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How do refugee entrepreneurs navigate institutional voids?

Insights from Malaysia

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Introduction

Globally, there are nearly 30 million refugees whereby “one person is forcibly displaced every two seconds as a result of conflict or persecution” (UN, 2020). The adverse conditions that refugees face expose them to exploitation and discrimination in employment (Shneikat & Alrawadieh, 2019). For survival, some refugees opt for self-employment and operate micro-businesses. Businesses run by refugees are often characterised as small, informal and low-tech with low start-up capital requirements (Kachkar, 2019). The common characteristics of refugee-run businesses are a reflection of the multiple and significant disadvantages refugees face: poverty, limited access to education and training, language barriers in host countries, to name a few. Notwithstanding the hardships they face, refugees are pushing the limits of what many identify as entrepreneurial qualities. Their necessity-driven entrepreneurial activities are conducted not only in the hope of improved livelihoods and economic self-reliance, but also to enable integration in the local community for themselves and their families. While refugees are often viewed as a problem that has to be dealt with (Jacobsen, 2002), their entrepreneurial activities may offer contributions to local economies. For instance, they may offer new products or services that benefit locals (e.g., traditional cuisine not available in the host country) or offer new value through impact-driven organisations (e.g., language translation work for social enterprises who engage with refugees and other types of migrants).

The disadvantages refugees face are escalated in countries that have not acceded to the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol, such as Malaysia. In such countries, refugees are precluded from legal residence, legal employment, public healthcare, public education, and other

public services, thus adding unique levels of adversity and disadvantage. Yet, such countries still host significant numbers of refugees. For example, as of February 2020, there are 178,990 refugees and asylum-seekers registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2020a) in Malaysia, which is a popular transition country for many refugees while waiting to be resettled to a third country.

The lack of legal protection and right to work for refugees in Malaysia necessitates engagement in entrepreneurial activities to earn a livelihood, while also presenting them with institutional voids that make entrepreneurial activities more challenging and potentially less rewarding. Institutional voids occur when “institutional arrangements that support markets are absent, weak, or fail to accomplish the role expected of them” (Mair & Marti, 2009, p. 419). For refugees in Malaysia, institutional voids impede their ability to make sense of the new environments and to access appropriate support for their entrepreneurial activities (Heilbrunn & Iannone, 2019; Khoury & Prasad, 2015). Previous research on refugee entrepreneurship maps out the challenges refugees face when starting up a business, including language and communication barriers; discrimination and racism; limited local networks; lack of access to finance; lack of support resource; cross-cultural challenges; legal constraints; uncertainty and lack of security; constraints on movements; and lack of business skills (Alrawadieh et al., 2019; Kachkar, 2019; Refai et al., 2018; Shneikat & Alrawadieh, 2019; Wauters & Lambrecht, 2008). It also recognises the benefits refugees can obtain from entrepreneurial activities (e.g., Fong et al., 2007; Shepherd et al., 2019; Shneikat & Alrawadieh, 2019). Yet, we know very little about how refugee entrepreneurs navigate institutional voids (c.f., Heilbrunn, 2019) to engage in entrepreneurial activities that help support them and their families.

In this study, we aimed to develop an in-depth understanding of how refugee entrepreneurs navigate institutional voids in market participation in Malaysia. What we view as mostly absent from the literature on disadvantaged entrepreneurship are real-life accounts of how refugee entrepreneurs, as one specific group of disadvantaged entrepreneurs across multiple categories, cope with the constraints posed on them through agency, creativity, and resourcefulness to participate in markets. To address this omission, we employed an inductive research design because under-developed and new research topics can benefit from a rich qualitative foundation that facilitates future deductive research and is appropriate for ‘how’ research questions (Edmondson & McManus, 2007), such as ours. This approach is also consistent with recent research investigating adversity and disadvantaged entrepreneurship (e.g., Shepherd & Williams, 2014).

Our findings revealed that refugees adopted different and gendered approaches to navigate institutional voids. The women refugees in our study *anchored* toward safety by leveraging the legitimacy of market intermediaries (e.g., social ventures and refugee support organisations) to gain protection for their entrepreneurial activities and to access markets while conducting their labour at home. The men refugees in our study engaged in *harbouring* – concealing entrepreneurial activities in the local community or under others’ identities to protect income-generating opportunities. Our findings thus provide nuance and demonstrate plurality in how refugee entrepreneurs navigate institutional voids. They contribute towards a more holistic understanding of refugee entrepreneurship by linking previous insights on the challenges refugee entrepreneurs face (e.g., Alrawadieh et al., 2019; Kachkar, 2019; Wauters & Lambrecht, 2008) and the benefits they can expect (e.g., Fong et al., 2007; Shepherd et al., 2019; Shneikat & Alrawadieh, 2019). Finally, our findings provide a further understanding of refugee entrepreneurs as a specific group

of disadvantaged entrepreneurs and offer insights for development agencies, policymakers and other institutions on how to support refugees' entrepreneurial activities.

Refugee entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurs may face multiple categories of disadvantage because they belong to certain social groups related to gender (Nourin et al., 2019; Murzacheva et al., 2019), socio-economic status (Mair & Marti, 2009), refugee status (Bizri, 2017), and ethnicity (Foley & O'Connor, 2013) that lack access to entrepreneurial capital, thereby are limited in their entrepreneurial activities. Yet, the benefits of entrepreneurial activities for those who are disadvantaged in supporting sustainable development are arguably enormous, including but not limited to eradication of poverty and social inclusion (Al-Dajani et al., 2015; De Clercq & Honig, 2011; Fong et al., 2007; Mair & Marti, 2009). Consequently, it has been argued that promoting entrepreneurship among disadvantaged groups should be an important issue for policymakers globally and for local entrepreneurship ecosystems (Lee et al., 2019). In this study, we focus on a specific group of disadvantaged entrepreneurs – refugee entrepreneurs.

A refugee entrepreneur is an individual who is a refugee and whose primary source of income comes from entrepreneurial activities (Shepherd et al., 2019). As per the 1951 International Convention on the Status of Refugees (broadened by the 1967 Protocol), a refugee is defined as “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” (UNHCR, 2020).

