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# Civiness in exile: The solidarities and struggles of South Sudanese refugees in Cairo

Rachel Ibreck<sup>a</sup> and Angelina Seeka<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Politics and International Relations, Goldsmiths University of London, London, UK; <sup>b</sup>End Impunity Organization, Juba, South Sudan

## ABSTRACT

We explore refugee solidarities and struggles under conditions of extreme political exclusion and violence, based on collaborative ethnography with South Sudanese refugees in Cairo. From the perspective of the refugees, the city is hostile and precarious. They are routinely subject to racism, deprivation, and arbitrary applications of law. At the same time, South Sudanese people have historical roots in Cairo and have generated forms of moral and political order there, shaped by fluctuating relations with each other, the city, and their homeland. We argue that these inconspicuous socio-political structures provide community citizenship at the urban margins. Additionally, we show how refugees strive for legitimate authority, social welfare, and rights in exile, within and beyond these local realms. We label these endeavours ‘civiness’ to capture their situated politics. The refugees’ relations and contentions are distinctive in that they are mostly oriented towards customary and humanitarian authorities, rather than the state; they rely on and encourage quotidian solidarities; and they blend notions of custom with references to human rights and constitutional norms. In this harsh context, South Sudanese refugees deploy civiness to promote survival with dignity and to counteract dehumanizing modes of humanitarian governance.

## KEYWORDS

South Sudanese refugees; humanitarianism; human rights; solidarity; citizenship; civiness

## Introduction

In the humanitarian lexicon, Egypt serves as both a ‘transit state’ and a destination for settlement for people fleeing conflict and crisis. It is a crucible in a volatile region, hosting exiles from across the Horn of Africa and the Middle East, most of them in Greater Cairo. Egyptian leaders have promised protection to their ‘brothers from the Arab and African countries’ and expressed pride in the nation’s history as ‘a safe haven for the oppressed and those fleeing wars over the years’ (Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs for Arab Affairs cited in UNHCR, 2019b). The country is pivotal in

**CONTACT** Rachel Ibreck  r.ibreck@gold.ac.uk  Politics and International Relations, Goldsmiths University of London, London SE14 6NW, UK

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the humanitarian system as a strategic partner for western governments in both ‘the Khartoum process’ (2014) – a pact between countries in the Horn of Africa and Europe to control migration and human trafficking – and the Global Refugee Compact (2018), which promises international cooperation to support refugees in developing countries (UNHCR, 2019b). As such, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has labelled Egypt ‘a lead example in the region in hosting refugees in an urban setting’ (Filippo Grandi cited in UNHCR, 2019a).

In contrast, from the perspective of many refugees, Egypt is barely a sanctuary and frequently a place of deep insecurity, as illustrated in a succession of refugee mobilizations and sit-ins, as well as more covert forms of resistance against the ‘contradictions’ of urban refugee governance (Pascucci, 2017). As far back as 1994, there are records of sporadic protests by refugees outside the UNHCR office in Cairo against inhumane conditions and rejections of asylum and resettlement applications (Moro, 2004, p. 429). Several peaceful demonstrations at UNHCR have ended in violence: in 2005, 29 Sudanese refugees were killed during an eviction (see Rowe, 2009); in 2016, an Ethiopian refugee self-immolated, also causing the death of another (Grey & Ismail, 2016). In 2020, security forces ‘brutally’ attacked Sudanese refugees who were demanding justice following the appalling murder and mutilation of a child (Amnesty International, 2020). These persistent and sometimes tragic refugee mobilizations provoke questions about the vagaries of humanitarian governance and about the participation of refugees in the political life of the city.

Refugees and migrants experience conditions of extreme vulnerability and ‘rightlessness’ (Gündogdu, 2015) everywhere in the world. This global issue has specific characteristics in Egypt where humanitarian policies designed to encourage ‘self-reliant’ urbanized refugees over the past two decades have mostly failed to address their ‘marginalisation and impoverishment’ (Grabska, 2006; Sperl, 2001, p. 23). Egyptian people have offered a warm welcome to some refugees, especially Syrians. However, the majority are insecure and vulnerable to violence. In the words of an international human rights lawyer representing asylum-seekers in Cairo: ‘even if declared a refugee and handed the United Nations blue identification card ... such persons will never be truly protected in Egypt’ (Elliot, 2014, p. 341). Only a minority are granted refugee status and it has been, and remains, ‘virtually impossible’ for refugees to gain citizenship (Center for Migration and Refugee Studies [CMRS], 2005).

A shortage of resources is partly to blame – there is a huge disparity between the demand for humanitarian support and its actual provision. For instance, in July 2020, soon after our field research, UNHCR reported that donors had provided only 33% of the funds necessary to support some 260,000 registered refugees and asylum-seekers (UNHCR, 2020a). Moreover, the official statistics represent only a fraction of the forcibly displaced and vulnerable people in Egypt – some five million people are involved in ‘mixed migration’, according to the government and humanitarians (IOM, 2019). Meanwhile, there are high rates of poverty, unemployment, and inequality among the host population, fuelling concern among Egyptian policymakers that the rights and resources available to refugees should not exceed or undermine those available to nationals (Grabska, 2006, p. 18).

Compounding the lack of humanitarian support is profound legal uncertainty; refugees are subject to ‘the devastating effects of changing laws’ (CMRS, 2005). Significantly,

over the last decade, Egypt has stepped up its repression and securitization of refugees and migrants in line with European agendas to reinforce or ‘externalize’ their borders against migration (Norman, 2016, pp. 49–50). More generally, Egyptian political opposition and civil society have been crushed by President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi’s government since 2014 (Human Rights Watch, 2018) such that, as Ardovini and Mabon put it: ‘the state of exception has become ... the paradigm of government’ (2020, p. 471). Even before these crackdowns, Egyptian security forces were notorious for torture, intimidation, and extortion (Pascucci, 2014, p. 9). These dire conditions surely limit the scope for political action – for citizens, let alone refugees.

