FASHIONING ROOTS AND ROUTES: SAFE SPACES FOR REFUGEE RESILIENCE THROUGH PARTICIPATORY FASHION AND TEXTILE MAKING

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how participatory fashion and textile design can catalyse community resilience and connect cultural heritages with lived experiences of migration. Drawing on the 'Decolonising Fashion and Textiles' project, conducted in London between 2022 and 2024, this paper aims to examine how designers can facilitate safe spaces and enable refugees and asylum-seekers to engage in collective making practices, explore layered identities, co-create artefacts, and redesign their own futures. Rather than framing culture as fixed 'roots', in this paper we conceptualise culture as dynamic 'routes' – evolving processes shaped through displacement, resettlement, and an on-going negotiation of identity.

In the participatory action research project discussed in this paper, we used decolonial co-design methods grounded in deep listening and ethics of care, rather than adopting a designer-led problem-solving approach. Throughout the project, we engaged forty-one London-based refugees and asylum-seekers from nineteen different countries, alongside students, art and design practitioners, policymakers, charities and industry stakeholders. In this paper, we specifically discuss diverse spaces of belonging as routes that can help lay new roots in times of displacement. Facilitating a number of these spaces or spheres of engagement with diverse participants, we traced the systemic barriers faced by refugees and asylum-seekers and developed design-led interventions and policy advocacy. The collaborations consisted of co-creation workshops with master's students and roundtable discussions including policymakers, charities, and industry professionals. We also held workshops with professional makers members of the long-established Art Workers' Guild in London. These making spaces aided the

participants in reflecting on their cultural heritages and lived experiences of migration, while expressing their shifting identities and reclaiming their creative agency.

In this paper, we argue that the act of making, rooted in personal identities and craft traditions, enables participants to articulate hybrid identities, embodied in textile and fashion artefacts that weave together cultural roots and migration routes. Design can open 'routes' into meaningful employment: participants' craft skills align with skills shortages in the fashion industry, revealing a strong potential for design-policy collaboration. However, systemic barriers (in terms of legal status, access to work, prejudice, etc.) demand structural change; hence, creative and political action is needed to support community resilience.

The findings from our research project demonstrate that participatory fashion practice can create spaces of belonging, enable ethical cross-cultural connections, challenge dominant narratives about refugees, and open routes into meaningful work without erasing cultural heritages. In this paper, we argue for design interventions that support cultural sustainability and social justice — connecting cultural roots with migration routes, designing 'with' rather than 'for' displaced populations, and linking making spaces to policy and industry networks. In times of increasing global displacement and disruption, design can act as a powerful force for safe, inclusive, brave and just spaces for transformative learning and rebuilding lives, across cultural boundaries and borders.

Key Words: Participatory design, fashion and textiles, refugees, cultural sustainability, decolonising fashion, community resilience

1 INTRODUCTION

Global displacement has reached unprecedented levels, with 123.2 million people forced to flee their countries due to war, persecution, environmental crises, and structural inequalities (UNHCR, 2024). In the UK, refugees and asylum-seekers face complex systemic barriers that hinder their ability to rebuild their lives in a new place, including restrictions on the right to work, insecure housing, social isolation, and widespread stigma associated with the 'refugee' label. Although refugees are often presented as a homogeneous community within public and political discourse, their lived realities are very diverse, shaped by different cultural backgrounds, professional skills, migration journeys, and aspirations for resettlement. Yet, dominant narratives about refugees often adopt a deficit lens, framing them as passive recipients of aid rather than as active agents with knowledge, skills, and creative capacities. Although work is being done by local councils, charities and other organisations to support a transition into life in the UK, social integration is not always possible nor welcomed, and refugees are often trapped in a no man's land of belonging.

Design – particularly fashion and textile making – offers a critical, yet underexplored site for addressing these challenges. Fashion and textiles are deeply entangled with culture, identity, labour, and power (Morcom & Raina, 2025). They can reproduce colonial

hierarchies and exploitative labour systems, but can also function as spaces of resistance, care, and re-imagination. For instance, the UK fashion and textile industry has highlighted skills shortages and has subsequently promoted entry into a wide range of jobs, including *"fashion and footwear manufacturing, dyeing and weaving, leather work, pattern cutting, bespoke tailoring and design and development roles"* (UKFT, 2023). In this paper, we advocate for bridging the skills gap in the UK fashion and textile industry with the skills refugees already possess. We also acknowledge the critiqued practices of the fashion industry which outsources manufacturing to the Global South. We do not advocate to adopt the same exploitative practices locally with a diasporic population, but rather encourage desirable and mutually beneficial placements and apprenticeships, in line with the UKFT's stated aspirations. Overall, in this paper we argue that participatory fashion making can support community resilience, cultural sustainability, reciprocal and transformative learning, whilst opening routes for planting new roots in the place of resettlement.