While refugees may be considered as an integral part of the immigrant population, refugee entrepreneurs are distinct from immigrant entrepreneurs (Heilbrunn & Iannone, 2019). Immigrant

entrepreneurs are broader in capturing non-refugee immigrants, who tend to be future-oriented and who may opt to return to their home (country) once they become financially better off from entrepreneurial activity (Bizri, 2017; Wauters & Lambrecht, 2008). Refugees are involuntary immigrants who are forced to 'flee' their countries for survival and safety, unlike economic immigrants who voluntarily 'leave' their countries seeking better opportunities (Shneikat & Alrawadieh, 2019). Specific deprivation characteristics further limit refugees from entrepreneurial activities, compared to non-refugee (economic) immigrant entrepreneurs: (1) limited social network in the host country; (2) no longer possible to return to their country of origin to acquire resources; (3) experienced traumatic events which may cause psychological problems; (4) fewer opportunities to prepare for new settings due to need to flee quickly; (5) little or minimum possession of valuable things, including money and certificates of education (Wauters & Lambrecht, 2008). In summary, refugees are the most marginalised group of immigrants who are exposed to discrimination, impoverished living conditions and high rates of unemployment (Bloch, 2008, 2014).

In terms of work and employment opportunities, refugees typically do not have full access to employment opportunities similar to that of the host countries' citizens. For example, Syrian refugees in Turkey have the right to apply for a work permit, but they do not have direct access to Turkey's labour market (Kachkar, 2019). Palestine refugees have limited employment prospects in Lebanon, whereby they are prohibited from at least 19 groups of professions (ILO, 2012). Whereas refugees in Malaysia are banned from work altogether (Sreekumar, 2020). Even if refugees secure a job, they face issues related to low pay, illegal work with lack of legal protection, discrimination, exploitation, unfavourable working conditions, limited chances to promotion (Shneikat & Alrawadieh, 2019). Given these constraints, refugees often engage in entrepreneurial

activities, such as self-employment and starting microbusiness. In other words, many refugees are *pushed* into entrepreneurial activities for *survival* (Bizri, 2017; Shneikat & Alrawadieh, 2019) with potential benefits of improved livelihoods, economic self-reliance, self-efficacy, and integration in the local community, thus resulting in reduced vulnerability (Fong et al., 2007; Kachkar, 2019; Shneikat & Alrawadieh, 2019; Shepherd et al., 2019; Wauters & Lambrecht, 2008).

The disadvantaged conditions of refugee entrepreneurs are reflected in the common characteristics of their entrepreneurial activities and the challenges they face. Refugee-run enterprises, particularly in refugee camps, are often small, informal, and low-tech with little capital needed to start, such as internet cafes, hairdressing and dressmaking businesses (Kachkar, 2019). The informal and illegal (as refugees are not always allowed to register a business legally) forms of entrepreneurial activities among refugees are common (Bizri, 2017). They face multiple challenges that include but are not limited to language and communication barriers (Lyon et al., 2007), cultural challenges (Fong et al., 2007), and difficulty in navigating the institutional environments of their host countries (Refai et al., 2018; Wauters & Lambrecht, 2008). Beyond these challenges, refugee entrepreneurs can also experience more significant constraints to their entrepreneurial activities in the form of institutional voids.

Institutional voids of refugee entrepreneurship

Institutions are preconditions for markets to exist, such as property rights, governance structures, autonomy and enforcement mechanisms (Fligstein, 2001; Mair & Marti, 2009; McMillan, 2002). These arrangements make it possible for individuals who take on entrepreneurial risks and uncertainties to capture the potential wealth generated. Institutional voids occur when institutional arrangements that support market activities are absent, weak, or underdeveloped (Khanna &

Palepu, 2000; Mair & Martí, 2009). Institutional voids do not represent institutional vacuum (Bunce & Scanadi, 1992), instead they pose situations in which the present institutions that are insufficient in supporting markets (Mair et al., 2012). When institutional voids occur, individuals lack the incentives and protection to engage in entrepreneurial activities because they may not have the right to engage in these activities, may face high transaction costs and uncertainty, or lack the opportunity to capture any wealth generated.

Scholars across disciplines have focused on the impact of institutional voids on three different types of market activity: market development (e.g., Fligstein, 2001), market functioning (e.g., La Porta et al., 1998), and market participation (e.g., Mair & Martí, 2009). While political scientists (e.g., McDermott, 2002) and economists (e.g., North, 1990) consider it the role of the state to develop institutions that support market activity, research in international business and entrepreneurship has examined how actors with resources, such as business groups and firms, alone or with others, strategise to avoid, remedy, compensate, shape, and take advantage of institutional voids (e.g., Boddewyn & Doh, 2011). Indeed, this perspective portrays voids as entities to be “filled” by powerful actors who take action. However, such action is likely more difficult for those in disadvantaged positions and with lower levels of power to fill the void, such as refugees.

Refugees face multiple institutional constraints that hinder market participation through entrepreneurship and their ability to make sense of the new environments (Heilbrunn & Iannone, 2019; Khoury & Prasad, 2015). Refugees tend to have little or no tangible and intangible resources, which limits access to capital for starting entrepreneurial activities (Heilbrunn & Iannone, 2019). Appropriate entrepreneurship support schemes may be absent due to the pressure on intermediary and support organisations to focus on emergencies, relief and life-saving activities, hence lacking

resources for longer-term development and livelihood programs, such as entrepreneurship support (Kachkar, 2019). Moreover, many discouraging policies restrict refugees' movement and deprive them from the right to work or to work in specific occupations as well as the right to own property (Kachkar, 2019). These legal restrictions serve as institutional voids that deprive refugees of opportunities to formally and legally generate income through market participation. They are a reflection of the concern that refugees may overstay in the host country, which is a concern particularly strong in emerging economies (Jacobsen, 2002). Yet, refugees still reside in countries where institutional voids limit their entrepreneurial activities, such as in Malaysia. While they may lack the power and resources to address institutional voids at the macro level, they may navigate around institutional voids at the individual level to earn a living. Indeed, emerging research demonstrates refugees entrepreneurs' resilience amidst adversity (e.g., Shepherd et al., 2019) and bricolage in creating small scale markets to overcome institutional voids (Heilbrunn, 2019). While previous research has investigated how refugee entrepreneurs engage in bricolage in market creation to overcome institutional voids (Heilbrunn, 2019), our understanding of how refugee entrepreneurs navigate institutional voids in market participation is limited. Thus, our main research question is: *How do refugee entrepreneurs navigate institutional voids in market participation?*

Methods

We employed an inductive research design because it is appropriate for 'how' research questions (Edmondson & McManus, 2007), such as ours, and for under-developed and new research topics that benefit from a rich qualitative foundation. This approach is also consistent with recent research investigating adversity and disadvantaged entrepreneurship (e.g., Shepherd & Williams, 2014).