Nevertheless, we already know that refugees and migrants often act politically in novel ways, dispelling the notions of a ‘humanitarian imaginary’ that conceives of them as pure victims and ‘objects of assistance’ (Malkki, 1996). Various scholars assert that they engage creatively in self-organizing, political mobilization and protest (Amisi & Ballard, 2005, p. 3; Lecadet, 2016; Malkki, 1995; Tazzioli, 2020). Significantly, McNevin (2013) finds that some refugees enact notions of citizenship and make political claims with ‘transformative potential’; while Nyers emphasizes their capacity to do so in dire situations that are precisely designed to limit them (2010, p. 127). Moreover, Lee argues that migrants act less visibly to display an ‘interstitial agency’ in their lived practices, including by adopting liberal scripts in pursuit of ‘rights, dignity, and respect’ (2010, pp. 65–66). Beyond this, Ataç et al remind us that migrant journeys – their very ‘struggles for and of movement’ – are inherently contentious and generative of ‘new forms of citizenship and political community’ in a world of borders (2016, p. 529).

With these insights in mind, we explore refugee solidarities and struggles under conditions of extreme political exclusion and violence, based on collaborative ethnography with South Sudanese refugees in Cairo. We begin with a history of the South Sudanese presence and politics in the city; we then explain our methodology and positionality, before turning to an analysis of the refugees’ discourses and practices.

We show how, from the perspective of the refugees, the city is a hostile and precarious environment where they are routinely subject to racism, deprivation, and arbitrary applications of law. At the same time, South Sudanese people have historical roots in Cairo and have generated forms of moral and political order there, shaped by fluctuating relations with each other, the city, and their homeland. We argue that these inconspicuous socio-political structures provide community citizenship at the urban margins. Additionally, refugees strive for legitimate authority, social welfare, and rights in exile, within and beyond these local realms.

Our findings resonate with previous accounts of refugee rights and citizenship struggles (see above), but also reveal a situated politics, that we label ‘civicness’. We find that the refugees act politically in distinctive relations and contentions that are principally oriented towards customary leaders and humanitarian agencies, rather than state authorities. They rely on and encourage quotidian solidarities within local communities and social networks. They also creatively blend notions of custom with references to an assortment of human rights and constitutional norms. In this harsh context, the refugees deploy civicness to promote survival with dignity; and to counteract dehumanizing modes of humanitarian governance.

## South Sudanese Communities in Cairo: A History of Struggles

South Sudanese<sup>1</sup> people have maintained a marginal but consistent presence in Cairo over hundreds of years – their entanglements with the Egyptian state and its people are historically ‘complicated and intimate’, as Trout Powell affirms (2003, p. 220). These ties were forged in violence in the nineteenth century under the *Turkiya* (1821–1885), a period when the Egyptian Ottoman ruler annexed, and plundered Sudan for slaves; southerners were often brought forcibly to the city. Later, Egypt was complicit as a junior partner in the Anglo-Egyptian condominium over Sudan (1899–1955); Egyptians became ‘colonized-colonizers’ making all Sudanese in some sense their colonial subjects (Trout Powell, 2003, p. 22). This relation embedded itself socially and politically to the point that even after Sudan’s independence some Egyptian nationalists continued to envisage dominion over Sudan, and to press for the unity of the Nile Valley (Moro, 2004, p. 428).

The history of slavery and colonialism dictated a conception of southern Sudanese people as racial and social subordinates. They were exploited for military and agricultural labour, but also in domestic slavery – so much so that a stereotype emerged in popular culture depicting them as ‘subdued and dependent servants’ (Trout Powell, 2003, p. 78). Indeed, the tradition of Egyptian elites being served by black slaves continues to echo into the present, shaping preferences for employing southern Sudanese women as domestic workers (Ahmed, 2010, p. 365). British colonial policy also influenced social and racial inequalities, especially after 1924 when the Egyptian presence within Sudan was reduced and Britain introduced separate administrative and religious policies for northern and southern Sudan, restricting Islamization in the south and thus deepening the gulf between southern Sudanese and Egypt. All these legacies have hampered the development of cultural and family ties between Egyptians and southerners, in contrast to the more equitable and convivial relations that some Egyptians have developed with northern Sudanese elites (Moro, 2004, p. 429).

At the same time, colonialism produced cultural familiarities and socio-economic linkages which, combined with geographical proximity, encouraged both southern and northern Sudanese to travel to Egypt to seek opportunities or sanctuary, depending on changing political circumstances. Thousands of Sudanese students took up scholarships from the Egyptian government, especially in the 1970s–1990s (Moro, 2004). Increasingly, they fled to the city from spiralling conflicts in their homelands. The number of refugees escalated after 1989, during the second Sudanese civil war (Saeed, 1999, p. 103). Some refugees returned home following the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 or after South Sudan’s independence in 2011. Then the 2013 civil war displaced around two million people across borders (UNHCR, 2020b) and while most fled to Sudan or Uganda, some came to Egypt.

The legal status of South Sudanese people in Egypt has also been influenced by regional politics, with political shifts over the post-independence years adding a layer of confusion. All Sudanese enjoyed the right to reside in Egypt during the period from 1982 until 1995, when new political tensions between Egypt and Sudan led to its suspension. In 2004, UNHCR suspended refugee status determinations for Sudanese considering progress in the Sudanese peace process (CPA), while relations improved between Egypt and Sudan. That same year, the two countries signed a ‘Four Freedoms’ agreement

promising free movement and work, residency, and property ownership rights (Grabska, 2006, p. 295) – although this was never fully implemented and ceased to apply to southerners after South Sudan's independence. Since then, Egypt has maintained a security interest in South Sudan and its government largely because of its concerns about the management of water resources within the Nile basin (Biong Deng Kuol, 2018, p. 56). Constant political uncertainties and tensions between Egypt and its neighbours have complicated the refugees' situation.

