help her communicate with Ali, the social worker admitted that there wasn't any available on the spot (there are phone interpreters available remotely, but this is certainly not an ideal situation for a psychological or even social intervention). The phone conversation went on to clarify two problems, identified by the three of us in many other cases: 1) there is a mismatch between the perceived reality of refugees by institutions and the reality shared by refugees with their informal networks; 2) the power and privilege held by host institutions can become a form of structural violence.

Ali's specific situation was followed up by a series of official letters to all stakeholders responsible for his family's integration in Portugal. After one month of UREP'S informal mediation, Ali was offered the opportunity to become autonomous: he would receive an amount of social benefits which corresponded to the full cost of his integration plan, which would then allow him to search for a new house and take on full responsibility for his own integration from then on. He accepted after discussing the pros and cons with Ahmed Abdullah, declaring that he felt much happier without the direct dependency on an institution, even if that option was harder in many practical ways. Ali has since remarried and found a job. He continues to live in Portugal with his re-constituted family.

Many other cases have not had such a fortunate conclusion; at least not yet. UREP receives regular phone calls from individuals and families across the country, who are facing problems

related to fails and/or gaps in the institutional support system. UREP subsists with donations and therefore funding is not always available to help refugees that present these urgent needs. In some occasions, Ahmed Abdullah and Mubarak Hussein donated money from their own pockets, to sort out family emergency situations (e.g. to transport a family from a village in Portugal to Lisbon, to pay for a family's utilities' bills to avoid power or water cuts, to purchase food and other basic items to ensure a family's survival until the end of the month). For Ahmed Abdullah these are 'moral obligations'. As the president of UREP, he feels responsible to give an immediate answer where institutional support fails. His aim was always to connect refugees with institutions, making sure they access their rightful services and benefits; but the response from institutions usually has a different 'timing' than the one demanded by these pressing situations. 'At UREP we have no Saturday, no Sunday, no 'after-work' schedule. We sometimes answer phone calls at 3 a.m. because we know they can be emergencies.' This flexibility comes at a cost: 'we are constantly tired and sometimes need to make personal sacrifices to help others. We do it because we believe that this is important. Because we've been in their shoes before and we know how it feels' (Ahmed Abdullah).

4. Shared reflections: effects of structural violence in refugees' lives

Nixon (2014) points out that there is a natural phenomenon of 'slow violence' taking place in communities. This notion articulates the idea of structural violence as described by Paul Farmer and John Galtung (Galtung, 1969; Farmer, 2005; Mahar, 2016; Fontanari & Borri, 2017). Structural violence encompasses the systematic ways through which some individuals are more likely to become neglected or targeted by violent practices than others. Slow violence (Nixon, 2014; Fontanari & Borri, 2017) is a process of subtle suffering that affects individuals in their process of integration into an unequal society where they are at social disadvantage (in this case, as refugees). Structural violence goes hand in hand with slow violence, but this latter concept underlines the process through which suffering can go unnoticed and undetectable in societies where inclusion and integration are supposedly contemplated by the institutional practices (Fontanari & Borri, 2017). The difficulties in gaining access to everyday needs such as healthcare, livelihood, and education, due to subtle barriers such as language, bureaucracy and discrimination, are examples of this unnoticed reality. The data presented by Governmental institutions such as the High Commissioner for Migration, in order to inform integration policies and furnish decision-making outputs are 'cold data' (Bateson, 2017), deprived of the idiosyncrasies and interconnections which make each *refugee case* unique. The national monitoring systems on refugee integration moulded a faceless crowd into a manageable set of typecasts that can be processed quantitatively. Once a refugee searches for a job, like in Lisa's case, a limited set of possibilities is offered through a normative system, based on previously set stereotypes. One refugee looking to find his own way into the job market might become stuck at an employment centre where she/he is expected to quickly 'fit' into something fast and predictable. Put it differently, there is no space for individuality in a system of cold data (Bateson, 2017).

Beyond the name, country of origin, profession and 'integration steps still absent in the plan', there is little space for any agency and creativity. These are some of the ways through which the State exercises its disciplinary power over the bodies of refugees; rendering them 'useful and docile' (Foucault, 2003). Regulating patterns of life through actions of biopolitics, exercised over

the bodies of refugees (e.g., registering them, taking their fingerprints, making them sign integration plans, discouraging their aspirations and keeping them under the eternal scrutiny of institutions) represent a subliminal sense of ‘duty’, by state institutions, to protect the repressive policies of the governing State. Overt violence can manifest blatant abuse and confrontation, whereas indirect violence is manifested through different indirect ways like cultural beliefs, practices and subtle relational attitudes performed by institutional workers; all of which cause harm. Some of these interactions require particularly careful attention: the neglect or denial of services can do as much or even more harm than direct confrontation or overt violence. For example, withholding access to water, power, medication or food can contribute to a slow mental deterioration and humiliation that might go unnoticed but is a clear account of damage (Fontanari, 2017).

