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Negotiating class positions in proximate places of refuge: Syrians in Egypt and Somalians in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on ethnographic research with Syrians in Egypt and with Somalis in Kenya, we argue that forced migrants who are able to choose their migration trajectory might opt for places of refuge in vicinity. We show that in these contexts it is easier for some forced migrants to preserve their socio-economic status. We introduce the term proximate places of refuge to highlight that not only geographical aspects matter for these considerations, but also similarities in lifestyle and living conditions. We explore how people negotiate their class position in proximate places of refuge by looking at how they relate their current situation to the setting they lived in before and to other possible destinations. Furthermore, we show that three aspects of class-making are of specific importance in such a setting: an emic demarcation from the category of the 'refugee', a focus on entrepreneurialism and the valuation of high work ethics, and the ability to transfer different sorts of capital from one place to another. We conclude that moving to proximate places of refuge eases the process of transferring class positions without rupture for some forced migrants.

Introduction

Forced migrants who have the resources to choose between different destinations may decide for 'proximate places of refuge' in order to keep a similar socio-economic status to the one they held in their country of origin. These proximate places of refuge are characterised not only by relative geographical closeness (also phrased as near diaspora) but also by similarities in lifestyle (in the sense of Bourdieu) and living conditions. This environment creates a potential to 'blend in' and the ability to enjoy a kind of semi-visibility. We will show that decisions for proximate places of refuge are not only based on familial networks and hopes for return, but equally on forced migrants' socio-economic position and classed aspirations. These are expressed through valuing entrepreneurialism and high work ethics as key elements of class-making and through

discursively distinguishing oneself from the 'refugee' label. Decisions about destination countries are also influenced by awareness about the relative differences of settling in distant or proximate places of refuge. The arguments expressed in this article focusing on forced migrants might be mirrored in other forms of migration, such as the migration of highly skilled migrants (see Yanasmayan 2019).

We use the term 'forced migrants' for people who have left their locality of origin in the context of persecution or conflict, while acknowledging the blurriness of the forced-voluntary migration dichotomy (Crawley and Skleparis 2018). The category 'forced migrant' (or 'refugee') is used by aid organisations, states, and host populations, to label people based on their nationality and specific form of visibility – and Syrians and Somalians featuring in this piece were aware of these ascriptions. We show that this labelling has implications for their ability to retain or build certain socio-economic statuses.

By juxtaposing two examples of forced migrants settling in proximate places of refuge in the so-called Global South, Syrians in Egypt and Somalians in Kenya, we show that these settings reveal important similarities concerning the socio-economic conditions for refugees and the way these groups cope with and evaluate their situation. Since our focus is not set on the particularities of each place, we highlight what these places have in common and not where they differ. Contrasting the cases of Syrian refugees in Egypt and Somali refugees in Kenya from a classed perspective, based on Bourdieu's notion of different sorts of capital, its convertibility, and varying valorisation is revealing for various reasons. Firstly, migration research has tended to focus on Europe or North America as end-points of migration routes. And secondly, inequality research has mostly focussed on national settings, omitting migration in research on citizens or considering migrants only in relation to one national setting, and not multiple or transnational ones (Weiss 2005). This national focus conceals interdependencies between socio-economic positioning before and after migration and the role migration regimes play in these trajectories. The existing small body of literature concerning transnational class formation mainly focuses on elite networks or highly skilled migrants (e.g. Struna 2013). Thus, we know little about socio-economic positioning of forced migrants within transnational settings, in relation to global inequality, and in the context of forced migration in the Global South.

The influence of class on possibilities of (forced) migrants has been the focus of some research (Kaufmann, Bergman, and Joye 2004; Kim 2018; Van Hear 2014). Yet, the figure of the refugee is still often analysed as 'having no relation with global and localized class structures, modes of production, and political economies' (Pascucci 2019, 584). In this article, we analyse forced migrants' perceptions of and approaches to class-making in comparable settings, that is proximate places of refuge. Our material suggests that refugeeness is negotiated less in terms of a position of departure from one's country of origin but rather as a classed position of arrival, which forced migrants seek to circumvent.

In the following, we present the research context and methods before outlining our theoretical approach concerning class and proximate places of refuge. To show why some forced migrants decide to flee to and stay in proximate places of refuge, we highlight different forms of proximity that matter in their decision-making processes. Firstly, we present geographical vicinity of their country of origin as a defining factor, before engaging with proximity in the sense of similarities in lifestyle and living conditions that Syrians and Somalians found in Egypt and Kenya respectively and which motivated

them to stay. Finally, we analyse three aspects of class-making that were of concern for Syrians and Somalians, namely, their perception of refugeeness as a classed category, entrepreneurialism and high work ethics as a route to reclaiming their former status, and the difficulties of transferring their socio-economic status from one context to another. The presentation of these themes sheds light on research partners' continuous and careful consideration of their class positioning and efforts to materialise a 'good' life.

