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Refugee agency in secondary mobility decision-making: a systematic literature review

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Decisions made by millions of refugees about where to go, how to make a living and how to secure a future are fundamental drivers of secondary movements. While a substantial body of literature addresses factors contributing to migrants' decision-making, a comprehensive understanding of the central role of refugees in secondary mobility decision-making, including agency and strategies employed, remains underexplored. This is partly due to the belief that refugees are constrained by external and structural factors and cannot exercise agency, which we challenge. This article provides a systematic analysis of the literature on refugees' secondary mobility decision-making processes. Using a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology, it presents an in-depth analysis of 40 peer-reviewed, English-language research articles selected from the Web of Science and Scopus databases published before September 2022. The article critically examines the drivers, prevailing dichotomies and conceptual frameworks surrounding refugee categorization, agency, and mobility. By synthesizing a wide range of literature, our paper presents emerging alternative concepts and frameworks that shed light on the complex dynamics of decision-making.

KEYWORDS

refugee, agency, decision-making, mobility, immobility

1 Introduction

Amid record-high global forced displacements, efforts by developed nations to deter and manage refugees' movement, have left a handful of states to bear the brunt of refugee protection (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Hathaway, 2014). Over 75% of the world's refugees currently reside in low- or middle-income countries, with two-thirds enduring protracted situations that extend beyond 5 years (UNHCR, 2022). Consequently, international protection often translates to long-term dependency on humanitarian aid, encampment, and limited prospects for lasting solutions. This 'containment approach' (Chimni, 2002) not only overburdens the first countries of asylum but also accounts for the rise in secondary movements, where refugees depart from their first or current country of (*de facto*) asylum in search of improved protection elsewhere (Aleinikoff and Poellot, 2013).

Despite the systemic factors underlying this phenomenon, developed states often label secondary movements as 'irregular migration' or 'queue jumping' (Garlick, 2016; Martin, 2021). Such movements, even significant ones like the influx of Syrian asylum-seekers into

Europe around 2015, are frequently depicted as crises or extraordinary phenomena (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Tan, 2017). This discourse contrasts with the limited empirical understanding of refugees' secondary movements and the associated decision-making processes. While considerable refugee studies delve into initial destination choices (where to go), self-reliance strategies, and network considerations (Düvell, 2019), a comprehensive understanding of refugees' central role in secondary movement decision-making, encompassing agency, strategies used, and models of decision-making, remains underexplored. This diverges from research on irregular migration (Benezer and Zetter, 2015; Mainwaring and Brigden, 2016), which highlights fragmented, unplanned journeys occurring in stages (Collyer, 2010), distinct from the holistic perspective needed for secondary refugee movement. Addressing this gap has profound implications for governmental and humanitarian responses beyond crisis narratives (Van Hear et al., 2018; Bergman-Rosamond et al., 2022).

Such insight must particularly consider the risks and vulnerabilities refugees encounter in their first countries of asylum as potential drivers for secondary movement. Identifying these risks, understanding refugees' risk management strategies, and discerning how individual risk perceptions impact the decision to move or remain are crucial. While early literature on migrant decision-making oversimplifies the push and pull factors (Skeldon, 1990; De Haas, 2011),[1] emerging studies highlight migrants' dynamic recalibrations during their journey (Townsend and Ooman, 2015). Furthermore, risk assessments and decisions interconnect with -migrants' experiences, beliefs, emotions, and information gleaned from their environment, reflecting their social and cultural backgrounds and networks (FitzGerald and Arar, 2018; Düvell, 2019; Ghosn et al., 2021; Riva and Hoffstaedter, 2021).

Building on this evolving but nascent literature, this article undertakes a systematic review of refugee secondary movements, spanning diverse disciplines and methodologies. While traditional literature reviews are often associated with retrieval bias methodological limitations (Snyder, 2019), this study employs a systematic literature review (SLR) with a structured search protocol and defined criteria to ensure transparency and replicability. Originally developed for evidence-based practice, SLRs suit for research fields with varied conceptual and epistemological approaches with diverse information sources (Shaffril et al., 2021), exemplified by the dispersed nature of refugee secondary movement literature across disciplines like sociology, social and cultural anthropology, human geography, law, development studies, migration, vulnerability, risk management, and public policy. Employing a systematic approach facilitates comprehensive coverage of diverse parameters influencing refugees' decision-making.

The article addresses two key questions:

1 What does existing scientific literature reveal about manifestations of refugee agency in secondary movements?
2 What critical perspectives and emerging trends characterize the literature on secondary mobility within refugee agency?

The subsequent section delineates the SLR methodology, search strategy, and article selection process. The ensuing sections present the results, with the analysis unfolding in two streams: first, exploring drivers of secondary movement, risk assessment, and location choice; second, considering competing theoretical and conceptual frameworks for analyzing secondary refugee mobility.

2 Methodology for systematic literature review

Several guidelines and seminal studies exist on structuring and executing credible SLR (see Schultze, 2015; Beerens and Tehler, 2016; Shaffril et al., 2021). This study addresses the SLR guidelines developed by Shaffril et al. (2021), which, though developed for climate change adaptation, offer a comprehensive set of steps adaptable to social science SLRs. Shaffril et al. (2021) outline six systematic steps: (i) reviewing protocols, established standards, guidelines, and relevant articles; (ii) formulating review questions; (iii) implementing systematic search strategies; (iv) evaluating quality; (v) extracting and analyzing data; and (vi) presenting findings (Shaffril et al., 2021, p. 22267).

2.1 Protocol and eligibility criteria: databases and criteria

SLRs emphasize utilizing multiple databases to mitigate retrieval bias in the search process (Durach et al., 2017). This study leverages Web of Science and Scopus due to their coverage and capacity for advanced search queries. Our inclusion criteria encompassed peer-reviewed research (journal articles and book chapters) written in English. We excluded conference proceedings, editorials, book reviews and reprints. Since the objective is to review refugee's agency and decision-making, we included the research in the areas of social sciences, humanities, and law.[2]

2.2 Formulating review questions

We broadly define 'secondary movement' as post-initial refugee mobility of legal protection status. This covers movement within first countries of asylum, cross-border shifts, and return to countries of origin.

Key review inquiries are:

- What research methods and data sources characterize the literature?
- Which groups and methodologies were employed in the studies?
- What factors underlie refugees' decisions for secondary mobility as identified in the literature?
- What critiques and emerging trends characterize literature on secondary mobility within refugee agencies?

