




## Article

# Refugee Women Business Mentors: New Evidence for Women's Empowerment

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**Abstract:** With over 27.1 million refugees displaced globally across national borders as a result of protracted crises, conflict, and danger, resettlement in host nations remains challenging. One approach for empowering refugee women in their host nations is to enhance their economic participation through entrepreneurship. We contribute to the growing research on refugee women's entrepreneurship by focusing on refugee women entrepreneurs as mentors to other refugee women and exploring the impact of mentoring upon the empowerment of refugee women business mentors. The aim of the study is to explore the impact of being a mentor on the empowerment of refugee women entrepreneurs settled in the United Kingdom. As such, the research question asks to what extent does being a mentor influence the empowerment of refugee women entrepreneurs. The qualitative study involved six refugee women business mentors who co-designed and led an entrepreneurship training programme for refugee women in the United Kingdom and charted their empowerment journeys through four potential empowerment junctures within the mentoring process. First, the refugee woman as a mentee, then as a member of a mentoring group, thirdly as a facilitator in the mentoring process, and finally as a reflective agent. Our contribution to the women's entrepreneurship discipline lies in our finding that refugee women's engagement as mentors enhanced their empowerment in ways that their entrepreneurship alone cannot.

**Keywords:** refugee women; empowerment; mentoring; entrepreneurship



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## 1. Introduction

Within this paper, we explore how a refugee-led business mentoring programme in the host nation of the United Kingdom empowers entrepreneurial refugee women mentors. Our findings offer some hope to the millions of refugee women fleeing their hometown. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), this massive global refugee displacement means that receiving countries located in Europe as well as the Global South continue to face humanitarian, social, economic, and political challenges, as well as the consequences of hosting refugees. Existing research points to a complicated economic integration process owing to adverse circumstances arising from traumatic exodus experiences, particularly for refugee women who endure massive family responsibilities [1–4]. The UNHCR defines refugees as “people who have fled war, violence, conflict, or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country”.

Much of the available literature on refugee women in both Global North and Global South host nation contexts considers refugee women there as necessity entrepreneurs [5], home-based entrepreneurs [6], or micro-entrepreneurs [7], requiring training and mentoring support to establish their enterprises. As such, we offer a unique focus through our consideration of refugee women as mentors, with experience and expertise, and thus agency, to mentor other nascent refugee women entrepreneurs.

Within this paper, we offer a novel approach to refugee women's entrepreneurship by focusing upon refugee women in the United Kingdom as business mentors offering their mentoring services on a business start-up training programme. Indeed, the aim of the study is to explore the impact of being a mentor on the empowerment of refugee women entrepreneurs settled in the United Kingdom. As such, the research question asks to what extent does being a mentor influence the empowerment of refugee women entrepreneurs.

To this extent, the aim and research question addressed in this paper contribute to advancing contemporary understandings of women's empowerment in two ways; firstly, by exploring how being a refugee woman business mentor delivering mentoring services to other nascent refugee women entrepreneurs empowers the refugee woman business mentor. Indeed, we argue that being a mentor is more empowering to the refugee woman than being an entrepreneur. This argumentation arises from our data analysis, which showed that, in being a mentor, the refugee women are able to analyse and apply their entrepreneurship knowledge, skills, and experiences to support their mentees. In many ways, being a mentor signaled their position as role models, capable of supporting others, as a result of their own entrepreneurship journeys in their resettlement in the United Kingdom. Secondly, we explore how the nascent refugee women entrepreneurs mentored by the refugee woman business mentor are also more empowered than nascent refugee women mentored by non-refugee women mentors because of the shared familiarity with psycho-social, well-being, and economic challenges of the displacement journey involving uprootedness and re-rootedness, as well as the sense of temporary permanence.

As such, the contribution of this study is threefold—a contribution to the women's empowerment literature, a contribution to the sustainable development literature, and a contribution to the refugee mentoring literature. By focusing upon refugee women as business mentors rather than mentees, we maintain that women's empowerment is a cyclical process [8]. We contribute to that literature that has limited its lens to viewing refugee women in both Global North and Global South host nation contexts as informal sector necessity entrepreneurs, home-based entrepreneurs, or micro-entrepreneurs requiring business support rather than as successful entrepreneurs with business experience and expertise, as well as agency, and who can offer mentoring and business advice to other early entry entrepreneurs. Indeed, the sustainability literature on gender equality and women's empowerment is also biased towards refugee women who require help rather than those who can offer that help; thus we contribute to bridging this gap in the literature. Additionally, we also contribute to the gender-blind literature on refugee 'life skills' mentoring, which enables "refugees to embark on the challenging and personal journey of change from powerlessness to control over their lives" [9] (p.338). We do so by recognising the specificities of the role that refugee women mentors play in this regard.

Additionally, we contribute to the under-explored literature on refugee women's entrepreneurship and respond to the call for more contemporary research into the diversity of women's entrepreneurship in a broader range of contexts [8,10–12], highlighting the importance of expanding the visibility and voices of refugee women during their economic and social integration processes [13].

Following the introduction, this paper begins with a review of the literature on women's empowerment, entrepreneurship and refugees, and refugee women as business mentors. This literature review is followed by a description of the context of the United Kingdom (UK) in which the study was undertaken, and then the research methodology is described. After the methodology section, we present the findings and then discuss these in relation to the literature, before concluding with a set of future research directions and implications for research, policy, and practice.

### *1.1. Women's Empowerment*

In the last thirty years, women's empowerment has been a key goal in the dialogue on social development [14]. Khwaja [15] suggests the definition of empowerment to consist of two main traits: influence and information, which allow people to voice their choices

and obtain impactful outcomes on decisions. Empowerment brings a slightly different meaning to different groups and contexts [16]. It can be coined under an umbrella definition: “Empowerment was as an iterative process with key components including an enabling environment that encourages popular participation in decision-making that affects the achievement of goals like poverty eradication, social integration and decent work for all as well as sustainable development” [17] (page 5). According to Alsop et al. [18], two main components are found in empowerment: agency and institutional environment. With the ability to act on one’s value (agency) and the opportunity to utilise agency successfully within the institutional environment, empowerment is manifested [19]. Agency is a process of making free decisions by oneself, which can be for socially beneficial/well-being reasons to the extent that they are matched with one’s values and identities [20]. Drydyk [21] further proposed that the three distinct but related dimensions of empowerment are as follows: agency, well-being, freedom, and power. He posits that development may be less empowering than it might have been if any of these dimensions are not fulfilled. Wood et al. [12] call for more research on marginalised women and their needs, where it is important to listen to their personally meaningful empowerment goals that would bring a more significant impact on women’s role in society.