Research context and methodology

Most Syrians arrived in Egypt in 2011 and 2012 after the outbreak of the civil war in their home country. Since Egypt has no policy of encampment (Häkli, Pascucci, and Kallio 2017), more than 138,000 Syrians settled predominantly in urban areas such as Cairo, Alexandria, Damietta and Mansoura (Ayoub and Khallaf 2014, 7). Initially, there were no visa restrictions for Syrians in Egypt and most Syrians chose to move to Egypt because they had kin or business networks there (Ayoub 2017, 82). Syrians who registered with UNHCR had access to public education and public health care in Egypt (Davis et al. 2017, 30). In 2013, after then-President Morsi was toppled, visa restrictions were imposed, effectively stopping the arrival of Syrians. After ousting of Morsi and the Rabaa Square massacre[1] Syrians were accused of interfering in Egypt's internal politics and supporting the Muslim Brotherhood (Fritzsche 2013).

The arguments put forward in this article are based on 14 months of ethnographic research among Syrian refugees in Egypt, conducted by Suerbaum in 2014 and 2015, and on ongoing conversations with twenty interlocutors via social media. Fieldwork took place in Cairo and 6th of October City – a satellite town close to Cairo. Suerbaum engaged in participant observation and informal conversations while volunteering in different NGOs, and she collected more than sixty semi-structured interviews with Syrians and Egyptians. Most interlocutors were male, between 18 and 65 years old, and described themselves as stemming from the Syrian middle class. Many were university students or had studied in Syria and were active in the (informal) labour market. Even if most interlocutors had experienced impoverishment, only a few lived in severe poverty. The group of Syrian refugees with whom Suerbaum conducted research does not represent the range of Syrian refugee biographies in Egypt.

Since the start of the civil war in southern Somalia in the early 1990s, inducing forced migration to Kenya, the majority of Somalians in Kenya has at least temporarily lived in one of the camps in the northern part of the country. Most of the 271,000 officially registered Somalian refugees are still residing in one of the two camp complexes, Dadaab and Kakuma (UNHCR 2021). Until 2011, Kenya followed a laissez-faire encampment policy, enforced only erratically. This changed after multiple terror attacks by the Somalia-based al-Shabaab in retaliation to the Kenyan army entering Somalia. In 2014, Kenya finally designated the camp areas as the only place where refugees can settle legally. This official notice was accompanied by a round-up of Somalian refugees in urban areas, a traumatic event for many. In the following years, the enforcement of this policy loosened again. In 2016, Somalians were not recognised as *prima facie* refugees anymore, but had to go through a prolonged asylum process, leaving many without registration. With their official registration some Somalians move back and forth between the camps and Somalia, staying in one place if the situation allowed (in terms of physical or food security

etc.). Those who could afford it also move to Kenyan urban areas, especially Nairobi, escaping the insecurity and structural marginalisation of the camps. In these urban areas many (in)formal structures have been established over the years (Hassan 2019). While most of the Somalian camp population can be regarded as poor (Danish Refugee Council 2013, 27; see also Boeyink and Falisse 2022), Somalian migrants in Kenyan urban areas mostly settle in (lower) middle- to upper-class living areas (Carrier 2017). Living in urban areas gives an extent of freedom and access to infrastructure, but also means confrontation with prejudices and police harassment. Kenyan Somalis have been treated as ambiguous citizens (Scharrer 2018) from the colonial period onwards and the immigration of Somalian forced migrants has furthered the development of stereotypes, often blurring the distinction between Somalian refugees and Kenyan Somalis. Stereotypes about Somalian refugees have changed over time, ranging from refugees seen as 'poor migrants' the Kenyan state had to feed, fuelling the conflict by supporting strict versions of Islam, to being accused of 'colonizing' the country with their strong presence in the economic and political realm.

Scharrer conducted 10 months of ethnographic fieldwork with Somalis in Kenyan urban areas between 2010 and 2018, mainly in Nakuru, the fourth-biggest city of Kenya, with shorter stays in Nairobi and Mombasa. She carried out participant observation in various Somali neighbourhoods (from poor and lower-middle class areas to expensive living quarters) and shopping centres, did archival research, and conducted structured network interviews (including questions about education, occupation and income) and biographical interviews with Kenyan Somalis, Somalian refugees and Somalian return migrants. Altogether she conducted about 100 interviews with people in the age range from 18 to 70 years. About half of the interviewees were women and about half of them were forced migrants from Somalia. Scharrer kept contact to some Somali migrants via social media and by meeting them again in Austria in 2017–2019. Furthermore, she led a research project about Somali migrants in Germany between 2017 and 2020, based on participant observation and semi-structured interviews.

Ultimately, we analyse the socio-economic conditions of two groups that both self-settled in urban areas in proximate places of refuge. While forced migration from Syria to Egypt was a rather new development, Somali refugees had been present in the Kenyan urban areas for 30 years.

Theory and state of research

In order to analyse our empirical material, we rely on Bourdieu's (1984) notion of different sorts of capital – economic, social, cultural and symbolic, its convertibility from one sort to another and the deviating valorisation of the various sorts of capital in different settings. We approach class not only as a matter of economic structure, such as control over means of production or the distribution and consumption of wealth, but also as migrants' self-identifications, in the form of class consciousness or status hierarchies (McGregor 2008, 467, Hunkler et al. 2022). We do not perceive class as spatially contained, but follow scholars who highlight migrants' multiple positioning in transnational spaces (McGregor 2008; Nowicka 2013). Thus, we start from the premise that migrants evaluate their socio-economic situation by taking into consideration notions of class stemming from the various contexts they have lived in, and in relation to other migrants from

their home countries living elsewhere. This also means that transnational migrants can inhabit several classed positions in the different settings to which they are attached.

