

# Unveiling the *Canvas Ceiling*: A Multidisciplinary Literature Review of Refugee Employment and Workforce Integration

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**Increasing levels of displacement and the need to integrate refugees in the workforce pose new challenges to organizations and societies. Extant research on refugee employment and workforce integration currently resides across various disconnected disciplines, posing a significant challenge for management scholars to contribute to timely and relevant solutions. In this paper, we endeavour to address this challenge by reviewing and synthesizing multidisciplinary literature on refugee employment and workforce integration. Using a relational framework, we organize our findings around three levels of analysis – institutional, organizational and individual – to outline the complexity of factors affecting refugees’ employment outcomes. Based on our analysis, we introduce and elaborate on the phenomenon of the *canvas ceiling* – a systemic, multilevel barrier to refugee workforce integration and professional advancement. The primary contributions of this paper are twofold. First, we map and integrate the multidisciplinary findings on the challenges of refugee workforce integration. Second, we provide management scholarship with a future research agenda to address the knowledge gap identified in this review and advance practical developments in this domain.**

## Introduction

Scholars and practitioners alike increasingly recognize the importance of socially responsible business practices and inclusive workplaces (see George *et al.* 2016; Shore *et al.* 2018). This recognition includes greater attention to the integration of various marginalized groups into the workforce (e.g. Moeller and Maley 2018). Despite these commendable developments, refugees are often left out of such discussions. This is surprising since the challenges of the humanitarian crisis occupy media headlines across the world. At the end of 2018, the world’s refugee population was over 25.9 million, the highest figure since the inception of the UNHCR in 1950 (UNHCR 2019).

While integrating refugees into the workforce is challenging, it is one of the most critical steps in the overall integration of refugees into the receiving society (Feeney 2000). Existing research shows that many refugees are unemployed (Mikhael and Norman 2018), under-employed (Krahn *et al.* 2000; Vinokurov *et al.* 2017), under-paid (Carlsson and Rooth 2016; Yu *et al.* 2007), working in the informal economy (Crush *et al.* 2017a), or dependent on public assistance (Hansen and Lofstrom 2009). Research indicates that refugees are precluded from finding employment commensurate with their experience and expertise (Junankar and Mahuteau 2005; Krahn *et al.* 2000; Mahuteau and Junankar 2008).

Despite urgent calls to study the inclusion of refugees into the mainstream workforce (Barak 2016) and repeated calls for management scholars

to address the opportunities and challenges of global migration (Buckley *et al.* 2017; Kornberger *et al.* 2018), prior research points to particular challenges in studying refugee employment issues. First, relevant theorizing and effective strategies for refugee workforce integration require an in-depth understanding of the distinctive nature of this group (Szkudlarek *et al.* 2019). Unlike skilled migrants and expatriates who choose to relocate for professional reasons (Crowley-Henry and Al Ariss 2018; Guo and Al Ariss 2015), refugees are forced to flee their home countries, and their admission into a new society is not based on a match between their skills and the needs of the job market (Kaabel 2018; Malkki 1995). The refugee experience, therefore, differs considerably from that of other expatriate and migrant groups, with many refugees encountering an array of legal, socio-economic, psychological and physiological challenges that negatively impact their workforce integration and job performance (e.g. Agbényiga *et al.* 2012; Bevelander and Lundh 2007). Second, refugee research is fragmented by a myriad of disciplinary silos. Such fragmentation poses significant hurdles for management scholars in conducting informed research that builds on existing knowledge and adequately utilizes work in other disciplines. These interrelated findings across various disciplines point towards the need to review and systematize the multidisciplinary insights on refugee employment in order to propose insightful research designs and provide relevant solutions.

With the above in mind, in this review we aim to address the following research question: What are the factors impeding refugee workforce integration? Developing a clearer and more comprehensive understanding of the factors hindering refugee workforce integration, we identify numerous implications for management scholarship that will stimulate future research with the aim of finding workable solutions. The main objectives of this paper are therefore twofold: first, to review and map out studies from various disciplines, including ethnic and migration studies, management, social work, sociology, psychology and political science; and second, to elaborate on future research directions for management scholarship to guide well-informed and relevant research in this domain.

Based on our review, we develop the concept of the *canvas ceiling* to denote the multilevel system of barriers distinctive to refugees' struggle in their quest for workforce integration. The *canvas ceiling* represents the combination of latent structural and cultural

nuances that negatively impact refugees' access to commensurate employment and consequent professional advancement, thereby perpetuating workforce inequality. The notion of the *canvas* derives from the temporary shelters made of canvas in which many refugees stay. Unlike the glass (cf. Cotter *et al.* 2001) and bamboo ceilings (cf. Hyun 2012), which predominantly impede minorities' career opportunities within an organization, the *canvas ceiling* encompasses institutional-, organizational- and individual-level challenges that refugees encounter in accessing and advancing quality employment within the receiving society. The concept of the *canvas ceiling* thus brings to the surface the interrelated multilevel complexities of refugee workforce integration highlighted in this review.

We begin by clarifying the terminology around refugee integration and describing the methods used in this review. Before mapping the research terrain, we set the scene by describing the current status of the literature on refugee workforce integration. We then present the multidisciplinary findings using a relational framework across three levels of analysis – institutional, organizational and individual – followed by a discussion of implications and a future research agenda.

## Refugees and refugee integration terminology

Research on refugees spans multiple fields of scholarship (Voutira and Doná 2007), resulting in varying definitions and overlapping concepts. Most fields apply the 1951 UN Convention definition of a refugee, as a person who has fled from the home country crossing international borders because of a well-founded fear of persecution (Shiferaw and Hagos 2002), or the 1969 OAU Convention definition, which extends the inclusion criteria to those linked to 'external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order' (Arboleda 1991, p. 194). Legal scholars, however, suggest that these definitions are outdated, partial and circumscribed (Doyle 2008; Moldovan 2016; Shacknove 1985; Vaughns 1998) because they fail to capture specific situations facing refugees (e.g. environmental refugees displaced by climate change) in contemporary international socio-political and environmental contexts (Moldovan 2016; Rankin 2005; Wood 2014). Moreover, despite adopting international definitions, individual nations design

widely varying immigration mechanisms and visa application procedures that are diverse in the way they define and grant protection to refugees (Doyle 2008; Miranda 1990; Moldovan 2016; Shacknové 1985; Vaughns 1998). These definitions often reflect a country's current socio-political interests (Kaabel 2018). Furthermore, inconsistent definitions of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants may exist even within a country (see Baker *et al.* 2008 for a discussion of definitional discrepancy in the UK). Therefore, for the purpose of this review, we adopt an overarching definition of *refugees* as individuals, regardless of their legal status, who have fled their home country to seek protection and security in another country, and cannot safely return due to a well-founded fear of the prevailing circumstances in their country of origin.

Researchers investigating the process of refugee integration rely on several related concepts, including resettlement, settlement and integration, to explore the process by which refugees rebuild their lives in the receiving country. We define refugee *resettlement* as an organized process of selection, transfer and arrival of individuals to another country (see Valtonen 2004). We acknowledge that this definition is restrictive, as it does not account for the increasing prevalence of unmanaged migration processes. Consequently, we propose the term refugee *relocation* to refer to a non-organized process of individual transfer to another country.

We use the term refugee *settlement* to refer to the process of basic adjustment to life – often in the early stages of transition to the new country – including securing access to housing, education, healthcare, documentation and legal rights (see Valtonen 2016). Employment is sometimes included in this process, but the focus is generally on short-term survival needs rather than long-term career planning.

For the purpose of this review, we define refugee *integration* as a dynamic, long-term process in which a newcomer becomes a full and equal participant in the receiving society (cf. Valtonen 2016). Compared to the general construct of settlement, refugee integration has a greater focus on social, cultural and structural dimensions. This process includes the acquisition of legal rights, mastering the language and culture, reaching safety and stability, developing social connections and establishing the means and markers of integration, such as employment, housing and health (see Puma *et al.* 2018; Strang and Ager 2010).

