Relational Social Work

African Refugees' Experiences of Oppression: The Journey from Naïve to Critical Consciousness

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Abstract

As global migration increases, the number of refugees, including those from African countries, is intensifying within the European Union and specifically Italy. African refugees who travel to Italy face a host of violent experiences including slavery and human trafficking. Social workers in Italy work side-by-side with these refugees to help them explore the emotional and geographic elements of their journeys and begin the process of integrating into a new society. This paper provides an in-depth examination of the narratives of two African refugees who made the dangerous journey from their homes in Africa to northern Italy where they participated in a vocational training program. These narratives, drawn from a larger qualitative study that took place in Como, Italy, highlight African refugees' oppressive experiences on the journey, their process of self-reflection, and their evolution from naïve to critical consciousness. Social workers can build upon and learn from refugees' growth and resilience forged through these difficult journeys and they can draw upon the wisdom and experience of more established refugees to help them, in turn, nurture and support newly arriving refugees.

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African Refugees' Experiences of Oppression: The Journey from Naïve to Critical Consciousness[1]

As global migration increases, the number of refugees, including those from African countries, is intensifying within the European Union. African refugees who journey to Europe, specifically to Italy, face a host of violent and oppressive experiences including slavery, human trafficking, forced prostitution and forced labor. Italy serves as a key gateway between Africa and Europe (ETIAS, 2024) and has received a mounting influx of refugees with over 1 million arrivals in the last decade (from 2013 to 2023). Many have traveled from their homes in Africa through Libya which is a place of chaos and sociopolitical disorder. Social workers in Italy and many other European countries work side-by-side with these refugees to help them explore and integrate the emotional and geographic elements of their journeys and to begin the process of integrating into a new society (Koenig, Hudson et al., in press). Because of their substantial role in working with and supporting refugees, it has become imperative for social workers to know about refugees' journeys, their experiences with and awareness of oppression, and their growth and development in the midst of these oppressive experiences.

Many African refugees are under the age of eighteen, travel alone and have never left their home country. Their youth and inexperience includes a naïveté regarding the personal and larger structural oppression that they will experience along their journeys. This inexperience can be referred to as a naïve consciousness which Freire (2005) described as occurring when people are unaware of the conditions in which they live and how those conditions oppress them (Koenig et al., 2019).

Social workers can engage in dialogue with these young refugees to learn about their journeys, and also encourage them to interact with other refugees who have gone through similar oppressive experiences. By engaging in dialogue with others and reflecting on their oppression and resilience, refugees can begin the process of moving from naïve to critical consciousness out of which they can take action to address their oppression.

This paper provides an in-depth examination of the narratives of two African refugees whose pseudonyms are Mustafa and Omosalewa (who later takes the name Faith to evade traffickers). Their narratives were drawn from a larger qualitative study in which the participants ranged in age from 15 to 26 years old. This study took place

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in Como, Italy, a border city near the Swiss Alps (Koenig, Hudson et al., in press). For the purposes of our study, we use the terms «refugee» and «economic migrant» interchangeably. Although the 1951 UN Refugee Convention (United Nations, 1954) defined the term refugee with an emphasis on the protected status of the person who is fleeing violence or persecution, this definition is now contested in sociopolitical discourse (Marchetti, 2020). Scholars indicate that the divide between economic migrants and refugees is a distinction without a difference in that both face shared difficulties with language, housing and the need for social, economic and emotional support (Sigona, 2018; Zetter, 2007).

In this study, all participants underwent an uncertain and often traumatic transition from their homes in Africa as they crossed the dangerous Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea and made their way to northern Italy where they participated in a vocational training program at Cometa, an agency designated as an EU Center of Excellence that supports internships and integration into Italian society (Koenig & Nardi, 2019). Our in-depth examination demonstrates how these refugees moved from naïve to the beginnings of critical consciousness as they journeyed from home to northern Italy. These two narratives highlight African refugees' oppressive experiences on the journey. Their process of reflection on these experiences contributes to the development of their critical consciousness that connects their personal experiences of oppression to larger unjust social and political structures in which they are embedded (Freire, 2005). This dawning critical consciousness then leads both refugees to take decisive action to change their journey and their overarching growth and development.