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1 For example, 'push–pull factor' appears in the intergovernmental European Migration Network's Asylum and Migration Glossary. See: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-migration-network-emn/emn-asylum-and-migration-glossary/glossary/push-pull-factor_en

2 We excluded results from engineering, mathematics, physics, natural sciences, health sciences and similar fields, and retained results from fields such as anthropology, demography, risk management, human geography, migration studies, refugee studies, cultural studies and similar fields, which we classify as social sciences and humanities.

2.3 Systematic search strategy, search queries and results

Scopus and the Web of Science employ distinct search operators and strategies. Web of Science allows query combinations post-search, while Scopus provides more accurate search results with combined queries. We tried two search queries initially before developing the final search query. These involved fewer, directly relevant keywords: 'refuge', 'asylum', 'forced migra* AND mobilit*', 'move* AND deci*' both in Scopus and Web of Sciences. We reviewed the titles and abstracts of the search results and harvested other relevant keywords Relevant keywords were augmented from the search results in the pilot phase. The pilot search especially helped to identify keywords regarding secondary mobility. Transit, journey, trajectory, journey pattern were among those together with the keywords indicating agency, such as decision, choice, decision-making, choose and strategy. Moreover, enhanced indexing of keywords in both databases facilitated an inclusive approach across disciplines and theories. Truncation function (*) accommodated keyword variations. The search ended in September 2022, we included all relevant articles in databases published before this date and excluded publications after this date.

The table shows the keywords used. Columns were combined using the AND function, whereas rows were combined using the OR function (Table 1).

Initial queries yielded 869 and 1,064 articles in Web of Science and Scopus, respectively. Eligibility filters reduced these to 154 (63 from Web of Science and 91 from Scopus), which were further reduced to 68 after title-abstract review and deduplication. Two authors read the abstracts more carefully and individually assessed the content to decide whether they provide an analysis of secondary mobility decision-making or not. Then the authors decided on the corpus following a joint evaluation of individual assessments, including every article on secondary migration decision-making of refugees. This rigorous analysis left 41 key articles, with two removed

due to language and focus discrepancies. Notably, a highly relevant article absent from Web of Science and Scopus databases were included due to citation frequency. The final analysis included 40 articles (Figure 1).

2.4 Quality appraisal

All stages involved at least two authors, scrutinizing abstracts and checking the context rather than relying solely on keyword review. Through ongoing assessment in data analysis phase, the authors checked each article's relevance to the topic under review. The discussion section references key articles mentioned in the collection to highlight broader field connections.

2.5 Data extraction

We conducted an in-depth qualitative analysis of the selected content using NVivo software. For NVivo analysis, we used a broad coding strategy encompassing categorization of empirical findings and theoretical/conceptual variations. This approach fulfills Shaffril et al.'s (2021) sixth step–data analysis, whose results are presented in the following section.

3 Results

This section presents the review findings. First, we provide an overview of the corpus, highlighting publication year, methods, regions, and refugee groups (Table 2). Key factors shaping secondary refugee movement decisions are then thematically explored. This section concludes by discussing emerging conceptual critiques and alternative frameworks.

TABLE 1 Search keywords.