Research indicates that refugee life satisfaction depends largely on job and financial contentment (Colic-Peisker 2009). A high level of workforce integration is associated with gaining a stable, usually permanent and full-time, job and adequately remunerated employment that closely fits refugees' level of skill endowments (Schmitt 2012), thereby providing adequate economic security. Accordingly, in this review, *refugee workforce integration* is understood to be a process in which refugees engage in economic activities (employment or self-employment) which are commensurate with individuals' professional goals and previous qualifications and experience, and provide adequate economic security and prospects for career advancement.

## Methods

In order to identify factors impeding refugee workforce integration, our review had to span multiple disciplines, including ethnic and migration studies, social work, sociology, psychology and political science. We began with a systematic approach to identify key articles from these disciplines, searching on Web of Science and Scopus with keywords such as refugee employ\* (AND integration). We identified 58 articles of relevance. We then applied a snowballing method from these articles, following references cited and citations to these articles until no new relevant articles were identified. Our initial review of these articles revealed an array of overlapping concepts and terminologies that were applied across various fields (e.g. job, employment, occupation, career). These terminologies were used to refer to various stages of employment ranging from preparation and job-seeking to career advancement and promotions. We identified 150 journal articles, seven working papers, three dissertations and 11 edited books or book sections discussing workforce integration of refugees, published between 1982 and 2019. Of these 171 sources, 147 publications focus on specific receiving countries – 121 in developed countries, 20 in developing economies and six in both developed and developing countries. The remaining 24 publications discuss the receiving economies in general, without reference to a specific country.

In mapping out the findings of the terrain sitting across multiple disciplines, we used the relational framework to capture the embedded nature of the phenomenon of refugee workforce integration. A

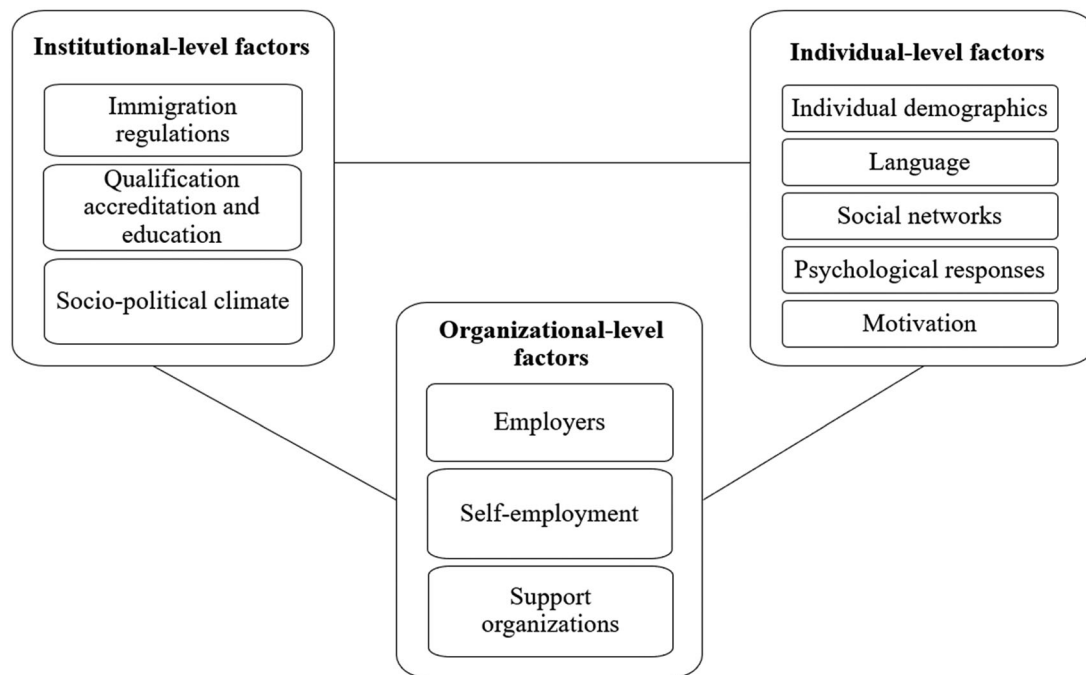


Figure 1. Factors influencing refugee workforce integration

relational framework (Al Ariss and Syed 2011; Hakak and Al Ariss 2013; Syed 2008; Syed and Özbilgin 2009), widely used in the context of diversity management and migrant employment-related issues, ‘transcends the disciplinary and methodological demarcations . . . that usually characterize migrant research’ (Syed 2008, p. 31). Application of a relational framework enables us to map the findings of extant research spanning various theoretical domains and using diversified methodological approaches. Additionally, this approach allows us to recognize the related and interdependent effects of various factors on refugee workforce integration. More specifically, instead of isolating and privileging any given level of analysis, the relational approach assumes their interplay and compound contribution to the investigated phenomena (Syed and Özbilgin 2009). We follow previous work in this domain (e.g. Al Ariss *et al.* 2012; Ali *et al.* 2017; Crowley-Henry *et al.* 2018; Fosslund 2013) and map our findings across three levels of analysis: institutional, organizational and individual (see Figure 1). We recognize that our partition of findings across levels is arbitrary at times, due to the compound and interrelated effects of various constructs on refugee employment outcomes. In the discussion section, we elaborate in more depth on the interplay across the levels of analysis.

## Setting the scene for the review

We start by noting that the refugee crisis in general, and refugee workforce integration in particular, are at the core of what at times are heated socio-political debates across the globe (see e.g. Cooper *et al.* 2017 for an analysis of the Australian media discourse and Francis 2015 for a study on the Jordanian public’s sentiment towards refugees). While many societies are committed to hosting refugees and highlight the cultural, social and economic value that this particular migrant group can bring to their countries (Bach *et al.* 2017), others are vehemently opposed, arguing that refugees pose security, economic and social threats to the receiving countries (Campbell and Oucho 2003; Masenya 2017; Özbek 2018). The fear-driven rhetoric is widespread in public debate and the media (Esses *et al.* 2013), as well as actively used in election campaigns (see e.g. Gale 2004 for an example case of 2001 Australian election campaigns and media coverage, during which it was argued that Australian border protection was at risk due to increased acceptance of refugees). Without a doubt, these socio-political debates influence diverse responses to the refugee crisis at institutional, organizational and individual levels, as well as have implications for research in this domain (McGahan 2019). In this sense, as researchers

of refugee-related issues, we are part of this debate, and as such, we make our stance explicit to inform the readers of our positioning. We support the suggestions of prior literature that the ongoing refugee crisis is a societal issue requiring the collective effort of multiple parties, many of which are involved in, affected by, or have some partial responsibility towards addressing the challenges of refugee relocation, (re)settlement and integration (e.g. Betts 2010; Boustani *et al.* 2016; Valtonen 2004, 2016). As researchers of refugee-related issues, we acknowledge that we too are embedded in a broader social web of relations and are, in many respects, a part of this broader discussion. It is our hope that our review can contribute to refugee policy and practice, particularly from a management and organizational perspective. Through this literature review, we aim to provide a holistic perspective of refugee workforce integration by presenting the current literature at various levels of analysis, as well as elaborating on the interrelatedness between levels. While most of the refugee literature focuses on either the institutional (Betts 2010; Black 2001) or the individual level (Aliaga-Isla and Rialp 2013; Yakushko *et al.* 2008), we also elaborate on organizational-level implications to better elucidate the role of employers and support organizations in refugee workforce integration (Betts *et al.* 2017). Overall, refugee workforce integration is a collective responsibility requiring the engagement of various actors including refugees, organizations and governments (Betts 2010; Malkki 1995; Valtonen 2016).