Despite this history of subjugation and insecurity, the record also shows that northern and southern Sudanese refugees have invented a variety of self-help practices and forms of political organization in Egypt. Ali (2015) traced the emergence and evolution of a Sudanese women's movement in Egypt (in the years before the independence of South Sudan), and its significance not only for exiles but domestic politics. Moro (2004, p. 429) documented a successful protest by southern Sudanese women who gathered in front of the UNHCR compound in 1994 to demand refugee status. They persuaded the Egyptian government to reverse its opposition and UNHCR began to consider their applications, although over the next decade only a minority of them were ever actually registered as refugees. Most strikingly, an estimated 3000 southern and northern Sudanese refugees camped out in Mustafa Mahmoud square near the UNHCR office for three months in 2005, demanding an end to violence and deprivation, and resettlement. This protest caught the attention of many scholars. For Moulin and Nyers, it constituted a radical challenge – exposing the failings of humanitarian 'governmentalities of care and protection' (2007, pp. 358–360). In Fadlalla's analysis, the refugees acted within the constraints of their humanitarian category but also generated 'borderless solidarities', awakening support from Sudanese people in the diaspora and Egyptian activists (2009, pp. 92, 113). Pascucci adds that this occupation set precedents that would be echoed in mass protests by Egyptians and other groups of refugees (2014, p. 84). Yet, as Rowe emphasizes, it resulted in devastating losses for the participants. The Egyptian police intervened to brutally evict the refugees, killing at least 29 of them, while injuring or arresting hundreds of others. Ultimately, the refugees felt it as a collective trauma and a defeat (Rowe, 2009, pp. 7–9, 79).

Less visible but more durable forms of political action underpinned and survived these protests (Rowe, 2009, 79). Sudanese and South Sudanese refugees formed community associations in the city that, as Saeed (1999) highlights, have worked to support their basic needs and to represent their interests. Grabska reinforces this point with evidence of how such self-help associations and churches have provided forms of material support, through remittances, informal labour, and mutual assistance (2006, pp. 301–304). Meanwhile, Ahmed (2010) shows how wider informal networks and religious organizations have supplied practical assistance, including by helping women find jobs as domestic workers. Convincingly, Pascucci argues that such associations and networks promote everyday 'relations of care, solidarity and belonging' to the extent that we might classify them as forms of 'autonomous political action', and expressions of 'agency beyond resistance' (2014, xi).

These patterns of civic action and community-building found among South Sudanese refugees in Cairo also resonate with findings in other countries. Vancluysen (2022) writes of the 'everyday mobilities' and reliance on 'transnational family networks' of South Sudanese refugees in Uganda. Relatedly, Grabska (2021, p. 252) shows how displaced

Nuer displaced people in Khartoum were negotiating identities and social relations ‘in-between’ Sudan and a newly independent South Sudan; they felt obligations to support their fellow Nuer with education, justice, and health care initiatives in Khartoum while also sending assistance to communities in the South, fostering a ‘translocal citizenship’. Bakhit (2021) also explores the efforts of displaced southerners in Khartoum to deliver protection and services, and labels these as a shantytown ‘community citizenship’, emerging in the absence of legal citizenship. These various accounts reveal the civic and political agency of refugees, but only provide hints of the struggles, power relations and violence within refugee communities that Moro (2004) and Jansen (2016) have identified. We seek to better understand these internal dynamics, as well as the ways in which refugee associations and modes of political action have evolved over time, to make sense of their political significance.

### ***The Research Process***

South Sudanese make up the third-largest group of asylum-seekers and refugees in Egypt (after Syrian and Sudanese), numbering close to 20,000 during the research phase in 2017–2020 (UNHCR, 2020a). Some refugees have been in Cairo for decades, having fled during the Sudanese wars of the 1990s; others came more recently to study or work and were unable to return. Several have crossed borders many times, with the latest group displaced by the civil war that erupted in 2013, two years after South Sudan gained its independence.<sup>2</sup> Given these complexities, while only some research participants were officially recognized as refugees, we refer to all as such. We adopt this expansive definition in line with previous scholars of refugees in Cairo, on the basis that all research participants had either applied for refugee status or had good reason to fear returning to South Sudan at the time of the research (see Grabska & Mehta, 2008, p. 10; Johnson, 2013; Montaser, 2020).

Our efforts to trace the refugees’ social practices and relations were based upon the principles of collaborative ethnography. This means that we adopted many of the standard tools of ethnographers but abandoned the presumption of a ‘distant observer’ and instead pursued a highly participatory method, directly informed by the concerns and agendas of people experiencing violence or injustice (Rappaport, 2008; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). This approach offers a supplement (not an alternative) to standard research ethics, pursuing methods that are productive ‘both for the professional ethnographer and for the community’ (Rappaport, 2008, p. 3). It involved co-convening a workshop on women’s rights with refugee women’s associations; and co-organizing a series of eleven discussion forums with community-based organizations. Our collaborators were individuals who had already displayed commitments to the welfare and rights of their communities. In addition, we collected numerous observations of discussions and events and undertook nineteen life history interviews with community leaders, including chiefs, church leaders, women’s leaders, teachers, and students from various ethnic groups. These various interactions involved more than two hundred refugees and led us to relevant documentary sources, including petitions, letters, and social media posts. They allowed us not only to identify accounts and evidence of political agency, but also to observe its exercise in practice in relation to opportunities and spaces generated through the research.