FIGURE 1
Flow chart of query search and selection steps.
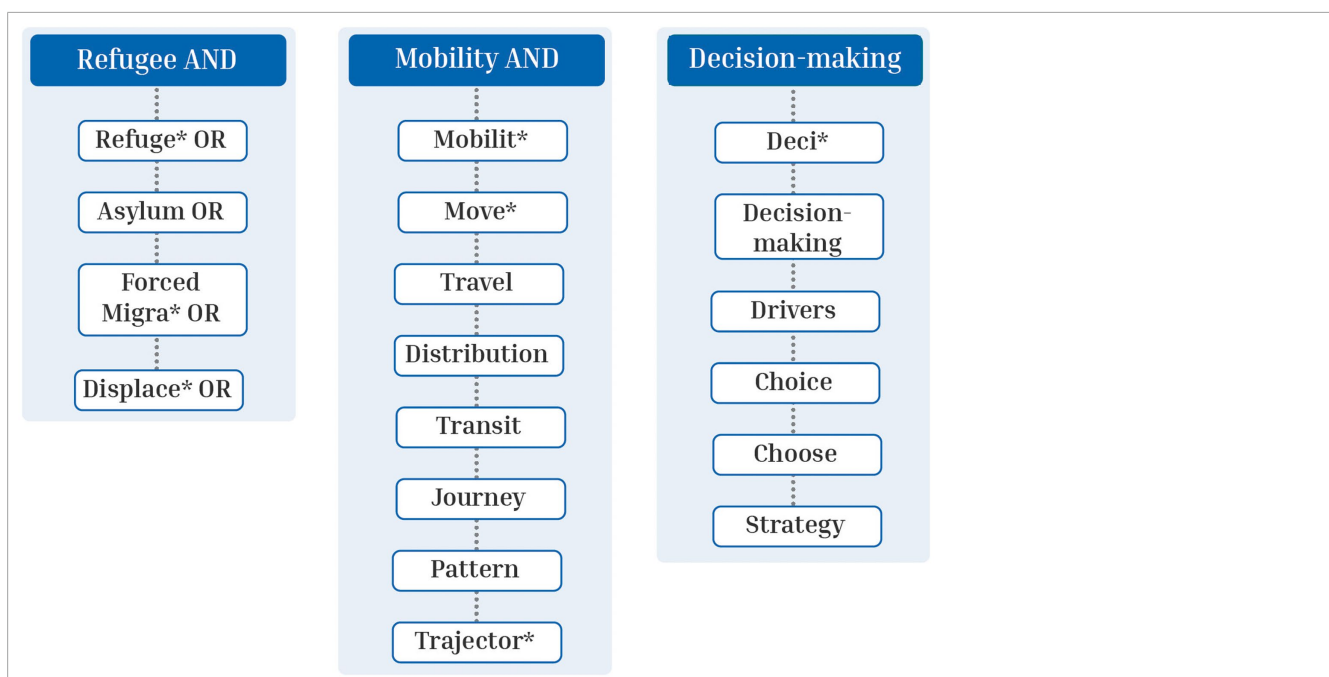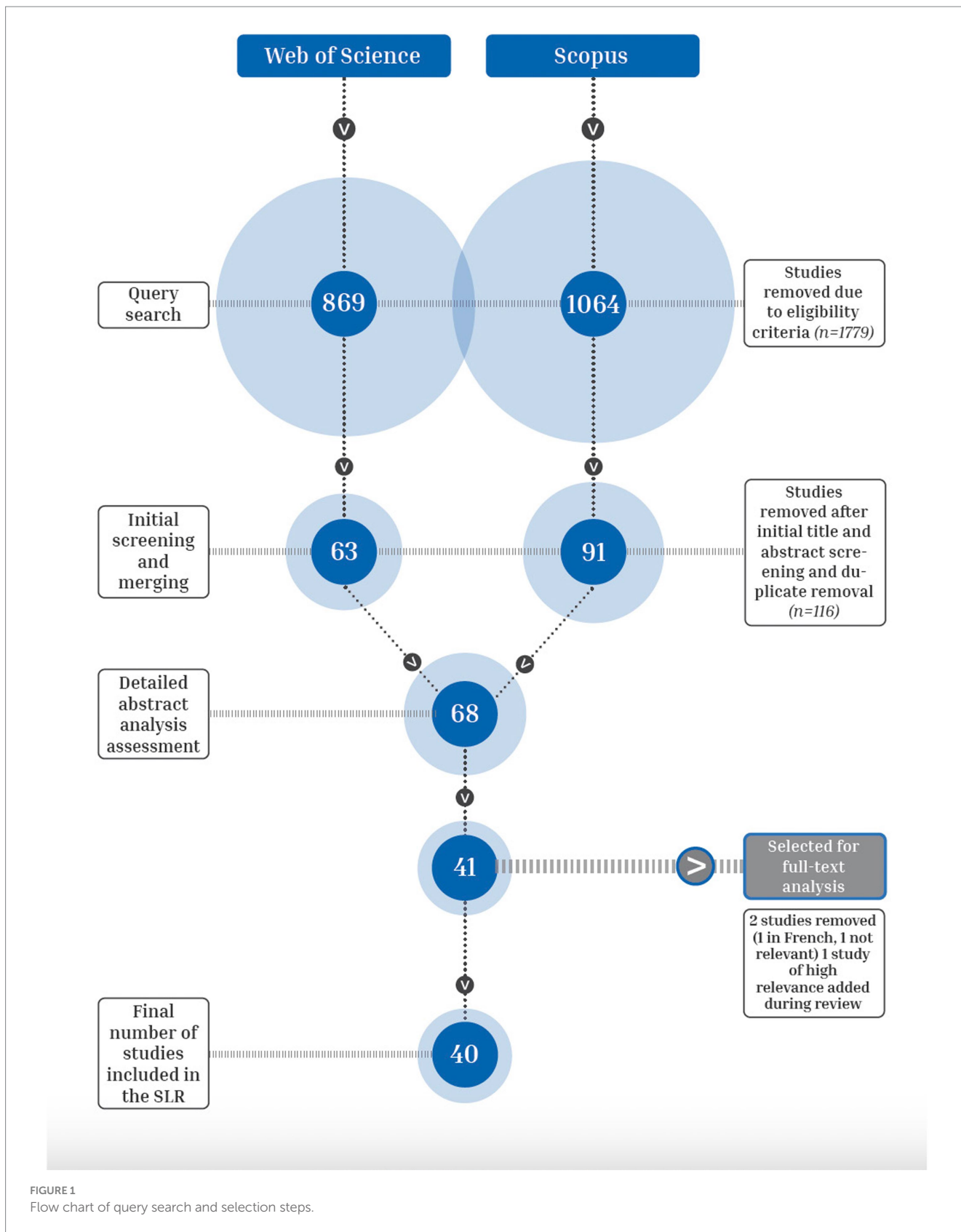
Figure 2 shows a surge in the literature after 2015, with 88% post-2015 articles. This coincides with the 'refugee crisis,' particularly Syrian refugees' movement to Europe. Figure 3's word cloud underscores Syrian refugees' prominence. Most studies

($n = 33$) focused on migratory routes from the Middle East to Europe.

Of 40 articles, 27 used qualitative methods, 5 quantitative, 4 mixed methods, and 4 analyzed existing literature and secondary data.

TABLE 2 Reviewed articles, characteristics, and framework/concept for analysis (*n* = 40).