Literature Review

This literature review addresses four key concepts that are central in this study: oppression, self-reflection, naïve consciousness and critical consciousness. The study participants, all of whom migrated from African countries, have lived with the consequences of the multigenerational impact of colonization which represents systematic oppression (Jacobs, 2014). This oppression is understood by Freire (2005) and others (Brave Heart, 2000; Chenault, 2011; Fogelman, 1988) to contribute to a naïve consciousness and vulnerability that is passed on to subsequent generations. For example, the educational system in Nigeria is described by some to continue the effects of colonization where youth do not learn to ask questions, explore contradictions, and engage in critical processes (Akinsanya & Ojotule, 2022).

Oppression can be broadly conceptualized in two ways: as structural oppression that includes an overarching dynamic reflecting all types of oppression in which individuals or sup-groups' (e.g., racial, gender-based, ability-based, and queer) freedoms and/or access to social goods are systematically restricted (Khader, 2024). The second category of op-

pression is epistemological oppression (Dotson, 2014), in which individuals or social subgroups are systematically blocked from contributing to a society's knowledge base (e.g., the negative reactions to including *The 1619 Project* in public school curriculum) (Jones et al., 2021). For our purposes, we have chosen to draw on Chenault's (2011) definition of oppression which integrates both structural and epistemological oppression. Chenault, an Indigenous social work scholar, defines oppression as «a condition of powerlessness that cuts across every system within a culture» (p. 20).

In discussing how people who experience oppression move from naïve to critical consciousness, Freire (2005) posited that as oppressed people engage in self-reflection on their social positions (e.g., based on their country of origin or skin color), their understanding of those positions evolved. In that process of evolution, their personal views of their identity and the oppression they experienced were transformed in relation to the society in which they were embedded (Diemer et al., 2016).

Self-reflection goes beyond just being aware of our thoughts and feelings in the moment, but also includes reflecting on those thoughts and feelings. Scholars refer to this as reflection-on-action and this involves interpreting what has happened (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Fook & Gardner, 2007; Koenig, Spano et al., in press; Schön, 1983, 1987). There is no single formula for interpretation, but it may incorporate aspects such as: evaluating one's personal capacities for asking questions and examining oppressive group or individual behavior; exploring fears, confusion, and anger when faced with a difficult situation; and being willing to explore new ways of thinking about one's situation. According to Freire, new understandings that emerge from this self-reflection drive the person to action and that changes the trajectory of their future development. For many in this study, like Mustafa and Faith, self-reflection and action in the face of violence was the prime mover in their early growth process.

For Freire (2005), education is the motivating force in this dynamic. His circular model of education, in which the teacher and student are in a constant cycle of teaching and learning from each other, was designed to bring the student to a state that came to be called conscientization, or critical consciousness. In this state, the liberated person accurately perceives themselves, their position in society, the oppressive forces arrayed against them, how to question authority, in its various forms, and how to act to bring about change.

In discussing the parallels between Freire's work and the principles of the strengths perspective, Hegar (2012) emphasized the social work values of the importance of human relationships and the dignity and worth of the person (NASW, 2021). Freire communicated these same principles in his central message when he insisted that not only do people have the capacity and ability to learn about the sociopolitical contradictions functioning as oppressive forces in their society and act against them, indeed, only they can do so.

Research Questions

Our exploratory study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do participants describe their journey from home in Africa to northern Italy?
   a) What prompted them to leave?
   b) What happened on their journey that led to self-reflection?
   c) What actions did they take as part of this self-reflection?
2. How do they understand their integration into Italian society?