Research context

The context for our research is Malaysia. Refugees' entrepreneurial activities and experiences occur in a context of absent institutional arrangements to support their market participation as Malaysia has not acceded to the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol. In this context, refugees are not guaranteed the right to housing and legal residence, to public education, to public healthcare or other public services, to work, to official documentation for identity purposes. Their property rights, rules of exchange, and autonomy are not guaranteed, yet essential for entrepreneurial activities (Fligstein, 2001; Campbell & Lindberg, 1990; Woodruff, 1999; McMillan, 2002). Furthermore, there is no distinction between refugees, asylum-seekers, and undocumented migrants under Malaysian law, which exposes refugees to the risk of arrest, prosecution, and prolonged detention and refoulement (UNHCR, 2020c). In particular, refugees who are not registered with UNHCR are classified as 'illegal immigrants' by the Malaysian government (Floyd et al., 2015). This makes Malaysia an exemplar context (Langley & Abdallah, 2011) to study how refugee entrepreneurs navigate institutional voids in market participation.

As of February 2020, 178,990 refugees and asylum-seekers were registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (UNHCR, 2020a) in Malaysia. Among them, 86 percent are from Myanmar, in which 66 percent are Rohingyas. Other countries of origin of refugees in Malaysia include Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, Syria, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Iraq, and Palestine. In terms of gender, 68 percent of refugees are men and the rest are women. Seventy-five percent of these registered refugees are above 18 years old. These figures represent only those refugees who are formally registered with the UNHCR and the estimated population of undocumented refugees in Malaysia is between two to four million (UNHCR, 2020c).

The principal organisation concerned with refugee affairs in Malaysia is the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Its operations emphasise activities related to registration, resettlement, and humanitarian support (Floyd et al., 2015). Other organisations involved with refugee affairs in Malaysia include domestic non-profit, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which mainly work on refugee advocacy and activism; international NGOs which usually provide funding to local organisations and occasionally provide training to domestic NGOs; and community-based organizations (CBOs) which tend to be ethnic-based, focusing on educational programmes, and often act as a mediator between refugees and the UNHCR, healthcare providers, embassies, and the media (Floyd et al., 2015; Wake & Cheung, 2016). Most of the CBOs are run on a voluntary basis, thus their services may be inadequate due to poor administration and a lack of leadership, and only a few of them are consistently active (Wahab, 2018). Finally, law enforcement officers and state officials are widely accused of taking advantage of refugees' vulnerability, often resulting in harassment, arrests (International Rescue Committee, 2012) or the extortion of cash, cell phones, and other valuable possessions (Floyd et al., 2015).

The chances of refugees to gain permanent residence status or citizenship in Malaysia are almost zero (Zarkesh et al., 2017). Hence, Malaysia is merely a temporary settlement for refugees as it only allows them to stay on humanitarian grounds while waiting to be resettled or repatriated. Resettlement is a long-term process. Globally, fewer than one percent of the registered refugees with the UNHCR are resettled to a third country each year (Fishbein, 2020; UNHCR, 2020d). According to the UNHCR (2020a), only about 88,000 refugees in Malaysia have been resettled to third countries since 2005. In other words, the 'transition' period of many refugees in Malaysia could take up to 10 years, or indefinite in some cases. The survival and livelihood of the refugees who are deprived of legal employment in Malaysia, during this rather long transition period, has

long been an issue. Most refugees secure jobs illegally, which exposes them to abuse and discrimination. Working as cleaners, waiters, construction workers and other odd jobs (NST Online, 2019), partial or non-payment of wages, verbal harassment at work, on-the-job injury are common among refugees at work (International Rescue Committee, 2012). In these circumstances, refugees in Malaysia may be pushed to entrepreneurship due to necessity and survival. Because of the informal and illegal nature of refugees' businesses, no data is available on refugee entrepreneurship in Malaysia.

Data collection and sources

Before we began data collection, our intention was to conduct a study of how social ventures support refugees, thus focusing on social ventures as intermediaries. However, after starting fieldwork, it became clear that all adult refugees that the social ventures we engaged with were themselves entrepreneurial actors who actively engaged with and responded to adversity and disadvantage in different ways. Intrigued by the different dynamics and choices made by the refugees we engaged with, we concentrated on how refugee entrepreneurs navigated institutional voids in market participation.

During our fieldwork with social ventures, we encountered challenges to access refugees as research participants due to several reasons. First, because Malaysia does not officially provide support for refugees, they tend to be dispersed and 'hidden' in urban environments with limited mobility. Second, there are significant language barriers with different languages and dialects used amongst different communities of refugees; professional interpreters are not readily available and not trusted due to their identities and work commitments with official institutions, where power dynamics may be an issue. Third, we discovered that refugees had doubts about outsiders and were reluctant to share information about their lives and personal histories because of fear of how the

information might be used against them. There is also fear for their safety as they are common targets for human trafficking due to their lack of personal identification documents and lack of support from law enforcement. Indeed, for most refugees their only experience with interviews and participation in research was with the UNHCR – an activity that is highly significant for refugees and thus often a traumatic experience that affected their willingness to participate in research. Finally, the very nature of our research on entrepreneurial activities made refugees hesitant to participate because their entrepreneurial activities were often deemed illegal.

We took several steps to address these challenges. First, we relied on gatekeepers from social ventures, community centres, and other support organisations who were already trusted amongst refugee communities for introductions (e.g., Perez et al., 2013) and on community members as interpreters who were not affiliated with official institutions. Second, we aimed to build trust and rapport with informants by spending significant time in informal conversations to address questions and concerns around the research and how the data would be used in ways that would not cause harm. This was also supported by collecting only minimal personal information and allowing informants to participate without being audio recorded. Finally, all our (potential) informants were practicing Muslims. Thus, we followed strict gender-related norms related to attire, space use, seating arrangements to protect their wellbeing and build rapport. All these steps helped informants to provide revelatory accounts of their private and work lives as refugee entrepreneurs.