Looking at the everyday practices of refugees trying to cope with this scenario of structural violence, we can focus our attention on how they manage to produce new social and political spaces (Fontanari & Borri, 2017). Subjectivity and intersubjectivity between refugees, activists and not, is in itself an opposition to the rigidity and normative imposition of institutional practices. Informal solidarity networks shed light into the processes of transformative change enacted by people living in subjugated conditions. An understanding of these processes needs to take into account the daily struggles of refugee activists, whose everyday practices try to break the structural constraints, or get around them, facilitating the expression of refugees’ individual subjectivities. From this standpoint, refugee activists can be perceived as historical subjects embedded in a political, social, and economic structure which they try to reshape, through their resistance and power negotiations with the host community.

5. Conclusions

The people that stimulated this paper remain quietened and partially made invisible by the institutions that control their lives. Agier (2011) mentioned that the rigid compliance of institutions supporting asylum seekers and refugees to the desires and goals set by their own Governments is what contributes to a certain homeostasis in the system. Often conflicting with the well-being of *beneficiaries* they are paid to serve and support, institutions perform a contradictory movement which Agier (2011) described as ‘the hand that cares and the hand that strikes’. We live in a world of increasing control over our movements and our bodies, divided by an ever-deepening abyss between the prosperous and politically powerful, and the powerless ‘undesirables’, among which are the blurred categories of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants.

While Portugal officially remains a friendly and well-perceived European Member-State, ‘under the rug’ Portuguese integration policies have been poorly implemented, depending on ‘who’ is responsible in each institution, and constantly alternating between ‘friendly’ and ‘violent’. Didier Fassin labelled this troubled relationship between care and control as ‘compassionate repression’ (Fassin, 2005), a similar concept to that of Agier’s ‘hand that cares vs hand that strikes’ (Agier, 2011). In other words, the way through which the integration system operates puts *beneficiaries* in a position where they can never meet their helpers as equals (Agier, 2011). Former refugees who become community advocates and social activists are potential agents of change in this system of solidarity controlled by the institutions. For instance, and how our article illustrates, UREP has been doing mediation between refugees and institutions through independent voluntary

work since 2013. Their perception is that, throughout the 18 months stipulated for ‘integration’, newcomer refugees need a holistic and coordinated support to properly access all the key institutions. In the absence of this coordinated response, informal solidarity has been replacing some of the state institutions’ responsibilities, by establishing trust relationships, providing information, guidance and follow up. This indicates that the available institutional support for refugees in Portugal, which is funded by both European and national sources, is still insufficient.

Borrowing Agier’s words (Agier, 2016), all refugees’ existence is based on politics. A politics of life against the politics of indifference. ‘It symbolises alterity and mobility with an insistence, even obstinacy, vis-à-vis a world that sees them as a problem’ (Agier, 2016). The politics of life can be manifested through the establishment of informality and fluidity beyond the rigidity of institutional spaces, as UREP experience demonstrates. It’s a movement towards agency and control of resources, which is achieved by redefining the host country’s hospitality in the interstices of informal relationships, reciprocity, trust and deconstruction of cultural stereotypes. Conversely, the politics of indifference, as applied by the State, are manifested by an inflexibility or unwillingness to adapt the policies to the real people. The Portuguese State’s narrative seems to be focused on legal and political righteousness, trying to convey a positive image of refugee integration. The authority of the State operates through the ‘disciplining’ of the bodies, in order to meet that image. Docile bodies are the ones who obey and conform to the normative rules and expectations set by institutions, whereas complaining parties are perceived as non-conforming bodies. As non-conformant, they will find it hard to be seen, heard and understood, and are likely to ‘disappear’ from the system.

Concluding, in today’s Portugal, a refugee fleeing direct conflicts and political violence, trying to find safety in an imagined ‘humane society’, ends up confronted with a high risk of poverty, precarious living and psychosocial challenges. Confronted with these realities on a daily basis, Mubarak Hussein and Ahmed Abdullah have been persistently reclaiming refugees and asylum seekers’ rights to express their concerns and make their own projects of integration. But volunteering, being an activist and researching, all at the same time, are undeniably difficult to reconcile, as their experience shows. We believe that collaborative researches that can fully integrate different knowledges and positions within the refugee solidarity system have many practical and ethical advantages moving forward.

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