Methods

This study uses a naturalistic paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Padgett, 2016) to explore African refugees' emotional and geographic journeys from home to northern Italy where they have participated in Cometa's vocational training program in Como, Italy. Specifically, in this paper, we examine in-depth two refugees' journeys, the experiences they had along their journeys that contributed to their self-reflection and action (moving from naïve to critical consciousness), and how they understood their integration into Italian society.

Naturalistic inquiry, which supports the use of a qualitative design, views reality as constructed from a range of viewpoints and narratives and that numerous characteristics such as African refugees' experiences of leaving home and traveling thousands of miles, often experiencing violence on their way to reaching northern Italy, influence these realities. Furthermore, because minimal systematic research has been conducted on African refugees' journeys combined with their participation in vocational training to better integrate into Italian society, a qualitative design emphasizing the development of major themes, inferences, and conclusions that emerge from the data analyses lent itself well to this exploration. A semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions enabled study participants to provide a broad range of detailed narratives about their often difficult and violent journeys. This study also used other sources of data including participants' photos and maps of their geographic journeys. Participants verbally consented to including their photos and helped create the maps that delineated their journeys as part of the data collection process. All participants consent were digitally recorded, and this study was approved by the IRB at the University of Kansas.

Participants Characteristics and Context for the Study

This study provides an in-depth examination of two African refugees from Nigeria — Faith and Mustafa. Faith identified as female and was age 20 when she began her journey

which lasted one year in duration. Mustafa who identified as male began his journey at age 17 and this journey lasted 11 months in duration.

At the time of their interviews, Faith and Mustafa were currently participating in Cometa's vocational training program in Como, Italy, the Minimaster, which prepares future waiters and housekeepers for the local hospitality sector. Since 2009, Cometa has provided vocational training (VET) for refugees aimed at supporting their transition into the job market. In more recent years, Cometa has provided VET courses and a specific program structure to refugees, many of whom have limited social support and knowledge of the Italian language which contribute to barriers to entering the job market. Cometa's program welcomes the refugees and provide personal support throughout their vocational and Italian language training and involve them in social and cultural activities to help them better integrate into Italian society.

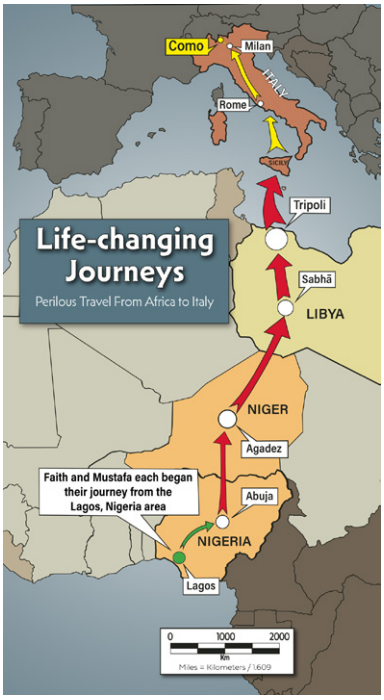

Figure 1 Faith and Mustafa Map.

Data Collection and Analysis

For the larger study, the primary investigator developed a purposive sample of African refugees who had either completed, or were in the process of completing, the

VET program at Cometa in job skills training and aspects of Italian language and culture. These potential participants were contacted by Cometa's program director to determine if they were open to providing a digitally recorded 60-to-90-minute interview.

Potential participants were also offered an interpreter from Italian to English. Neither Mustafa nor Faith required these interpretation services. Interviews included questions on (1) demographics (e.g., age and country of origin); (2) life before the journey (e.g., Tell me about your life before you decided to leave home?); (3) personal experiences of their journeys (e.g., Describe your journey from home in Africa to northern Italy?); and (4) participants' involvement with Cometa (e.g., How did you end up in the VET program in Como, Italy)?