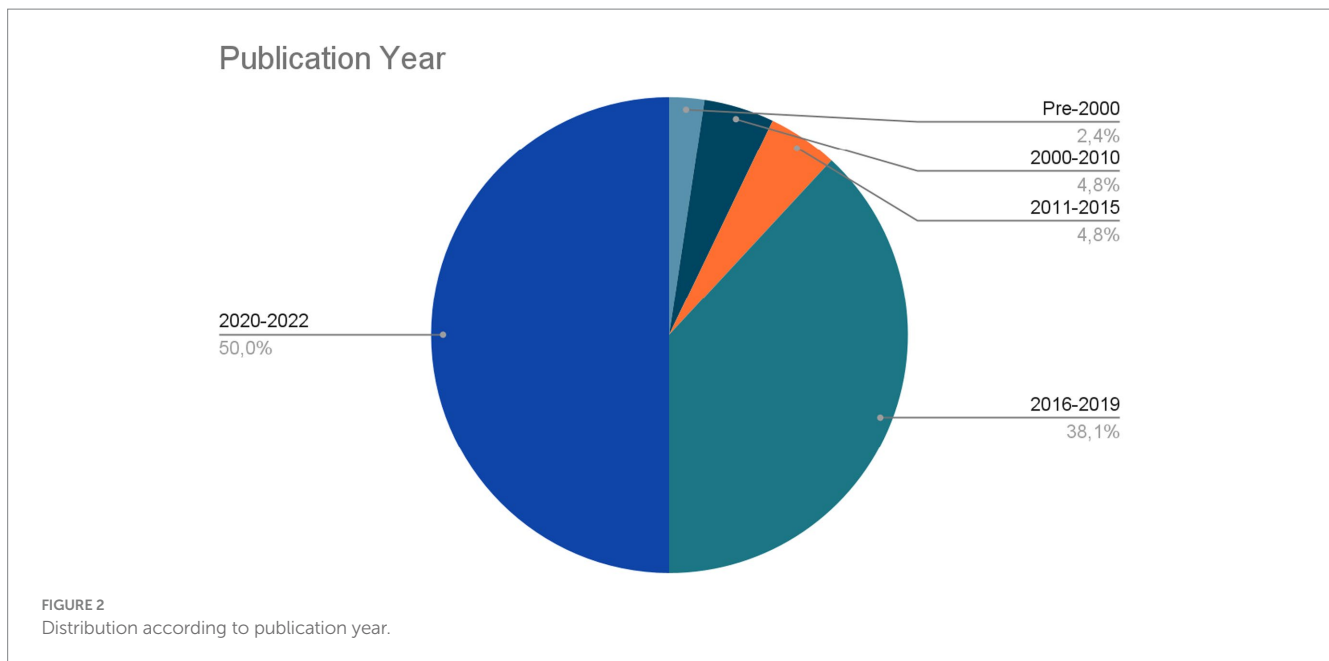|	Author(s) (year)	Disciplinary background (first author)	Methodology	Case-Refugee group	Geographical Focus/Country of the study	Framework/ concept
1	Crawley and Jones (2021)	International migration	Qualitative	Syrian, Nigerian and Afghan	Turkey, Libya and Iran	Migrant journeys
2	Maroufof and Kouki (2017)	Migration studies	Qualitative	Pakistani	Greece	Masculinity
3	Wahab and Khairi (2019)	Human security and international migration	Mixed	Rohingyas	Bangladesh, Malaysia	Activities of transnationalism
4	Tegenbos and Büscher (2017)	Conflict and development	Qualitative	NS	Kenya	Conflict mobilities
5	Boese et al. (2020)	Sociology	Qualitative	NS	Australia	Multi-local settlement mobilities
6	Syed Zwick (2022)	Economics	Quantitative	NS	Libya	Determinants of migration
7	Legomsky (2003)	Law	Document review	NS	NS	Legal/descriptive
8	Clark (2019)	Politics and international relations	Qualitative	Hazara (from Afghanistan)	Indonesia, Australia	Life narrative approach (ethnographic)
9	Koser (1997)	Migration studies	Qualitative	Iranian	Netherlands	Labor migration
10	Düvell (2019)	Migration studies	Qualitative	Syrian, Afghan, Eritrean, Yemenit, Somali, Iraqi	Turkey, Greece	Migration Infrastructure, Opportunity-constraints structure
11	Riva and Hoffstaedter (2021)	Gender, women and sexuality studies and migration	Qualitative	Central American, Rohingya	Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, United States	Internal contradictions in the human rights framework
12	Kvittingen et al. (2019)	Social and policy sciences/migration and refugees	Qualitative	Syrian, Iraqi	Jordan	Push-Pull
13	Schuster (2005)	Sociology	Qualitative	NS	Italy	Status mobility
14	Ghosn et al. (2021)	Political science/peace and conflict	Quantitative	Syrian	Lebanon	Descriptive
15	Matsui and Raymer (2020)	Not available online	Quantitative	Developing countries	Developed countries	Push-pull
16	FitzGerald and Arar (2018)	Sociology	Review article	NS	NS	World systems theory
17	Tobin et al. (2022)	Anthropology	Mixed	Syrian	Jordan	Family and kinship dynamics in mobility
18	Rottmann and Kaya (2021)	Anthropology	Qualitative	Syrian	Turkey	Cultural intimacy, emotions and refugee belonging
19	Achilli (2016)	Political anthropology	Qualitative	Syrian	Jordan	Ethnographic
20	Shaffer and Stewart (2021)	Anthropology	NS	NS	UK, South Africa	Migration trajectories
21	Poole and Riggan (2020)	Anthropology	Qualitative	Eritrean	Ethiopia	Temporal trauma and precarity
22	Kuschminder (2018)	Migration studies	Quantitative	Afghans	Greece and Turkey	Refugee journeys
23	Merisalo and Jauhiainen (2020)	Not available online	Quantitative	NS	Jordan, Turkey, Iran, Greece, Italy	Social media/digital connectivity

(Continued)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

	Author(s) (year)	Disciplinary background (first author)	Methodology	Case-Refugee group	Geographical Focus/Country of the study	Framework/ concept
24	Missbach (2019)	Sociology/mobility	Qualitative	NS (Afghan Hazara)	Indonesia	ethnographic
25	Kuschminder and Waidler (2020)	Migration studies	Mixed	Afghans, Iranian, Iraqi, Pakistani, Syrian	Turkey, Greece	'transit' as spaces of transit migration
26	Iaria (2011)	Migration studies	Qualitative	Iraqi	Jordan, Syria	Returnee's preparedness resource mobilization and the transnational mobility and social networks approach
27	Crawley and Kaytaz (2022)	International migration	Qualitative	Afghan	Greece, Turkey, Iran	Refugee journeys
28	Torfa et al. (2022)	Development economics	Qualitative (Process Net-Maps)	Afghans, Syrians	Germany	Ethnographic
29	Van Hear et al. (2018)	Anthropology and development	NS	Afghan, Somali	Iran, Pakistan, Southern Africa	Push-pull plus
30	Belloni (2016)	Sociology	Qualitative	Eritrean	Italy	Gambling studies
31	Galemba et al. (2021)	Anthropology	Qualitative	Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador	Mexico-Guatemala border	Contingency logics
32	Aru (2022)	Political and economic geography	Qualitative	NS	Italy	
33	Blair et al. (2022)	Political science	Mixed	NS	Africa, Middle East South Asia	Descriptive
34	Glorius and Nienaber (2022)	Human geography	Qualitative	Syria, Iraq, Eritrea, Gambia, Sudan	Luxemburg, Germany	Aspiration-ability model, migration thresholds, social capital theory transnational theory
35	Nimführ and Sesay (2019)	Anthropology	Qualitative	Non-deportable Refugee (NS)	Malta	Ethnographic border regime analysis
36	Arriola Vega (2021)	Anthropology	Qualitative	Central American	Mexico	Fluid (im)mobility
37	McMahon and Sigona (2021)	International migration	Qualitative	NS	Mediterranean	Ethnographic
38	Wissink et al. (2013)	Migration studies	Qualitative	Diverse group of migrants from Africa, ME and Asia	Turkey	Dynamic migration trajectories – socio-institutional environments
39	Dubow and Kuschminder (2021)	Migration studies	Qualitative	Afghan, Iraqi, Syrian	Eastern Mediterranean route	Refugee journeys
40	Tuzi (2019)	Refugee and gender studies	Qualitative	Syrian, Eritrean	Italy, Greece, Germany, Lebanon	The insecurity-mobility model

Qualitative methods dominate due to the cultural shift in migration studies (Levy et al., 2020). Similarly, Table 2 reveals the disciplinary backgrounds of the first authors in the SLR collection, underscoring that most authors engaging in refugee decision-making in the first countries of asylum specialize in migration studies, sociology, and anthropology.