Fieldwork was conducted between August 2019 and January 2020 through formal and informal interviews with refugee entrepreneurs, intermediaries, and customers as well as through observations of service delivery and sales. In total, we engaged with 13 refugee entrepreneurs who had lived in Malaysia for at least several years: two from Afghanistan (women), one from Syria

(woman), one from Palestine (woman), and nine from Myanmar from the Rohingya community (men). All refugee entrepreneurs met the following criteria: 1) were officially registered with the UNHCR in Malaysia, 2) resided only in Malaysia, and 3) whose primary source of income came from “the activity of organizing, managing, and assuming the risks of business or enterprise” (Shane, 2008, p.2). These refugee entrepreneurs engaged in entrepreneurial activities in diverse sectors, such as food and beverage, accessories, education, interpretation. They all operated as solo entrepreneurs or ran micro-businesses, pushed into entrepreneurship due to necessity or compassion for others. When conducting interviews with refugee entrepreneurs, we relied on a semi-structured approach to give informants a platform for their experiences and stories. Interviews covered four broad areas: personal profile, entrepreneurial activities and challenges, engagement with intermediary organisations and institutions, as well as community engagement and participation. Interviews ranged from 40 minutes to 60 minutes, averaging 50 minutes.

Interviews were conducted either in the native language of the participants with the help of interpreters or in English depending on what the participants felt most comfortable with. When interpreters were involved, we selected native speakers whose ethnic, religious, or gender identities did not pose risks or traumatic triggers for the participants. When interpreters were involved, they were briefed on the nature of the research, the interview guide, and the dynamics of interviews. Thus, interpreters were in a position to provide additional explanations and capture nuanced meanings in the vocabulary and expression of the participants. We avoided interpreters who had previously worked with the UNHCR to minimise additional power dynamics during the interview or traumatic triggers because interactions with the UNHCR are stressful experiences with life-long consequences for refugees. Interviews conducted in native languages were translated in English by the interpreters before data analysis.

We triangulated and contextualised information by conducting interviews with nine individuals in intermediary organisations supporting refugees. We further triangulated data by observing informants' service delivery and sales as well as their interactions with customers and intermediary organisations. Finally, we conducted informal interviews with customers. Due to the often illegal nature of refugees' entrepreneurial activities, there were few resources available. Thus, we relied on extensive interviews and observations. We kept a detailed record of events, informal interviews, and observations, taking notes about content and processes, including verbatim quotes (c.f., Zilber, 2002). We asked questions for clarification and checked inferences during breaks and at the end of events or meetings. We found informants to be much more candid when talking informally than during formal interviews. We also collected archival information on refugees in Malaysia from various official and non-governmental sources, such as reports, brochures, press releases, and legal texts to contextualise the data.

All data was stored and managed using NVivo 12.

Data analysis

Our approach to data analysis followed common prescriptions for inductive qualitative data analysis (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). Data analysis started with open coding to categorise the raw data into first-order categories that served as a platform for the voices and experiences of refugee entrepreneurs and made their point of view the foundation of the analysis (Gioia et al., 2012). We coded units of meaning using simple phrases to describe the meaning of the unit (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). We engaged in constant comparison whereby each unit of meaning was compared to the previous one in the data source as well as all units within a category were compared to one another to ensure that they reflected the same experience and to refine categorical boundaries.

The first-order categories described the key elements of the participants' journeys of navigating institutional voids as refugee entrepreneurs from their own perspectives, but they did not reveal theoretical explanations and relationships. To distill themes that could serve as theoretical building blocks with explanatory value, we engaged in axial coding to consolidate first-order categories into second-order themes and dimensions, which were theoretical interpretations of the participants' lived experiences (Gioia et al., 2012). We continuously developed new themes and made changes to existing themes to reflect instances that did not fit into our themes. At this stage, we engaged in constant comparison again, this time at the level of themes to ensure they were clearly differentiated, yet captured the nuanced meaning of the first-order categories. When we created or changed themes, we re-analysed all previously analysed data based on the new set of themes.

This process resulted in 11 second-order themes that broadly captured common challenges of life in Malaysia resulting from institutional voids, types of entrepreneurial activities, types of support accessed, types of social capital leveraged, and challenges emerging from entrepreneurial activities in institutional voids. While the initial difficulties experienced were similar across all refugee entrepreneurs, we noticed differences in the other second-order themes between the participants. These differences helped us to identify two different approaches of how refugee entrepreneurs navigate institutional voids – anchoring and harbouring. Thus, two of our aggregated theoretical dimensions (i.e., anchoring approach and harbouring approach) did not consolidate second-order themes of the same construct (e.g., social capital that could consolidate bridging and bonding social capital). Instead, the aggregated theoretical dimensions consolidated second-order themes across constructs based on how they reflected the patterns enacted by the participants engaged in the phenomenon (e.g., bridging social capital and intermediary-facilitated

entrepreneurial activities). The relationships between first-order categories, second-order themes and aggregated theoretical dimensions can be seen in Figure 1.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

In the next section, we describe the two identified approaches. We start with the common challenges experienced by refugees in Malaysia resulting from institutional voids that push refugees toward entrepreneurial activities. Next, we describe each approach by differentiating them across the four aspects: type of entrepreneurial activities, type of support accessed, type of social capital leveraged, and challenges emerging from entrepreneurial activities in institutional voids. A visual representation of our findings is presented in Figure 2.

Findings

The refugee entrepreneurs in our study experienced intersecting conditions of disadvantage due to institutional voids that limited their market participation. These disadvantages put their lives at risk and thus simultaneously pushed refugees into and hindered entrepreneurial activities. In the absence of rights to work and generate income legally, the participants in our study lived in deprivation which introduced multi-dimensional resource scarcity. This included limited financial resources whereby participants often could not afford to cover expenses. Their situation could easily worsen if any urgent expenses appeared, such as the need for healthcare, particularly when lacking insurance, as explained by Rohingya entrepreneur #1, who founded a community centre:

I mean this is not something I should be proud of, we don't even have health insurance, [we] don't have health insurance because international health insurance costs around 1,500 to 1,800 dollars [Ringgit Malaysia, approximately 350 to 420 USD].

Deprivation, as separate from legal access, further limited market participation because it influenced the types of activities refugees could engage with and whether they could even connect with customers. For example, one of our Afghani participants shared the challenges of receiving orders from customers: *“because back then my financial situation wasn’t good, I didn’t have a phone, so I couldn’t receive a call from them”* (Afghani entrepreneur #2). The other Afghani entrepreneur shared how deprivation made certain orders impossible to take: *“because the distance is really far, there isn’t enough money, half or most of the money is the cost of the transportation”* (Afghani entrepreneur #1).

Many refugee entrepreneurs also experienced challenges related to lack of access to education and language barriers, enhancing the limitations of market participation. Many left their countries with no chance to keep their education certificates thus were not recognised for their skills and expertise in Malaysia. Moreover, they lacked access to public education in Malaysia, or could not afford the expensive private school fees. These language barriers and limited education increased refugees’ vulnerability by shaping their confidence and access to interactions with support organisations, institutions, and law enforcement officers. They also limited market participation by shaping interactions with business stakeholders. For example, Afghani entrepreneur #1 shared:

They said something, and I didn’t understand, I made my own assumption and went home.