The researcher and an Italian colleague with expertise in European migration jointly analyzed interview transcripts, including those of Mustafa and Faith. The constant comparative method was used for data collection and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Padgett, 2016). Strategies were used to establish trustworthiness in this study's findings including the use of member checks with respondents, the development of an audit trail, the use of multiple data sources, the use of multiple researchers in data collection and analyses, the use of raw data in the final report, and the inclusion of data reconstruction products as part of the final report. These strategies helped to expand, add to, and refine the codes thereby creating trustworthiness and increasing the credibility of findings.

Findings

What follows is two in-depth narratives that highlight a typical set of violent experiences that contribute to self-reflection and action for Mustafa and Faith as they traveled from home to northern Italy. These narratives include (1) their description of what home in Africa was like before they began to travel; (2) their often difficult and violent experiences along the journey that led to self-reflection; (3) actions they took that flowed from this self-reflection; and (4) their integration into Italian society where they are currently participating in Cometa's VET program.

Mustafa Narrative

Description of Home

Mustafa was born in Benin City, Nigeria and his mother tongue is Edo. He speaks English and Italian. As a child, Mustafa's parents argued over religion. He and his mother are Christians and his «dad is a pagan». His parents separated and he lived with his mom who had very limited financial resources. This prompted Mustafa to leave home.

Violent Experiences

Mustafa began his journey out of Nigeria at age 17. It took him over seven months to travel from Benin City through Niger and into Sabha, Libya where he had to sneak across the Sahara desert on backroads and in an open-air «jeep, a huge one, without a roof on it» (and without a passport) before arriving in Tripoli, Libya. This part of his journey was punctuated by the violent death of his friend and traveling companion with whom he had discussed the limits to his future if they stayed in Nigeria. Unfortunately, and while in Tripoli, his friend was shot. Mustafa remarked, «I cannot believe that the guy is dead… It feels like, it's kind of a dream. He was the guy who motivated me to leave Nigeria. I never believed he couldn't make it». Mustafa «witnessed six deaths» on his journey out of Nigeria to Tripoli near the edge of the Mediterranean Sea.

Figure 2 Mustafa.

At several points along the journey in Niger and Tripoli, Mustafa worked to continue traveling. His mother had «gathered money for some months» to support Mustafa in the beginning, but when he called back to ask for more support, his mother said she had nothing left and that Mustafa would need to work to continue his journey. While in Tripoli, Mustafa got a job at a car wash and recounted the following frightening and eye-opening incident: «There was a day I went to work… in a car wash. Then, I mistakenly broke a glass [windshield] of some Arab… It was a nice, beautiful car. It was, it was a mistake, something happened to the car. The glass got cracked, not broken, cracked».

The Arab woman who owned the car said to Mustafa, «Oh… you are going to pay for this». While she was talking, her husband came out of the car with a gun… He was like, «Oh, come here, come here, come here», with the gun.

«I was, I was quiet. I was not having any of that. I was even thinking, I'm dead because I... owed [money]... Yes, he was an Arab with a gun. And so... I apologize[d]».

Mustafa laid all the money he had «made that day... out on the table» and said, «This is all I have, I don't have any other money. You guys should just please take the money».

The Arab couple responded, took the money, and said, «Yeah, you have to pay».

Self-reflection and Action

Mustafa reflected more broadly on this incident and said, «You know, Libya, I notice one thing. Libya, they don't, they don't see [themselves] as African... They don't see themselves as part of Africa. They see their self, I don't know, maybe part of Europe. I don't know, something like that, because they say [to me], "You Africa, you Africa"».

Mustafa noted that the Libyan people «always say Black» when they refer to him. Mustafa's responded saying, «Africa is Africa is Africa is Africa». The car wash incident propelled Mustafa into further self-reflection about the real threats to his safety in Libya. He stated, «I stay[ed] home for a week... without doing any job. I was afraid, like maybe this person, they ask for some more damages and they could kill me... I still, I love to live».