3.1 Factors driving secondary migration: risk and decision-making

Secondary movement is migrants' and refugees' relocation from or within a country after initial refuge from their country of origin. Although the initial stage of the flight from an imminent danger

FIGURE 2
Distribution according to publication year.

FIGURE 3
Word cloud showing the prevalence of specific refugee groups in the review corpus.

related to war, displacement, and threat is regarded as the riskiest part of the journey, secondary movement can be equally life-threatening. Afghan refugees' journeys exemplify these dangers, including walking for days without food and water, exposure to elements, abuse, extortion, and deaths (Kaytaz, 2016; Kuschminder, 2018).

The perilous journey to Europe from Turkey or the Mediterranean, often by overcrowded boats poses risks such as pushbacks, drowning, exploitation or abuse, detention, and deportation. Risk assessment and decision-making are influenced by migration ambitions, familial expectations, structural conditions, and peer information (Kuschminder, 2018). Refugees in protracted

displacement employ diverse strategies to navigate asylum governance regimes, leveraging social, economic, and political assets (Zetter and Long, 2012; Crawley and Kaytaz, 2022; Vancluysen, 2022). Secondary movement decisions are not only affected by state and humanitarian organizations, but also by family, kin, and personal networks (De Haas, 2021).

Physical safety concerns drive irregular migration. Violence and witnessing death push migrants toward Europe for survival. Crawley and Kaytaz (2022) quote an Afghan refugee during an onward journey explaining the reason to migrate: 'In Iran, I was afraid to go out. They treated Afghans as dogs. Afghans go to Iran because they share the same language and religion and expect everything to be good; however, these are all lies. Iranians torture Afghans. When I went to another city in Iran to work, they arrested me and wanted to deport me because Afghans are not allowed to move cities.' [Male, Sayyid, aged 32, divorced, no children; Crawley and Kaytaz (2022), p. 8].

Asylum seekers fear violence despite semi-protectionist policies (Clark, 2019). The decision to move is justified by stories of abuse, torture, and exploitation exacerbated by the ill-defined status of asylum seekers, contributing to migrants' secondary movement decisions.

Risk evaluations or trade-offs occur at all stages, with death as the ultimate risk. Dwelling on Black Africans' experiences in Libya, Crawley and Jones (2021) demonstrate how the risk of death compels migrants to take any possible risk. The constant risk of being killed makes staying in Libya untenable, making Europe imperative for survival. They cite a Nigerian man: '[It] is too risky to go back across the desert. It is better to cross and risk your life at sea than to return. In Libya, if you stay, you know that you will die 1 day. You die in the desert. It is better to risk your life in the boat.' (Crawley and Jones, 2021, p. 3235). Ghosn et al. (2021) found violence in origin and asylum countries making refugees 'experts' in assessing risk. Their research showed that those who have been directly exposed to violence are more willing to return than those who have not because the latter cannot assess the level of risk associated with returning.

McMahon and Sigona (2021) analyzed refugees' experiences of death and associated risk during journeys. Irregular migrants are exposed to news on migrant deaths, and this affects migration decisions. Participants, particularly in the Saharan Desert and Libya, who witnessed death accept the certainty of their own deaths before crossing the sea. The decision to move was, 'thus, interpreted by them not as a search for a better life but as a way of seeking to determine when and where death would come: it was a decision to face death at sea rather than on land' (McMahon and Sigona, 2021, p. 621). Perceived imminent death heightens life-threatening risks (Crawley and Jones, 2021; McMahon and Sigona, 2021). Experiences during a journey influence decisions and risk trade-offs continually (Galemba et al., 2021). Crawley and Jones (2021) note how the death of a friend, relative, or gatekeeper reconfigures the resources, logistics, and information, impacting staying in or moving. Literature labels Libya and Iran as the most dangerous places for physical safety.

However, experiencing violent pushbacks in the Mediterranean and witnessing deaths can prompt some people to reassess risks. Wissink et al. (2013) show how experiencing death led Turkish irregular migrants to abandon risky plans for safer stays. Like other refugee decision-making elements, conditions and asylum country experiences shape dynamic trajectories. Wissink et al.'s (2013) study is significant, depicting how irregular border crossing risks reshape secondary movement intentions.

Upon reaching Italy, many refugees avoid applying for asylum, opting to irregularly cross ambiguous borders. This stems from uncertainty about procedures, protection policy gaps, difficult economic and social situations, and evading the internal EU border regime (Aru, 2022). Conversely, those fearing refoulement seek asylum by assessing insights from countrymen or acquaintances. This showcases active multi-source refugee information assessment, particularly through social and digital connections with successful re-settlers (Tuzi, 2019). Blair et al. (2022) suggest *de jure* policy dissemination via communication technologies and transnational ethnic kin. Glorius and Nienaber (2022) support this, comparing asylum governance assessment in Germany and Luxembourg-bound journeys. Similarly, Belloni (2016) asserts that those seeking asylum in Italy might breach the Dublin Regulation for enhanced Northern European protection.

Socio-economic rights and the ability to access services are recurring themes in studies by Schuster (2005), Kvittingen et al. (2019), Poole and Riggan (2020), and Tobin et al. (2022). Achilli (2016) reveals that many interviewees faced challenges accessing basic services in Jordan, including affordable healthcare, risking refugees' lives. Blair et al. (2022) stress the importance of access to services, free movement, and employment opportunities in host countries. The absence of procedural rights for formal work triggers secondary movements, including return (Kvittingen et al., 2019). Kuschminder (2018) notes that Afghan refugees cited 'employment opportunities' and 'opportunities to make more money' as key reasons for choosing Turkey in her research, while employed refugees are less likely to migrate from Turkey (Kuschminder and Waidler, 2020). However, this variable is insignificant in Greece, whereas in Turkey, employed participants are 11 percentage points less likely to migrate onwards than participants who wanted to stay in the country. Similarly, Wissink et al. (2013) cited reasons for staying in Turkey, including the ability to reside with one's family, employment, and asylum applications.