Van Hear (2004) distinguishes between 'near' and 'wide' diaspora, arguing that the choice of destination mainly depends on the financial resources available. Since destinations in the wider diaspora are often more expensive to reach, they are only accessible for those forced migrants who can invest this higher amount of financial capital. We argue that apart from moving to a distant country being usually more costly, there are other important factors that make destinations in the vicinity of the country of origin attractive. This has been illustrated by Sorescu-Marinković (2016) who shows, using the example of Romanian migrants in Serbia, that due to the presence of a long-established Romanian minority population, recently settled migrants were able to use the proximity of language and similarity in lifestyle to build close relationships within the Romanian minority. New migrants could live in the 'social fog' of the established minority population and could thereby become almost invisible (50).

In the cases we discuss in this article, there was in addition a palpable lack of host state interference, making living in Egypt and Kenya respectively more attractive. Norman (2019, 43) argues that besides political inclusion and exclusion of migrants, there is a third kind of policy vis-a-vis refugees, 'whereby a state defers to international organisations and civil society actors to provide basic services to migrants and refugees'. She stresses that 'indifference-as-policy' or, as she later conceptualises it, 'strategic indifference' (Norman 2021) regarding the treatment of refugee populations creates an 'environment that allows for the *de facto* integration' of refugees (Norman 2019, 43). Pearlman (2020, 6), argues, following Norman, that if host states leave refugees to self-settle, refugee entrepreneurs with capital have the chance to establish themselves facing relatively fewer legal barriers to launching commercial ventures. The downside is that poorer refugees receive little protection from impoverishment (2020, 2). By comparing Syrian refugees' classed positions in Germany and Turkey, Pearlman (2020) found that interventionist host states, like Germany, level refugees' class stratification during displacement, while host states' strategic indifference, as in Turkey, results in selectively placing refugees in different class categories. Thus, host states practising strategic indifference allow some forced migrants to prosper economically and give them the potential to blend in. Nevertheless, blending in also depends on the host state's definition of refugee status, the surrounding laws and policies and how they define everyday life.

By using the terminology of proximity, we argue, building on van Hear (2004), that destination choices in contexts of forced migration are not only informed by the availability of financial resources, but also by considerations concerning similarities in lifestyle and living conditions, which are closely linked to aspects of class and aspiration. Using the term proximate destinations also relates to emic evaluations of migration decisions. Proximate and distant should not be treated as a binary, but rather as a spectrum along which places can be more or less proximate, and more or less distant.

Classed perceptions and aspirations

Syrians in Egypt have predominantly been described as 'middle and upper-middle class' in popular and academic discourses (Ayoub 2017). Especially those who arrived in Egypt directly after the uprising in Syria are classified as affluent. With the continuation of the

conflict, Syrians from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds arrived (Ayoub 2017, 77). Syrians in Egypt hold the reputation of being hard-working and innovative with particularly high skills in the food industry (Ayoub 2017, 85). Being from the middle class was an important aspect of self-perception of Syrian refugees interviewed in Egypt. They narrated their middle-classness by referring to properties back in Syria, their family's former status and influence, the region they came from, their upbringing and education. The use of this self-classification also had gendered relevance, Syrian men and women sought to clarify their alignment with what they considered respectable middle-class masculinity and femininity (Suerbaum 2020). Furthermore, most interviewed Syrians tried to show why they did not fit the label 'refugee', even if they eventually registered with UNHCR because of the changing political situation in 2013 and the consequent heightened need for protection and assistance.

In Kenya, the public image of Somalian refugees has in the last two decades been shaped by a minority of urban rich and middle-class businesspeople, and not by most urban poor and those residing in the camps. Among Somalian forced migrants' class was, on most occasions not self-descriptive, but became apparent through habitus and practice. This practice referred to the places people settled in (the term class was used frequently in reference to middle-class and upper-class neighbourhoods, such as South C in Nairobi), the mosque they went to, or the education their children received. Living environment, or rather affordable rent, was in most cases the best proxy for class. Further indicators of economic class were forced migrants' education and occupation (both in Somalia and Kenya), as well as having family relations to more distant places of refuge and thus being able to receive remittances. In case Somalis explicitly referred to class, they used terms such as poor (*maskiin*), rich (*hantiie*) and normal people (*dadka caadiga ah*) or lower, middle and upper class (*dabaqadda hoose, dhexe* and *sare*; see also Hagmann et al. Forthcoming on social class in Somalia).

In both cases under study, class came up as a point of reference. To different degrees Syrians and Somalians have been visible in their respective host countries. Eventually, both groups earned the reputation of being successful and hard-working entrepreneurs, which was not only perceived as positive but backfired and increased hostility. Furthermore, Syrians and Somalis interviewed invested a lot of effort in clarifying that they could not be categorised as 'refugees'.

Proximate places of refuge

Geographical proximity

Geographical closeness influences forced migrants' decisions to move to a proximate place of refuge, an important element which has been dealt with in the literature most frequently (van Hear 2004, Rüegger & Bohnet 2018, 67). Moving to neighbouring countries often requires less financial resources, is accessible with public routes of transport and less legal constraints, making movement between region of origin and place of refuge easier.