In this paper, we draw on 'Decolonising Fashion and Textiles' (DFT), an AHRC-funded participatory action research project which we led at London College of Fashion, UAL (LCF) from 2022 to 2024 (Morgado & Mazzarella, 2024). The project explored how decolonial design approaches could support refugees and asylum-seekers to reconnect with their cultural heritages, express their shifting identities, and contribute to shaping more just futures, through fashion and textile practices (Mazzarella & Mirza, 2023). Rather than focusing on fixed cultural 'roots', here we frame culture as a series of 'routes': dynamic and evolving processes shaped by displacement, resettlement, and on-going negotiation of identity and belonging.

The central research questions guiding the project discussed here are:

- How can participatory fashion-making foster belonging, agency and cultural sustainability for displaced communities?

- How can designers create routes for refugees into resettlement without erasing cultural roots or reproducing extractive or exploitative practices?

- How can designers support resilient practices for refugee communities while addressing systemic barriers through advocacy for policy change?

By examining multiple 'spheres of engagement' – including a student project brief, co-creation workshops, collaborations with artisans, and policy roundtables – this paper contributes to demonstrating how fashion and textile design can operate as a connective practice across community, institutional, and political domains.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The contemporary fashion industry is increasingly recognised as unsustainable across multiple fronts, including ecological preservation, social justice, and the protection of autonomous livelihoods (Mazzarella *et al.,* 2019). While the industry is commonly guided by the three core pillars of sustainability – environmental, economic, and social – there is an urgent academic and practical necessity to integrate a cultural agenda as a fourth essential dimension (Walker *et al.,* 2018; Brown & Vacca, 2022). Drawing on Williams (2022), we define cultural sustainability as the development of inclusive systems that acknowledge and nurture a plurality of cultural heritages, beliefs, and histories in relation to geographical and ancestral contexts.

Historically, the fashion industry has disregarded the textile heritage of marginalised groups, with fashion brands undertaking cultural appropriation practices, using traditional designs from other countries without referencing or compensating the communities they belong to (Young, 2008). Niessen's (2020) concept of the 'sacrifice zone' of fashion denotes the craft practices and clothing traditions of cultural minorities which have been historically undervalued as 'non-fashion' and systematically 'othered' by dominant notions of culture and 'taste' (Bourdieu, 1984). Challenging the Western lens of the clothing industry that dominates mainstream narratives, in this paper we reframe fashion through a focus on the socio-cultural practices and material artefacts emerging from the 'peripheries' where multi-ethnic communities can thrive.

The global flows entrenched in the fashion system pose a need to dismantle colonial legacies by unlearning internalised Western concepts of progress and modernity (Shultz *et al.,* 2018). While our primary narratives are often inherited through family and culture, the global fashion system is still largely dominated by a few cities and business conglomerates which impose a 'coloniality of making' that assimilates diverse practices (Van Amstel, 2023). However, facilitating 'strange encounters' between others and us (Ahmed, 2020), we can create transformative spaces where diasporic communities can engage in a psychological reframing of their own identities and shape empowering new narratives (Blomfield & Lenette, 2018).

Central to this shift is the transition from viewing culture as fixed 'roots' to dynamic 'routes' (Hall, 1997). As people migrate across borders, forming what Appadurai (1990) calls 'ethnoscapes', they navigate a *"fraught space of possibility and hopefulness"* (Murphy and Chatzipanagiotidou, 2020, p.10). This movement allows for the emergence of shifting identities of people who both retain and evolve certain aspects of their culture, whilst leaving others behind, and providing a fertile ground for empowering co-action spaces (Mirza, 2024).

In this context, design plays a critical role for activating social change and shifting public perception. Through the material practice of craft-making, designers can challenge established power hierarchies and foster empowerment among marginalised groups (von Busch, 2022). The research presented here is situated within the field of 'design activism' (Fuad-Luke, 2017) which seeks to challenge the *status quo*, and bridge marginalised communities with those in power, contributing to social justice (Costanza-Chock, 2020).