In the context of women’s empowerment and entrepreneurship process, Al-Dajani and Marlow [8] note that empowerment is about process and agency. It requires women to play the active agent role in the process of social change or have an increase in power. During the empowerment process, women need to have access to resources and must also be able to use them effectively to gain more ‘power’ [22]. Rowlands [23] divides the expression of power into four categories: *power over* (ability to resist manipulation); *power to* (creating new possibilities); *power with* (acting in a group); and *power from within* (enhancing self-respect and self-acceptance). This categorisation of power could be used as a tool to evaluate the empowerment process. Based on Rowlands’ categorisation, recent work by Ng et al. [24] found that ‘power to’, ‘power with’, and ‘power from within’ are prevalent among women entrepreneurs within a collective society, and personal empowerment contributed to the empowerment of the society. They suggest examining the empowerment process based on different contexts as women entrepreneurs are not a homogeneous group.

### 1.2. Refugee Women and Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is considered a refugee settlement strategy that can offer significant contributions to the labour markets of local economies and enhance the livelihoods and well-being of the refugee and their families [25]. However, Collins [2] contends that refugees are the most unlikely entrepreneurs as they often lack assets, financial capital, and credit history. Their qualifications are not accepted, or they do not have the required documentation [26], and thus lack quantifiable human capital. In addition, their access to social capital from informal networks of family and friends may be narrow, and refugees may have limited knowledge of the rules and regulations, institutional processes, and legal frameworks of starting a new business in their host countries. These challenges have more significant implications for refugee women who wish to undertake the entrepreneurship pathway, as research found that women and minority groups have fewer affiliated networks [27]. Research has also indicated that refugee women often feel incapable [28]. Mawson and Kasem [7] suggest that refugees would profit from access to networks of other refugee entrepreneurs for business mentoring and guidance, especially those who have faced comparative challenges, for example, language, financial records, and lack of social networks. While these networks would help start a business, they would likewise help social integration, empowering refugees to move past their limited ecosystem and gain exposure to a broader diversity of life. It is, therefore, important to explore how mechanisms like teaching and mentoring fellow refugees amplified one’s personal agency in entrepreneurship and developed a positive self-identity in society [29].

Business growth programmes for women entrepreneurs succeed when they address specific gendered vulnerabilities of women [30], thus highlighting the importance of hav-

ing targeted entrepreneurship support programmes for women. Indeed, Marchand and Dijkhuizen [25] found that participation in refugee entrepreneurship programmes strengthened the refugees' personal development and empowerment. Though entrepreneurship is often posed as an economic endeavour focused on the individual, Al-Dajani and Marlow [8] demonstrate that it is also a socio-politically situated venture where disadvantaged women on the periphery can be empowered through their enterprises. With a massive number of refugee women displaced in developed countries, refugee women who have successfully settled and developed their own ventures could be a crucial resource to the host countries. UNCTAD [31] (2018) recommended support programmes that link new refugees with established refugee entrepreneurs as mentors and coaches to nascent entrepreneurs. These programmes can be in the form of one-off mentoring sessions or workshops that facilitate contact between refugees and successful refugee entrepreneurs who have gone through a similar experience. However, there is little targeted research on mentors for nascent entrepreneurs in the refugee entrepreneurship context [32], especially on how the refugee women entrepreneurs are empowered through their mentoring experiences. There is a great potential for these refugee women entrepreneurs to give back by supporting others to pursue a better life and business venture. To support policy endeavours that emphasise equality and inclusivity for the underprivileged such as refugee women, more research on refugee women's entrepreneurship, especially on their role as business mentors, is needed.

### *1.3. Refugee Women as Business Mentors*

There is a breadth of studies on how mentoring influences entrepreneurship, especially in nurturing future entrepreneurial activity [33–35]. Bozeman and Feeney [36] offer a definition of mentoring as an informal transmission of knowledge over a sustained period between the mentor and mentee. The mentoring process is often considered one of the steppingstones of enterprise success [37,38]. Limited social networking opportunities among women entrepreneurs are widely recognised [39], and gendered roles have challenged women entrepreneurs to access resources and social capital [40,41]. Unsurprisingly, the situation is more challenging for refugee women living in a culturally dissimilar host country. The value of peer mentors, that is, refugees who mentor other refugees, reduces what Hynes [42] suggests is a mistrust specifically concerning the 'refugee experience'. Smith [43] also alludes to this, although in the context of the researcher and participant relationship, the same can be applied to facilitating a mentor–mentee relationship based on a shared social identity, in this case being a refugee. According to Al-Dajani and Marlow [8], empowered women, who then act as role models for other women, positively affect self-identity. The close mentorship of participants throughout the entrepreneurial process is a way to develop refugees' self-confidence. The use of refugee mentors can facilitate identity formation and recognition, thus fostering the women refugees' self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem [44].

Several studies have investigated the impact of using a refugee or peer mentoring approach to support newly arrived refugees [45–48]. Both Paloma et al. [29] and Gower et al. [49] found that mentors' empowerment increased during the mentoring duration. Kisi and Nagar [50], drawing on "helper theory" [51], report mentors feeling empowered after their mentoring experience. Although studies have investigated the impact of mentoring support programmes on the mentees, few have focused solely on the mentor, especially when the mentors have a shared status with the mentee [52,53]. This urges Bagnoli and Estache [54] to call for more research on the impact of mentoring on mentors and how they view their roles. Jain and Chaudhary [55] claim that entrepreneur mentors are under-researched in categorisation and effectiveness. There is a lack of research examining the effect of refugee women's mentoring on entrepreneurship. Berntsen et al. [56] also insist that the entrepreneurship literature acknowledges the critical role of enablers, yet the underlying components and contextual effects remain understudied and under-theorised. Following the logic that entrepreneurship empowers women and mentoring nurtures en-

trepreneurship, refugee women participating in entrepreneurship programmes as mentors should achieve high levels of empowerment.

#### *1.4. Research Context: The United Kingdom*

As of mid-2021, UNHCR [57] reports that the United Kingdom had 135,912 refugees and 83,489 pending asylum cases. The majority of those claiming asylum came from Iran, Eritrea, Albania, Iraq, and Syria. Of those, a third were women. Refugee women face a number of barriers to integration into the United Kingdom, including gender discrimination in the labour market, lack of affordable childcare, and social isolation [58]. In the United Kingdom, asylum seekers who do not have refugee status yet do not have the right to work, except in exceptional circumstances, but once they are granted refugee status, they are entitled to the same benefits as British citizens, including the right to work and start a business.