Even though Mustafa had been understandably «afraid of crossing this [Mediterranean] Sea» with «that balloon» type boat, the car wash incident motivated him to actively face that fear. He banged the restaurant table several times where we were talking and said, «people die every day» trying to cross the sea and he was «not going do that. I am afraid, No. But seeing the situation in Tripoli. I couldn't resist it. It was like, "Fine, I've made up my mind". I am going», «When the weather is quite good», Mustafa gets «in the bowel» of an overcrowded balloon-type boat in a cramped position, and next to a pregnant woman. Mustafa said, «the bottom [of the boat] was going down [deflating] and everybody was afraid. You know everybody was shot [tired]. There was a lady [who was] pregnant. So, I was kind of sorry for her... Mustafa sighs. It's that bad [and] she gives up... She couldn't make it [pause]. You know flashing back, it's kind of hard.

After some days, they were rescued by the «Italian Navy» and the «fuckingest issue was [she] was dead already». The rescue crew covered «the [woman's] body with the baby inside». Mustafa again banged the table several times and said, «It's tough like that».

Beginning of Integration

Mustafa was inside the Italian ship for two days and then arrived in Messina, Sicily. He remarked, «I was kind of very, very happy... I made it to life... It wasn't easy. I have to change everything. They give us new clothes. I was like in paradise [laughs]». Mustafa called back to let his mom know he made it to Italy. She said to him, «You have to send

a picture because I don't believe you are alive». He sent photos to his mom through Facebook and she reacted, «She was like, that is you. So, you are alive. [Mustafa laughed]».

The Italian government brought Mustafa directly to Como and he stayed in a refugee camp in the center of the city. He attempted to find work when he first arrived in Como, but without a command of the Italian language, his attempts were futile. While searching for work, Mustafa met a woman who asked him, «Would you like to go to go school?» Mustafa responded, «I would love to go to school, but I don't have money. How am I going to do that?» And it is she who eventually linked Mustafa to Cometa, an agency that provides a vocational training program for a growing number of refugees. Mustafa described the head of the Cometa school, Jacopo, as his first friend. He said, «I have other friends, but the first friend I make is Jacopo [who] is from Cometa school. Because when I came new, I wasn't having any friends… He is the first friend I made… He gives me the opportunity to be where I am today».

Jacopo placed demands on him that were difficult to meet but were absolutely necessary for Mustafa's success. Mustafa stated, «Jacopo had to sit me down… I told him, "I really need a job". He said, "I know you need a job, but… first you have to speak the language". So, I was like, it is quite difficult». Over a one-year period, Mustafa attended Italian language school, Cometa's Minimaster Food and Beverage course, and obtained an internship with Cometa's assistance as a hotel waiter. At the time of our interview (and without any prior work experience before coming to Italy), Mustafa had successfully worked in the hotel business for two years. Mustafa attributed Cometa with giving him life, «I would say it is the best place to ever be, like Cometa is my home. Not a school, but my home… The opportunity I [have] today, thanks to Cometa. They give me life».

Figure 3 Mustafa at work.

In summary, Mustafa left home due to his parents' religious differences which, in turn, had caused financial hardship. He experienced violence both in Libya and on his

journey across the Mediterranean Sea that lead to self-reflection and started a process of evolution from naïve to critical consciousness. This dawning awareness facilitated the continuation of his journey and integration into Italian society.

Omosalewa to Faith Narrative

Description of Home

Omosalewa's home is near Lagos, Nigeria. Her mother tongue is Edo, and she also speaks Benin, Italian and English. Omosalewa described herself as having more than twenty siblings and being «from a polygamous home [in that] my dad got married to three wives». However, Omosalewa noted, «I didn't grow up with [my siblings]. I did not grow up with my dad. I grew up on my mom's side and they didn't get to know me». It was only after her dad died that she met his other two wives. She reflected, «When I lost my dad, my mom was not able to pay the money [for me to go to school]... and so, I had to drop out to follow [my mom]». Omosalewa only obtained six years of education in Nigeria and dropped out of school at age ten.