Moving beyond the patronising practice and language of 'helping' vulnerable communities through a deficit lens (Farahani, 2021), design activists must strive to create enabling conditions for true agency. In social and political theory, Foucault (1994) discusses power as a form of domination, while Bourdieu (1984; 1986) describes power in social and cultural terms. By applying and adapting Miller and VeneKlasen's (2006) social science power relations' framework into a collaborative design context (Mirza, 2024), we advocate for navigating interpersonal relations through the lens of power 'with' (design as collective strength), power 'within' (design as self-belief), and power 'to' (design capability to create change and realise one's own choices). From this perspective, design researchers need to constantly reflect on their positionality, challenge their privilege and consider the power dynamics at play in collaborative processes.

The project discussed here aims to understand the concepts of cultural sustainability and community resilience in the context of fashion and textiles, through an original and distinct focus on the lived experiences of London-based refugees, while contributing to the growing discourse on decolonising design (Escobar, 2018, 2020; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Tunstall, 2023; Mignolo, 2025) and fashion (de Greef, 2020).

3 METHODOLOGY

In this paper, we discuss the educational, co-creation, and advocacy phases of the 'Decolonising Fashion and Textiles' project led by our diverse team of design researchers from London College of Fashion, with a wide range of professional collaborators and external partners. In this project, we employed a participatory action research methodology, following a cycle of planning, action, and reflection to support an in-depth investigation of qualitative data with participants to explore social, cultural, economic, and environmental issues, develop interventions and influence new practices (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2003). We adopted an ethnographic approach to holistically investigate several aspects of the intervention over a two-year-long project. As per Mattelmäki (2006), we adopted an exploratory, rather than evaluative approach, engaging participants in natural settings (*i.e.,* community centres, university classrooms, and politically neutral hired venues). The process was open to refinements throughout the project as new learnings shaped subsequent research activities.

Adopting a purposive sampling strategy, we collaborated with a core group of London-based refugees and asylum-seekers, while simultaneously engaging students, professional artisans, cultural institutions, industry stakeholders, policymakers, and the general public. Rather than adopting a designer-led problem-solving approach, our project team prioritised collaboration, ethics of care, deep listening, reflexivity, and responsiveness to participants' lived experiences and aspirations. The project engaged forty-one participants with refugee or asylum-seeking status, originating from nineteen different countries (including Afghanistan, China, Eritrea, India, Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Syria). The participants had fled their countries for diverse reasons, including war, political persecution, gender-based violence, and many expressed aspirations or prior experience in the fashion and textile sector. In addition, the project involved:

- Thirty master's students collaborating with six refugees as part of the 'Collaborative Challenge' unit at LCF;

- Five professional makers affiliated with The Art Workers' Guild (AWG) in London;

- Thirty-eight stakeholders from across the fashion industry, policymakers, and charities working with refugees contributing to advocacy for policy change.

Following initial desk research and ethnography, throughout our various spheres of engagement with the project participants, we collected qualitative data via:

- A brief embedded in the LCF curriculum, bringing together master's students and refugee collaborators to co-create fashion artefacts, storytelling and advocacy campaigns, and social entrepreneurship models, foregrounding the diverse lived experiences, cultures, and skills of refugees. This phase was supported through participant observations (throughout five lectures, three student-led workshops, and the student presentations of their final projects) and an evaluation questionnaire, to collect feedback from students and refugee collaborators at the end of the project.

- A series of making workshops (thirty-eight in total) was delivered. As a project team, we worked closely with the participants to listen to the systemic challenges faced by refugees and asylum-seekers in London and elicit their aspirations for a more equitable and sustainable future. The design and making phase started in June 2023 with a tour of the Fashion collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London. Assistant Curator Jessica Harpley showed to our project participants the museum's vast collection of historical garments, jewellery, and accessories from all over the world, while fostering debates around decolonising fashion and cultural sustainability. To collect feedback on the making phase, an external evaluator facilitated an art-based workshop, engaging participants in a group drawing activity, to overcome their language barrier and creatively express their thoughts more freely.

- The co-creation phase was complemented by a full day design and making workshop organised at AWG through the guild's outreach committee (Figure 1). AWG is a charitable organisation that comprises of over four-hundred designers, makers, artists and architects who excel in their fields. The workshop provided an opportunity to have diverse conversations and mutual learning in spaces which would not normally be accessible to refugees. It included craft demonstrations by guild members and a chance to try an artisanal technique for the rest of the day.