Throughout this review, we have identified several gaps that limit our understanding of refugee workforce integration. First, although we attempted to explicate research incorporating different contextual settings, the heavy focus of the literature on developed countries skews our review findings towards that context. Research in developing contexts suggests that refugee resettlement is more focused on survival needs (e.g. providing food and shelter) rather than on employment (we elaborate on this in the subsequent section; see e.g. Smit and Rugunanan 2014), which in part explains why there is less research on the employment journey of refugees in developing countries. Moreover, the lack of research in developing countries might also be indicative of a widely documented propensity of (management) scholarship to engage in research narrowly concentrated in certain regions of the world (see e.g. Lewin 2014; Tsui 2013). This observation with respect to refugee issues is concerning for two reasons. First, the majority of refugees reside in developing countries, such as

Turkey and Lebanon (UNHCR 2019), and thus understanding refugees' employment journey in these particular contexts is important, perhaps more so than in the context of developed economies. Also, as we have briefly mentioned above, socio-political environment plays a critical role in drawing out positive and active responses from stakeholders at institutional, organizational and individual levels. Yet, socio-political environments in developing countries can be highly volatile and unstable, thereby posing greater threats to the success of refugee integration in these contexts. The paucity of research in developing contexts forms an important agenda for future research.

Second, the literature on refugee workforce integration naturally situates itself in multiple disciplinary silos. Prior studies, therefore, use a range of theoretical frameworks (or are atheoretical) and research methodologies, resulting in significant fragmentation of knowledge. Table 1 presents an overview of key articles in each discipline and the predominant frameworks and theories utilized, along with their primary findings. Visualizing the disciplinary silos helps to understand better the origin of the key findings that emerged from our multidisciplinary review, as well as providing readers with insights into the major streams of conversation within this fragmented field. We begin by reviewing the institutional factors, focusing on the legal and regulatory frameworks and socio-political conditions surrounding the process of refugee workforce integration.

## **Institutional-level factors**

The complexity of institutional-level factors impacting refugee workforce integration spans an array of transnational conventions, international regulations, national legislation and, in some cases, even municipal provisions of support. Despite this complexity, our review indicates that most research focuses on national-level factors, including (i) the influence of institutional regulations around immigration and (ii) institutional arrangements regarding recognition of foreign qualifications and education, as well as (iii) socio-political climate involving public sentiment and political rhetoric. The institutional-level factors that influence refugee workforce integration encompass both formal and informal institutional components. The first two points deal with formal institutions, which refer to the structural constraints, such as laws, regulations and formal agreements, while the third discusses informal institutional factors

Table 1. Mapping refugee workforce integration research

| Discipline                   | Predominant areas of study  | Sample theories used   | Principal findings  |
|------------------------------|---|--|---|
| Ethnic and migration studies | Downward mobility; discrimination; integration; adaptation; adjustment; family issues; diversity issues; coping strategy (Ager and Strang 2008; Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2007; Connor 2010; Fozdar and Torezani 2008; Krahn <i>et al.</i> 2000)      | Human capital and social capital (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2007; De Vroome and Van Turbergen 2010; Krahn <i>et al.</i> 2000); adaptation and adjustment (Montgomery 1996); social movement theory (Stewart <i>et al.</i> 2008)                                  | Individual-level factors, such as individual demographic characteristics, language skills, social networks, psychological health and level of motivation, influence refugee settlement, resettlement and (workforce) integration. Means and markers of integration, including housing, education, health and employment-related issues, influence refugees' integration into society. |
| Management                   | Discrimination; job search; wages and working conditions; workplace issues; co-ethnic economy; refugee entrepreneurship (Bizri 2017; Campion 2018; Wauters and Lambrecht 2006, 2008)  | Cultural distance (Lundborg 2013); agency (Tomlinson 2010); social capital (Bizri 2017; Gericke <i>et al.</i> 2018); inclusion framework (Knappert <i>et al.</i> 2018); psychological contract theory; social cognitive career theory (Baran <i>et al.</i> 2018) | Refugees are often discriminated against in recruitment processes, and excluded from inner circles, which delimits their opportunities for career advancement. Individual agency and proactive behaviours are seen as core facilitators of employment and workplace integration.  |
| Political science            | Formal institutional structures; political interests; responsibility; human rights; welfare reform; policy response; immigration and integration policy changes (Bloch 2008; Jacobsen 1996; Sales 2002; Valenta and Bunar 2010)                       | Social movement theory (Boersma <i>et al.</i> 2018); (individual choice) game theory (Borjas 1982)   | Institutional structure is formed mostly in response to socio-political sentiments and interests of the receiving countries, even though refugee resettlement should be driven by humanitarian imperatives. Changes to immigration and integration policies are driven by the shifting socio-political and economic interests of the receiving countries.                             |
| Psychology                   | Mental health; trauma; stress and coping strategy; psychological adjustment and adaptation; psychological well-being and attributions (Beiser 2009; Schweitzer <i>et al.</i> 2006)  | Psychological adjustment (Beiser and Hou 2001); cultural distance (Beiser <i>et al.</i> 2015); acculturation (Schweitzer <i>et al.</i> 2006)   | Misalignment of policy and practice and social and mental health services often overlook the set of psychological conditions that negatively influence refugee workforce integration. Refugees' experience of discrimination and unfair treatment in the job market and workplaces worsens their mental health.   |
| Social work                  | Volunteering; cross-sector collaboration; refugee policy (Pittaway and Bartolomei 2001; Potocky-Tripodi 2003, 2004)   | Social capital theory (Potocky-Tripodi 2004); adaptation and adjustment (Potocky-Tripodi 2003); acculturation (Austin and Este 2001)   | Lack of adequate on-arrival information and support; absence of appropriate and affordable housing; challenges with language acquisition; restricted access to education and employment opportunities; discrimination within the workforce impede refugee (workforce) integration.  |
| Sociology                    | Social norms, beliefs and values; discrimination; socialization processes; communication patterns; media discourse; employer discourse; social responsibility; diversity issues (Bloch 2004; Portes and Stepick 1985; Tilbury and Colic-Peisker 2006) | Labour market segmentation theory (Portes and Stepick 1985); assimilation (Portes and Stepick 1985); social network (Korac 2003); human agency (Castles 2003)  | The persistence of high refugee unemployment rates and extensive participation in co-ethnic communities continue to limit opportunities for refugees to move up the socio-economic ladder and push them to the fringes of the receiving economy. Polarizing public discourse hinders refugee (workforce) integration.   |

involving socio-cultural and political climate and its impact on refugee workforce integration (see Pejovich 1999; Peng and Pleggenkuhle-Miles 2009).

### *Immigration regulations*

Sovereign nation-states have assumed the responsibility to protect refugees for 'whom special measures of public policy are justified' (Black 2001, p. 63). However, research indicates that these policy measures are likely to be triggered by political interests rather than concerns for the wellbeing of refugees (Kaabel 2018). Conversely, the well-intended legal instruments and institutional environments designed to assist and aid refugees can undermine their financial and social self-sufficiency (e.g. Bloch 2008; Crush *et al.* 2017a; Jackson and Bauder 2013) and economic integration (Hainmueller *et al.* 2016). Research in the Swiss context, for instance, found that the lengthy asylum process, during which refugees wait in limbo for a decision on their humanitarian claims, limits refugees' economic self-sufficiency (Hainmueller *et al.* 2016). Research in OECD countries suggests that 'the structural status quo', where contemporary asylum policy still considers refugees to be outside of the country's workforce (Kaabel 2017, p. 60), results in inadequate accumulation, valuation and utilization of human capital embedded in the refugee workforce (Kaabel 2018).

A primary example of an integration policy that reflects political interests is a geographical focus on refugee resettlement. Often, as is the case in Australia (e.g. McDonald-Wilmsen *et al.* 2009), resettlement in rural areas is encouraged over metropolitan regions. Employment opportunities in these areas can be scarce, with limited options commensurate with the existing skills of refugees; notwithstanding the limited and often non-existent support services needed for successful integration, such as local language training, educational programmes and physical and mental health services (Broadbent *et al.* 2007; Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2007; Taylor 2005).