The United Kingdom's integration strategies include entrepreneurship as a solution to employment and self-reliance. Despite this, there was a lack of entrepreneurship programmes specifically targeting refugees before 2015 in the United Kingdom [59]. This meant very few refugees, let alone refugee women, had completed any entrepreneurial mentoring programmes when recruiting participants for this project. There is still no specific entrepreneurship mentoring provision designed for refugee women in the United Kingdom. Refugee entrepreneurship support here often fails to consider childcare needs and cultural preferences for women-only sessions. The programmes are usually focused on individualistic pursuits of entrepreneurship, failing to utilise a community and collectivist mindset. Women are often excluded from participation because of parental responsibilities. The preference for women-only entrepreneurship programmes is often dismissed in discussions on mentoring programme design, citing the need within the U.K. context to exclude gender preferences as unnecessary when providing entrepreneurship support.

According to Richey et al.'s [60] evaluation of the U.K. refugee entrepreneurship pilot scheme that involved year-long, tailored business support programmes for refugees designed and delivered by the Centre for Entrepreneurs and funded by the Home Office and the National Lottery Community Fund after 2018, to "prove the efficacy of refugee entrepreneurship programmes and to experiment with different models of delivery" [60] (p. 2), there is significant demand for business support from refugee communities, and the delivered refugee business support programmes resulted in the creation of new start-ups initiated in a range of settings and circumstances. Richey et al.'s [60] evaluation identified seven overarching recommendations for supporting refugee entrepreneurship in the United Kingdom, but these were not gender-specific and will be highly dependent upon available government motivation and funding, which is limited because of the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia–Ukraine conflict.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

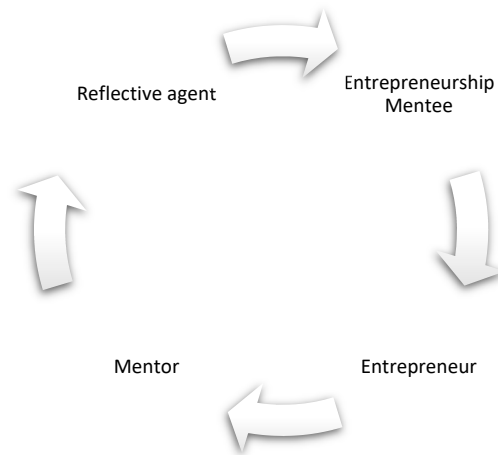
This study explored a women-only entrepreneurship mentoring model that was designed and facilitated by refugee women entrepreneurs as mentors, mentoring other refugee women entrepreneurs. We concentrate on four potential empowerment junctures within the mentoring process (See Figure 1). First, the refugee woman as a mentee, then as a member of a mentoring group, thirdly as a facilitator in the mentoring process, and finally as a reflective agent.

#### *Participants*

Six refugee women mentors aged 25 to 49 were recruited through a network for refugee entrepreneurs and a local refugee charity. This recruitment was through the connections of the lead researcher who conducted the interviews and knew the participants as she had previously been a volunteer mentor to refugees herself. As the 'first wave' of recipients of refugee entrepreneurship mentoring, these women became obvious choices to recruit to the study. In addition, as an academic with refugee entrepreneurship mentoring experience,



she had observed and empathised with some of the specific issues facing refugee women being mentored in entrepreneurship within the United Kingdom. This positioning helped develop and sustain a trustful, mutually considerate, and reciprocated relationship between the researcher and the participants [61].



**Figure 1.** Four critical junctures of the mentoring process.

The participants were selected based on the following criteria: (a) awarded or in the process of being granted refugee status, (b) completed tertiary education, (c) engaged in an entrepreneurial endeavour, and (d) indicating the ability and willingness to help other refugee women develop their entrepreneurial intention. Table 1 outlines the profile of the participants. All six participants held at least a university degree, with two holding postgraduate qualifications. At the time of recruitment, four participants had been awarded refugee status, and two were in the application process.

**Table 1.** Participant demographics.

Identifier	Country of Origin	Education Level	Age Category	Life Status	Business
Mentor 1	Palestine	Bachelor's degree	30–34	Single	Online clothing store
Mentor 2	Palestine	PhD	30–34	Single	Designer
Mentor 3	Yemen	Master's degree	30–34	Single	Food blogger and pop-up restaurant owner
Mentor 4	Libya	Bachelor's degree	25–29	Single	Motivational speaker and activist
Mentor 5	Eritrea	Bachelor's degree	25–29	Divorced w/children	Online products
Mentor 6	Afghanistan	Bachelor's degree	44–49	Married w/children	Food stall

All participants signed an informed consent form explaining the study's aims and process. The assurance of anonymity would be through using numbered identifiers. Initially, all potentially identifying demographic information was excluded [62], but on request from the participants, their country of origin was re-instated for representation purposes.

The six participants facilitated an entrepreneurship workshop for sixteen refugee mentees. An initial interview was conducted with each of the participating mentors where a discussion around their entrepreneurial start-up journey, mentoring they had received themselves, and their expectations for the mentoring process was carried out. The interviews usually lasted about an hour. All interviews were conducted in English; although this was not one of the participant criteria, all participants were bilingual and chose to be interviewed in English.

Two weeks before the workshop, a mentor discussion group was organised to explain the concept of the workshop and define their roles as mentors. The participants were invited to share their new venture creation stories. The guidelines were unstructured to foster a free-flowing conversation within the group. These open conversations resulted in discussions that moved between English, Arabic, and Farsi and entailed exchanges about the asylum process and the struggles of starting their businesses in the United Kingdom. The lead researcher recorded the face-to-face discussions using a discreet camera placed on the table and recorded the video chat with their consent. In the discussion group, the mentors designed and contributed to the content for the entrepreneurship workshop. It was immediately apparent that the mentors wanted to create a safe and non-judgemental space for their refugee mentees. The workshop would be a women-only space based on shared gendered preferences. The mentors decided that their mentees could bring their children to the workshop to promote and encourage attendance.