Figure 1: Project participants working on wax modelling for jewellery design with an AWG member. Photo by Francesco Mazzarella.

- Three roundtable discussions were facilitated, engaging a total of thirty-eight stakeholders from across the fashion industry, policymakers, and charities working with refugees, with the purpose of advocating for policy change. This phase included a public action we delivered in Parliament Square in London in partnership with Citizens UK and Together with Refugees, advocating for the protection of children's 'Freedom to Play'. Finally, during Refugee Week in June 2024, visual artist Lucy Orta facilitated a drop-in workshop called 'Lifeline', transforming 'The Globe' at the V&A into a 'Nest', building on a collaborative workshop which invited asylum-seekers and refugees to reflect on the meaning of lifeline and share their lived experiences. This public activation encouraged visitors to share responses through interacting with a series of soft objects relating to different themes. The results fed into the development of a zine, expressing the challenges that asylum-seekers and refugees face upon arrival in the UK, as well as the opportunities that helped them to rebuild their life in the place of resettlement.

We thematically analysed the collected data following a manual, iterative process that encompassed data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing (as per Kara, 2015). Following Miles and Huberman (1994), the process of data reduction entailed selecting, synthesising, and transforming data. We produced data displays in the form of tables to represent coded data (with category names attributed to meaningful segments of the audio transcriptions) and facilitate the recognition and comparison of themes, identified

as patterns cutting across the data. Finally, we drew conclusions from the data by identifying themes and sub-themes, and outlining relationships between them.

4 FINDINGS

The following sections discuss how the DFT project created a safe space of belonging, bridging cultural differences, engaging participants in a process of collective making and transformative learning, contributed to building community resilience, cultural sustainability and advocacy for policy change to support refugees in rebuilding their life in a new place.

4.1 Safe Spaces and Spaces of Belonging

A primary finding from the DFT project was the critical shortage not only of safe spaces for refugee participants but also of spaces of social belonging and interaction with others whom they might never come into direct contact with. Within our project team, we reflected on the parallel lives that diverse communities in the UK live alongside one another, where some interactions that could shift perspectives would otherwise never happen. Through our intensive workshop programme, we learnt that participants, as well as members of the public, have little opportunity to interact with one another. Indeed, interactions and experiences with 'others' are the precursors of change in perception. In response, we facilitated external activities for project participants with refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds to broaden their networks.

The creation of a safe space was predicated on a *"listening-first"* approach, and – according to the participants – it was facilitated by the professional, empathetic attitude of the project team, handling the research ethics process with care. The intercultural exchange facilitated as part of the 'Collaborative Challenge' unit involving students and refugee collaborators was instrumental in navigating the ethical complexities of displacement. As one student said: *"The project encouraged me to open up about my vulnerabilities, and allowed the refugees to speak about their journeys in a safe environment"*. By shifting the focus from traumatic histories to *"happy memories"* – especially through the lens of food and textile material culture (Figure 2) – making became a vehicle for creating an amicable space to talk about personal identities and having a common goal towards cultural sustainability. One refugee collaborator noted: *"The honesty of the project members in expressing their feelings made me feel very close to them"*. Another stated: *"The project was like an anchor for me; the creative process fostered a sense of belonging, beyond cultures"*. This evidences how the project contributed to transforming a research and educational collaboration into a safe and 'brave' space (Arao & Clemens, 2013) of social belonging. To facilitate this process effectively, designers can practise what Eichbaum and Bleakley (2025) call 'relational

empathy', which is characterised by curiosity, cultural and epistemic humility, bidirectional engagement, and relational consciousness.

Figure 2: Supervisors, students and refugee collaborators showcasing 'The Flavour Exchange' project at the Barbican Library, London. Photo by Mehrdad Pakniyat.