### *Recognition of foreign qualifications and education*

Research points to the numerous 'labour market shelters' (e.g. accreditation bodies, professional associations and employment agencies) that safeguard the local workforce and employment opportunities by 'creating shelters in their labour market' (Freidson 1999, p. 123), thereby posing even greater impediments for refugee employment. These labour market

shelters are the main facilitators for the accreditation of qualifications, education and training necessary for successful workforce integration, and by setting high standardized and localized procedures, they 'restrict entry into higher-status and better paying occupations and professions, the result being that those already employed there face less competition' (Krahn *et al.* 2000, pp. 77–78). Research indicates that labour market shelters offer inappropriate support (Abdelkerim and Grace 2012) by failing to consider refugees' prior education or work experience (Bloch 2002), applying instead strict regulations in the accreditation of foreign credentials (Guo 2009; Krahn *et al.* 2000). For instance, in Canada, the devaluation and denigration of prior education and work experiences restrict refugees' entry into higher-paying professional occupations (Krahn *et al.* 2000). This form of marginalization often stems from different standards of practice across countries; standards that position knowledge from developing countries as inferior and incompatible (Guo 2009). As a result, inappropriate criteria in valuing foreign credentials are applied (Krahn *et al.* 2000; Lamba 2003). In this sense, Lamba (2003, p. 47) referred to 'systemic discrimination', whereby refugees' past qualifications, experience and educational backgrounds are denied, restricting entry to the desired job market.

Although education is seen by many as a means for meaningful employment (Becker 1994), for refugees, the level of education can have an adverse effect. For instance, a recent study of over 2000 refugees in Australia showed that pre-immigration education is negatively correlated with employment outcomes (Cheng *et al.* 2019). Similarly, a study in the UK showed that refugees with managerial professions and higher-educational backgrounds, such as postgraduate qualifications, took longer to find suitable employment, due to difficulties converting their qualifications, the paucity of bridging courses and the need for further local education experience (Shiferaw and Hagos 2002). A drop in occupational status is observed in all migrant groups post-migration; however, this decrease is much steeper for refugees (Chiswick *et al.* 2003). Inaccessibility to careers commensurate with previous experience and qualifications can lead to numerous negative consequences, such as reduced earnings, unemployment, under-employment and mental health issues (Baran *et al.* 2018; Ives 2007), all of which are likely to further exacerbate the challenges of workforce integration for refugees.

These formal institutional arrangements reflect the socio-political interests of the receiving countries. In

conjunction with polarized societal attitudes towards refugees, the institutional environment of many countries has been observed to push refugees to the fringes of a receiving society's economy (e.g. Edin *et al.* 2003).

### *Socio-political climate*

Apart from the formal institutions, such as laws, regulations and policies around immigration, integration, qualifications accreditation and education, informal institutions, ranging from socio-cultural values and norms to political climate, also delimit employment opportunities for refugees. As refugee resettlement and workforce integration are largely influenced by a broad socio-political context (Malkki 1995; Schierup *et al.* 2006), there is an extensive polarized debate about accepting and integrating refugees into the receiving society and its workforce (Matar 2017; Morrissey 2012). This debate inevitably impacts refugee integration in general and workforce integration in particular (see Ilgit and Klotz 2018 for a discussion in the German context). The politicization of refugees as a social burden or unwanted competition in the job market makes it difficult for them to find and secure meaningful employment and career advancement opportunities in receiving countries (Casimiro *et al.* 2007). Such politicization increases refugees' perception of discrimination, which in turn negatively influences their career adaptability (Campion 2018).

Interestingly, research indicates that societal discourse around sympathy, care, tolerance and humanitarianism (Sales 2002) can promulgate cultural stereotypes (Hanson-Easey and Augoustinos 2011), which may create further barriers to refugees' resettlement outcomes. Depicting refugees as victims in need of assistance can negatively impact societal perceptions, which may prompt policy changes to deter refugees altogether (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Tan 2017). This is likely to influence policymakers' development of the regulatory system, contributing to systemic discrimination and numerous forms of marginalization linked to refugees' career development and trajectories (Al-Dasouqi 2016).

Prior research suggests that the cascading effect of both formal and informal institutional-level factors influences employers' views towards refugee employment (Hurstfield *et al.* 2004) and the individual refugees' perception of their professional self-worth (Lacroix 2004) in relation to workforce integration and employment prospects. We discuss

these organizational- and individual-level factors in more detail in the following sections.

## **Organizational-level factors**

Our analysis of organizational-level factors affecting refugee workforce integration includes two sets of stakeholders, employers and organizations supporting refugees in resettlement. We also discuss the emerging research on refugee entrepreneurship as an alternative route to economic participation and workforce integration.

### *Employers*

While refugees constitute an accessible talent pool in many countries, research indicates that refugees are offered, and accept, low-paying, low-skilled, dangerous and even illegal jobs (e.g. Brees 2008; Kenny and Lockwood-Kenny 2011; Thornton 2006). Research on the role of employers in refugee workforce integration indicates that suboptimal employment outcomes are often driven by lack of appropriate organizational structures and practices, as well as ethnocentrism and discrimination, cascading down into organizations from the institutional level (e.g. Hurstfield *et al.* 2004).

### *Recruitment and selection*

Human resource management scholarship and practitioners generally accept and recognize the positive relationship between a diverse workforce and organizational outcomes (Sheehan and Anderson 2015). However, migrants are frequently excluded from efforts to diversify the workforce (Syed 2008). This is surprising since studies in numerous countries (e.g. Australia and Sweden) showed that employers who hired refugees were largely satisfied with their performance (Lundborg and Skedinger 2016; Szkudlarek 2019). Moreover, employers that successfully hired refugees were likely to recruit from this group of migrants again and recommended refugee job seekers to peers in the industry (Lundborg and Skedinger 2016; Szkudlarek 2019).

It is well established that refugees face various forms of discrimination during the recruitment process. Discrimination is mainly linked to precarious legal status, gender, accent, religion, appearance and/or ethnic background (Hugo 2014). These forms of discrimination are particularly widespread amongst



'visibly different' groups of refugees, such as Muslim women in Australia (Northcote *et al.* 2006), and less prevalent among so-called 'invisible' groups of refugees, such as Bosnian refugees in Australia (Colic-Peisker 2005). Many researchers also highlight that an extra burden is put on refugee women to overcome employer bias in order to gain access to employment (Koyama 2014; Krahn *et al.* 2000; Tomlinson 2010). Research in the US context showed, in particular, that resettlement agencies and local employers made 'assumptions about gender roles and identities with the refugees' (Koyama 2014, pp. 267–268).

Prior research has also found evidence of systemic marginalization during the recruitment of refugees. On the one hand, employers intentionally imposed higher standards on refugee applicants, compared to local employees (Lundborg and Skedinger 2016). On the other hand, employers were reluctant to consider refugees, due to challenging and time-consuming processes of assessing foreign education and qualifications (Phillimore and Goodson 2006). Unfortunately, research indicates that employers are frequently unaware of their discriminatory practices and deny unfair treatment of refugee applicants (Fozdar and Torezani 2008).

### *Training and development*

Sustaining employment is particularly challenging for refugees without post-employment training and development opportunities (Bloch 2008; Miletic 2014). However, in many instances, cultural and, to a lesser extent, occupational training is only provided by support organizations immediately after migration and is not offered by employers at workplaces (Nawyn 2010). From the employers' perspective, refugees are rarely considered strategically important, so few are provided with the cross-cultural and other forms of support traditionally provided to expatriates (Szkudlarek 2009).

While a small study in the UK showed that employers did not identify a need for workplace training for refugees in menial and low-paid jobs (Bloch 2008), numerous studies found that post-employment training or retraining is essential for all groups of refugees (e.g. Bloch 2008; Stewart 2003; Szkudlarek 2019). Research highlights the importance of such (re)training due to refugees' time out of the labour market in addition to their lack of experience and knowledge of the specificities of the local workplaces (Bloch 2008). Lack of on-the-job training schemes re-

stricts the development of workplace skills and poses further difficulties for refugees' upward career mobility (Bloch 2004).