Furthermore, not only the fieldwork, but also the project conception and the analysis of the findings were collaborative, calling for particular reflection on the co-authors' positionalities. In Seeka's case, the research had an auto-ethnographic dimension since she was able to draw upon her own lived experiences as a South Sudanese refugee in Cairo at the time of the study. In some ways, she was a community insider, 'studying the familiar' (Berger, 2015, p. 222), along the lines of Moro's (2004) study of South Sudanese refugees in Cairo, and Ali's research on Sudanese women's participation in 'exile politics' in Cairo, in which the author was 'integral to the subject matter ... and the analysis' (2015, p. 4). Simultaneously, Seeka was socially situated as a woman, a member of the minority Fertit ethnic group, and a newcomer to Cairo in 2016, locating her as a peripheral member of the community in the eyes of some refugees. She also had to consider political affiliations among the refugees, given her status as a prominent human rights activist who had fled the regime in South Sudan. In contrast, Ibreck was firmly positioned as an 'outsider', as a mixed-heritage (British-Ugandan) woman based in London. She visited Cairo for periods of research in August 2017, February 2019, and July 2019, and met with Seeka for a joint analysis of the findings in Kenya in 2020. This strategy of 'limited and uneven immersion' (Krause, 2021) was appropriate for an outsider in this highly sensitive research context, where the longer-term presence of the researcher would likely place unwarranted demands on the time and emotional labour of refugees, and at worst could potentially exacerbate their fears and risks.

Our teamwork helped Seeka to establish boundaries between her dual roles as refugee and researcher, while bolstering her authority and access to some groups. It also allowed Ibreck to learn about developments over time without maintaining a constant presence; to build networks; and to discover innumerable subtleties that would otherwise have been missed or misunderstood. The result is an intimate view 'from below', focusing exclusively on the refugees' perspectives and actions, enabling us to analyse refugee discourses, self-organizing practices, norms, and relationalities.

## **The Humiliations of Humanitarian Governance**

In community meetings, South Sudanese refugees frequently referenced notions of equal human rights and complained that humanitarian actors were utterly failing to live up to their commitments to protection, welfare, and dignity. They shared profound criticisms of UNHCR, the lead humanitarian organization in Cairo, responsible for classifying their legal status and providing access to assistance. They lamented the paucity of financial and medical support; and accused the organization of inefficiency at best, and systematic discrimination and corruption at worst.<sup>3</sup> They described deeply frustrating encounters at UNHCR's offices and futile appeals for assistance that left them feeling humiliated. Since many had either been in Egypt for decades; or had experienced humanitarian aid elsewhere, they were conscious of a deterioration in refugee protection and services: 'Before 2004 UN agencies and Caritas were giving good service. Now the UN sends you to Caritas but when you go the staff will say they are not responsible for you' (Luwo community meeting, February 2019). Neither the basic needs of refugees, nor their expectations of fair, equal, and respectful treatment were being met. Decades of research with Sudanese refugees show that: 'often, the kinds of assistance that refugees or IDPs [Internally-Displaced People] receive, or the ways in which it is provided, do not

make recipients feel respected or that their dignity is considered', and only occasionally do they feel 'taken good care of' (Moro, 2019, pp. 22–24). In Cairo, the refugees' disillusionment with humanitarianism appeared universal and unremitting, as a community leader observed: 'There is no UNHCR here, because the office here doesn't care how much problems we face' (interview, Nuer leader, September 2018).

Refugees have written numerous complaints and made in-person representations to UNHCR and other humanitarian actors. A letter from a group of four women listed protection, health, employment, education, finance and housing as burning issues, and concluded with an appeal for help: 'How long we shall suffer like this. We are seeking interventions since we cannot go back to our country because there is not safety there. We are just stuck ... Our future seems dim' (letter to UNHCR, 29 July 2018). Refugees criticized bureaucratic delays and mismanagement of cases; arbitrary refugee status determination procedures; lengthy processes of registration; and the failure to address injustices for refugees whose claims had been rejected with 'closed files'. Since the organization is badly overstretched, delays and dysfunctions have become normalized – as even some UNHCR Cairo staff have admitted (Pascucci, 2014, p. 149). A UNHCR representative present at the meeting of a South Sudanese women's group was candid about the problems. He sought to pre-empt an inevitable rush of complaints by blaming a lack of funding and advising them to support each other:

People always want to speak their hearts out whenever there is a UNHCR representative around ... [but] there are sixteen countries that are donors to the UNHCR here in Egypt, [and] they don't donate enough to support all the refugees here ... we urge refugees to withstand social protection because the commission cannot protect them all the time everywhere. (women's event, December 2019)

The women at this meeting were not deterred; they implored the UNHCR to at least prepare them for 'self-protection' from sexual violence and to advise them on 'where to seek aid ... because they risk their lives entering the country through smuggling and all kind of dangerous ways just to seek protection with the UNHCR' (women's event, December 2019). More commonly, the refugees are strategic and selective in their exchanges with UNHCR for fear of negative consequences. As a community leader explained, they 'won't talk freely' fearing that they are being monitored by 'security guards' who will inform the Egyptian local authorities of any charges levelled against them (interview, September 2018).

Heated discussions within community meetings were even more damning. Refugees characterized the UNHCR as an accomplice in racism and discrimination, suspecting that it is beholden to Egyptian staff and gives preference to refugees from other communities. They accused the organization of 'games' including nepotism and corruption and complained of outright racism: 'That UN body is dominated by Egyptians [who] don't classify us as people' (Fertit community meeting, February 2019). They also observed that preferential treatment is given to other refugees: 'They put South Sudanese on one side ... then they started working with the Syrians ... Why are our people treated like that? They all left the country for almost the same reasons!' (group meeting with women's development organization, May 2019). Differential treatment is interpreted as further evidence of racial discrimination: 'They are just being racist; it is just the colour of skin' (women's group meeting, February 2019).