Facilitating co-creation workshops where participants draw on their diverse cultural practices implies facing significant challenges. For instance, in one of the workshops, an Iranian woman was triggered by a Pakistani participant's decorative artwork centred on her hijab through which she proudly represented her culture. This prompted a tense discussion. The Iranian participant argued that violence is exercised against women in her country because of its compulsion, in contrast to Pakistan, where women have the freedom to wear the hijab or not. As workshop facilitators, we had to carefully prevent the conflict from escalating while fostering an environment in which diverse opinions, cultures and lived experiences were recognised as equally valid. Another example of this was noted throughout the co-creation workshops, in which some participants were proud of their national culture and dress traditions, while others argued that culture and religion can be factors driving conflicts and wars across countries, and advocated for protecting our shared humanity, beyond borders. This evidences that focusing on culture through a single lens can create distance, while our role as social designers is to facilitate dialogue, co-existence, and connection, in line with Gupta and Ferguson (2008). This requires engagement in structured, dialogic, and participatory processes that enable individuals affected by harm to express their lived experiences, encounter diverse

perspectives, and move towards repair and reintegration through the creative making of artefacts. This also aligns with a restorative justice approach that supports what Gavrielides (2025) describes as 'cathartic pain' in relation to the issues raised.

Our project findings highlighted the need to adopt a trauma-informed design approach (Dietkus, 2022), having safeguarding measures and support systems in place when working with vulnerable people, alongside accessing counselling services if the research triggers discomforting memories. Going beyond a 'do not harm approach', our project foregrounded the importance of 'ethics of care' (Gilligan, 1982), investing in 'emotional labour' to build relationships based on trust and long-term commitment, as advocated by Yee *et al.* (2024). Learning from this experience, we realised the need for a code of conduct, to be co-created with the project participants at the beginning of each work package and approached as an evolving document to be revisited iteratively. This would also consider new participants joining at different project stages. Moreover, beyond caring for project participants, there is a need for researchers working in emotionally charged contexts to also practise self-care. This can be done by engaging in debriefing meetings with the whole team to discuss any sensitive issues arising, or accessing occupational therapy, as advocated by Skinner *et al.* (2025). This is an issue often overlooked in project timelines and funding structures, and which instead must be considered as both an individual and institutional responsibility, in line with Kumar and Cavallaro (2018).

4.2 Community Resilience

Within the DFT project, community resilience is evidenced through the complex navigation of lived experiences, where certain cultural forms are preserved while others are discarded as a mechanism for survival and social integration. Our findings highlighted that, while resistance is a cornerstone of resilience in the face of extreme adversity, a profound tension exists between Western narratives of 'home' and the 'hostile environment' (Griffits & Yeo, 2021) encountered by refugees and asylum-seekers in the UK. Crucially, our research challenged the romanticisation of resilience, as noted by one of our project participants:

> *"People from the Global South are resilient, although [...] they should not have to always be resilient, because they also deserve tenderness and loving care, instead of violence and resilience. [...] Sometimes, resilience is worshipped because it's easier to worship resilient people rather than deconstructing and dismantling the system that oppresses them. Many of them do not even want to be resilient or face this violence, but they have no choice".*

The focus on a refugee's 'strength' can often be used by public institutions to deflect responsibility, avoiding the deconstruction of the oppressive systems that demand such resilience in the first place. Instead, we argue for moving beyond this 'worship' of resilience, and demand well-functioning systems of care. Moreover, whilst we advocate for the power of communities (with a shared matter of concern) to achieve social justice,

it is also important to create spaces for 'agonistic pluralism' – in line with Mouffe (1999) and DiSalvo (2010) – spaces where consensus is not forced, but where diverse perspectives can challenge existing power hierarchies without fear. For instance, at the 'Freedom to Play' public action, our project participants showed and held up the banners they had collectively created (Figure 3). Three participants spoke publicly, sharing their collective manifestos for a compassionate future, while demonstrating their self-confidence, sense of agency and hope.

Figure 3: Public action 'Freedom to Play' in Parliament Square, London. Photo by Michela Ajani.

4.3 Cultural Sustainability: From Roots to Routes

In our research context, cultural sustainability is redefined not as a static preservation of the past, but as a dynamic sense of belonging, achieved through nonconformity and the redefinition of fashion. For refugees living transient lives, sustaining textile heritage offers a vital sense of belonging, as highlighted by one of our participants: *"This project made me love my culture more. No matter where I go, my culture will remain with me"*. However, our project highlighted that sustaining the past is not always appropriate or desired, particularly when cultural heritage is entwined with traumatic memories or colonial narratives of domination and oppression. Drawing on Hall (1997), we frame cultural sustainability as the cultivation of dynamic 'routes' rather than fixed 'roots', a process where a culture evolves as people travel, allowing certain traditions to fade while embracing change and shaping 'regenerative cultures' (Wahl, 2016).