### *Remuneration*

Empirical evidence suggests that remuneration and pay should be based on common principles and practices that consider individual knowledge, ability and skills (Shen *et al.* 2009); however, refugees' employment terms and conditions are notably worse than those of other migrants (Sweetman and Warman 2013; Yu *et al.* 2007).

Refugees often work in low-skilled jobs, earning minimum wages (e.g. Brees 2008). Wage discrepancies can be even worse for refugees trained in their home countries. In the UK, only having local UK tertiary qualifications was positively associated with higher employment rates and greater earnings (Bloch 2008). An Australian study with similar findings suggests that wage discrepancies may be due to employers' inability to understand, or lack of time and resources to recognize, home-country qualifications (Cheng *et al.* 2019). Even so, a UK study found that, despite having local qualifications, refugees were still worse off in terms of their earnings when compared to other ethnic minority groups (Bloch 2008). Lower wages, longer working hours and worse employment terms and conditions are attributed not only to employers' inability to understand refugee qualifications and experiences, but also to discriminatory biases against refugee employees (Green 2005). For example, a Swedish study found pay differentials between local and refugee employees, where employers believed that refugees lack co-operation skills to work with staff and customers, which they assumed hinders refugee employees' productivity (Lundborg and Skedinger 2016). Perceptions, rather than objective measures of performance, are used as a proxy in assessing adequate remuneration.

### *Employee relations*

Prior research suggests that refugees and other ethnic minority workers frequently experience a general climate of exclusion or isolation in the workplace (Knappert *et al.* 2018). In many cases, refugees perceive employers, supervisors and co-workers as perpetrators of discrimination and exploitation through ignorance rather than malice (Boese 2015). Despite anti-discrimination and equal opportunity policies, ethnic minority group members are often excluded

from the ‘inner circle’, and feel alone, uncomfortable and devalued at workplaces (Knappert *et al.* 2018). A Canadian survey of 525 refugees revealed that 70% of individuals were not satisfied with their current employment, and 60% believed they were over-qualified and excluded from promotions (Lamba 2003). Research in Turkey suggested that female refugees were exploited and excluded by employers more harshly, because they tended to have limited work experience and thus were less likely to have other employment options (Knappert *et al.* 2018). Refugees described such experiences as humiliating; in some cases, they chose to work in the informal economy to avoid workplace discrimination, despite being exposed to poor working conditions and limited advancement opportunities (Broadbent *et al.* 2007).

### *Self-employment*

Whilst some refugees opt to start small businesses due to limited economic opportunities and prospects through traditional employment paths (Crush *et al.* 2017b), others – often those who have been self-employed in the past – choose to establish their own businesses in receiving countries (Wauters and Lambrecht 2006). Regardless of the reasons for starting their own businesses, refugee entrepreneurship is often a necessity rather than an opportunity-driven choice (Bizri 2017).

Refugee entrepreneurs can become significant economic contributors to their receiving countries (Hugo 2014) and often employ other refugees (Alrawadieh *et al.* 2019), thereby forming their own ‘ethnic economy’ (Gold 1992; Trankiem 1986). With numerous benefits of co-ethnic ties, research points to the advantages of this form of employment, including flexible schedules, personalized reward systems and various forms of support in resettling in the receiving country (Trankiem 1986). Yet, due to their marginalized position in the labour market, refugees hired through co-ethnic ties are likely to have worse employment conditions, such as lower wages and longer hours, compared to those of other local employees (Gold 1992). In addition, refugees’ co-ethnic economies are generally within a small community and operate within lower-skilled industries, such as trade of handicrafts (Wauters and Lambrecht 2006) and hospitality (Alrawadieh *et al.* 2019). In the long term, working in co-ethnic communities can provide relatively limited opportunities to develop further social and human capital, including local language abilities and professional networks (e.g. Edin *et al.* 2003).

### *Support organizations*

Support organizations in this review refer to those organizations with practices and activities aimed at assisting refugees in matters related to resettlement and (workforce) integration. Research on support organizations suggests a diverse typology of these organizations, including governmental initiatives, government-sponsored or government-contracted organizations, non-governmental and non-profit organizations and social enterprises (Garkisch *et al.* 2017; McIntosh and Cockburn-Wooten 2019; Torezani *et al.* 2008). Support organizations aim to assist refugees’ access to employment through job counselling and referrals (Banki 2006; Majka 1991), language and skills training (Matikainen 2003; McIntosh and Cockburn-Wooten 2019), cross-cultural training programmes (Lauer and Yan 2013; Ponzoni 2015) and provision of local experience through employment and volunteering (Martin 2012; Yap *et al.* 2011). They are often gatekeepers of resources, such as information and social networks, to which refugees need access in order to seek employment (Godin and Renaud 2002; Lacroix *et al.* 2015; Steimel 2017).

### *Training and career coaching*

Employment support for refugees is a complicated and multi-faceted process (Dykstra-Devette and Canary 2019). Research on support organizations consistently finds that they play a pivotal role in ‘empowering’ refugees in settlement and integration into the receiving economy (Lacroix *et al.* 2015), while acknowledging the sometimes ineffective and disorganized nature of services offered (e.g. Steimel 2017; Tomlinson and Egan 2002). Most of the literature on refugee support organizations focuses on the disappointing and consistently low employment outcomes for refugees (Tomlinson and Egan 2002), with many researchers pointing to a lack of organized assistance programmes (Korac 2003). Research in four European countries, for instance, found the resettlement and integration support centres ill-equipped to support refugees in their initial attempts to enter the job market (Chadderton and Edmonds 2015). With inappropriate expertise in the process of recognizing qualifications, professional development alternatives and training and education, resettlement agencies struggle to facilitate employment options for refugees (e.g. Abdelkerim and Grace 2012). Similarly, Nawyn (2010, p. 157) suggested that training offered by support organizations was not only

inadequate and led to particular ethnically stereotypical occupations, such as manicurists, but also ‘funnelled refugee women into feminized occupations’, including childcare providers. As such, support organizations can limit refugees’ career choices by offering immediately available jobs and failing to cast a wide net for employment opportunities (Steimel 2017). Often, support organizations are forced to enact the political agenda of (local) governments, which prioritizes immediate employment over career planning and professional advancement (Finnan 1982).

#### *(Non-paid) work experience*

Support organizations can both facilitate employment and act as potential employers for refugees (Tomlinson 2010; Yap *et al.* 2011). For example, support organizations can offer internal employment and volunteering opportunities (Abdelkerim and Grace 2012; Tomlinson 2010) to provide refugees with valuable local experience and ‘[re]construct] identity and [foster] a sense of belonging’ (Jackson and Bauder 2013, p. 375). In relation to volunteerism, however, research points to contradictory outcomes. Whilst some researchers suggest a positive relationship between volunteerism and refugee employment outcomes (Abdelkerim and Grace 2012), others argue that refugee volunteers are predominantly engaged in menial work while challenging tasks are given primarily to local volunteers (Rast and Ghorashi 2018).

#### *Labour market intermediary*

A range of support organizations act as intermediaries among refugees, employers and other employment-related stakeholders (McAllum 2018; Newman 2010; Ott 2013). This intermediary role includes advocacy for the rights of refugees (Boersma *et al.* 2018), lessening of institutional barriers and direct facilitation of employment (Garkisch *et al.* 2017). Often, institutions in receiving countries lack understanding of the needs of refugees in finding and sustaining employment, thereby requiring an intermediary to better facilitate communication between a refugee job seeker and a potential employer (e.g. Matikainen 2003).