## The Threat of the Egyptian Security State

In contrast to the critiques of humanitarians for their failures to live up to expectations, the Egyptian state appeared in the refugees' accounts mainly as a perpetrator of abuses, rather than as a potential duty-bearer and provider of public goods and citizenship. The refugees' experiences and perceptions of the state were shaped by their applications for residency permits at the *Mogamma* – the 'high temple' of a Kafkaesque Egyptian bureaucracy (Diab, 2016) – and by their encounters with the police and other state security personnel. In interviews and meetings, the refugees recalled tortuous efforts to obtain residence permits:

I spent four days sleeping at the immigration to get the residence permit. Until I reached the point to go in and then they told me to go back to the end of the line ... I said I would not go back, and then the officer took the form from the UN and tore it down. This was in 2018. (Fertit meeting, February 2019)

More troubling still was the 'grip of governmental control and security surveillance' (Pascucci, 2014, p. 86). Police brutality and everyday injustices fuelled the Egyptian revolution in 2011, and abuses by security forces multiplied and became more 'flagrant' under President al-Sisi (Human Rights Watch, 2020). As refugees are at the bottom of the social hierarchy, they usually lack the connections or '*wasta*' needed to navigate the security state (Diab, 2016). To apply for a residence permit, refugees travelled at night, waited for days in the heat, and faced abuse and rejection. They saw no alternative since anyone found without a permit could be imprisoned: 'If they find you without the residence permit, they'll arrest you and the UNHCR office has to bail you out which takes time' (interview, woman refugee GY, July 2018). Refugees described being stopped on the street to show their permit and being awoken at midnight or three o'clock in the morning in spot checks for documents at their homes, which might lead to either arrest or fines. They felt at the mercy of a bewildering bureaucracy and in constant fear of arrest (community meetings and interviews, February 2019).

## The Continuum of Violence

The refugees reported multiple and persistent experiences of violence, as consequences of both the hostility of the state and the neglect of humanitarians, and of tensions within their own communities and families. At the extreme, they described murders, unexplained disappearances and deaths, kidnappings of women and children, and organ theft (illegal organ-trading networks are rife in Cairo, according to Columb, 2017). Everyone suffered the routine structural violence of racism and poverty. Criminality, bag snatching, beatings, sexual harassment in the streets, and assaults on dignity were also said to be commonplace. Frequently, the perpetrators were identified as Egyptian, but refugees also denounced members of their own community.

Several refugees gave searing accounts of extreme hunger and poverty; they spoke of seven or eight refugees confined in tiny rooms in soaring temperatures; and of their inability to pay for medication, rent, or even basic food. A woman who fled to Cairo with her grandchildren in 2016 – having already endured the disappearance of her son, the killing of her daughter-in-law, and a government raid on her home in South Sudan – said she regretted her exile: 'I even wished to be killed by a bullet than to be

suffering like this in a foreign country, the children get thin every day because of lack of food. The situation here is worse' (interview, woman refugee GY, July 2018). A religious leader stated that refugees were now vulnerable to starvation, giving an example: 'Even last month two people starved to death in their apartment because they didn't have the money to buy food' (interview, pastor, July 2018).

Arbitrary detention and intimidation by security forces were also routine threats. Refugees appealed to UNHCR and to civil society organizations such as St. Andrews Refugee Services (StARS) for assistance, but even if the organizations were sometimes successful in securing a release, the process was traumatic, took time, and cost money. This led to speculation that arrest was a mechanism of police extortion. Families had to pay to visit their relatives and, if they had the money, to release them: 'Two of my brothers. They were arrested because they didn't have a resident permit ... You can pay 200 [Egyptian] pounds to go in ... If you have money, you can go and buy [bribe] an Egyptian' (Greater Equatoria meeting, February 2019). In some cases, those without papers would simply be deported (Zande community meeting, February 2019).

No one expected any assistance from the police, instead they worried that taking an allegation to the police could lead to imprisonment without investigation: 'Egyptians don't interfere in the issue of violence between the [South] Sudanese ... They will intervene if this group break something relating to an Egyptian; then ... people know that if there is a problem, they will take you to the prison' (*Takafel* meeting, February 2019). In one instance, a woman who was beaten up by Egyptians was herself arrested and 'locked up because her residence permit was expired' (women's workshop, February 2019).

Many refugees claimed that sexual violence and harassment of women by Egyptians was proliferating but went unreported and unpunished: 'If the girl is raped by an Egyptian ... if you take the case to the Egyptian, they will not open any case against their people' (Fertit meeting, August 2017). As one man reflected, the refugees do not even hope for access to justice in such cases: 'It all goes back to the law ... no law is carried out when these things happen to refugees' (Fertit community meeting, February 2019). For some young girls and their families, this meant not only the suffering associated with the violation and a lack of access to justice, but also unwanted pregnancy without support, in breach of both international human rights norms and South Sudanese customs: 'teenagers have been raped and get pregnant and give birth ... but you don't have the right to claim for that' (Greater Equatoria meeting, February 2019).

Most refugees worked in the informal sector, given the *de facto* lack of a right to work and high unemployment rates with a 'chronic shortage of jobs' even for Egyptians (Pascucci, 2014, pp. 111–123). As illegal workers, they were exploited and sometimes abused. Five refugees gave detailed accounts of how employers falsely accused them or their relatives of theft and dismissed them without payment, right at the end of their short-term contract as domestic workers (*mobit*).<sup>4</sup> In one case, a refugee recalled how an employer 'brought out a *panga* (machete) and knives' to threaten her, claiming that she had stolen a ring (Zande community meeting, February 2019). More distressing still, some refugees told stories about women who were sexually abused, committed suicide, or disappeared from their workplaces (Greater Equatoria meeting, December 2019). In such cases, refugees felt helpless: 'they know they cannot report to the Egyptian law ... they don't even report this [to the community] ... unless when there is a workshop, the cases come out' (*Takafel* meeting, February 2019).