They had [actually] told me to take the sewing machine, take it home if I could do the work. I didn’t understand that, which I could have actually done the work.

The purposefully created institutional void limiting market participation by refugees also created conditions for active harassment by law enforcement officials which increased the refugee entrepreneurs’ vulnerability in relation to financial and emotional risks. Not only did they lack

protection, but they were actively harassed by law enforcement officers who demanded bribes to keep their operations open or not be locked up. Indeed, multiple participants shared that the “average rate” of bribes was MYR1500 (approximately USD420), which was approximately equivalent to their monthly income. Because these abusive behaviours were not regulated by the system, but dependent on individual law enforcement officers, they created uncertainty and a cognitive burden beyond the financial setback of an individual bribe. This uncertainty limited the mobility and market participation of the refugees. To remain safe, they avoided certain places, such as specific markets, avoided going too far, avoided going to new places alone. The experienced uncertainty also limited their long-term planning concerning entrepreneurial activities, as explained by a worker in the Rohingya community centre:

They have no idea if they will be here tomorrow, in one week? or in one year? So it's difficult to make plans and to think in the long term [...] they won't travel too far, there are a lot of police raids. Even when leaving in the morning, they're not sure [if] they're able to go home at night.

Despite institutional voids designed to limit their market participation, the refugees in our study were engaging in entrepreneurial activities in order to generate income for livelihood. However, they engaged in two different approaches to navigating the institutional voids that shaped their entrepreneurial activities. These two approaches are anchoring and harbouring, which we present next.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

Anchoring approach to navigate institutional voids

One of the approaches the refugee entrepreneurs used to navigate institutional voids was *anchoring* toward safety by leveraging the legitimacy of market intermediaries to gain protection for their

entrepreneurial activities and access markets, while conducting their labour at home. The entrepreneurs in our study who used this approach were the women refugees from Afghanistan, Palestine, and Syria. Their entrepreneurial activities included food and beverage preparation, hosting unique food-related experiences in their homes, as well as making clothes, jewellery, and accessories. All these activities were home-based and relied on the skills that the women already had. However, they did not recognise these opportunities alone nor pursued them on their own. Instead, the opportunities to sell authentic Middle Eastern food to companies or to sell high-end jewellery to tourists were recognised by social ventures and other market intermediaries that then involved refugees as business partners supplying the products on offer. In these cases, the social ventures developed novel business models to support refugees by leveraging a loophole in legislation: refugees cannot be employed by existing organisations nor register their own organisation, but they can be sub-contracted as freelancers.

By engaging in entrepreneurial activities as sub-contractors for social ventures and other market intermediaries started by locals, the refugee entrepreneurs generated income for their families: *“I am not asking for help but we want to work and receive money in return for our work so that we can solve our family’s problems and our financial problems.”* (Afghani entrepreneur #2), while also gaining protection and minimising the risks of abuse and harassment: *“the money is better, and the place is safer. When I bring the work, the same minute they give me my money, it sits well with my heart.”* (Afghani entrepreneur #1).

By engaging with social ventures and market intermediaries, refugee entrepreneurs who adopted the anchoring approach also accessed specific types of support for their entrepreneurial activities that made access to mainstream markets easier. The organisations they supplied for carried most of the design, development, packaging, and distribution responsibilities. The

organisations provided access to markets, thus reducing the need for refugee entrepreneurs to expose themselves to gain transactions. For example, the Afghani entrepreneurs produced jewellery and accessories, which are then packaged, advertised, sold, and shipped by the social venture. While the refugee entrepreneurs generally followed the designs and templates established by the social ventures, they also proposed their own ideas for products. For instance, the Palestine and Syrian refugees developed the core elements of their menus that were sold by the social venture. Meanwhile, Afghani entrepreneur #1 proposed a new product that was later developed by the social venture and produced by its many refugee suppliers.

Refugee entrepreneurs who adopted the anchoring approach benefited from the legitimacy of the social ventures they supplied products for. They benefited from the legitimacy of the social ventures that came from being visible in mainstream society and being legally registered. Essential in this process was quality control to ensure meeting the demands and formal requirements of the mainstream market, as explained by the founder of the social venture supporting the entrepreneurs from Palestine and Syria:

We put in a lot of procedures to make sure that families cook great food, and consistently as well, with quality and hygiene. So we put in procedures, like getting typhoid injections, getting food handling certification, rating their kitchens, doing spot checks, making sure that they attend kitchen training.

Quality control procedures were also evident in the other industries, not just in food and beverage. For example, the Afghani entrepreneurs who produced jewellery and accessories had each item inspected and potentially returned if it did not meet the criteria of the social venture. Such quality control processes were seen as addressing the stigma refugees faced, as an employee

in one of the social ventures explained: *“on the customer end it is ‘How do I trust this?’. You know the food comes from this kitchen, so how do I empower this kitchen to gain more trust from people.”*

By engaging with social ventures and market intermediaries, refugee entrepreneurs leveraged and enhanced their bridging social capital. Through interactions with those social ventures and their customers, the refugee entrepreneurs developed relationships with members of mainstream Malaysian society, outside of their networks. These relationships, in turn, provided support beyond the refugees’ entrepreneurial activities, such as identifying affordable healthcare providers, recommendations for schools, donations of books and supplies for children. For example, the Palestinian and Syrian entrepreneurs had regular dinners with the members of the social venture that they supply products for, while one of the Afghani entrepreneurs hiked as a leisurely activity with one of the social venture’s members.

While the anchoring approach enabled market access and legitimacy for refugee entrepreneurs, thus enhancing their income-earning opportunities, it also introduced unique challenges that shifted the risks from the ‘outside world’ to the refugees’ homes. Home-based entrepreneurial activities were seen as reducing the abuse and harassment risks that refugee entrepreneurs experienced outside of the home. However, these activities could also bring risks to home in two different ways. First, the anchoring approach, which was adopted only by women refugee entrepreneurs in our study, challenged traditional gender norms, which might put them at risk. To illustrate, Afghani entrepreneur #1 shared: *“Now he [her husband] gets money from me, before I got money from him but now when he has something to do, he asks me ‘Can I have MYR20 (approximately 4.5USD) so that I can go to this place?’”* as her husband could secure only a few days of work a month. Thus, women refugees became the primary earners in their families whereby *“[Some] husbands don’t respond well, and it can lead to conflict and abuse”* as explained by the

founder of one of the social ventures. Second, certain entrepreneurial activities required interactions with customers in the homes of the refugees, thus disclosing the identities and locations of refugees and turning them into easier targets for human trafficking given the lack of protection they faced.