Industry collaboration and cross-sector partnerships have shown positive results in the US (Hunter and Mileski 2013) and in Jordan (Libal and Harding 2011) by enhancing a support organization’s capability to act as an intermediary between refugees and employers. Recently, refugee-run organizations have also been identified as potential partners in compre-

hending and capitalizing on refugees’ qualifications and experience and reaching out to the wider refugee community (Easton-Calabria 2016). Although the potential contributions of refugee-run organizations are significant, these organizations are relatively small and often struggle to sustain their work (Easton-Calabria 2016).

Overall, the analysis of organizational-level factors suggests a multiplicity of stakeholders involved and the complexity of their operations in contributing to refugee workforce integration. Employers, support organizations and refugee entrepreneurs all operate within the constraining environment of the institutional context in which they are located. In this regard, the socio-economic context has an impact on organizational processes and outcomes through, for example, the generosity of funding allocated to support organizations, grants and subsidies for employers and the availability of micro-financing for refugee entrepreneurs (Szkudlarek *et al.* 2019). Moreover, findings from institutional- and organizational-level studies point to the need for engagement of multiple stakeholders, including governments, non-governmental organizations, education providers and businesses to address the challenges of refugee workforce integration.

## **Individual-level factors**

Our multidisciplinary literature review revealed five categories of individual-level factors that influence refugee employment: individual demographics, language, social network channels, psychological responses, and motivations.

#### *Individual demographics*

Demographic characteristics, such as gender and age, are salient factors in finding and maintaining employment (Khawaja and Hebbani 2018; Potocky-Tripodi 2003) in all receiving countries, regardless of the country’s level of economic development (e.g. Danso 2002; Smit and Rugunanan 2014). In most cases, refugee women were less likely than men to be employed (Bloch 2008; Ivlevs and Veliziotis 2018; Khawaja and Hebbani 2018; Knappert *et al.* 2018; Northcote *et al.* 2006). As discussed in previous sections, this could be due to limited work experience, discriminatory practices, or gender biases. Notwithstanding discrimination against women in general, refugee women experience longer lags in learning

the local language due to a range of factors, including the unavailability of adequate childcare support facilities and reluctance to attend mixed-gender classes (Casimiro *et al.* 2007).

With regards to age, a UK study found that younger refugees face fewer barriers and find shorter routes to employment compared to older generations (Shiferaw and Hagos 2002). Similarly, results from a Swedish study found that refugees in their thirties experienced higher and longer employment lags compared to those in their twenties (Lundborg 2013).

### *Language*

Local language competency is vital to all refugee jobseekers (Beiser and Hou 2000; Szkudlarek 2019). Research conducted in South Africa found that despite many refugees speaking more than one language, lack of proficiency in the common language spoken in the receiving country prevented them from participating in education, securing employment and advancing their professional careers (Smit and Rugunanan 2014). Similar findings have been noted in Canada (Jackson and Bauder 2013) and Sweden (Lundborg 2013). Research in the US suggested that local language proficiency in itself is not sufficient to enhance economic status, but is a prerequisite for sustainable employment (Potocky-Tripodi 2001). Insufficient language skills to find sustainable employment commensurate with previous experience or qualifications often result in refugees working in low-skilled service jobs, such as cleaning, taxi-driving, construction and farming (Colic-Peisker 2009), or in informal economies (Smit and Rugunanan 2014), leading to the risk of being trapped in tenuous economic conditions.

### *Social networks*

Social networks have a critical influence on refugees' search for employment (Beaman 2011; Bloch 2002, 2008; Fozdar 2012). In many cases, social and informal channels are seen as more effective in leading to positive employment outcomes, compared to formal support programmes (Frykman 2012; Lamba 2003; Lamba and Krahn 2003). As such, refugees are keen to build stronger social networks (Makwarimba *et al.* 2013). Previous research has pointed to refugees' length of residency and language competency as positively linked to broadening social networks (Cheung and Phillimore 2014). However, more recent research suggests that refugees have found ways to fast-track

their expansion of social networks via the use of information and communication technology (ICT). For instance, refugees in rural Australia use digital technology to expand their social networks (Alam and Imran 2015), which can lead to improved employment outcomes (Lloyd *et al.* 2013). In fact, it has been suggested that refugees' ICT proficiency might be an important precondition for employability in many contexts (Wilding 2009).

Yet, previous research suggests that merely having social networks does not increase the likelihood of refugee workforce integration (Cheung and Phillimore 2014); instead, it is the structure and composition of refugees' social networks that matter (Lamba and Krahn 2003; Nakhaie and Kazempur 2013), as well as long-term engagement in such social groups (Beaman 2011). In a recent study, Gericke *et al.* (2018) point to the need for vertical support (such as governmental and third-sector assistance) as a valuable source for adequate employment for refugees, in comparison to horizontal bonding between refugees and co-ethnic groups, because the latter provides access to mostly low-skilled jobs and can lead to under-employment (Gericke *et al.* 2018).

### *Psychological responses*

Refugee workforce integration is especially challenging due to the psychological vulnerability of this group of migrants. Compared to other migrants, refugees tend to have poorer mental health at the time of arrival, thereby making settlement and integration more difficult (Pumariega *et al.* 2005; Turner *et al.* 2003). Refugees' mental health challenges, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety (Gerritsen *et al.* 2006), negatively affect refugees' workforce integration (De Vroome and Van Tubergen 2010). However, there is also a strong link between economic integration and mental health, suggesting that refugees' engagement in employment and education can reduce the risk of mental disorder (Bhui *et al.* 2006).

Recent research emphasizes the importance of psychological well-being in refugees' employment-seeking journey, because it influences job-search self-efficacy (Pajic *et al.* 2018). Similarly, resilience is vital in building career adaptability (Obschonka *et al.* 2018), which refers to the ability to cope with critical conditions, such as transitions and traumas, in occupational roles (Savickas and Portfeli 2012). However, refugees are generally more distressed when attempting to join the local workforce (Beiser and

Hou 2001; De Vroome and Van Tubergen 2010), which contributes to further difficulties in securing and sustaining employment. Refugees describe failing to find commensurate employment and reliance on governmental assistance as humiliating, which compounds the devaluation of self (Lacroix 2004). High-skilled refugees, in particular, experience greater levels of depression, shame and uselessness, despite their lengthy postgraduate training and years of work experience (Willott and Stevenson 2013). This deflated self-image, in turn, poses greater hindrance to employment prospects (Lacroix 2004).

Often suffering from trauma and loss of family, freedom and material possessions, refugees who believed that they were moving to a 'paradise' can encounter disappointment, despair and hopelessness (Pittaway *et al.* 2009, p. 137). In an Australian study, refugees expressed their disappointment when home-country credentials were not formally recognized, their qualifications were doubted by recruiters, co-workers talked down to them or ignored them, managers distributed work unfairly and their religious beliefs and practices were not understood (Casimiro *et al.* 2007). These findings are similar to research results in other countries, such as Sweden (Frykman 2012), Canada (Krahn *et al.* 2000) and the UK (Willott and Stevenson 2013). Harsh conditions in receiving economies produce higher mental distress in refugees, exacerbating their pre-migration trauma (Schweitzer *et al.* 2006) and existing tensions and acculturative stress (Djuretic *et al.* 2007; Yako and Biswas 2014). Refugees swing between hope and disillusionment in their pursuit of sustainable employment and career advancement, a process that can lead to further distress (Pittaway *et al.* 2009; Rousseau and Foxen 2010; Smit and Rugunanan 2014).

### *Motivation*

As is the case for other migrants, motivation is key to successful refugee integration (Shiferaw and Hagos 2002) and a critical contributor to proactive behaviours in finding and sustaining employment in receiving countries (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2003). Refugees are highly motivated to integrate into receiving societies given their inability to return to their homelands (Borjas 1982), and thus are strongly motivated to improve their local language skills, obtain local qualifications and secure employment commensurate with their qualifications and skills (Cortes 2004). These high levels of motivation often translate into high levels of motivation to find work (Colic-Peisker

and Tilbury 2003; Willott and Stevenson 2013). However, as discussed in previous sections, empirical evidence has consistently found that tenuous economic conditions can result in refugee dissatisfaction, limited social networks and poorer physical and mental health outcomes (Huot *et al.* 2016; Ives 2007; Jackson and Bauder 2013), eventually leading to demotivation (Willott and Stevenson 2013) and lower self-efficacy (Pajic *et al.* 2018).