In our project, we experienced that the dominant fashion system tends to make people from cultural minority backgrounds believe that their material culture and way of dressing may be less valuable. Instead, we advocate for the need to facilitate co-creation processes where all cultures can thrive in their own right, for instance through cultural activism – including design, art, craft and making (Hackney, 2013; Corbett, 2017; Fuad-Luke, 2017). Starting from the premise of not re-enacting dominant power narratives, in the DFT project, we engaged in a reciprocal process of storytelling and textile making to conceptualise and reflect on important aspects of the participants' identities, cultures, migration journeys, and shape collective visions for compassionate futures. This is evidenced in the jacket customised by one project participant, who used drawing, appliqué and embroidery to represent his cultural roots and routes, as he poignantly stated:

> *"I used the sycamore leaf as a symbolic start of my asylum claim journey. I represented two faces evoking feelings of uncertainty and loneliness. I drew the prophet Mohamed's Mosque which represents my identity as a Muslim. Besides this, I drew European houses. The green plants are rooted in both buildings; they show that a new chapter has been opened in my life".*

The culmination of this work was the 'Fashioning Stories of Change' event we delivered at the V&A during Refugee Week in June 2024. The fashion performances served as a public reclamation of space and contributed to challenging the colonial legacies entwined in collaborating with a historical British institution, while making art accessible to everyone, and inspiring creativity and heritage innovation (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Participants in 'Fashioning Stories of Change' at the V&A. Photo by Asmae el Ouriachi.

At that event, twenty-one participants delivered public performances wearing the garments that they had made, functioning as material manifestations of their craft skills, personal and cultural identities, migration journeys, and narratives of resilience and hope. As backdrop for the performance, a bespoke music track produced by Diego Garcia Martin featured the participants' sound recorded statements, highlighting their stories of transformative change, like the below example:

> ***A Mile in My Shoes***
> *Nope, not an hour or a minute.*
> *Not a suggestion, wish, or even a learning experience.*
> *Yet the shoes and the journey mean so much.*
> *A dreamer reaching for the stars as they fall from the dream catcher above filtering the bad…*
> *Colours of hope (white),*
> *New beginnings (yellow),*
> *The ocean (blue).*
> *The threads entangled via surgical knots to hold it all together,*
> *Carrying "one step at a time" into the future.*
> *Hope.*

4.4 Cross-Cultural Connections and Shifting Perceptions

Our research demonstrated how participatory design can act as a vital bridge between disparate social worlds, that would not otherwise meet. By focusing on cultural commonalities, such as positive shared stories centred on food or the universal symbolism of a T-shirt and pair of jeans, the project successfully transitioned participants from mutual apprehension to empathy. As stated by one student, the experience was instrumental in *"shifting mental spaces towards empathy rather than being scared of learning about other cultures"*. Here, the creative process functioned as a 'de-labelling' mechanism. In fact, in dominant narratives, individuals are often stripped of their complex identities and confined by the singular, often unwanted 'refugee' label. The impact was so profound that one student admitted that the project *"removed a lot of stigma I had towards refugees"*, now seeing them instead as peer creative collaborators.

Our research also highlighted that 'active listening' serves as a critical tool for navigating what Murphy and Chatzipanagiotidou (2020) call a 'fraught space' of intercultural tension. The co-creation workshops effectively contributed to *"awakening to the sensitivities and perspectives of other people"*, offering tools and approaches to challenge own prejudice and bias. This is evidenced by one participant who described the process as *"listening with the mind, not just with ears"*. Moreover, the guided tour at the V&A enabled the refugee participants to learn that the museum is free to visit, and anyone can use the space and see the permanent exhibitions. They have now discovered

a cultural organisation they can start to connect with as they rebuild their lives in London. Another successful activity was the workshop facilitated at AWG, where the refugee participants showed great engagement with traditional artisanal techniques and asked for more similar interactions. The workshop also changed perspectives of the craft demonstrators who might have had preconceived ideas of participants who are labelled as 'refugees', instead finding them so *"engaged, enthusiastic, and eager to learn"*.