While the anchoring approach reduced the need to be outside of the home and thus the risk of encountering law enforcement officers, it created a different type of uncertainty for the refugees: uncertainty if they would have work and how to plan their work. The refugee entrepreneurs who adopted the anchoring approach relied on social ventures for market access and orders, but they experienced unpredictability: *“The work isn’t consistent, maybe I will be without work for three months or four months. Last year it went up to five months, that was a lot; it was too long”* (Afghani entrepreneur #1). This unpredictability was explained by the member of one of the social ventures: *“because so far we have 226 artisans, but unfortunately, we cannot give [work] to [all] artisans everyday because we don’t have enough orders”*. While different from the uncertainty of encountering law enforcement officers, this uncertainty had an effect on the refugee entrepreneurs’ planning: *“I cannot go and get another work”* (Afghani entrepreneur #1) because of potential overload and inability to deliver all work taken.

Harbouring approach to navigate institutional voids

The other approach refugee entrepreneurs used to navigate institutional voids was *harbouring* – concealing informal entrepreneurial activities in the local community or under others’ identities to protect the self. With this approach, refugee entrepreneurs leveraged bonding social capital within their ethnic communities or strong levels of trust with select locals to hide entrepreneurial activities from law enforcement. The entrepreneurs in our study who used this approach were men refugees from the Rohingya community. Their entrepreneurial activities included offering food and

beverages, repairs, manual labour, interpretation, as well as providing education and community support, which were all conducted in public spaces. However, they recognised and pursued these opportunities on their own because these activities were seen as the only option for survival. As explained by Rohingya entrepreneur #3: *“Most of the people work even though they do not have the right to work, they are doing it for their survival, like collecting trash, recycling things or selling vegetables and so on.”*

To engage in such entrepreneurial activities and conceal them from law enforcement officers, the refugee entrepreneurs adopting the harbouring approach relied on bonding social capital with high levels of trust. This bonding social capital reflected both the trust within the Rohingya community in Malaysia and the strength of relationships that existed from the homeland. The strong ties between people from the same village could even stretch across generations, such as the relationship between the fathers of Rohingya entrepreneur #1 and Rohingya entrepreneur #2 in Myanmar, which seeded their collaboration in initiating an enterprise together in Malaysia. All participants shared that they found customers through their close co-ethnic networks and all of them worked in places where other members of the Rohingya community worked, such as a specific wholesale market, which in turn attracted more attention from law enforcement officers who conducted frequent raids. As Rohingya entrepreneur #3 shared: *“I’m meeting my friends from the same village and the relatives. It is our own people, not other communities. I’m working for my own people.”* Bonding social capital also included trusting relationships with selected locals who agreed to register the refugees’ businesses under their names. Indeed, during interviews with those who engaged in the harbouring approach, we were repeatedly told that everything in the life of a refugee entrepreneur was based on trust - trust in networks to find customers and work

together, trust in networks to be notified of raids, trust in a local who can register a business and not claim ownership.

The bonding social capital leveraged by the refugee entrepreneurs who adopted the harbouring approach also played a role in the types of support they accessed. These entrepreneurs sought support that enabled them to conceal their entrepreneurial activities. On one hand, some of the refugee entrepreneurs did not register their entrepreneurial activities and conducted business informally. To conceal their activities, they relied on WhatsApp groups and strong bonding social capital from the Rohingya community to notify them of raids and risks, so they could hide and minimise exposure when warned. On the other hand, some registered their businesses and obtained all the licences required for conducting their work openly “*so that we can stand on our own and we can have a durable solution for our survival*” (Rohingya entrepreneur #1). However, these businesses were registered under the name of a ‘trusted’ local person, who in some cases was incentivised by profit sharing without any contributions. To further protect themselves and their entrepreneurial activities, the refugee entrepreneurs who adopted the harbouring approach also sought language and computer skills training. They accessed the training through classes in a community centre or by teaching each other informally. They considered language and computer skills as essential to protect and conceal their entrepreneurial activities because they enabled navigating the system. By improving their language and computer skills, they could access support from NGOs in terms of how to start and manage entrepreneurial activities that were considered “safe” or at least less visible, as shared by Rohingya entrepreneur #1: “*to get into businesses that are relatively safe or do some research on the business*”. Rohingya entrepreneur #3 further explained the benefits of these skills:

They [the NGOs] have plans and booklets and training on how to set off and what to do. Also, some of the volunteers come; they share their skills. [...] because of having some basic computer skills and English skills, I can cope with the training provided by the NGOs.

While the harbouring approach enabled refugee entrepreneurs to pursue their activities in public under concealment, thus enhancing their income-earning opportunities, it did not offer protection. Indeed, it introduced an urgent need for protection: whom refugee entrepreneurs needed to protect themselves from and who needed to be protected by them. Refugee entrepreneurs who relied on a local in registering their businesses needed to protect themselves from their “trusted” local partner because “*next day they can say it’s mine, it’s gone, all finished.*” (Rohingya entrepreneur #1) or demand all profits. For example, a refugee entrepreneur lost his grocery store that was under the name and license of a local person based on trust after the “trusted” partner took over the successful business. In such cases, refugee entrepreneurs had no legal rights to prevent such situations or to protect their businesses because their illegal work could be reported to law enforcement officers by their “trusted” partners. Beyond the challenge to protect themselves and their businesses from “trusted” partners, refugee entrepreneurs who adopted the harbouring approach were also concerned with protecting their communities. Because entrepreneurs who adopted this approach relied on the ethnic community for customers, for collaborations, and for general support, their businesses tended to be the target for law enforcement raids whereby anyone who was not registered as a refugee could be arrested. The refugee entrepreneurs were concerned that their entrepreneurial activities could put their community members at risk. This challenge was explained by Rohingya entrepreneur #1:

Everyday I'm nervous here myself. Even if they [law enforcement officers] cannot do anything to [name of company] as a company because it is legally protected [registered], they might come and arrest people here. Come after people here and ask to see the UN card. And what if they say "I don't have to check it [here]. Come with me to the police station." That will be the last day of [name of company] as people are not going to come back once the police come.