All of the above individual-level factors are intertwined with institutional- and organizational-level conditions. For example, the socio-political climate and organizational culture affect refugees' well-being and their integration efforts (see Berry 1997 for a discussion on the importance of openness and inclusive culture of the dominant or hosting group in migrant integration). Similarly, initiatives to overcome negative narratives around refugee employment (see Garkisch *et al.* 2017 for an extensive discussion on the initiatives of support organizations in this domain) can contribute to employers' openness towards this group of job seekers as well as impacting their experiences in the workplace. Positive employment outcomes may, in turn, affect the increasing acceptance of refugees by employers (Lundborg and Skedinger 2016) and by receiving societies, which can then impact the socio-political debate and policy formulation.

### *Discussion: The canvas ceiling in refugee employment*

Many refugees face a multitude of barriers affecting their workforce integration. Each level of analysis we have described above points towards a range of factors that impede employment for this migrant group. Yet, it is the interplay of these various factors that cumulatively contributes to suboptimal employment outcomes.

Application of a relational framework allows us to synthesize the findings, thereby highlighting the interrelated effect of barriers identified in this review. The cascading effect apparent in the barriers to refugee workforce integration is especially important. First, the socio-political environment impacts the overreaching institutional frameworks for refugee employment and policy formulation as well as the organizational behaviours in recruiting and workforce integration of refugee job seekers. The official scaffoldings are accompanied and impacted by the public discourse surrounding refugee (re)settlement, as policies around migration and refugee integration are developed in consideration of the specific circumstances

(with an array of legal, political, social, cultural and religious interests) of the receiving countries (Penninx 2005). Especially the negative socio-political climate towards migrants in general, and refugees in particular, heightens stereotypical beliefs about refugees in societies and workplaces (e.g. Zárate *et al.* 2004; Zimmermann *et al.* 2000). Researchers suggest that such socio-political discourse is likely to influence the success of refugees' adjustment in the receiving communities and workplaces (Casimiro *et al.* 2007; Correa-Velez *et al.* 2015; Szkudlarek *et al.* 2019). Second, the institutional system determines the level of support and funding given to support organizations and employers, thereby impacting the organizational-level engagement in facilitating refugee workforce integration. Financial aid from governmental bodies is especially important for support organizations, as many of them are not-for-profit and struggle to maintain appropriate levels of assistance (Garkisch *et al.* 2017). Adequate and continuous institutional support is also essential for employers to recruit and manage refugee workers (Tahiri 2017). Finally, these combined effects interplay with the individual circumstances of refugees seeking employment, which influences their motivation and psychological well-being, as well as their employment prospects in relation to their individual dispositions or demographics.

This compound combination of barriers to refugee workforce integration is most apparent when taking a top-down perspective (from the institutional to the individual level). However, the interrelated effects are also likely to be present from a bottom-up perspective, whereby individual employment outcomes and circumstances collectively impact the socio-political climate around refugee workforce integration. For example, institutional barriers and social marginalization at the macro-level, combined with organizational-level factors such as employers' unwillingness to commit time and resources to understanding refugees' home-country qualifications (Phillimore and Goodson 2006) and discriminatory practices (Fozdar and Torezani 2008), create stronger barriers for refugees attempting to access adequately remunerated employment opportunities. Such barriers push refugees to aim at the lower end of the economic spectrum (Carlsson and Rooth 2016; Vinokurov *et al.* 2017; Yu *et al.* 2007), which, in turn, demotivates them and sometimes worsens their psychological distress (Beiser and Hou 2001; De Vroome and Van Tubergen 2010; Ives 2007; Jackson and Bauder 2013). Research shows that refugees become accustomed to being trapped in these temporary and

low-status jobs, which results in loss of employment self-efficacy (Xypolytas 2018). With little economic stability, refugees continuously live in precarious conditions in which their survival needs (Crush *et al.* 2017a; Xypolytas 2018) outweigh the time and effort needed to foster the skills and experience required to build professional careers in receiving countries. The longer refugees spend in suboptimal economic conditions, the wider the socio-cultural gaps between refugees and mainstream communities (Xypolytas 2018). Consequently, marginalization becomes a vicious cycle for refugees, where overcoming challenges at one level may not significantly help in eliminating the complex multilayered barriers to refugee workforce integration.

Reflecting upon the challenges of refugee workforce integration and the complex combination of barriers, we introduce the concept of the *canvas ceiling*. Use of the canvas metaphor explicates the challenging nature of finding and sustaining rewarding employment with advancement opportunities, and the prolonged extreme conditions that refugees face, even after leaving their temporary shelters. The notion of the ceiling is used to illuminate the limits that a particular social group encounters in their career journey (cf. glass ceiling and bamboo ceiling). This career journey includes finding a means to professional advancement in an employment opportunity that aligns with individuals' prior skills and career goals (see e.g. Boyd and Thomas 2001; Morgan 1998; Wright *et al.* 1995). The notion of a *canvas ceiling* denotes that, for refugees, not only is their professional advancement challenging, but so is access to employment that is commensurate with their previous experience and qualifications. Our mapping of the field indicates that the *canvas ceiling* represents an extreme form of systemic marginalization that cuts across multiple levels and results in an interplay between the complex combinations of barriers at those levels. That is, refugees experience interrelated effects of compound challenges that they must overcome in order to achieve adequately remunerated and commensurate employment with prospects for professional advancement.

The notion of the *canvas ceiling* is useful to capture the dynamic consequences of interactions among refugees, organizational stakeholders and institutional systems. It illuminates the often invisible and complex boundaries to refugee employment and workforce integration and enables those to be seen, understood and analysed. Many of the challenges might not be unique to refugees, but the extent and

the compound effect of the combination of factors impeding employment is among the most severe for refugees in comparison to other groups of migrants. At the same time, we hope that our paper will inspire and inform scholars working with refugees and other marginalized groups to advance our theories and improve employment outcomes for all employees.

## Researching refugee workforce integration

The complexity of the *canvas ceiling* phenomenon and the scarcity of management research in this domain provide an opportunity for multiple research avenues. A list of future research directions is suggested herein and in Table 2 to guide management scholars in contributing to tangible solutions to refugee workforce integration. Our recommendations are structured across both vertical (including multiple levels of analysis) and horizontal (within each level of analysis) axes, highlighting and reflecting the complexity of the *canvas ceiling* in refugee workforce integration. Also highlighted is an important research gap on employing organizations that needs to be addressed to tackle the challenges of refugee employment.

### *Vertical, multilevel approaches*

As discussed above, barriers to refugee workforce integration do not operate in isolation. Consequently, our mapping of the literature emphasizes the need for a relational approach to understanding refugee workforce integration. This requires an increased level of interactions among stakeholders, along with research approaches that simultaneously consider multiple levels of analysis. Studies on refugee employment that span various stakeholder groups, such as national governments, employers, trade unions, civil society and refugee groups, need to be introduced to examine how shared responsibilities can promote better awareness of the interplay among the barriers encountered by refugees in finding and sustaining (self-)employment. In addition, future research can incorporate interrelated aspects of refugee workforce integration by investigating how factors at one level may impact those at another level. For instance, an investigation into socio-political and economic conditions that encourage employers' engagement in refugee workforce integration, refugees' entrepreneurial activities and refugees' co-ethnic economy can further inform our understanding of the

multilevel nature of refugee workforce integration. Moreover, institutional reforms to facilitate foreign qualifications accreditation could improve refugee job seekers' and employees' prospects for career advancement, thereby increasing their work motivation and efforts to integrate into receiving societies and workplaces.