Episodes of violence and impunity were associated with systemic racial discrimination and abuse. As a group of women appealing to UNHCR wrote: ‘Black men and women experience most of the time discrimination, racism ... example, “Chocolata, Chocolata” “boonga” or samara (meaning ‘black’)' (letter to UNHCR, 29 July 2018). Similarly, a woman expressed her distress in a meeting: ‘Even if I arrive first [in the shop] I will not get any item until the rest of the line of Egyptians is finished. that makes me feel very bad and emotionally down’ (Fertit meeting, 2019). Such discrimination also has economic costs; refugees complain that they pay higher rents than Egyptians (a point confirmed by empirical research, Grabska, 2006, p. 302). They also find it difficult to find places to stay because of their race and religion (interview, pastor, July 2019).

Besides the violence emanating from the Egyptian state and society, refugees also experience spirals of violence within their own South Sudanese communities. The most visible perpetrators are the ‘Nigga’ gangs that have formed in the neighbourhoods where South Sudanese refugee communities have congregated. The gangs embody resistance to both the Egyptian state and society, and their own community elders and norms. The young men who join them are, according to Lewis, using drugs, music, criminality, and violence to express resistance to the powerlessness of displacement (2009, pp. 52–53). In the fashion of urban gangs globally, they compete or fight over territories and resources. They sometimes inflict violence on their own communities. Gang members are accused of robbing and beating their parents and teachers to the extent that ‘teachers can’t go alone they have to go in groups to give protection’ (Greater Equatoria meeting; Luwo community meeting, February 2019).

Less openly discussed is the violence that husbands and intimate partners inflict on refugee women and children behind closed doors in domestic settings. When this happens, the women are liable to be trapped, with little chance to either report the abuse, to get a divorce, or to escape the perpetrator. The fact that women typically work informally as domestic workers, often becoming the main breadwinners, does not in itself liberate them from patriarchal authority, underpinned by statutory, customary, and religious regimes.

Sexual and gender-based violence is a distinct problem, but one that is also deeply intertwined with the precarity of the refugees’ existence; in Hyndman’s analysis, refugees’ lives are ‘gendered and racialized at multiple scales’ (2010, p. 456). This profound vulnerability is illustrated in a single life history recounted by Christina (interview, February 2019), who fled to Cairo with her husband during the second Sudanese civil war in 1989 and found work there as a housekeeper. Soon after the birth of her first child, Christina’s husband began beating her. In a matter of years, he started abusing her two daughters. In 2003, Christina tried to divorce him. She turned first to the customary system, but the Dinka chief refused to divorce her, since neither her husband, nor his family (who have rights under the bride wealth system), would give consent.<sup>5</sup> Next she appealed to UNHCR and was given legal advice, but the Egyptian court also refused to act since (she was told) the ‘husband was refusing to sign’. At that point Christina threatened to kill herself – she was only saved because someone found her and ‘took away the knife’.

This traumatic history was the background to a suicide attempt and the eventual disappearance of one of Christina’s daughters in 2009. Patriarchal authority also shaped the fate of Christina’s other daughter – she was disciplined and beaten up by a male cousin,

and then ‘fell’ from a balcony and died. In both cases, the police and humanitarian agencies failed to investigate and provide support. The only solidarity that Christina received came from other Sudanese and South Sudanese refugees who raised money to pay for her daughter’s hospital treatment and to send her body to South Sudan for burial.

Refugees are caught in a web of violence, without protection or access to justice for the overwhelming number of crimes committed against them. On one level, their ‘main coping strategy’ appears to be the ‘endurance of bad treatment’, as Grabska observes (2006, p. 296). Yet inconspicuously, in the confined social spaces that they have carved out for themselves, refugees develop shared understandings, and moral and political positions. They deplore humanitarian governance, depicting the failures of the system and its complicity in their degradation, engaging in an ‘infrapolitical’ (Scott, 1990) critique of power that is inherently restorative of a sense of dignity. In turn, their ‘claims for dignity’ serve to bind together the refugees as a collective, encouraging a ‘group cohesion’ (Marche, 2012, pp. 2, 9) that is also perceptible in community solidarities and struggles.

## **Civicness**

South Sudanese refugees have developed forms of mutual assistance, community-building, and initiatives for social and political change. Through them the refugees demonstrate their capabilities and valorize collective identities, countering their experiences of discrimination in Egyptian society where ‘the dignity of the South Sudanese people is not respected’ (Greater Equatoria meeting, February 2019). Such self-help efforts and gatherings have both material and socio-political purposes and benefits, but do not fit with (generally Eurocentric) concepts of civil society, human rights activism, resistance, or citizenship. We bundle them into the capacious empirical concept of ‘civicness’, which might include any form of civic struggle for legitimate authority, social welfare, and a rights-based constitutional order, pursued under regimes characterized by violence and predation (Kaldor, 2019; Kaldor & Radice 2022) and we also identify the distinctive elements of this situated politics in Cairo.

## ***Ethnic Authorities and Associations: Solidarity and Constitutionalism***

The most resilient and prevalent refugee authorities and associations invoked notions of kinship and ethnicity as the foundation of duties and reciprocities, but also adapted notions of custom to the demands of the urban context. Of note were the chiefs, who were selected to represent and regulate people from their ‘home’ areas based on ethnicity. In South Sudan, chiefs have long been, and remain, pre-eminent in governing local communities and administering justice, drawing authority from their invocations of custom on one hand, and relations to the state, on the other (see Ibreck, 2019, pp. 70-71). In Cairo, the role was tailored to constrained circumstances. Chiefs received ‘no salaries and no reward’, but commanded legitimacy based on their efforts to mediate disputes and deliver justice within families and communities, especially in cases of divorce, pregnancy outside of marriage, or the rape of women and girls by a South Sudanese perpetrator (Kuku chief, August 2018). They responded to problems as they emerged and made representations on the other refugees’ behalf – for instance, to assist people who have been arrested and imprisoned.