At age 15, Omosalewa was at a loss for what to do with her life. She remarked, «How am I going to survive?... My mom is there, but nothing is going [on], it was kind of painful. And, so, I decided to learn a work — how to make dresses... [but] it got to the point [where] I cannot afford [to live]. My mom is sick, she cannot afford it. So, I was kind of asking, "What kind of life is this on my coast?" I don't go to my dad's people to help me because I don't feel like someone from there [will] help me because... I didn't grow up with them».

Omosalewa said, «Life was really difficult then. Seeing [my mom] struggling, nothing, with no money, she's sick... [and] having the worst pain».

Figure 4 Faith.

Time passes and Omosalewa meets a friend who tells her about a girlfriend who had left and «traveled to Europe». She said, «Whoa, how did it happen, your girlfriend travel to live and go to Europe?». And, so, Omosalewa's friend, in turn, took her to a man «to talk to him, to know about the journey they take». The man said that when they had traveled up to Europe, Omosalewa would «manage to pay him [for the journey]». Omosalewa stated that she «didn't want to tell her mom… because… she will say that I should not go, that I should stay. [But] then, I traveled. It was only this guy then that I traveled with».

Violent Experiences

On their journey through the Nigerian communities of Eucuman and Emchi, they meet up with another man and woman. Together, these people warn Omosalewa, «We are going to do some kind of things to [you] so that when you get to Europe, [you] will be able to pay [us] back and won't run away». Omosalewa reported that they performed a kind of «scary» sexual ritual on her so that they could somehow have power over her. She recounted, «They took a kind of electric thing, they take some of my hairs [from] my armpit and private hairs. So, they use it to sell, so, that when the person go[es] to Europe, they will not run away… [Instead], I will be scared that the thing that they did, that my hair that they took from me, that they are going to kill me with it».

Omosalewa described traveling up «from Nigeria, to Niger, to Libya» with these people; and as they continued to travel, Omosalewa became aware that she was being human trafficked. She said, «After a time, I realize that the person I meet in Nigeria is not the same person that is taking me to Europe. They [were] like doing business with me. Like say [you and I], we are here doing business. He would take you to me. You would pay him…They were selling and selling and selling. And then, they got to Tripoli, and then, the man in Tripoli sell me to a woman in France».

Omosalewa struggled to describe what was happening and the interviewer asked her, «[Are they selling you] for sex?».

Figure 5 Faith in praise.

She responded, «Yes, but to God be the glory. The woman that they wanted to go and do the business with in Libya, the woman didn't come. She said that she's scared [of] the place where I am. When she comes, [she is afraid] they are going to kidnap her, kidnap me. So, I decided that... I am tired, let me go back to my suffering in Nigeria. Just take me back. They said, 'No' the journey has changed. I am going to Libya... and they do not bother me again».

Self-reflection and Action

Omosalewa continued to engage in reflection about her situation, «When I was still in Libya, I was thinking, to go and be sleeping with men, collecting money, is not any good. I don't like it. And, I said to myself, I have to play with this man. Let me see if he can really help me. The man will call people, "Ah, here is this girl, do you want to buy? She is free. She is really good with this and really good with [that]". Many people said, "No, she is going to run away". So, this woman in France said... that when I come to France, I will work, and I pay her. I said, "Ok" and she took my picture, my name, my address. Everything was good then. But on my way, something came into my mind that when I got to Italy, I will not go to France. Then, I have to change my name».

Along with her captors, Omosalewa initially tried to cross the Mediterranean Sea. However, while crossing by boat, they get caught by the police and were «taken to prison» for five weeks. Omosalewa stated that while in prison she woke up one morning to realize that one of the young female prisoners had been bought by a man and taken from the prison. Omosalewa hoped that the man would return and choose her too. Surprisingly, Omosalewa said, «this man also came again to buy me in prison and then he sold me to [the] woman in France».