Most Syrian refugees interviewed travelled to Egypt by plane when there were no visa restrictions. A few interviewees reported that they used to travel back and forth between

Egypt and Syria in the first period of their displacement. Among Somalians, geographical proximity mattered especially for poorer refugees, who mainly fled to the closest neighbouring country (Ethiopia, Kenya and Yemen). To enter Kenya, Somalians officially required a visa. However, most Somalians cross the border and can reach Dadaab without one. This changes when migrants move to Nairobi, as crossing the inner-Kenyan border between the northeastern parts of the country and central Kenya costs them about 300 US$ per adult, including bribes and smuggling services (Hamza, Nairobi 2018). Even though this price is high enough to bring families into a situation of involuntary immobility (Lubkemann 2008), it is still less than 10% of what forced migrants must pay when moving from Somalia to Europe (based on data gathered by Scharrer in 2017).

Nonetheless, the longing for distant places and the close observation of the trajectories of fellow Somalis moving to Europe or the US were immanent aspects of settling in proximate destination countries. Similarly, Syrians' decision to settle and stay in Egypt was deeply informed by information gathered about the living conditions of forced migrants in Europe.

Similarities in lifestyle

Living in proximity to one's country of origin has been described by our interlocutors as a conscious choice and strategy after gauging one's options and individual situation. This ongoing act of weighing up was influenced by perceptions about unknown destinations, which were accumulated via news, social media and contacts abroad as well as migrants returning from distant places and showing their 'success',[2] and the everyday reality in the current place of refuge. The advantages of language proficiency and 'cultural closeness' trumped the expectations associated with living as refugee in the far diaspora, among them presumed legal security and inclusion in the welfare system. We encapsulate this 'closeness' as similarities in lifestyle by building on Bourdieu's idea of habitus as internalised forms of social conditions, which in turn systematically produces different life-styles (see Bourdieu 1984).

As far as Syria's neighbouring countries were concerned, many Syrians interviewed in Egypt mentioned that Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan were more expensive than Egypt. Turkey was often ruled out because of the language barrier, presumed cultural differences and the fact that other Syrians had already taken over existing work opportunities. Lebanon was frequently associated with extreme racism against Syrians. Living in specific proximate places was thus deeply entangled with awareness about assumed advantages and disadvantages of living in other places of refuge. Many Syrians interviewed had been motivated to move to Egypt because they expected to benefit from living in a country in which Arabic was spoken, where the culture appeared similar and Sunni Islam was the dominant religious orientation. Moreover, they reported that living in proximity to Syria relativised their sense of abandoning their home for the unknown (see also Pearlman 2018, 303). For many Syrians interviewed in Egypt, Europe held an ambivalent status – as a place of prosperity, wealth, and progress on the one hand, and as a place of cultural and religious distance on the other. While it was praised for its welcoming attitude, especially when compared with the Gulf states' responses to the 'Syrian refugee crisis', Europe was also perceived as a place of stasis,

enforced adaptation and state interference (Suerbaum 2020). Hence, moving to Europe could cause uncertainty and a sense of loss and miscomprehension.

Ehab, a young Syrian man who came to Egypt in 2012 and worked in a construction company, was one of the many interlocutors expressing this bargain:

> The Syrians are not very happy in Europe because they are in a new country with new people and they don't know how to deal with them. […] In Egypt, I live with Arabs, we speak the same language and we understand each other.

Ehab mentioned loss of social capital and 'cultural fluency' as reasons for not considering a life in Europe. Similarly, Qays, the founder of an aid organisation for Syrians in Cairo, was critical of the idea of leaving the Middle East for Europe:

> In Germany, there are [Syrians] who prefer to just take money, so they don't need to worry about anything. The Egyptian society is close to the Syrian society. It's better that the Syrian stays in societies that are close to our societies. The Western society for us is strange and different.

Qays juxtaposed the proximity of Egyptian and Syrian 'culture' against the alienating 'other culture' of the West. Even though he was occasionally extremely critical of the Egyptian population, in this quote he described a uniting, border-crossing 'Arab culture'. In their comparisons of life in Europe and in Egypt, both men relied on accumulated knowledge about unknown destinations and made use of presumed cultural similarities within the Arab world vis-à-vis perceived cultural distance between Syria and Europe.

Rather well-off Somalians considered proximate destinations, such as Egypt, UAE, South Africa or Turkey in the migration process. They linked destination choices to former experiences of mobility (such as having studied in Egypt or having trade relations to India), considerations of future socio-economic positioning (such as educational possibilities in Turkey or economic prosperity in South Africa) and lifestyle (e.g. in religious terms as in Saudi Arabia). Somali forced migrants interviewed also described differences between more proximate and more distant places of refuge based on presumed 'cultural otherness/sameness'. They made an emic distinction between *qurbajoog* (those who stay abroad, an equivalent for 'diaspora') and *qolqoljoog* (those who remain inside the country). *Qurbajoog*, however, only refers to those having migrated to 'Western' countries, since they are perceived as having 'adopted other cultures, habits and ways of life that are different from those in Somalia' and are therefore considered as 'being socially and culturally different.' (Abdile & Pirkkalainen 2011, 60).