The two-day workshop entailed several group-guided meditation sessions designed and run by the mentors. During the mentoring sessions, the mentees were assigned to a specific mentor in groups of three; they would then rotate between mentors to hear different entrepreneurial stories. First, the mentor would introduce herself and share the story of her entrepreneurial beginnings. Next, the participants were engaged by discussing their own stories of entrepreneurship or entrepreneurial ideas; these were recorded in their 'working documents', which served as a business model canvas by the end of the two-day workshop. This documentation of ideas allowed the participants to have an obvious idea of what they needed to do to set up a new business or further develop their existing business idea. They moved through the sessions, hearing multiple stories throughout the day while being supported by the mentors to build their understanding, confidence, and entrepreneurial planning in terms of business strategy, marketing and social media, financial management, as well as health and well-being.

After the mentoring workshop, the mentors were again interviewed using a semi-structured conversational technique in their chosen space. Except for two interviews conducted online using Skype, the other four were undertaken in-person at coffee shops selected by the mentor participants. There was a marked difference in the atmosphere of the interviews. The familiarity, camaraderie, and trust built through our shared experience as researcher and participant meant that the conversations were rich, relaxed, and detailed. The participants reflected on their mentoring experience and spoke about what being a mentor meant to them, lessons learned in the mentoring process, any meaningful changes they had experienced, and what they would change about their mentoring style. They also shared which of their mentees they had stayed connected with and the positives they took away from the overall mentoring experience.

The data examined in this study included (a) interview transcripts from the interviews conducted with six participating refugee women mentors, (b) recorded observations from the two-day entrepreneurship workshop for refugee women, and (c) notes taken by the lead researcher throughout the project and during the refugee mentor discussion group. The first interviews conducted with the participants focused on questions about their own new venture creation and what they felt they could offer in terms of experience and know-how to refugee women participating in an entrepreneurship workshop. For example, "*Can you tell me about how you started your business?*" A review of the initial individual mentor interviews facilitated the following questions: "*Why have you agreed to be a mentor? What are your expectations for the mentoring process in the context of an entrepreneurship workshop for refugee women?*" The subsequent interviews centred on the personal changes that the mentors had encountered through their mentoring experience, including identity and recognition, belief in oneself, and networking. The final stage of interviews questioned whether their mentoring experience has led to any consequential personal transition.

We focused our qualitative, thematic analysis on the feedback referring to the mentor's own personal changes through mentoring. For example, *"Did you learn anything meaningful about yourself from your mentoring experience?"* Consequently, the data generated from the initial structured questions about their entrepreneurship endeavours were used as an adjunct to the personal narratives of their mentoring experience and the subsequent data from the mentor discussion group, observations, and researcher field notes. Through a reflexive thematic analysis, we show the oscillation between fear and empowerment through the junctures of mentee and entrepreneur, which settle and fix on *empowerment* during the mentoring process.

Using Rowland's [23,63] categorisation of empowerment—*power over* (ability to resist manipulation), *power to* (creating new possibilities), *power with* (acting in a group), and *power from within* (enhancing self-respect and self-acceptance)—as coding units, we were able to develop themes from the narratives under the concept of empowerment. This allowed us to evaluate the empowerment process at each of the mentoring junctures. Individual responses were coded at level one, and overall key themes across all cases at level two. Finally, to illustrate the empowerment potential of the mentoring process, we use excerpts from the participant interviews that related to their experience as mentees, entrepreneurs, mentors, and finally reflective agents. Table 2 shows the data coding and supporting quotes.



**Table 2.** Data coding and proof quotes.

Provisional Categories and First-Order Codes	Interview Excerpts	Theoretical Categories (Second-Order Themes)	Aggregate Theoretical Dimensions
Statements about experiences as a mentee in an entrepreneurship program	“As a recipient of mentoring, I think there was a vulnerability and being vocal of my concerns and needs and weaknesses at the start of the relationship with my mentor. I did enjoy allowing myself to be vulnerable, and then the next thing is feeling empowered to be challenged to figure out my own path and what I wanted to do next.”—Mentor 3	Vulnerability Be challenged	Challenge to create potential
	“Through my experience as a mentee, I was introduced to potential funders for my business, but the issue was I didn’t know how to talk to them. I felt intimidated by these men, so I never pitched my idea, and I never got the funding I needed...There was not anyone that could be turned to for help and support with this.”—Mentor 5	Lack of confidence Intimidation Isolation	
	“I have all this education and experience; one of my mentors was a young man in his early twenties with no real understanding of who I was; at times, I felt a bit patronised . . . .”—Mentor 2	Patronisation	
Statement about experiences of being an entrepreneur	“I am always conflicted; I keep asking whether I should surrender to the fear or take the empowerment.”—Mentor 2	Conflicted	Feeling of ‘lack’
	“I’ve been here for five years. But I still don’t know how things work here. I really needed to ask someone like, oh what and where can I start? How do I start?”—Mentor 6	Lack of support	
	“I did not have anyone that was like-minded when I started my business.”—Mentor 1	Isolation	
	“Women are more comfortable if you create a space for them and allow them to talk about their hopes and understand how they can go about them. I don’t know about the participants, but that is one of the major issues for me. I have a dream, but I don’t know how to do it.”—Mentor 2	Barriers to realisation	
	“ . . . there is a lack of entrepreneurs but also a lack of women role models. . . .”, I asked myself why are Eritrean women so afraid to try new things?”—Mentor 5	Lack of knowledge Lack of role models Fear	
Statement about their experiences being a mentor	“Initially, I looked at these women; they were all married with children, and I thought, what can I teach these women? I know nothing.”—Mentor 2	Humbled	Empowering through manifestation of power over (ability to resist manipulation)
	“When you live with fear, you can never take risks. You can never improve. You can never consider these ideas, but if you have people who have these dreams and with the ability to elicit this to get them to talk about them, then you do empower them to think. Oh yes, there’s something I do like and there’s something I can improve, so why not. It’s just this breaking the fear. So, you create this place where you think you get your participants to think that we are all equals. Don’t think of me as the mentor; I’m just a participant like you. I’m learning from you, learning from me, so it’s all equal, so that breaks the fear, that breaks kind of the hierarchy that we are talking about.”—Mentor 2	Equality	Power to (creating new possibilities)

Table 2. Cont.