Discussion

Our findings showcase the value of conducting research with refugee entrepreneurs as a specific group of disadvantaged entrepreneurs, instead of applying insights from broader research on disadvantaged entrepreneurship or immigrant entrepreneurship that may not accurately capture the experiences of refugees. Overall, our study contributes to a more holistic understanding of the experiences of refugee entrepreneurs by complementing previous research that has focused on the challenges (e.g., Alrawadieh et al., 2019; Kachkar, 2019; Wauters & Lambrecht, 2008) and the benefits they can obtain from entrepreneurial activities (e.g., Fong et al., 2007; Shepherd, Saade & Wincent, 2019; Shneikat & Alrawadieh, 2019). Our findings have several implications for research on and support for refugee entrepreneurship.

First, our findings demonstrate the plurality of how refugee entrepreneurs face hardship and adversity. Instead of assuming a one-size-fits-all approach, our findings show that while refugee entrepreneurs face similar challenges merely by their status as refugees and the institutional voids imposed on them, they adopt (at least) two different approaches to conduct different types of entrepreneurial activities in institutional voids, to access different types of support, and to leverage different types of social capital. However, these approaches also shape

the type of challenges they experience further down in their entrepreneurial journeys and affect the risks they face. For example, the refugees who adopted the anchoring approach encountered irregularity in income and the personal risk of conducting entrepreneurial activities at home; whereas the refugees who adopted the harbouring approach, encountered high risk of detainment by law enforcement officers, to lose valuables due to extortion or robbery, or to be let down by their business partners.

Overall, these different approaches in how refugee entrepreneurs navigate institutional voids in market participation matter for research on refugee entrepreneurship and on institutional voids. On the one hand, by focusing on market participation our findings add to the existing refugee entrepreneurship research which has explicated refugee entrepreneurs' activities in market creation (Heilbrunn, 2019). On the other hand, these findings matter for the broader research on how actors with disadvantages and limited power overcome institutional voids. This stream of research is still emerging and research on how actors engage with institutional voids has focused predominantly on those with power, such as states and business groups (e.g., Boddewyn & Doh, 2011). The emerging research on actors with limited power has so far revealed how these actors enact bricolage to overcome institutional voids in relation to market participation and market building (e.g., Mair et al., 2012; Heilbrunn, 2019). In moving beyond bricolage, our findings demonstrate heterogeneity between disadvantaged actors. Future research can build on these findings and investigate how refugee entrepreneurs navigate institutional voids in relation to market functioning through different types of activities, beyond bricolage.

Our findings also show the effects of both formal and informal institutions and their interactions as elements of entrepreneurial ecosystems on refugees in Malaysia. Formal institutions in Malaysia, such as the rule of the law and property rights, are purposefully designed to limit

refugees from market participation, thus hindering protection and livelihood opportunities. However, informal institutions, such as social norms and values, also hindered market participation for the refugees. Similar to Wauters and Lambrecht's (2008) observation, the refugee entrepreneurs in our study had difficulties in reaching potential clients due to prejudice regarding the quality of their products and stigma around refugees. Thus, both formal and informal institutions limited market participation for refugees.

These interactions between formal and informal institutions are further amplified by the approaches of refugees in navigating institutional voids. Refugees who adopted the anchoring approach, accessed support from organisations, such as social ventures and market intermediaries, that had legitimacy and were supported by formal institutions. However, refugees who adopted the harbouring approach leveraged informal institutions, particularly trust, to access markets, to stay safe, to gain skills and knowledge. However, it is worth noting that refugees may find it difficult to leverage and access host country informal institutions due to the stigma they experience and cultural differences, thus limiting interactions with mainstream society and enhancing reliance on co-ethnic trust. The reliance on co-ethnic trust is in line with Alrawadieh et al.'s (2019) observation, however, our findings also show the importance of particularised trust outside of co-ethnic communities. The refugees who adopted the harbouring approach relied on the trusted individual(s) for their business, which both enabled their entrepreneurial activities and posed a high risk of losing ownership or profits at the same time. Thus, while informal institutions may enable refugees' entrepreneurial activities in and around institutional voids, they are not a panacea and indeed can create negative outcomes. Future research on exactly how formal and informal institutions affect refugee entrepreneurship is thus required. Explicating the diverse interactions between formal and informal institutions and acknowledging the diversity of informal institutions

(e.g., social capital, different types of trust, stigma) would be highly beneficial in enhancing our understanding of how institutions influence the experiences of refugee entrepreneurs.

Our findings also reveal an important gender element whereby the women and men refugees engaged in different types of entrepreneurial activities and accessed different types of support. Women and men also differed in terms of where their entrepreneurial activities took place. While the women refugees tended to engage in entrepreneurial activities inside their homes (anchoring approach), the men refugees engaged in entrepreneurial activities away from home in the public sphere (harbouring approach). In line with previous research which reveals that overall women occupy a disadvantaged position in entrepreneurial activity (Essers et al., 2010; Murzacheva et al., 2019), our findings also provide initial insights into how this disadvantaged position intersects with refugee status. While gender emerged in the analysis, instead of driving this research, these findings call for more research on how gender and refugee status intersect to shape women refugees' entrepreneurial activities, which will also be valuable for support schemes. Indeed, an intersectionality perspective on entrepreneurship is still only emerging (e.g., Murzacheva et al., 2019; Tlaiss, 2019) and future entrepreneurship research can further explore how gender intersects with other disadvantaged categories, such as socio-economic status, religion, age, etc. This further highlights our previous suggestion for future research to investigate differences between refugees and conceptualise refugee entrepreneurship as a heterogeneous phenomenon.

Practical Implications

Our findings raise a significant concern about the protection of refugee entrepreneurs. Given that the regulations concerning refugees in Malaysia and in other countries that are not signatories of

the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol are unlikely to change anytime soon, international and local NGOs, social ventures, and refugee support organisations need to consider the mechanisms that can best protect refugees specifically when engaged in entrepreneurial activities that present different types of risks. Particularly, given social ventures' well documented collaborative and multistakeholder nature (e.g., White et al., 2018; Branzei et al., 2018), they may play a key role in developing such mechanisms for protection. For example, social ventures can collaborate with relevant institutions to conduct in house training for their sub-contractors and freelancers, thus increasing the knowledge and skills of refugees. This will, in turn increase refugees' overall confidence to interact with local communities, to advocate for themselves when facing harassment, and to seek support for their entrepreneurial activities.