Concerning Kenya, a distinction can be made between the north-east with its Kenyan Somali population and the refugee camps situated there and the urban areas beyond. While some refugees see the Dadaab camp complex merely as an extension of Somalia (Bashir, Salzburg, 2019), in the urban areas Somali migrants find various kinds of lifestyle prevalent simultaneously. In most cases, they settle among other Somalis, Kenyan Somalis and Somalians returning from Europe or North America, to increase a sense of security, solidarity and similarity in lifestyle, making use of ethnic linkages (see Rüegger & Bohnet 2018) and living in the 'social fog'. In addition, there is an awareness that in the Kenyan urban areas difference does not necessarily mean exclusion. Bille, for instance, an upper-class hotel owner in his late 40s, who grew up in Mogadishu and came to Mombasa around 2010, told Scharrer that 'one forgets sometimes that [Kenya] is not

home'. In his case, proximity in lifestyle related to living at the coast of the Indian ocean in both Somalia and Kenya, similarities of current Mombasa and the Mogadishu he knew before the war and relatively generous Islamic regulations. He believed that Somalians felt more at home in Kenya than in Ethiopia, even though in Ethiopia it was easier to become invisible due to phenotypical resemblance. Yet, the presence of other minority groups in Kenya, such as Arabs or South Asians, meant, to him, that a kind of cosmopolitanism had evolved, an argument expressed often among Somalians when talking about choices of destination.

Similarity in living conditions and the potential to blend in socio-economically

The third element of living in proximate places of refuge refers to forced migrants' potential to transfer their socio-economic status from the place of origin to their current destination. This transferability is influenced by economic and political structures, the way daily life is organised, and the extent to which refugees can adapt and blend in (Kibreab 1999, 399).

Even if by law forced migrants were not allowed to access the respective formal labour market, many Syrians and Somalians either worked informally or were able to set up independent businesses. Many Syrians interviewed in Egypt reported they did not have to cope with state interferences in the economic realm. Somalians in Kenya reported state intrusion mainly in the private realm and especially during the period when the Kenyan state restricted refugees to the camps. In terms of work and business, Somalians in Kenya had to deal with the same kind of erratic administrative action as fellow Kenyans. This sense of being familiar with and able to manoeuvre the proximate business environment is important for how forced migrants establish themselves as entrepreneurs and how they describe themselves in terms of work ethics.

According to Ahmad, for instance, a young Syrian man who had lived in Egypt for three years before moving to Germany, Egypt was easier to manoeuvre than Germany when looking for work. When asked for the main difference between the two countries, he answered with a smile: 'Egypt has no tax office!'. As a translator from Arabic to English who found work opportunities in Egypt through word of mouth and could eventually live a relatively stable life, he was shocked about the bureaucratic challenges involved in working as a self-employed translator in Germany, which slowed down his labour market integration.

Syrian refugees in Egypt were visible to varying extents, depending on the overall political climate, the space in which they lived, worked (esp. the food industry), dress and use of language. After the Raba'a Square massacre in 2013 Syrians became extremely visible. Many Syrians interviewed stopped going out and avoided speaking their dialect. Moreover, certain ways of dressing, such as a dark coat and a light-coloured hijab, were perceived to be 'typically Syrian'. Many Syrians and Egyptians alike associated Syrian women with beauty and certain attributes, such as fair skin, colourful eyes and blond or brown hair, while they ascribed black hair, dark eyes and skin to Egyptian women.

Mazin, a CEO of a successful start-up, described consciously using his Syrian background for his work. His two Egyptian co-founders frequently left the presentation of their work to him, since the trio experienced that Mazin received a lot of attention and empathy with his refugee background. In his daily life, Mazin spoke Egyptian

dialect, however, during workshops, lectures, and official meetings he stated that he used the Syrian accent to arouse interest.

As for Somalian forced migrants, they occupied a highly ambivalent social position in the Kenyan fabric. They were clearly visible as ethnic Somalis and thus treated with suspicion as potential outsiders. Somalian refugees as well as Kenyan Somalis were often singled out by police, in contrast to other inhabitants of the urban areas. On the other hand, Somalian refugees also made use of their resemblance to Kenyan Somalis, since they were visible as ethnic Somalis, but not as non-citizens (Dirir, Nairobi 2018).

Overall, Syrian and Somali forced migrants in Egypt and Kenya were aware that they had the potential to blend in as Egyptian or Kenyan Somali which gave them the option to navigate everyday life and the business environment creatively, by foregrounding different parts of their identity.

Class-making in proximate places of refuge

Refugee status and refugeeness

A decisive factor contributing to the possibility of 'blending in' relates to the rigidity of the implementation of legal regulations. Even though Syrians in Egypt and Somalians in Kenya often held context-specific temporary legal statuses as refugees, these legal statuses did not necessarily translate into de facto exclusion in everyday life, because regulations were not always enforced strictly.

When Syrians in Egypt register with UNHCR, they receive asylum seeker status and the right to a temporary residence permit. Many Somalians in Kenyan cities are not registered as refugees in the camps. Interviewees stated they preferred living in urban areas despite high financial costs and legal insecurity. In contrast to the camps, they encountered livelihood uncertainty and lack of physical security, as well as meagre economic and educational possibilities. Camp-registered Somalians used this as a fall-back strategy which also allowed staying on the lists for resettlement.