The chiefs had considerable difficulty in trying to negotiate with the security regimes in Cairo, and several chiefs expressed frustrations and fear that their efforts placed them at constant risk of arrest (interview, Fertit chief, February 2019). But they drew some strength from a collective decision-making forum, the Chiefs Council, or *Jalia*, bringing together five chiefs selected by 26 communities.<sup>6</sup> The *Jalia* had been undermined by ethnic divisions arising in the civil war in South Sudan to the point that it hardly met for most of the period under study. Still the forum revived its work following the 2018 peace agreement in South Sudan. And in January 2020, the *Jalia* contributed to helping the Fertit community to locate a young boy and to secure his release from prison (WhatsApp messages, January 2020).

At a popular level, various ethnic community associations were flourishing at the time of the research. They coordinated practical assistance and preserved cultural heritage and relations among the refugees in the city, much as they have done for decades (see Saeed, 1999), but they were also innovating and evolving. While each community had its own structures, collaborative research, observations, and interviews with the Fertit community; the Luwo community; the Zande community; the Union of Greater Equatoria; and the Nuer community associations, and interviews with representatives of the Abyei Dinka and the Shilluk communities indicated similarities in their associations. Members generally paid a small contribution fee to finance cultural activities and had the right to a say in their functioning.

The associations sought to help members who were in dire economic circumstances; they also assisted in cases of illness or bereavement or undertook advocacy on behalf of the refugees. Sometimes support was given directly, such as finding temporary lodgings for refugees when they first arrived in Cairo, or if they became homeless while there (Fertit community meeting, August 2017; interview, Kuku chief, August 2018). Alternatively, community leaders lobbied relevant authorities (mainly humanitarian or church organizations) for assistance. Some also engaged in more radical public advocacy: for instance, in 2017, the Fertit community petitioned the South Sudan government demanding an end to the atrocious violence against people in their home area of Wau, South Sudan (Fertit community, August 2017). Such ‘translocal’ (Grabska, 2021) commitments were also essential to the associations’ functioning. They were able to offer help largely because they were networking transnationally and mobilizing remittances from members of the ethnic diaspora based in Europe, Australia, and the United States. For example, at the start of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020 – when many refugees lost their jobs and humanitarian organizations literally closed their doors – community associations raised money from the diaspora and disseminated guidance for the health and welfare of their members using their social media networks.

The community associations were certainly guided by traditional notions of solidarity and reciprocity and, as Rowe observes, cultivated norms of responsible masculinity (Rowe, 2009, p. 79). But we also found that their meetings were deliberative forums in which critical dialogues among members took place. Moreover, the associations had procedures for the establishment of legitimate and accountable leadership. They tended to mirror the language and legalities of formal politics, organizing elections, establishing constitutions, and appointing presidents, vice-presidents, representatives for youth and women, and executive committees. Indeed, we documented a series of debates that led to the establishment of a constitutional document for the Fertit association in 2020,

enshrining commitments to uphold rights, duties and procedures that are: ‘driven by the values of tolerance and deep pride in our identity’.<sup>7</sup>

Not all refugees valued the community associations; some criticized individual leaders; others complained about internal tribalism (since ‘ethnic’ groups are internally fractured by clan and political affiliations). Notably, in 2019, the Nuer association was paralysed by tensions between clans that have fought on different sides of the civil war in South Sudan. Such cleavages were characteristic of post-2013 politics within South Sudan and they have also affected relationships and introduced new frictions within the refugee community, which, some claimed, ‘didn’t have any tribalism between the South Sudanese community here before [the war]’ (Fertit community meeting, August 2018). It is therefore remarkable that many of the associations still managed to come together regularly for joint ‘cultural days’, and some joined together in annual commemorations (on 15 December) dedicated to ‘the victims of the civil war and Nuer genocide’.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Struggles for Rights and Justice***

The refugees not only made claims for basic rights and justice; but also strived to deliver upon them directly. Most impressive were their achievements in the provision of primary education. South Sudanese refugees have established their own schools, either independently or in conjunction with other refugees, relying on fees from parents, voluntary efforts by teachers, and community members’ donations, as well as occasional grants from international donors.<sup>9</sup> On paper, the refugees have a right to put their children in Egyptian schools, but in practice they either cannot find places, or experience racism when they do (Pascucci, 2014, pp. 26–27), and many of them also want to learn in English rather than Arabic, because they hope for resettlement or return. During visits to three schools, we found mostly South Sudanese, but also a few other African children being taught by well-educated and experienced Sudanese and South Sudanese teachers, working for low salaries on the basis that they ‘have interest to educate children’ (The Innovation Primary School, February 2019). They were motivated to look after children who may otherwise be left ‘locked and unsupervised in cramped rooms ... without proper nutritional care or exposure to sunlight’ while their parents go to work. They were also tolerant of the fact that school fees are not always paid on time ‘because their parents cannot afford’ (The Sudanese Community Development Program school in Ain Shams, February 2019).

Furthermore, we found several other South Sudanese-led initiatives that sought to bridge differences and promote rights, bringing together refugees of diverse nationalities or linking them to Egyptians – although these proved difficult to sustain. For instance, at the time of our research, the *Takafel* association was operating with a lot of voluntary support and minimal funding. It had been established by South Sudanese refugees but also brought together Sudanese, Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Syrian volunteers who had ‘that heart to give’ (*Takafel* meeting, February 2019). They provided direct services, including after-school classes for teenagers in English and Arabic, training for women in handicrafts and legal advice to refugees. Yet, within a few months of our visit, *Takafel* had run out of funding and closed.