4.5 Decolonising Fashion and Challenging Power Dynamics

Our research highlighted that decolonising design practice requires an active 'unlearning' of institutional hierarchies and the 'coloniality of making' (Van Amstel, 2023). By adopting a 'listening-first' approach, both the core team and the students shifted their role from authoritative designers to facilitators of co-creation, challenging the ego-driven nature of traditional Western fashion practice and pedagogy. One student reflected on this shift: *"One must put aside the sense of self and ego, and open-mindedly behave like a sponge [...] welcoming new perspectives"*. This transition is essential to dismantling the 'sacrifice zone' of fashion (Niessen, 2020) where marginalised textile heritages are often undervalued or illegitimately appropriated by the dominant industry. Moreover, this 'open-mindedness' can be considered as the primary precursor to 'power with' – as per Miller and VeneKlasen (2006) – where design becomes a collective strength rather than a top-down imposition.

This deep engagement allowed for a realignment of power dynamics, where the workshop facilitators and students themselves moved from a paternalistic 'helper' attitude towards the refugee collaborators to a position of mutual vulnerability and respect. As part of this decentred process, we prioritised *"working in solidarity 'with' refugees rather than assuming a 'helper' attitude"*, as stated by one student. Importantly, the making space provided a platform for participants to relocate themselves within a vastly different social structure, as valuable contributing members of society. In this context, fashion is reclaimed as a signifying practice that restores the agency and visibility of the 'self' and the 'other' (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Workshop facilitator and project participant collaboratively making a vest with a screen-printed message advocating against power injustice towards refugees. Photo by JC Candanedo.

In the design phase of the project, the participants were encouraged to adopt a plurality of mother tongues and traditional craft techniques within their artefacts. In fact, decolonising fashion involves decentring language and technical approaches. One refugee participant validated this respectful handling of power imbalances, stating: *"I found the existing differences of opinion very natural and the way the team dealt with them very mature"*. As one participant noted, fashion in this context is *"about finding yourself. […] It's a tool to tell a story"*. By foregrounding these 'decentred narratives', our project moved fashion from a site of exclusion to one of inclusion and social justice.

4.6 The Transformative Power of Collective Making

Our research highlighted that the material practice of making fashion and textile artefacts together functions as a catalyst for personal and social transformation, restoring lost connections (with people, places, and practices), building support networks and fostering community resilience (in line with Sennett, 2008; Gauntlett, 2011; Hirscher, 2020). Moving beyond traditional academic hierarchies, in our project we engaged in a reciprocal process of making and learning 'with' participants rather than merely studying 'them' as research subjects. This approach is critical in decentring power and enabling 'power within' (an internal sense of self-worth) and 'power with' (through collective strength). One refugee collaborator pointed out: *"As a refugee, I felt like a stone. You need to find a way to share your pain, and this project is giving me an*

opportunity to get closer to my feelings and turn my pain into something beautiful". The transformative change facilitated through the project was evident in the fashion performances delivered at the V&A, which contributed to healing the participants' trauma and shifting prevailing negative narratives around refugees.

Contextually relevant material culture acts as an enabling condition for transformative learning, unlocking narratives that language alone cannot express. The choice of fabrics and the deliberate act of mark-making, deciding how and where they are placed allows participants to navigate their journey from powerlessness towards reclaiming agency (Mirza, 2024). Through the collaborative workshops, the participants developed a range of technical and soft skills, from embroidery and pattern cutting to advocacy and ethical thinking. One participant used the needlework embroidery techniques learned in the AWG workshop to make fashion artefacts in the co-creation phase of the project. Moreover, wherever possible, we enabled opportunities for roles to shift, so that refugees progressed from participants to facilitators of design activities (Figure 6); this created a space for personal growth and the development of new perspectives. Ultimately, collective making serves as a restorative practice that empowers marginalised individuals to shape their own lives and make a difference in society, as shared by one refugee participant at the 'Lifeline' public action: *"I am planting my own seeds in this country; I believe one day I will harvest my own fruits"*.

Figure 6: Participant (on the left) hired as workshop facilitator in a subsequent phase of the project, sharing her skills with others. Photo by Mehrdad Pakniyat.

4.7 Policy Advocacy: Weaving Threads of Opportunity

A critical part of the research was a series of roundtable discussions across sectors, resulting in the policy paper 'Threads of Opportunity: Good Work for Refugees in the Fashion Industry' (Mazzarella *et al.,* 2024) and its related lobbying campaign. Our research findings identified systemic barriers that trap refugees and asylum-seekers in cycles of destitution, poverty, and unemployability (APPG on Refugees, 2024), such as the lack of a permanent address and the exclusion of fashion roles from the UK's Immigration Salary List (that includes jobs which are in short supply within the UK resident labour market).