Even though most of our interview partners were registered as refugees with UNHCR, they were aware of the negative connotations of this category. The term 'refugeeness' was coined by Malkki (1992) and has been widely applied to grasp how people are shaped by being labelled, how they become aware of their specific position and how they deal with the negative image (Häkli et al. 2017; Luker 2015, Lacroix 2004; Ong 2003). Syrian and Somali forced migrants in Egypt and Kenya experienced the refugee identity as an imposition and refrained from internalising it (see Häkli et al. 2017, 191). In fact, they actively engaged in demarcation processes by ascribing the refugee identity to others.

Syrians interviewed distanced themselves from the refugee label by looking down on those relying on welfare support and not engaging in wage labour (Suerbaum 2020). They sought to prove incompatibility with the refugee label by emphasising their hard work and ability to provide for themselves. And they described those who went to Europe as real 'refugees' who 'begged' and waited for the welfare system to take care of them. Hani, a student of dentistry, defined who qualified in his eyes as a refugee:

> I don't feel like a refugee because the government doesn't pay for me. […] I am working, and I pay the rent and I pay for my life. I don't need the government to help me.

Hani's account suggests that being an independent agent, who can lead and control his life, is incompatible with the stereotypical image of a refugee. Through the attributes of self-sufficiency and participation in the labour market, Hani positions himself discursively in a middle-class context.

In the case of Somalians in Kenya, moving from the camps to the cities was a step to distinguish oneself from being a refugee, a label equated with being a 'victim, dependent on aid' (Lowe & Yarnell 2019, 195). Hanad, who had studied in the US, moved to Dubai and from there to Kenya in 2009, equated holding the refugee status and staying in the camps with embarrassment, even if it was only for staying on the resettlement lists:

> You are at the bottom of society. Which human being will think like this, to go on the list for refugees? That you put yourself into that category. So the social status, where you are in any level, determines how you get along. (Hanad, Nairobi 2018)

Bille, the hotel owner in Mombasa, is another example of forced migrants opting consciously for proximate places of refuge and avoiding being categorised as refugee. Even though his family had the financial and legal capital to migrate to the USA or Italy, Bille opted against this in order to avoid downward social mobility. He grew up as the son of a high-ranking politician and had studied in the USA in the 1980s. Therefore, he could imagine into what kind of situation the legal and social status of being a 'refugee' with all its accompanying restrictions would bring him in these places. When the war broke out in Mogadishu in 1991, he decided to take his parents and his younger siblings to Dubai instead, a place where the category 'refugee' did not exist in the legal sense and which he regarded also as culturally more proximate to Somalia. There it was relatively easy to invest their financial capital into building up a hotel, which, he assumed, would have been more difficult in the USA or in Europe.

Entrepreneurialism

Apart from incompatibility with the refugee label, another important aspect of status and identification was a focus on entrepreneurialism and an emphasis on the love for work. The notion of the 'refugee entrepreneur' that has gained prominence among humanitarian workers, academics and in the media centres on refugees as innovative, creative and resilient agents and is often based on racialised images and stereotypes (Pascucci 2019; Turner 2020; Leon-Reyes 2020). Entrepreneurialism among migrants is however often a necessity rather than a choice due to language barriers, exclusion from the formal labour market or discrimination at the workplace (Rametse et al. 2018).

Becoming an entrepreneur, among Somalians in Kenya and Syrians in Egypt, took place within economic structures relatively similar to those in the region of origin. This was one of the decisive reasons for staying in proximate places of refuge. The Kenyan and Egyptian states' practice of strategic indifference resulted in selective engagement (Pearlman 2020), beneficial to those who already had capital at their disposal (see also Üstübici & Elçi 2022).

Hamza, whose family ran a shop in an upper-class Egyptian neighbourhood, believed that Egypt's government made it easy for Syrians to become shop owners because '[Syrians] work a lot and we have opened many shops, factories and companies'. He said that it was possible to open a shop with 70.000 LE (equivalent to 3.500 € in

August 2018) or less depending on the area. His family did not have to fill in 'complicated governmental papers' to open their shop. According to Hamza, the main difficulties in Egypt for entrepreneurs relate to rising inflation, and the consequent increase in shop rents and service bills.

Among Somalians in Kenya, entrepreneurialism was an ideal to be reached. They shared this ideal with many Kenyans, for whom 'hustling opportunities' (Mwaura 2017) have become the theme of numerous conversations. For refugees coming directly from Somalia, the urban areas were places of survival by receiving remittances from family members or by doing 'odd jobs', such as cleaning or working in shops for little money. Some managed to continue their careers, such as business endeavours or in education, with little interruption. Ibrahim, for instance, fled Somalia in 2010. In Kenya, he was not able to continue studying journalism because of his refugee status. Yet, he was able to take private courses and started working in a radio station:

> When I got to Kenya, I made a lot of improvements in my life. I know that I am now going to the next level of my career. Because I was already working with a well-known radio there, an international [station].

Entrepreneurialism as lived experience was mainly narrated by Somalians who had already been involved in businesses before fleeing the country or by returnees from more distant places with the financial capital to set up successful business endeavours in Kenya (Scharrer 2019). Somalians with fewer resources and experience often started in shops of family members or acquaintances before opening their own businesses (Carrier 2017). They transformed the retail sector in Kenya by establishing new trade routes over the Indian Ocean (to Dubai and later China) and by a reconfiguration of space in business outlets subsumed under the heading of 'Somali shopping centres', a model quickly adopted by Kenyans. Somalis ascribed this success to the role of trust within their own networks (Carrier & Elliot 2018), but also to economic ingenuity and the hard and relentless work they invested in businesses and education.