In contrast, refugee women’s groups appeared to be growing at the time of the study. Among these, *Oumahat Agsan Al Karma Association* brought South Sudanese women of

different backgrounds and ethnicities together with the intention to ‘develop ourselves and our lives’ (meeting, May 2019). The association offered support and training for women, including a children’s day-care centre. It also engaged in advocacy, including the global initiative: *16 days of activism against gender-based violence*. Some refugees also participated in an energetic *African Women’s Club*, becoming involved in pan-Africanist celebrations of women’s achievements, and training and empowerment activities for women of all nationalities, including Egyptians alongside African migrants and refugees (WhatsApp, January 2020). The importance of these women’s groups cannot be overstated, since they all in some fashion cultivated notions of women’s rights and gender equality that challenged the dominant patriarchal authorities and norms prevailing in both South Sudanese and Egyptian society.

More diffusely, some refugees were part of transnational networks engaged in digital advocacy. They were increasingly active on social media, and this had given them new visibility and power. In June 2019, a storm of social media accusations of organ theft and complaints about the death of a student encouraged community leaders to demand action from the South Sudan embassy in Cairo. This eventually yielded a meeting with the embassy and a representative of the Egyptian government and a public response, although the government mainly denied that there was an organ-trafficking problem (Radio Tamazuj, 2019). Later that year, a video of a South Sudanese student being racially abused was posted on Twitter and went viral. Not only were the abusers arrested – itself a very rare achievement – but the South Sudanese victim was later invited by President al-Sisi to attend the World Youth Forum (WYF) (‘Bullied Sudanese student,’ 2019). Against the background of global anti-racist mobilizations, led by the Black Lives Matter movement, the refugees’ critique of racism in the city was finally acknowledged at the highest level.<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

South Sudanese refugees in Cairo described the international humanitarian regime as at best distant, and at worst corrupt or complicit in racism. They perceived the Egyptian state almost exclusively as a threat. Consequently, they emphasized their reliance upon their own self-help initiatives and institutions. We find that such localized refugee-led authorities, associations, and civic practices sustain people practically and socially: they improvise a form of ‘community citizenship’ (Bakht, 2021) that contributes to a sense of recognition, belonging and a measure of service provision and protection. Beyond this, they enable refugees to act politically both within and beyond their communities, covertly or openly struggling for legitimate and accountable authorities, and the provision of welfare, rights, and equality. Refugees contrive to develop and articulate distinctive civic strategies, claims and aspirations by intertwining selected elements from customary, human rights and constitutional norms that they encounter in their everyday lives. Sometimes chiefs, religious leaders and ethnic community associations promote forms of civicness, as they adapt entrenched socio-cultural reciprocities to concepts of human rights and democracy in this urban setting. Often, civicness is manifest in refugee-led schools, as well as in humanitarian, civic and women’s rights groups. Increasingly, it is to be found in digital spaces where refugees establish new networks and advocate for justice and rights.

In this case, civicness is a bundle of vernacular solidarity practices, resilient modes of local governance, and struggles for rights, that promote survival with dignity but do not promise fundamental change. Certainly, despite the new displacements and political tensions resulting from South Sudan's civil war, the repertoires of South Sudanese refugees have evolved progressively over time – including through the establishment of new women's groups, and the use of new media technologies of protest. Nevertheless, there are strong continuities in the problems they face and the ways that they respond. Historical inequalities borne of slavery and colonial relations still affect the refugees' everyday lives and are compounded by contemporary state repression and humanitarian neglect. While the refugees rely and build upon established practices of solidarity and struggle, these are defined and constrained by their precarious situation, and by their encounters with violence, repression, and the deficiencies of the international humanitarian order.

It does not make sense to conceptualize the presence of South Sudanese refugees in Cairo as temporary, as humanitarians tend to do. Refugees have long contributed to the vibrancy and sociality of this 'cosmopolitan' city (Pascucci, 2014, p. 7) – even if they have mostly been overlooked or excluded from Egyptian movements and collectives, and categorized as foreigners who do not, and cannot, belong. Through their very presence, the refugees contribute to exposing the failures of humanitarianism and to resisting racism, to the benefit of migrants and citizens alike.<sup>11</sup> Like Egyptian citizens, South Sudanese refugees also display a sort of 'critical conviviality' (Singerman & Amar, 2006, p. 10, 34) as they counteract dehumanizing conditions, build moral communities and claim rights, acting creatively in ways that we label 'civicness'.

## Notes

1. Until the independence of South Sudan in 2011, South Sudanese people held Sudanese nationality but were generally referred to as southern Sudanese (see Moro, 2004).
2. A peace deal signed in 2018 was still 'fragile' at the time of the study (International Crisis Group, 2019).
3. Note that while the organisation has routinely received only a quarter of its estimated budget it is by far the best funded humanitarian organisation in Egypt.
4. This lasts 36 days with four days of rest. Three-month contracts are also common.
5. See Ibreck (2019), for a study of South Sudanese customary law including in divorce cases.
6. The council has existed for several decades, according to Dr Leben Moro, South Sudanese scholar, and a former chief of the Kuku in Cairo (personal communication, July 2020).
7. Seeka translation from the original Arabic, Constitution of the Union of Sons of Fertit Associations in the Arab Republic of Egypt, 2020.
8. At the time of the research this did not include the Dinka community, reflecting the political divisions of the war.
9. In 2013, there were 18 schools that received support from grants, teacher training and scholarships (Pascucci, 2014, p. 127).
10. We thank Amira Ahmed for explaining this point.
11. We thank Heba Raouf Ezzat for her comment that the presence and proximity of the refugees contributes to anti-racist struggles in Egypt.

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