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What Does It Mean to Be a Refugee? Views from South Africa

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Abstract

Dominant representations of refugees often frame negative understandings of their circumstances, as well as affect wellbeing and limit opportunities for building dignified lives in exile. Drawing on the experiences of African refugee women in South Africa, this paper examines how the designation 'refugee' is perceived and contested. Participants are 20 refugee women living in Johannesburg, South Africa. The study reveals, through narrative methodology, five key areas of perception: lived perceptions of identity, stigma and social exclusion, resilience and survival strategies, past life and present realities, and aspirations for belonging and recognition. By foregrounding the voices of one of the most marginalized groups in society, the article highlights the critical links between refugee representations, and the possibilities of empowerment in the host country.

Keywords: Refugee Women, Perceptions, Lived Experiences, Identity, Stigma, Resilience