Our review recognizes the work of non-governmental organizations, which often runs in parallel with governmental systems of support. Support organizations may play an intermediary role between refugees and employers. Future research could explore which models and forms of brokerage and engagement lead to the most sustainable employment outcomes. Researchers could also study cross-sector partnerships and other forms of collaborative efforts perceived as crucial to addressing grand challenges such as refugee workforce integration (Ferraro *et al.* 2015; Koschmann *et al.* 2012). Intersectional approaches will not only help scholars develop a more comprehensive understanding of the *canvas ceiling* phenomenon, but also assist policymakers in creating initiatives that incentivize stakeholders to participate in refugee employment support systems.

### *Horizontal, cross-comparative approaches*

Given that refugee integration is a global phenomenon, we note with surprise the scarcity of multi-country cross-comparative studies. First, investigations of successful and failed initiatives across institutional and organizational levels of analysis would allow the identification of best practices to optimize governmental and organizational responses to the challenges of refugee workforce integration. Such studies could be guided by, for instance, comparative inquiries within and between developing and developed nations, research across different sectors, such as commercial and non-commercial, as well as an investigation into governmental and non-governmental initiatives promoting refugee workforce integration. Comparative case studies between organizations with differing forms of inclusive management practices, diversity policies and diverse motivations behind corporate engagement could also inform scholars and practitioners and assist in developing support systems that encourage and motivate engagement of employers in the facilitation of refugee workforce integration. Second, on an individual level, cross-comparative studies could look at the impact of various initiatives on diverse groups of refugees coming from different backgrounds across,

Table 2. Future research agenda on refugee employment and workforce integration

| Approach                      | Suggested research questions   |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Vertical, multiple level      | <p>How does the socio-political and economic ambience around refugee migration impact employers' practices and individual refugee employment outcomes?</p> <p>How do socio-political and economic conditions influence refugees' entrepreneurial activities and co-ethnic economy? What are different types of institutional incentives that lead to higher employer engagement, and how can they be sustained in times of political and economic instability?</p> <p>What are novel forms of (international) accreditation that can foster employer engagement and improve individual refugee employment outcomes?</p> <p>How are cross-sector collaborations between (supra-)national bodies, governments, support organizations, education and training providers and employers managed and maintained to improve refugee workforce integration? What are the factors that impede such cross-sector projects?</p>   |
| Horizontal, cross-comparative | <p>What are the challenges of and opportunities for refugee workforce integration in developed versus developing countries?</p> <p>What are the different conditions in workplaces that foster an inclusive environment for refugees across various industry and country contexts?</p> <p>What forms of diversity management practices lead to higher employment outcomes, and what are the conditions of their impact and effectiveness in various contexts?</p> <p>What are the drivers of corporate engagement and how can various forms of engagement spread within and between industries?</p> <p>How can various employers' initiatives influence workforce integration of refugees coming from different backgrounds across, for instance, demographics (e.g. ethnic background, religion, gender), skill levels (e.g. blue- and white-collar occupations, high- versus low-skilled jobs) and visibility in the receiving community (e.g. impact of participation versus non-participation in co-ethnic economy, large versus small ethnic enclave economy within the receiving country)?</p> |
| Organizational-level gaps     | <p>What drives or deters corporate engagement in refugee workforce integration?</p> <p>How could current diversity and inclusion policies and practices be extended to accommodate the circumstances of refugees?</p> <p>What are best practices in attracting and retaining a refugee workforce?</p> <p>What forms of up-skilling are suitable to accommodate the career transition of refugees who have not planned and strategized for their relocation?</p> <p>What is the impact of various forms of support on individual refugee employee performance and that of the work unit, with special emphasis on improving long-term employment and professional advancement for refugees?</p>   |
| Theoretical gap               | <p>How does understanding refugee workforce integration challenge long-standing assumptions on theoretical concepts, such as acculturation and culture shock, which have been studied predominantly in expatriate contexts?</p> <p>How can the multilevel concept of the <i>canvas ceiling</i> expand theorizing of inclusive workplaces, which currently emphasizes race gender-related issues?</p> <p>How can we expand and advance the global talent management literature, which focuses predominantly on narrowly defined high-potentials and expatriates, to encompass refugees?</p>   |

for instance, demographics (e.g. ethnic background, religion, gender), skill levels (e.g. blue- and white-collar occupations, high- versus low-skilled jobs) and visibility in the receiving community (e.g. impact of participation versus non-participation in ethnic enclave economy, large versus small ethnic enclave economy within the receiving country). Researchers of organizational behaviour could focus on, for instance, individual work identities and self-efficacy, to understand individuals' lived experiences and their journey towards commensurate and sustainable employment. These studies could examine the impact of various practices on cross-cultural adjustment, performance and the well-being of refugees.

### *Organizational-level gaps*

Our mapping review shows that current scholarship is state- or refugee-centric, with limited research at the organizational level. Empirical research is unevenly distributed, with considerably more research on support organizations than employing organizations. This is surprising, since businesses are the primary stakeholders in the refugee quest for employment. A closer investigation into motivations for business engagement, effective workplace initiatives, cross-cultural training, up-skilling training, diversity and inclusion policies, as well as various other forms of support within workplaces, could expand current theorization and understanding of corporate social



responsibility, corporate engagement in social issues and inclusive workplace initiatives. Also worth studying are the short-term and long-term organizational practices, policies and initiatives and their effectiveness throughout a longitudinal timeframe.

### *Theoretical gap*

Despite the wide variety of fields involved in researching refugees, many studies remain atheoretical. Greater advancement of the field could be achieved through, for example, applying diversified theoretical lenses. At the moment, for instance, the theoretical positioning of the current literature seems to suggest individual-level refugee agency. That is, refugees are expected to become more active in acculturation (Vinokurov *et al.* 2017) and integration efforts (Strang and Ager 2010), as well as developing their own human capital (e.g. Dustmann and Fabbri 2003) and expanding their social networks (Gericke *et al.* 2018; Korac 2003). To lessen the burden on individuals and understand shared responsibility across the levels of analysis, we observe the need to incorporate societal-, institutional- and/or organizational-level theories to better conceptualize the multiplicity of barriers to refugee workforce integration.

To expand theoretical contributions in the management field, extant assumptions in existing management and organizational studies should be questioned. For example, Szkudlarek *et al.* (2019) extended the long-standing theoretical framework of international adjustment by deviating from empirical path dependency on company-initiated international assignees, to study refugees' adjustment in receiving countries. Further studies can investigate the long-standing assumptions on theoretical concepts, such as culture shock and acculturation, which are predominantly researched in expatriation and international study contexts. The notion of the *canvas ceiling* developed in this paper can also bring about a multilevel overreaching perspective into our current theorization of management practices and inclusive workplaces. Research in this domain is primarily focused on race- and gender-related issues, and the inclusion of refugees is a promising avenue for expanding our theorizing. We also recommend the application of the *canvas ceiling* in global talent management and global leadership literature to further our advancement in fostering the refugee talent pool. Given the contemporary dynamics of global migration trends, challenging the pre-existing assumptions of management theories can

further advance our theoretical insights to encompass a wider range of globally mobile workers.

## Conclusion

We conclude by noting that our multidisciplinary review and proposed future research agenda aim to assist and contribute to greater engagement of both management scholars and practitioners in resolving refugee employment issues. We urgently call for the current knowledge gap in the field to be addressed. To do so requires a research approach that engages with numerous stakeholders, incorporating those who are perceived not only as research participants but also as direct recipients of knowledge. Only then can the relevance and applicability of the research be tested in various countries and contexts. With a rising call for socially responsible businesses and inclusive workplaces, management scholars and practitioners need to pay attention to the issue of refugee workforce integration and acknowledge the need for impactful research and practice in this arena. Given the increasing internationalization and diversification of workforces across the world, the function of management is progressively becoming *international* and *cross-sectorial* at its core. This change should be reflected both in practice and theory. We hope this review provides the foundation for a more nuanced and sophisticated expansion of the field.

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