Provisional Categories and First-Order Codes	Interview Excerpts	Theoretical Categories (Second-Order Themes)	Aggregate Theoretical Dimensions
Statement about their experiences being a mentor	“Mentoring means guiding and helping them figure out their own path and what they want to do. I think it’s important because I come from a culture that spoon-feeds, so I want to empower women from similar cultures and backgrounds to question and make their own life decisions.”—Mentor 3	Culturally sensitive	Power with (acting in a group)
	“I feel empowered that I can share my experiences . . . ”—Mentor 1	Supporting others	
	“You are in the company with other women who are positive and full of energy . . . Such lovely, active, full of positive energy women, they just give me more positive feelings and energy to encourage me to work for my future. I’m not just going to sit back and relax now that I had my children; I have my degree. That’s it.”—Mentor 6	Positive energy Encouragement	
	“I felt empowered to be in an all-women setup; it’s unusual we don’t experience that on a daily basis; it’s a reminder that we are valuable, and the guidance we give is more valuable if we are relatable role models. Men are important, but it is just as important for women to feel in a safe space and feel like you are valuable. So, I think that’s how I was empowered in that environment.”—Mentor 3	Women-only Self-recognition Safe space	
	“So, you don’t look at other people that, oh, she’s intimidating. She’s done this this, I can never do this, I’ll give up, I can never be like this, but if you feel that you are in an equal place, equal position, you feel oh OK. Actually, I can relate to this person. She’s gone through much that I’ve been through, and we can learn from each other. We can learn together.”—Mentor 2	Equality Shared learning	
	“It boosted my confidence; I feel like I have been learning every day since I started my business; I didn’t realise how much I knew until I started sharing it.”—Mentor 3	Self confidence	Power from within (enhancing self-respect and self-acceptance)
	“My mentoring experience allowed me to reflect on what worked and what didn’t. A lot of the women were interested in starting similar businesses in food. It gave me the opportunity to reflect. I had been so in the middle of things. This gave me space to share my failures and acknowledge how much I had done so I could give suggestions. To encourage them to make mistakes and not just fantasise about starting a business. It was so helpful thinking back on the things I had done.”—Mentor 3	Self-reflection Positivity Energy	
	“Being able to meet other refugee women is super inspirational, and it reinforces why I started my business. I want to give back to those communities because that is where I come from.”—Mentor 5	Inspiration Giving back	
	“When I see people fighting for their dreams, I think I have to be more like them.”—Mentor 4	Relatability	
	“What has been the most helpful is networking with people who are similar to me, other minorities, I can relate to; I find it easier.”—Mentor 1		

Table 2. Cont.

Provisional Categories and First-Order Codes	Interview Excerpts	Theoretical Categories (Second-Order Themes)	Aggregate Theoretical Dimensions
Statement reflecting on their different junctures in entrepreneurship/reflective agent	"I think the most valuable lessons I took away was never underestimate the other person's ability; you unconsciously feel you are superior, but it's easy to get into the space of I am better, I know more. You feel you are ahead of the game, especially it's important to keep yourself grounded. The exchange of life experience is just as important; you learn something from them that might not be professional."—Mentor 3	Learning from one another	Empowering 'us'
	"The workshop gave me new ways of thinking, to be with other successful women, wonderful women and see how they started their businesses; It gives me the courage to carry on."—Mentor 6	Woman as role model	
	"we were sharing as women."—Mentor 4"	Gendered perspective	
	"It boosted my confidence. I knew that I was skilled, and I had a more professional background than the women I mentored, and even if I didn't have all the answers, I was just meant to guide them. And help them find the answers together." —Mentor 6	Working together	
	"This felt different. I could share what I had learnt, I could share all the knowledge I had gained through my experiences, and they listened, and they were interested in what I had to say."—Mentor 3	Reciprocity	
	"I didn't know (name removed) before, and now I'm following her on Instagram. She is amazing; the way she helped (name removed) with her business idea is amazing."—Mentor 7	Connection	
	"I felt a connection with the Syrian and Iraqi refugee women. I felt so grateful that I was so privileged . . . I totally understood; through the whole asylum process, I spent a lot of time with other refugees, and this reminded me of those days. I wanted these women to be in a better position and try to live a normal life." —Mentor 3	Empathy	

### 3. Findings

In order to illustrate the journeys relevant to the potential empowerment of mentoring, we highlight the profiles of three of the six participating mentors (Mentors 2, 3, and 5). Unlike the other participants in this study, these three were all interviewed and observed over a three-year period as part of a wider ethno case study into refugee entrepreneurs and had themselves been through mentoring programmes before starting their entrepreneurial endeavours and subsequently becoming mentors. Following the profiles, the findings presented also include the responses and reflections of the other three Mentors 1, 4, and 6.

#### 3.1. Mentor 2

A 35-year-old Palestinian woman, living in the United Kingdom as a refugee for six years. She holds a doctorate from a U.K. university and had entrepreneurial intentions at the start-up stage. In addition, she had a background in education and had participated in mentoring programmes within the United Kingdom, as well as having worked with both NGOs and institutions creating workshops mentoring artists in her home country of Palestine. She was recruited to the project through an introduction to the lead researcher by a volunteer working in the local refugee community. She speaks English and Arabic fluently.

Mentor 2 reflected that, in her culture, the refugee women she would mentor epitomise success, that is, being married with children. Yet, regardless of her own life achievements and academic qualifications, she doubted her ability to offer anything of value to her mentees.

*“Initially, I looked at these women; they were all married with children, and I thought, what can I teach these women? I know nothing.”*

Mentor 2’s previous experience in running workshops proved to be invaluable in the setup of the mentoring workshop. The other mentors embraced her strategies for creating what she termed “equal” space. She felt that oral storytelling facilitated equality as it equalised the considerable discrepancy in educational attainment between the mentors and their mentees. In addition, this was a way to create an informal workshop to be inclusive and not alienate any participants from too complex delivery.

#### 3.2. Mentor 3

A 31-year-old Yemeni woman. She has refugee status and had lived in the United Kingdom for five years at the start of the project. She holds a master’s degree in social entrepreneurship from a U.K. university and described herself as a “serial entrepreneur”. She is bilingual in Arabic and English. She started a pop-up restaurant showcasing Yemeni food, presented a YouTube channel talking about her “foodie” experiences worldwide, and was in her second year of trading. She continued to work a main job while starting her business. She came to the project having participated in several mentoring programmes that matched host country mentors with refugee entrepreneurs in the United Kingdom. The mentoring programme covered various aspects of business start-ups and facilitated networking; it also introduced refugees to potential funders. She was recruited as a mentor for this mentoring project because she had been known to the lead researcher, who had been one of her entrepreneurship mentors through the programmes mentioned above.