Beyond general support programmes, social ventures, CBOs, and NGOs may work together to identify and tailor make entrepreneurship support programmes that target specifically facilitation of entrepreneurial activities among refugees. For example, sales and marketing training, conducting business through online platforms, etc. may support refugee entrepreneurs in increasing business transactions and exposure to more income-generating opportunities.

Next, our findings show that men and women refugee entrepreneurs access support and networks differently and subsequently encounter different risks. This suggests that social ventures and refugee support organisations may take into account the needs and potential risks of women and men refugees while encouraging entrepreneurial activities among all. It is important to ensure that the relevant entrepreneurial activities are in accordance with the social norms and values of different refugee communities, but at the same time ensuring that women refugees are continuously disadvantaged or subject to abuse because of gendered values.

To address the issue of negative perceptions and prejudice towards refugees and their entrepreneurial activities in the host country, various institutions may come together to initiate public campaigns in combating negative perceptions of refugees, which would be an essential step towards facilitating refugee entrepreneurship. According to Embiricos (2020, p. 260), “the idealized figure of refugees as entrepreneurs can act as a discursive tool to counteract anti-refugee sentiment by providing an alternative narrative of refugees who go beyond contributing to host societies to create and innovate.” Changing how refugees are perceived could help changing attitudes, behaviours and support of local society towards refugee entrepreneurship.

Limitations and future research

Our study is not without its limitations, which may open the horizon for new research. First, due to the inductive nature of our study, the findings should be interpreted as the outcome of the particular study and setting of refugee entrepreneurs in Malaysia, which implies a specific set of formal and informal institutions. Further research that involves a detailed comparative analysis of various contexts and legal frameworks could provide a deeper understanding of institutional voids and how refugees in different contexts navigate institutional voids in market development, functioning, and participation. Second, the sample size of this study was small and restricted to only the Rohingya refugees for men participants. Although the small sample is complemented with other sources to triangulate and contextualise the interview data, future research with more heterogeneous samples can provide further nuance in how refugee entrepreneurs navigate institutional voids in market participation.

Conclusion

Overall, this study contributes to a more holistic understanding of refugee entrepreneurship as a form of disadvantaged entrepreneurship and as a heterogeneous phenomenon. It demonstrates the plurality of how refugees navigate institutional voids to engage in entrepreneurial activities as a source of livelihood. These insights are of significant relevance to refugee studies and disadvantaged entrepreneurship research because they demonstrate the taken-for-granted significance of institutions in enabling and constraining entrepreneurial activities. Such insights can also be relevant for policymakers and support organisations, such as social ventures and NGOs, because they shape the context in which refugees work and thus can develop relevant and effective interventions to support refugee entrepreneurship.

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FIGURE 1
Data Structure

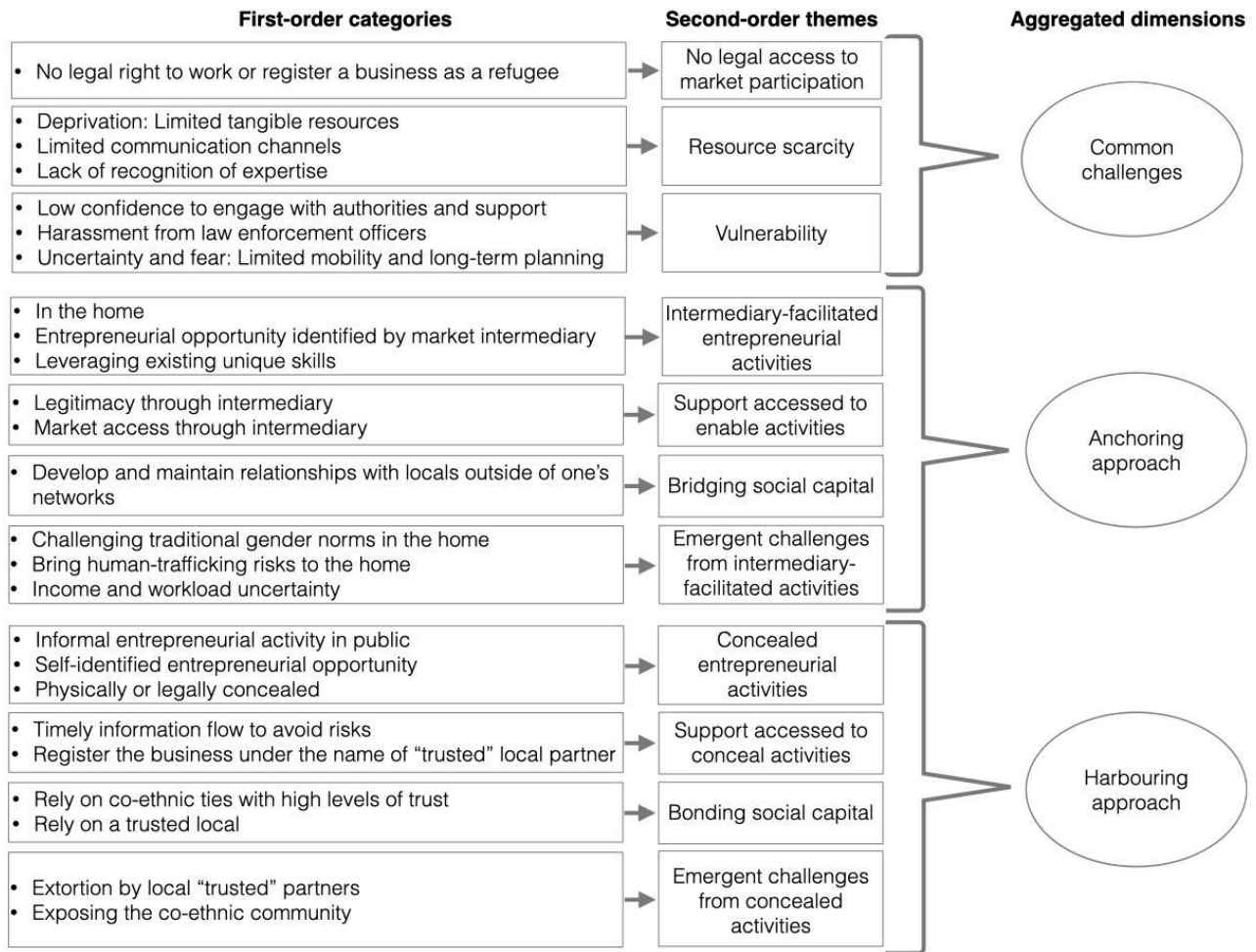


FIGURE 2

A model of navigating institutional voids in market participation