Iaria (2011) stresses how legal uncertainty and limited opportunities drive Iraqi refugees to return. Syrian refugees in Jordan face obstacles in accessing work permits and temporary residence, influencing secondary movement choices (Achilli, 2016; Rottmann and Kaya, 2021). Achilli (2016), p. 11 quotes a Syrian man in his late sixties, 'I felt lost when I first fled Syria to come to Jordan. I do not want to feel lost twice. The quoted refugee's ownership of land and a house in Syria makes returning home more appealing than moving to Europe, where prospects may differ significantly.

Crawley and Kaytaz (2022), Crawley and Jones (2021), and Torfa et al. (2022) reveal poor living conditions and socio-economic inequalities motivating Afghans to leave Iran. Boese et al. (2020) explore the interplay of employment and social ties in secondary movements. Their research shows that asylum seekers' work entry relates to local community membership and social capital developed during 'liminal spaces of involuntary waiting' (Mountz, 2011; Poole and Riggan, 2020).

State policy, procedural rights and protection policy are intertwined with socioeconomic rights. Authors, such as Iaria (2011), Clark (2019), Kvittingen et al. (2019), and Tobin et al. (2022), stress the importance of protection policy in affecting secondary movement. For Iraqi refugees in Syria and Jordan, slow resettlement progress drives return. Limited capacity of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the reluctance of Western governments to deal with a large number of resettlement applications exacerbate the situation. Prolonged uncertainty led refugees to return to Iraq, despite physical damage and trauma from the tragic loss of loved ones, their houses, land, properties, and jobs. For these refugees, return is not a matter of 'free choice' but more a reaction to the lack of alternatives (Iaria, 2011, p. 112). The precarious legal status and limited resettlement opportunities push refugees to consider return. Similar findings apply to irregular migrants in Indonesia (Clark, 2019, p. 95), who take risky routes toward Australia due to complex processes.

In addition to Iaria's (2011) findings, it is important to note that Syria and Jordan have not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention. Hence, refugees in these countries lack refugee status but are deemed temporary guests, requiring precarious temporary residence permits tied to several conjunctural and political motives. The same applies to Afghans in Iran (Crawley and Kaytaz, 2022). Since 2003, Afghan refugees in Iran obtain temporary protection, restricted by high fees and employment limitations. Registration issues and status regularization gaps lead most Afghans living in Iran to be deportable. Since 2007, Afghans have experienced mass deportation from Iran (Kaytaz, 2016), which is undoubtedly a major risk and has triggered a difficult journey toward Europe. Despite being legally unable to repatriate asylum seekers to Indonesia, Clark (2019) highlights widespread refoulement due to a lack of legal standards against state arbitrariness, which contributes to individuals' decisions to escape from Indonesia as quickly as possible.

Differences in policy environments also matter in terms of the routes pursued and the choice of destination country for secondary movements. Within the EU, national deterrence measures, such as strict family reunification procedures and long processing times, despite being eligible, have been linked to asylum seekers' willingness to embark on risky and irregular journeys either by sea or overland, as opposed to applying for asylum at the land borders of geographically more easily accessible EU Member States (Dubow and Kuschminder, 2021).

However, not all irregular migrants or refugees decide to leave their first country of asylum. Departure decisions hinge on various factors such as country conditions, cultural intimacy, and the success of coping strategies (Rottmann and Kaya, 2021). Kuschminder (2018) explores Afghan refugees in Turkey using strategies co-owning a business with a local to work and make a decent living. Syed Zwick (2022) scrutinized the protection incidents that forced migrants may experience in the form of persecution in the country of origin and in countries of refuge in the form of physical abuse, kidnapping, or robbery. Through a quantitative study of migrants in Libya, Syed Zwick (2022) observed the impact of protection incidents on onward migration aspirations to France, Sweden, or the United Kingdom, but not to Italy, over staying in Libya compared to respondents who reported not having experienced any protection incidents in Libya. She also noted that in the same context, not all individuals aspire to migrate. Some prefer to stay in Libya due to limited asylum opportunities and institutional barriers.

Personal networks and cultural ties significantly influence mobility decision-making (Kuschminder, 2018; Wahab and Khairi, 2019; Rottmann and Kaya, 2021; Tobin et al., 2022). Wahab and Khairi (2019) found Rohingya refugees preferred Malaysia due to its progressive Islamic image and compassionate society.

Conversely, cultural ties might prompt refugees to stay in the country of first asylum despite financial hardships. In Turkey, some opted against secondary movement because they 'felt comfortable due to its religious and cultural milieu', complicating simplistic economic or push-pull explanations (Rottmann and Kaya, 2021).

Various other factors play a critical role in structuring individual and family decision-making. Routes used by, or open to, smugglers and the associated costs (Koser, 1997; Kvittingen et al., 2019; Riva and Hoffstaedter, 2021); availability of hotels, transportation infrastructure, travel agencies or other private services (FitzGerald and Arar, 2018; Düvell, 2019; Riva and Hoffstaedter, 2021); the presence or absence of religious institutions, NGOs, and the UNHCR (Schuster, 2005; FitzGerald and Arar, 2018; Düvell, 2019; Riva and Hoffstaedter, 2021); the presence or absence of brokers that facilitate a migrant's registration as a refugee with governmental bodies or UNHCR (FitzGerald and Arar, 2018; Düvell, 2019; Riva and Hoffstaedter, 2021); the physical proximity of first countries of Asylum (Tobin et al., 2022); and the use of digital technologies to gain information about asylum policies, employment opportunities, and lodging in 'transit' and destination countries in addition to planning routes, (FitzGerald and Arar, 2018).

4 Contested concepts and competing theories

The previous section highlights the importance of agency in how refugees make risk calculations and choices at various stages of their journey, navigate between legal statuses, and actively design strategies for secondary movement. Another notable finding from the literature reveals compelling theories and conceptual variations. Reviewed articles manifest diverse categorizations of refugees, secondary movement definitions, and conceptualizations of 'refugee agency'. This divergence stems from authors' theoretical orientations and disciplinary positioning. Hence, analytical conclusions across the literature occasionally diverge. This section identifies key debates and emerging analytical tools for understanding refugee decision-making.