Mentor 3 was uniquely positioned to co-curate the entrepreneurship workshop. She had extensive knowledge of entrepreneurship through her studies, participation in numerous entrepreneurship programmes, and her own new venture experiences. Most importantly, she was willing to share her knowledge with other women.

*“Mentoring means guiding and helping them figure out their own path and what they want to do. I think it’s important because I come from a culture that spoon-feeds, so I want to empower women from similar cultures and backgrounds to question and make their own life decisions.”*

Her own experience as a mentee gave her valuable insights into creating a safe and empowering space for refugee women to explore entrepreneurship. In addition, she was

sensitive to cultural aspects and acknowledged her own privilege numerous times during the project.

### 3.3. Mentor 5

A 24-year-old Eritrean refugee woman living in the United Kingdom. She holds a bachelor's degree from a U.K. university and speaks fluent English and Arabic. She was divorced and had two young children. After her divorce, she decided to start a business to provide for and support her children. She had initially created a business focusing on STEM-based clothing for girls because she wanted to encourage her own daughters to think differently. However, having struggled with this start-up, she shifted her business focus to creating a holistic, sustainable lifestyle brand for Muslims. The idea came to her when she was preparing for the Hajj; she did not know how to prepare and struggled to find products that aligned with her values. This inspired her to start an e-commerce business producing and selling eco-friendly Hajj gift boxes. She mentioned social justice and environmental causes as driving factors for her business and specifically supporting other refugee women. She provided interesting insight:

*“Coming from an Eritrean background, there is a lack of entrepreneurs but also a lack of women role models. There was one older lady who was very entrepreneurial and started an internet café but other than that, they seem risk-averse. Do you know that it was actually the Somalian women who are kick-arse, who are amazing, they are so entrepreneurial, they have a hustle about them, I found that really inspiring. But I asked myself why are Eritrean women so afraid to try new things?”*

Mentor 5 was known to the lead researcher through a refugee entrepreneurship network. She had also participated in a refugee entrepreneurship mentoring programme that utilised host country mentors. However, she spoke about not always being able to attend all the mentoring sessions as she had childcare responsibilities. Mentor 5 also acknowledged how much she had learnt about the mechanics of a business start-up as a mentee, but expressed doubts about her confidence, especially when pitching her business ideas. She was trying to raise venture finance and get shareholders for the business; however, she said she felt intimidated and expressed not having the “language” to speak to male investors. She reflected that raising funds had been extremely difficult; she had used her own savings to start the business and said that she had had to continue working in order to finance her business as she was a single mother.

Her dream was to return to Eritrea one day to provide skill transfer and develop infrastructure for the country.

The following findings are reflective of all six mentors, although Mentors 1, 4, and 6 did not participate in any mentoring programmes as mentees themselves prior to starting their new ventures and becoming mentors.

### 3.4. Empowerment as a Mentee

When talking about their own experience of being a mentee, Mentor 3 reflected:

*“As a recipient of mentoring, I think there was a vulnerability and being vocal of my concerns and needs and weaknesses at the start of the relationship with my mentor. I did enjoy allowing myself to be vulnerable, and then the next thing is feeling empowered to be challenged to figure out my own path and what I wanted to do next.”* (Mentor 3)

This narrative clearly demonstrates the (*power over*) and (*power to*) categories of empowerment, which showed an ability to confront manipulation and create new possibilities. Whereas Mentor 3 was able to gain some empowerment as a mentee, interestingly, Mentor 5 expressed that she was not able to challenge that manipulation (*power over*) in order to create potential (*power to*):

*“Through my experience as a mentee, I was introduced to potential funders for my business, but the issue was I didn't know how to talk to them. I felt intimidated by these*

*men, so I never pitched my idea, and I never got the funding I needed...There was not anyone that could be turned to for help and support with this.” (Mentor 5)*

### 3.5. Empowerment as an Entrepreneur

When discussing mentors’ business start-up process, a recurrent theme emerged; all mentors mentioned being fearful (*power over*):

*“I have fear, and I have education; how must these women feel?” (Mentor 3)*

This fearful feeling could be explained by Vromans et al.’s [28] study that refugee women often feel incapable. Rowlands [23] reminds us that when people are consistently refused power, they may start to internalise those attributes and start to consider them true. Interestingly, we observed an oscillation between fear and empowerment when another mentor questioned their ability to overcome fear (*power over*) when asked about being an entrepreneur:

*“I am always conflicted; I keep asking whether I should surrender to the fear or take the empowerment.” (Mentor 2)*

Mentors 1 and 6 were able to reflect on their early entrepreneurship experience:

*“I did not have anyone that was like-minded when I started my business.” (Mentor 1)*

*“I’ve been here for five years. But I still don’t know how things work here, I really needed to ask someone like, oh what and where can I start? How do I start?” (Mentor 6)*

There was also a strong feeling of ‘lack’ of support, knowledge, and role models when the women became an entrepreneur.

### 3.6. Empowerment as a Mentor

The participating mentors embraced designing and creating the refugee entrepreneurship workshop in the group discussion session. As a result, the language they used started to change, and they spoke less about fears and more about the empowerment they felt within the group. They were demonstrating all four categories of empowerment: resisting manipulation (*power over*), creating possibilities (*power to*), acting within a group (*power with*), and enhancing self-respect and self-acceptance (*power within*).

Mentor 3 reflected:

*“I felt empowered to be in an all-women setup; it’s unusual we don’t experience that on a daily basis; it’s a reminder that we are valuable, and the guidance we give is more valuable if we are relatable role models. Men are important, but it is just as important for women to feel in a safe space and feel like you are valuable. So, I think that’s how I was empowered in that environment.” (Mentor 3)*

Rowlands [23] explains that an element of (*power to*) is led by a desire for a group to achieve what it is adept at, where interests are aligned, and the group sets its own collective agenda.

Mentor 5 referred directly to the mentoring experience as giving her time to acknowledge her skills and achievements, thereby demonstrating (*power from within*) and (*power with*):

*“It boosted my confidence; I feel like I have been learning every day since I started my business; I didn’t realise how much I knew until I started sharing it.” (Mentor 5)*

Mentor 3 echoed this view, evidencing all categories: (*power over*, *power to*, *power with*, and *power from within*):

*“My mentoring experience allowed me to reflect on what worked and what didn’t. A lot of the women were interested in starting similar businesses in food. It gave me the opportunity to reflect. I had been so in the middle of things. This gave me space to share my failures and acknowledge how much I had done so I could give suggestions. To encourage them to make mistakes and not just fantasise about starting a business. It was so helpful thinking back on the things I had done.” (Mentor 3)*



The mentoring programme opened many opportunities to network and collaborate, which boosted their self-esteem [64]. This increase in self-esteem was prevalent when the mentors described the realisation of their accomplishments through their mentoring experience. It also revealed that refugee entrepreneurs gain knowledge, resources, and validity by conceptualising their ideas with their social contacts [65].