To link the skills shortage in the fashion and textile industry (UKFT, 2023) and the aspirations of skilled refugees and asylum-seekers wanting to pursue a career in this UK sector, the right to work was deemed a primary concern of the project participants. Contributing to refugees' wellbeing, financial independence, and socio-economic integration, having good work in areas which are desirable and aspirational for refugees is also a way to feel dignified in their place of resettlement. However, refugees transiting through the asylum-seeking route have an overhanging effect on being able to secure a stable job.

To overcome the barriers identified and foster long-term resilience, the project proposed the following policy asks:

- **For Central Government:** Grant asylum-seekers the right to work within six months; and add relevant 'fashion and textiles jobs' to the Immigration Salary List.

- **For Local Authorities, the Greater London Authority (GLA), and the UK Fashion and Textile Association (UKFT):** Build safe and welcoming spaces for asylum-seekers and refugees to engage in fashion and creative activities contributing to enhancing their wellbeing and socio-economic integration. Develop and deliver 'skills training while you wait' programmes for asylum-seekers and recent refugees to ensure they are 'job ready' upon receiving the right to work.

- **For Fashion companies and Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs):** Develop 12-18-month traineeships for recent refugees paid at a real Living Wage, funded from large corporations' Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) or Environment Sustainability & Governance (ESG) budgets.

The above policy asks could fill gaps of unemployment whilst asylum is sought and contribute to overcoming several challenges related to mental health, financial independence, and social integration. This would also contribute to circumventing the load on Local Councils to find accommodation for people who have just received refugee status; in fact, they should be better able to find privately rented accommodation by getting on the job ladder earlier and securing paid work.

5 CONCLUSION

In this paper, we discussed a participatory action research project exemplifying how designers can facilitate safe spaces, aid refugees in rebuilding their identity, foster community resilience, and advocate for policy change. We discussed the crucial role of making – in particular, the participatory practice of fashion and textile design – in facilitating refugees to express emotions, address traumas, and find coping mechanisms in the arts. The paper discussed how the participatory design and making process can aid identity formation, life rebuilding, and transformational change, and brought to light deeper understandings of the concepts of cultural sustainability and community resilience, through the lived experiences of refugees. The creative space facilitated by designers can contribute to rebuilding self-confidence and reposition refugee participants within a new social structure, raising awareness of their contributions to host communities and shifting narratives from deficits to assets. Overall, the project discussed here also highlighted the role of fashion as a storytelling tool and a vehicle for social change, whilst contributing to the emerging discourse on decentring and decolonising fashion. In this paper, we argue for moving away from the dominant practice of social designers 'parachuted' into marginalised communities with the assumption that they can bring their knowledge and expertise to solve other people's problems. Finally, in this paper, we highlighted the community resilience of refugees who, despite the challenging lives they live, can build a collective ability to respond to oppression, challenge power structures, and activate social change through community efforts and pluralism. This germinates new roots in a place of resettlement for refugees whose shifting realities require creative and diverse networked routes towards stability and resilience.

Despite the above-mentioned contributions, we acknowledge the limited timeframe of the – funding-dependent – project discussed here, and the longer time which would be required to assess wider social impacts. We are also aware of the relatively small number of people who participated in this project, and the need to assess the relevance and transferability of the findings and outcomes through studies to be carried out in other contexts. Furthermore, despite our efforts to acknowledge our positionality, we are aware of the inherent power imbalance between the core team, the refugee participants, and the students involved in the project.

To overcome such limitations, future research should focus on ethics of care and researcher self-care which are crucial for healing the trauma experienced when working with vulnerable people and facilitating transformational change. In view of future work, we highlight the need for research teams to involve 'credible messengers' (Urban Institute, 2022), *i.e.,* individuals with lived experience and social standing so that they are perceived as trusted voices within a particular community, and to collaborate with a social scientist to co-create a code of conduct and bring it to life, and adopt it iteratively throughout the project. There is scope for developing creative-led media campaigns to disseminate policy recommendations and raise public awareness. Looking forward, it is also important to work with policymakers more directly to help moving from policy asks to actions, collaborate with the fashion sector to pilot inclusive traineeships to enable access to good work for refugees in the industry, and engage other relevant stakeholders in scaling out successful interventions.

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