4.1 On the refugee

The conceptualization of 'refugees' as a stable and meaningful label to describe a specific category of persons having migrated or 'on the move' is increasingly contentious in the literature (Koser, 1997; Schuster, 2005; FitzGerald and Arar, 2018; Kuschminder, 2018; McMahon and Sigona, 2021; Riva and Hoffstaedter, 2021; Crawley and Kaytaz, 2022). Refugees present a unique challenge for academics conducting migration studies, practitioners providing services, and politicians developing policies to serve this population. Often depicted as a homogenous category, refugees' victimhood can confine their autonomy and agency (Zetter, 2007; Crawley and Skleparis, 2018).

FitzGerald and Arar (2018) argue that 'the legal concept of "recognizing" refugees is based on the premise that refugees are an ontologically given category existing in the real world, waiting to be seen for who they are' (FitzGerald and Arar, 2018, p. 392). However, a 'refugee' is shaped by the creation of international borders (ibid:0.394). Riva and Hoffstaedter (2021), p. 6 reveal that third-party brokers, including legal advocates, NGOs, CSOs and other mediating agents, play a vital role in helping refugees gain their legal status. FitzGerald and Arar (2018) also observe a disparity between the definitions imposed by states and international institutions and the self-definitions by displaced people, who sometimes reject the refugee label or only use it situationally when interacting with authorities. Geographic mobility aligns with shifts in migration statuses (Schuster, 2005; Wissink et al., 2013); refugees strategically adopt legal labels throughout their journey (Carling, 2017; McMahon and Sigona, 2018, 2021). Criticisms target the refugee-migrant dichotomy, particularly its portrayal in media and politics, where Black African migrants are labeled as economic or illegal migrants, diminishing their protection status (Carling, 2017; McMahon and Sigona, 2018, 2021).

4.2 Foundational debates on mobility decision-making

The reviewed literature showcases diverse theoretical orientations and builds upon critiques of earlier strands of the literature. Notably, the push-pull theory, grounded in rational choice, faces criticism for oversimplifying migrants as cost–benefit calculators, neglecting the role of family, culture, kinship, and emotions in migration decision-making (Achilli, 2016; Maroufof and Kouki, 2017; Tobin et al., 2022).

Another major critique is the linear depiction of refugee mobility between origin and asylum (Kuschminder and Waidler, 2020; Crawley and Jones, 2021; Dubow and Kuschminder, 2021; Rottmann and Kaya, 2021; Snel et al., 2021). This unidirectional flow affects refugee conceptualisation as previously discussed and defines intermediary countries as 'in-between', possibly diminishing refugee experiences there. The contested concept of transit migration suggests individuals are 'stuck' or 'stranded' between two points, exploring their options (Collyer, 2010; Crawley and Jones, 2021).

The call to abandon 'transit migrant' is growing due to political controversies and its potential to exacerbate discrimination against irregular migrants (Dubow and

Kuschminder, 2021). Additionally, it has been linked to policy-making efforts that associate irregular migrants with the 'myth of invasion' (De Haas, 2008; Düvell et al., 2014). Critics of this framework suggests that migrants might lack a fixed destination in mind, control over their travel, and countries could serve as both destinations and transit points with changing perceptions over time (Rottmann and Kaya, 2021). They may even decide not to leave, making immobility a choice rather than entrapment. Critics suggest that migration patterns should be viewed as dynamic decision-making processes (Wissink et al., 2013). Research on recent refugee migration suggests that migration decisions reflect social, emotional, and economic lives in transit countries (Crawley and Skleparis, 2018), emphasizing the transformative nature of journeys for migrants (Kaytaz, 2016).

Protracted displacement is another widely criticized framework. Dominant conceptualizations of protracted displacement take a sedentarist approach, representing protracted displacement as a static situation in which refugees are 'stuck. This approach masks the agency of those living in protracted displacement situations and the ways in which mobility is strategically employed. Crawley and Kaytaz (2022) assert that addressing protracted displacement requires recognizing refugees' agency as the structural factors causing displacement. Etzold et al. (2019) redefined protracted displacement as a 'figuration', wherein multiple structural forces constrain refugees' capacities and free choices over extended periods.

The reviewed literature reveals complex refugee decision-making through empirical data capturing diverse phenomena observed in the field. These studies expand the scope of refugee goals, encompassing choices like remaining in first countries of asylum (Rottmann and Kaya, 2021) or returning to countries of origin (Legomsky, 2003; Ghosn et al., 2021). They also provide deeper insights into when and how refugees leave their first countries of asylum (Schuster, 2005; FitzGerald and Arar, 2018). Critiques within these reviewed works challenge mobility and 'refugee' categorization at their convergence, adding complexity to both the 'refugee' category and the assumed characteristics of their movement.

One of the most obvious issues regarding refugees' decision-making relates to states without formal recognition of refugee status. In Jordan, Kvittingen et al. (2019) highlight that the lack of access to decent legal employment serves as a major reason for Syrians and Iraqis to leave. This arguably transforms refugees into irregular labor migrants, where they are technically safe but lack opportunities for decent work, potentially leading to secondary movement or aspirations to return.

Further, though states often recognize a 'refugee' based on an individual's need for protection, the literature shows that refugees often act as a family unit, using different strategies for risk management and economic stability. Amid evolving security contexts, they take strategic actions within multiple timeframes (FitzGerald and Arar, 2018), complicating security-focused notions of individual refugee movement. This further complicates linear mobility ideas, as vulnerable family members stay behind, seeking protection and fearing their safety, but remaining in their country of origin as part of family reunification and risk management strategy.

Debates on migrant (refugee) categorization and mobility decision-making in the reviewed literature remain unsettled, offering a promising arena for further investigation.

5 Emerging concepts and alternative approaches

Scholars focusing on refugee decision-making have emphasized the importance of social capital, risk perceptions, and coping strategies in enhancing our understanding of intentionality and refugee agency (Wissink et al., 2013; Missbach, 2019; Merisalo and Jauhiainen, 2020; Arriola Vega, 2021; Tobin et al., 2022). This highlights the need for further studies and analyses regarding the integration of refugees within socio-institutional environments. To address the critiques summarized in the previous section, scholars have proposed alternate concepts and frameworks, elaborated upon below.