(Gendered) work ethics

Narrations of the valuation of high work ethics were in a strong sense classed and gendered. While Syrians interviewed in Egypt invested a lot of energy in clarifying their high work ethics, inventiveness and passion in demarcation from the Egyptians, Somalis in Kenya often discussed high work ethics by using the example of business people's local success, but also in relation to other destinations.

Syrians interviewed in Egypt used the narrative of 'Syrian' work ethics to demarcate themselves from the Egyptian host population. The discourse of Syrians' love for hard work was present even though most Syrian refugees in Egypt faced initial difficulties finding employment in a country with high unemployment and poverty rates. Unless they work informally, all refugees and asylum-seekers in Egypt require work permits and proof on the part of their employer that no Egyptian was available for the work position.

Ehab reiterated the success of Syrian refugees in Egypt, underlining their reputation as hard-working, creative and entrepreneurial.

> Thank God, the Syrians here are working. When some Syrians arrived here, they started small projects. They started small but they became big by now. Because of this some Egyptians think that the Syrians in general have a lot of money. Not all the Syrians in Egypt have money. The majority of Syrians aren't rich, however, some had the money to open small shops. From these small shops they started to make bigger projects.

This narrative defines the community's boundaries along the lines of willingness to work, success and economic capital. Class belonging is measured by people's entrepreneurial skills and inventiveness which eventually pays off and grants them success and wealth. It was expected of Syrian men to work hard and be inventive, while the gendered perception of a middle-class woman was that she could stay at home and did not need to labour, unless for pleasure (Suerbaum 2020).

Somalian forced migrants also took pride in their ability to work hard in order to reach their respective aims. However, these narratives mainly related to successful middle- and upper-class Somalian business people. The question of what kind of work was respectable was different for men and women, especially regarding manual work. Discussions about work ethics often arose when differentiating between possible distant destination countries. Warsan (40) was born in Mogadishu, moved to Egypt with her family in the early 1990s before being resettled to the USA two years later. After having lived in China for a considerable time, she moved to Kenya in the late 2000s to be closer to Somalia. In Nairobi, she was running an interior design company importing furniture from China. She narrated about her time in the USA that everybody worked and that they did all kinds of jobs: 'We didn't expect to get pampered. We were better off than people who didn't get that chance' (Nairobi 2018). With only a short time for adjustment before having to care for oneself, she argued that people ceased to be refugees after a few years. Several times she emphasised the merits of her own hard work, induced by the low level of social security in the USA, which she perceived as the basis for her economic success. Likewise, Filsan suggested that in the USA there were more economically successful Somalians than in Europe, because

> people don't work as hard in Europe. There is something missing there. There is no humbleness of one's own situation and no pride in one's own success, of having made it. (Nairobi 2018)

Both women implicitly referred to the Kenyan setting, which offered only little social security, yet enabled those with sufficient capital to build up independent businesses. They therefore contrasted what Pearlman (2020) calls interventionist host states, with many duties but also social security for refugees, with those countries adopting strategic indifference vis-à-vis migrant and refugee populations. Obviously, structures of refugee settlement are neither in the USA nor in Europe as homogeneous as the quotes suggest. Nevertheless, they show that the themes of state intervention, refugeeness and work ethics are prevalent when forced migrants relate their own situation to other possibilities.

Transferring one's socioeconomic status to proximate places

While some Syrians interviewed displayed a middle-class life and described it as comparable to their previous status in Syria, a transfer of one's socioeconomic status to Egypt was not always successful, complicating the narratives and ethnographic vignettes presented before. Iman, a widow and mother of two teenagers, struggled with the loss of

social and economic capital since their arrival in Egypt. She stressed her family's belonging to the middle class referring to possessions, education, belonging to a respectable family and a lifestyle that included time for relaxation. However, despite her and her son's hard work in Egypt, she was unable to live the life she aspired for herself and her family. She was shocked to find out that '[Egyptians] work all the time just to eat and drink'. The poverty she encountered made her feel that Syrians used to live like 'kings' back in their home country. Realising that her family's efforts were not sufficient to establish themselves in Egypt, they decided together that her son should leave for Sweden. They planned for him to apply for family reunification since she was unable to pay 5000 USD for her and her daughter's trip via the Mediterranean Sea.

> We worked very hard. My son worked from early morning till late in the evening and I worked for eight hours but we couldn't save. [...] We live on the poverty line [in Egypt], although we used to live in Syria on the line of the rich. We moved 180 degrees down.

Iman's statement reinforces the need for nuanced analyses. Syrian refugees in Egypt, even if they reported economic success and considered their living conditions to be good, lived in a country that was battered by inflation, high unemployment and poverty rates. Iman used her economic and social capital to borrow money and send her son to Europe and planned to make use of her social and cultural capital upon arrival in Sweden to improve the family's situation and escape the refugee label.

> We are going as refugees, but we don't want to stay all of our life as refugees. We just need the support until we can stand on our own feet and achieve something.