In the comments below, we see a definite reference to the (*power with*) and (*power from within*) categories, again demonstrating empowerment through mentoring:

*“Being able to meet other refugee women is super inspirational, and it re-enforces in me why I started my business. I want to give back to those communities because that is where I come from.”* (Mentor 5)

*“The workshop gave me new ways of thinking, to be with other successful women, wonderful women and see how they started their businesses, It gives me the courage to carry on.”* (Mentor 4)

*“You are in the company with other women who are positive and full of energy.”* (Mentor 1)

*“When I see people fighting for their dreams, I think I have to be more like them.”* (Mentor 6)

Mentor 3 compared her experiences of being a mentee and her role as a mentor:

*“I have all this education and experience; one of my mentors was a young man in his early twenties with no real understanding of who I was; at times, I felt a bit patronised ... This felt different. I could share what I had learnt, I could share all the knowledge I had gained through my experiences, and they listened, and they were interested in what I had to say.”* (Mentor 3)

This comparison highlights the importance of what Rowlands [23] terms *dignidad*, being deserving of and having a right to respect from others. This is more explicitly stated by the following comment:

*“What has been the most helpful is networking with people who are similar to me, other minorities, I can relate to, I find it easier.”* (Mentor 5)

### 3.7. Empowerment as a Reflective Agent

Mentor 3’s empowerment through mentoring extends, in turn, to respect for and acceptance of others [23].

*“I loved that they were sharing their hopes and dreams. It made me focus on teaching people to empower themselves, boosting confidence and giving them opportunities to question and ask why? Women just don’t question.”* (Mentor 3)

Mentor 2 initially spoke about her own conflicts regarding “surrendering to fear or taking empowerment” within her own entrepreneurial journey. Then, she reflected on her mentoring experience, which appeared to have a particularly positive influence on the language she used and the development of her own empowerment; when in a subsequent interview, she said:

*“When you live with fear, you can never take risks. You can never improve. You can never consider these ideas, but if you have people who have these dreams and with the ability to elicit this, to get them to talk about them, then you do empower them to think. So, oh yes, there’s something I do like, and there’s something I can improve, so why not. It’s just this breaking the fear.”* (Mentor 2)

Regardless of starting their journey at the entrepreneur juncture (see Figure 1) and not receiving mentoring themselves, Mentors 1, 4, and 6 were able to reflect on their empowerment received as entrepreneurship mentors. We see (*power to*, *power with*, and *power from within*), which were extended to others when they recount their experience:

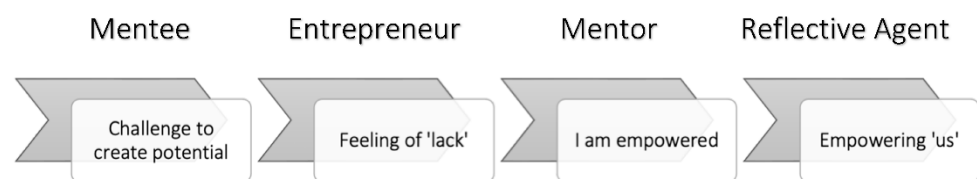
*“To just show them the way to do it or suggesting a way to do it is the perfect way to help them ... you give energy, and you take energy”* (Mentor 6)

*“Such lovely, active, full of positive energy women, they just give me more positive feelings and energy to encourage me to work for my future.” (Mentor 4)*

*“I didn’t know (name removed) before the workshop. She is amazing, the way she helped (name removed) with her business idea is amazing, I love encouraging people to get involved with the community.” (Mentor 1)*

#### 4. Discussion

We describe the mentoring model as a training workshop facilitated and curated by refugee women entrepreneurs and highlight their empowerment journey through their multiple roles as mentee, entrepreneur, mentor, and reflective agent. To answer the research question on to what extent does being a mentor influence the empowerment of refugee women entrepreneurs, Figure 2 illustrates the main findings.



**Figure 2.** The empowerment journey.

Figure 2 shows the development of empowerment. Empowerment is not necessarily built incrementally at each juncture, but waivers and oscillates. The first juncture of *mentee* begins the process of creating potential empowerment. Although the assumption is that, as an *entrepreneur* (an agent of change), the refugee woman would be empowered, she is in fact conscious of her lack of power. During the stage as mentee and entrepreneur, the refugee women faced a challenge to create their own potentials and were often limited by their ‘lack’ of many aspects, though some of them considered the notion of empowerment. Through *mentoring*, she is able to realise her own empowerment through her sharing of her achievements and finally, as a *reflective agent*, she is empowered by her shared mentoring experience. It extends beyond individual empowerment, to a collective sense of being together in the entrepreneurial journey, with nascent entrepreneurs from a similar background or life experiences as a refugee.

This study extends the women’s empowerment literature by showing how mentoring is more empowering than the entrepreneuring itself for refugee women. Reflecting on their start-up journey, the mentors felt inadequate and intimidated, as noted in prior literature [2,28]. They often questioned their ability to overcome fear and faced challenges to create productive potential. However, the expression of power changed when they became a mentor and curated and delivered a refugee women’s entrepreneurship training workshop. The refugee women mentors became more confident with a positive self-reflection [7,8]. Their acknowledgement of their skills and abilities to support others (*power with* and *power from within*) shows that their aspiration to inspire others has brought a significant empowerment effect onto themselves. This finding aligns with Ng et al. [24] that women entrepreneurs gain empowerment through a collective agenda. In addition, the findings also show that empowerment is a process and not an end goal [66]. It is an engaging process to ensure gain where the mentors play an active role in the process of supporting other refugee women. This enabled them to increase power while making a social change. These findings demonstrate that what makes the refugee woman a mentor unique is that she does not come to the process with this self-efficacy but develops and realises self-confidence through her engagement in the mentoring process [8,31].