The Migration journey is one such conceptualization that seeks to present the migrant/refugee journey as a complex unit of analysis, as opposed to a simple transition between countries (BenEzer and Zetter, 2015; Kuschminder, 2018; Crawley and Jones, 2021; Crawley and Kaytaz, 2022). Methodologically, research on migration journeys requires soliciting accounts of migration decisions and experiences in foreign locations to explore the meanings attached to these places in their everyday lives and mobility decisions (Crawley and Jones, 2021). This approach effectively brings forth experiences of protracted displacement that might otherwise remain concealed. Crawley and Kaytaz (2022) propose normalizing migration and challenging the presumed sedentary perspectives of migration studies, which tend to portray pre-departure and post-arrival lives as predominantly immobile. Galemba et al. (2021) stressed that journeys are multidirectional or sometimes fragmented due to deportation. Similar to migrants, refugees might accept temporary immobility to mitigate risk and enhance overall mobility.

The reviewed literature also presents the concept of migration infrastructure (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014; Martin, 2015) as a meso-level concept to understand how people regularly navigate the practical aspects of migration, distinct from both macro-level policy discussions and micro-level assessments of individual agencies. Introduced by Xiang and Lindquist (2014), this concept enables the analysis of complex processes between migrants and non-migrants and between human and non-human actors in the migration process, as it is increasingly and intensively mediated by different actors.

Glorius and Nienaber (2022) build on the aspiration-ability model of Carling and Schewel (2018), p. 145 who stated that migration decisions take place in 'two separate steps: the evaluation of migration as a potential course of action (aspiration) and the realization of actual mobility or immobility at a given moment (ability). Migration aspirations are shaped by individual attitudes, social norms, local ideas, and expectations from possible destinations compared to the actual place of residence. Mallett and Hagen-Zanker (2018) use the concept of 'migration thresholds' to refer to a set of psychological barriers that individuals must overcome before selecting mobility as a course of action. First there is the 'indifference threshold', followed by the 'trajectory threshold' in deciding on the means and direction of travel, and lastly the 'locational threshold' prioritizing destinations. In the second step, Glorius and Nienaber (2022) and Carling and Schewel (2018) note the ability to migrate is considered a crucial factor in migration decisions. In this sense, individual-level variables merge with structural conditions pertaining to economic, social, and political contexts.

Lastly, the framework of multi-local settlement mobilities, utilized by Boese et al. (2020), p. 3282 highlights the importance of settlements in the context of continued movements of international migrants after reaching their destination country. This framework combines mobilities

scholarship with the concept of settlement and argues that 'settlement is better understood as a social process involving spatial movement as well as stasis. The framework's value lies in its ability to examine multiple moves across multiple localities, considering employment, family, and community as interconnected factors in mobility decision-making.

It is important to note that the critiques and emerging frameworks extend beyond the field of refugee studies; in fact, they are widely utilized (if not originated) in migration studies and applied to the context of refugees in the examined articles. This underscores the interdisciplinarity nature of the field and the blurring boundaries between refugee and migration studies.

6 Conclusion

The systematic literature review delved into the decision-making processes of refugees to address a range of sub-questions: When does staying in the first country of asylum become a risk or devoid of prospects? What are the trade-offs between risks and returns when considering relocation? Who stays and why, and who proceeds to another destination and why? How do refugees formulate models and methods for their decision-making? Why do refugees choose to move after a certain period in their first country of asylum? Which assets do refugees consider when weighing their options? To what extent do structural factors, personal networks, and governmental and humanitarian responses influence the configuration of these risk?

The literature review identified four clusters integral to refugee protection, forming the project's overall analytical framework for modelling refugees' decision-making. These clusters are directly tied to risk perception, opportunities, asset bundles:

1 Physical safety and procedural rights (protection against *non-refoulement*, legal and *de facto* recognition of refugee status, access to courts and other remedies, and rule of law; Feller, 2006; Stevens, 2013).
2 Socioeconomic rights (shelter, health, sanitation, level of domestic and international assistance, access to the labor market, and the market's capacity to absorb refugees; Campbell, 2006; Betts et al., 2017).
3 Social inclusion and resilience (level of discrimination and hate crimes, intergroup dynamics, social networks, community initiatives, innovation, and entrepreneurship; Madhavan and Landau, 2011).
4 Durable solutions/right to a future (length and security of residence permits, access to naturalization, resettlement, and access to formal education/self-organized schools; Dryden-Peterson, 2016).

In summary, the categorization and conceptualization of 'refugees', their 'movements', and their 'agency' in secondary mobility set the analytical foundations and appear as pivotal determinants in how researchers frame decision-making on mobility depending on different methodologies. Many authors suggested that it is problematic to use 'refugee' as a stable concept that describes a specific form of mobility, emphasizing its fluid nature – encompassing geographic mobility coupled and fluid transitions between different migration statuses such as transit migrant, documented, undocumented, illegal, asylum seeker, guestworker, refugee, etc.

Likewise, forced vs. voluntary dichotomy has been highly criticized. The literature shows that the complexity of decision-making manifests in different ways, with mobility influenced by considerations of family, kin, culture, and networks, as well as state responses and international organizations' assistance. Access to employment and services are also important factors, but they vary depending on educational level. Higher-skilled individuals often face a lack of procedural rights to continue their profession, prompting onward mobility or even return to the country of origin.

Finally, the mobility vs. immobility dichotomy cuts across and intersects with other issues and is reflected therein. Contrary to general convictions, some migrants and refugees elect for voluntary immobility and decide to stay in their first countries of asylum when they perceive an inability to integrate into a culture and society that is radically different from their own, particularly in their onward journey to Europe. Protracted geographical immobility could also lead to community- and place-based social relations that become assets and social capital that develop over time with tangible and intangible benefits to migrants. Therefore, not all irregular migrants or refugees decide to move from their first countries of asylum by default. The decision to stay and consequently be labeled 'immobile' might stem from violent push backs in regions like the Mediterranean, prompting reassessment of risks associated with onward journeys. Decisions depend on the overall country conditions and migrants' coping mechanisms. This article shows that many of the terms used–refugees, transit migrants, (im)mobility, and concepts such as country of origin, destination, host country, and voluntary versus forced migration–are contested in the literature when used in ways that obscure agency and intricate decision-making processes.

The review also highlights that an overwhelming body of literature on refugee decision-making in the first countries of asylum is rooted in sociology, anthropology, and migration studies. This observation underscores the prevalence of debates and criticisms around established dichotomies and concepts from the perspective of contemporary social theory. Moreover, many critiques and emerging analytical frameworks extend to the broader field of migration studies, indicating similarity between the decision-making processes of refugees in the first countries of asylum and those of migrants in general. Further research is imperative to address these questions.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

Author contributions

SK: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. MH: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. TG-H: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. RS:

Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Resources, Software, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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