And, so, once more, Omosalewa attempted to cross the Sea and this time arrived in Sicily, Italy with the intent of contacting her human traffickers. It is at this point, she cuts off contact with the human traffickers. She said, «I was really thinking... in my mind, I don't know what to do because I don't want to sleep with a man at the end of the day and give money to another person. It is not really good for me. I have to change my name — change everything about me. So, when I got to [Italy], they ask me, "What is your name?". I told them my name was Faith; they write it down on my documents».

The man in Libya called Omosalewa when she arrived in Italy and tried to arrange for Faith to meet the woman from France, but Omosalewa remarked, «I have to use my sense to make sure that I didn't go to the woman's house. I know when I go there, she is going to use me. I know she has my picture and my address. She has discovered my mom and everything. I told my mom not to worry».

Beginning of Integration

When Faith arrived in Como, Italy she first lived in a cooperative that welcomes refugees on behalf of the central government. At the cooperative, Faith began to learn «how to speak Italian». And she went out to look for «contract work» which lasted a few short months. She stated, «What am I going to do? I can't sit at home, eating and sleeping... It is not really good». So, she asked staff at the cooperative, «If you see anything like school... I will go». Shortly afterwards, they helped set her up with an interview with Cometa. She remarked, «So lucky for me that they choose me». With Cometa's assistance, Faith completed an internship at a hotel on Lake Como. Faith said, «Everything has really changed for me. Because when I was working at [one] hotel, the woman that I was working with was always complaining that I don't do this well and I don't do that well... But since I got to Cometa, this [has] really change[d]. I learn how to make beds well, how to clean, how to do some house chores».

Faith stated that she continues to talk to her «friends in Nigeria,» and through Cometa, she also has «a lot of friends here in Italy». Faith hopes to be able to help other teenagers so that they can go to school. She said, «I'm just praying that God should bless with me with... money. I didn't go to school. I would love teenagers to go to school. What I see is that they don't have money to go... and I will give them this money... to go to school».

In closing, Faith remarked, «I wouldn't advise anybody to go through that much... It is really painful to see some people you live with in Nigeria, they are dying... I don't want someone again to pass that way. If me alone, can block the road, I would do it because a lot of souls are going down from this... place».

In summary, Omosalewa described her polygamous household as chaotic and one in which her own mother was in poverty and did not know her that well. Her father had also died and this prompted Omosalewa to move. She experienced violence all along the journey from her human traffickers that lead to self-reflection and started an evolutionary process from naïve to critical consciousness. This dawning awareness facilitated Omosalewa's decision to change her name and become Faith, separate from her captors, and seek out the education and employment in Italy that had been denied to her in Nigeria.

Discussion and Implications

We chose these two participants because they illustrated poignant, clear realizations of the move from naïve to critical consciousness in the context of personal and structural oppression. Both Faith and Mustafa were able to point to a set of experiences in which they underwent change in the context of their environment. For Mustafa, the moment occurred when the Arab man held a gun to his head at the car wash and he thought his

life was over. It is here that Mustafa understands that «Africa is *not* Africa is *not* Africa» and his black skin sets him apart from this Arab man and makes him less valuable than even a cracked windshield. For Faith, the moment occurred when she realized she was being bought and sold for prostitution on the journey. She realized that her body was simply merchandise, her *self* was nonexistent, and that this was not good for her. This self-awareness led to her changing her name from Omosalewa to Faith in front of the Italian authorities and provided her with just enough time to separate or disappear from her captors.

In the face of violent experiences, the refugees reflected upon their oppressive situations and made the decision to move into an arc or trajectory toward development and growth. They could see that why they were having difficulties was related to the oppression they were currently experiencing, had no control over, and could define as broader, structural oppression. They made the decision to act and initiated their crossing of the Mediterranean Sea into Italy. Faith and Mustafa moved from reflecting on the past to changing the arc of their future. Faith used her captors' perceptions of her against them. She took initiative and basically said, «I am not Omosalewa now, instead I have changed my name». Mustafa realized that being Black put him in a certain oppressive position in Libya and that he needed to keep traveling, to get on that boat and cross the Mediterranean Sea into Europe.