Iman seeks to live an independent life in which she only needs to rely on state welfare in Scandinavia until she has established herself. Moving to a distant destination country can offer her a legal status and a moment of support which she then wants to use as a chance to eventually leave state welfare behind. As argued by van Hear (2014, 112), there is a cost–benefit analysis of the expenses of a household member's migration and its anticipated benefits and potential obstacles. Yet, the analysis of advantages and disadvantages goes beyond financial resources. Rather, it is an evaluation that includes classed aspirations, legal categorisations, and individual familial contexts.

In the case of Hamza (26), his family had not been able to transfer their middle-class socio-economic status from Somalia to Kenya. Yet, even though he grew up in the refugee camps Dadaab and Kakuma, he later managed to study medicine in Nairobi. Hamza found it however difficult to reconcile these status differences. When meeting with other students or doctors, he said he 'dress[es] nicely and drinks tea with them' in order to hide his humble background – 'I don't show my problems' (Nairobi 2018). He also stated that

> The rich guys are giving each other money. They pay for each other's lunch, which the other could have afforded himself. At the same time their cousin might go hungry.

Hamza's mother instilled a strong educational aspiration in her children. She had managed to go to high school in Somalia, which even in the still operating Somali state of the 1980s was an exception. After moving to Nakuru in 2011, to enable Hamza to join a secondary school, the family skipped meals to pay for extra tuition for the children. Studying medicine in Nairobi only became possible for Hamza by

securing a scholarship, yet he was still dependent on remittances from his uncle in Australia and the generosity of well-off fellow students. At one moment, he was so ashamed of his own position that he 'did not want to live as a cockroach anymore' and tried to escape to Europe, following his younger brother. Even though Hamza knew about the torture his brother had endured in Libya and was informed about his brother's inability to finish secondary school, in his mind, his 'brother had made it' when he reached Europe and was granted asylum. Even if many Somalian refugees in Europe or North America failed to be successful in accordance with their own or their family's standards, there was a common belief that success was possible, as a matter of individual capability, hard work and luck. Hamza, however, was caught in Sudan, deported to Somalia and finished his studies two years later, eventually making another step in his endeavour for upward social mobility. To some extent he was therefore able to re-establish the social status his family once held in the second generation. His example shows the importance of different forms of capital (Bourdieu 1984): economic capital to survive in the city and to finance education and spatial mobility, social capital which, in the form of remittances, can be converted into economic capital and enhance his cultural capital. Cultural capital in turn can be converted again into economic capital (in the form of a scholarship) and social capital (when his mother and sisters joined him in Nairobi giving him much needed support). Now, Hamza's main fear was to lose his status 'the worst is going from up to down' (Nairobi 2018), to lose the socio-economic status he had worked for over a long time.

Conclusion

We have shown that forced migrants make decisions about their migration routes and evaluate their prospective socio-economic positions in proximate and distant places of refuge. They do so in constant comparison based on accumulated knowledge from and about those who live in other destination countries. For Syrians and Somalians moving to proximate destinations did not only concern geographic closeness, enabling cheaper travel and at times more mobility, it also meant settling in contexts offering similarities in lifestyle, living conditions and business environments. Both refugee groups benefited from lax implementations of legal status regulations and living in the social fog. Ultimately, our material suggests that some forced migrants experience fewer ruptures with their previous lives when migrating to proximate places as compared to more distant ones. Nevertheless, for Syrians in Egypt and Somalians in Kenya choosing life in proximate countries comes with the price of little legal security and the absence of a welfare support system. The choice of proximate destinations and the ability to make the best of their situation appeared to be reserved for those forced migrants with enough economic and cultural capital to sustain themselves.

As other contributions to this special issue show (Boeyink & Falisse 2022; Rudolf 2022), geographical closeness is often not enough to create the proximity in lifestyle and living conditions which Syrians and Somalians reported to have found in Egypt and Kenya.

Syrians in urban Egypt and Somalis in urban Kenya aspired to, and in the case of Syrians self-defined as, middle class. Important ways of class-making were the emphasis on one's personal incompatibility with the refugee stereotype and using

entrepreneurialism to highlight one's work ethics as a form of boundary making. Syrian and Somali forced migrants drew this boundary vis-a-vis the host population and other forced migrants. Perceptions and presentations of refugeeness, entrepreneurialism and work ethics are therefore deeply entangled. Based on our research partners' perceptions, it can be argued that a forced migrant was less defined by the reasons for leaving one's home and more by the conditions of arrival. Being a refugee was a classed position, which research partners tried to avoid, for instance by leaving UNHCR structures and through entrepreneurial success.

To distinguish oneself discursively from the refugee category can be read as a claim to higher socioeconomic status. Interlocutors relied on their discursive distinctions from the refugee category on their respective social capital. Cultural capital can be decisive for making mobility to proximate places of refuge possible. Living in a non-interventionist proximate place of refuge can enable those forced migrants with sufficient resources to transfer and grow their capital in the economic, cultural and possibly also social realm.

Notes

1. In June 2013, Morsi was removed from power and the Muslim Brotherhood has been brutally suppressed (Schielke 2015, 186). On 14 August 2013, security forces stormed two demonstration camps of Morsi supporters, Rabaa Square in Cairo and al-Nahda Square in Giza, killing at least 817 people.
2. What is actually transmitted via these channels is a different debate this article will not delve into.

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