This study underlines mentoring as a vital way of helping marginalised women to navigate and survive a system in which they are significantly underrepresented. We address the gap in the literature by examining the mentor’s perspective in refugee mentoring programmes [32,54]. By becoming a mentor in an entrepreneurship training program,

we noticed a strong willingness and engagement from the refugee women entrepreneur mentors to give back to the mentoring program. Recognising their prior limitations in venture development, they are keen to guide the nascent entrepreneur to find the right path in business. This further enriches the under-explored literature on refugee women's entrepreneurship. The findings show that not all refugee women entrepreneurs are motivated by personal success; instead, they are empowered when they can help others to grow and progress in business aspirations which they can achieve through mentoring others. This offers a novel insight into refugee women's entrepreneurship literature.

The participants in this study noted that they wanted to empower refugee women with similar experiences or shared social identities. As such, key features of the training workshop designed by the refugee women mentors and that removed significant barriers to participation were, firstly, the women-only mentoring programme and training workshop, and secondly, allowing the participants to bring their children and babies to the mentoring sessions and the training workshop. These influenced the refugee women's participation positively as childcare responsibilities are often cited as significant barriers to women's economic empowerment [67,68] and because refugee women, in particular, can be reluctant to leave their babies and young children in another's care, or may not have the social and financial means to do so. Prior literature acknowledges a lack of social capital among women entrepreneurs generally owing to their gender roles and responsibilities [39,41]. This study offers evidence that refugee women-to-refugee women mentoring can bring fruitful results and help expand their networks. The findings offer new considerations into the design of training programmes aimed at supporting refugee women and their benefits for refugee women with shared social identities.

This study also illustrated that having more refugee women's input and designed training programmes will contribute to refugee women's personal development and empowerment [25,31]. Accordingly, the study also gives voice and agency to displaced women by involving them in an entrepreneurship mentoring programme [12]. By positioning the refugee women entrepreneurs as core players in an entrepreneurship mentoring programme, we discovered their potential to support others and, in doing so, empower themselves. As such, we challenge the biases toward refugee women as needful groups. The participants are all highly educated and multilingual women entrepreneurs. Their participation in this mentoring program is voluntary, thus demonstrating their agency even as refugees [15]. They do not shy away from becoming a mentor to support nascent entrepreneurs who share displacement experiences like them. The International Women's Development Agency [69] advocates for enabling peer support, learning, and solidarity, supporting women to show their leadership capacity, and expanding women's recognition and position in the community by increasing women's participation in programmes. Our findings provide support by showing the beneficial impacts of engaging refugee women entrepreneurs as mentors and leaders in entrepreneurship training programmes for refugee women. The participants explicitly demonstrated their role as agents of change by facilitating a safe and equal space and creating an atmosphere of inspiration. In addition, they were able to exercise cultural sensitivity from a shared and informed background by accommodating their mentees' needs to bring their children with them to the workshop and mentoring sessions, thus addressing gendered vulnerabilities [30].

## 5. Conclusions

This study explored the nature and influence of a refugee women-led entrepreneurship programme on the empowerment of the refugee woman mentor. Through the narratives of the participants who co-created and delivered the entrepreneurship training programme, we demonstrated that refugee women's engagement as mentors enhanced their empowerment in ways that their entrepreneurship alone could not. Unfortunately, however, this empowering facet of the refugee woman as a mentor is not integrated into any fundamental entrepreneurship support from the United Kingdom as a host country. This is because the focus on empowerment as an incremental process for refugee women is contrary to

the United Kingdom's neoliberal agenda of monetary self-reliance as the goal for refugee integration. In addition, the country's hostile immigration policy [70] and the more recent formalised policy to relocate and transfer responsibility for refugees to Rwanda [71] do more to invoke vulnerability [72,73] than empowerment. This means that the voice of the refugee woman must be represented in a way that presents her views, is sensitive to her vulnerabilities, and acknowledges the negative effects of a hostile immigration policy on the empowerment of the refugee woman.

With regards to policy implications, as a refugee-receiving country, the United Kingdom should be facilitating the empowerment of refugee women through relevant and appropriate entrepreneurship support. There needs to be a shift in the approach that views refugee women as a problem requiring management [74]. This perspective of refugee women as passive beneficiaries means that most entrepreneurship programmes are often structured from a top-down approach. In fact, policy in this area remains underdeveloped and problematic. It often excludes what Doná [75] expounds as the refugee woman's voice, perspective, and experiences in the creation and representation of power. Policymakers concerned with sustainable outcomes should consider involving refugee women in creating and providing entrepreneurship support aligned with empowerment. Thereby enabling refugee women who have entrepreneurial knowledge to share that as part of an incremental and cyclical empowerment programme.

We highlight the implications of policy and practice and directions for further research. First, we utilise refugee women entrepreneurs as entrepreneurship mentors where they also co-created and implemented an entrepreneurship mentoring programme. Based on the positive outcomes, we recommend to policymakers to seek more input from the refugees themselves in designing and delivering refugee entrepreneurship programmes. Policies and programmes to support refugee entrepreneurship should enable refugee women to be part of the creation and implementation rather than being viewed as acquiescent participants. Refugees women should also be invited to co-create refugee entrepreneurship programmes as part of a process of incremental empowerment. This enablement should be conscious of the sensitivities of both gender [74] and culture [29].

Second, from a practical implication's perspective, offering women-only entrepreneurship programmes that incorporate child-friendly programmes. Initiatives to establish women-only and child-friendly entrepreneurship programmes are conspicuously absent in the United Kingdom, considering many refugees women's gender and cultural sensitivities and childcare responsibilities. Our research suggests that women only, child-friendly solutions should be prioritised when designing entrepreneurship programmes for refugee women. Business support agencies will need to counter the exclusionary nature of training and mentoring programmes in terms of participants' childcare needs. Facilitated childcare must be included in the programme design as a priority and matter of course. Otherwise, those most in need of these programmes are not able to access them.

It is important to note that this study examined the refugee entrepreneur mentor within the context of the United Kingdom, and among one group of refugee entrepreneur mentors. As such, further research and expansion are needed to look at refugee women mentors in multiple and diverse contexts within refugee receiving nations located in both the Global North and the Global South. This study only observes the empowerment process of refugee women from their entrepreneurial journey to mentoring. Future studies could further explore the empowerment process experienced by refugee women as they integrate into a new society. As more women and children are displaced globally, more research in the receiving nations is needed to expand the current knowledge on refugee women, especially on how to empower them. Doing so will contribute to the United Nations' goal of 'leaving no one behind'.

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