As noted by writers in philosophy, education and social work (Chappell Deckert & Koenig, 2019; Dewey,1938; Freire, 2005; Koenig et al., 2017), experience (e.g., like the violent experiences of Faith and Mustafa that occurred as they migrated from their African homes to Italy) can be a powerful teacher. Unfortunately, as we examined the professional literature, there appeared to be little to no scholarly writings which address refugees' migration journeys as crucibles or spaces for their growth and learning. Current refugee writings largely assume that learning does not begin for refugees until they arrive at their new destination. For example, scholars explore refugees' experiences of discrimination within their «receiving» country and specifically within the context of the vocational training paradoxically designed to help them begin integration into their new societal circumstances (Chadderton & Edmonds, 2015; Lee et al., 2020; Manhica et al., 2019). In effect, refugees have high dropout rates in vocational training, face considerable barriers due to language difficulties and employers' discriminatory or reserved attitudes, and are underrepresented in vocational training programs (Jørgensen et al., 2021).

Refugees' journeys are indeed harrowing but can also be the impetus for helping them develop a critical consciousness or awareness of structural oppression. As Freire (2005) stated, «To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity» (p. 47). This growing awareness of oppression can motivate refugees to take the initiative to act; these actions toward growth and development demonstrate great resilience. In the face of dire circumstances

that may include losing their lives, refugees draw upon their journeys as experiences for learning. This is illustrated dramatically by Mustafa who loses his close friend, five other people on the journey across the Sahara, and the pregnant woman who is shoulder-to-shoulder with him on the inflatable boat across the sea. According to the UN Missing Migrants Project, many, many refugees go missing and never make it across the Mediterranean Sea (IOM, 2024).

The participants interviewed for this study, including Faith and Mustafa, represent refugees who are survivors. We would suggest that there is much that social workers and other helping professionals can learn from these refugees' journeys that illustrate bravery, a willingness to acknowledge vulnerability, the capacity for self-reflection and gutsy action. This would be in keeping with Freire's understanding of a liberatory model of education where learning is reciprocal — teachers are students and students are teachers. When we listen to the refugees' views of the vocational training program at Cometa, we can see that Cometa is addressing the systematic oppression refugees often experience within Italian society and which functions as a barrier to their learning, their success vocationally, and their social integration. For example, Faith noted that through Cometa, she has a «lot of friends here in Italy» and Mustafa stated,

«Cometa is my home. Not a school, but my home... The opportunity I [have] today, thanks to Cometa. They give me life».

Cometa, along with other European vocational training programs, acknowledge gains that they have made in working with the refugees, but also express concerns about the level of recidivism in their programs (Manhica et al., 2019; Koenig & Nardi, 2019). We would ask, «Given the recidivism rate among refugees in vocational training in Italy and other countries in Europe, can we define refugees' development only in terms of their acquisition of language and job skills?» For refugees, their definition of growth, development and resilience may diverge from that of social workers and others who work with them in migration or vocational training centers. Refugees may view their journeys as spaces of pain and devastation, but also as testimonies to their realistic hope for the present and future. Social workers can build upon and learn from refugees' growth, development and resilience forged in the face of very difficult journeys. Consistent with an empowerment and strengths-based approach which are both rooted in Freire's ideas that have been often forgotten in newer social work writings (Koenig et al., 2019), social workers and other practitioners can start with the refugees' or clients' expertise that they have gained through the process of making it from home to northern Italy. Social workers can also draw upon the wisdom and experiential knowledge of more established refugees to help them, in turn, to nurture and support newly arriving refugees. As adherents of the strengths perspective, social workers acknowledge the centrality of community-based participatory practices in which refugees can come together to explore problems and solutions thereby being reflection-based actors in their own lives and concomitant narratives.

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