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Beyond Cessation: Everyday Borders and Protracted Refugeehood Among Liberian Exemption Holders in Ghana

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Abstract

The paper utilises everyday bordering scholarship to examine why Liberian refugees in Ghana deliberately sought exemption from the cessation of refugee status in 2012 and how they navigate everyday borders in Ghana. The paper is based on primary qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings show that participants' decisions to remain as refugees were influenced by multiple and interconnected factors, including unresolved trauma, fear of insecurity in post-conflict Liberia, fear of spiritual harm, loss of social networks and livelihoods, and concern about their children's education and future. Although Ghana was regarded as more peaceful than Liberia, exemption holders still experienced structural, socio-economic, cultural, and social forms of everyday bordering, alongside psychological bordering associated with memories of violence and perceptions of insecurity in Liberia. Participants also demonstrated agency in navigating these everyday bordering processes through informal livelihoods, social networks, and transnational ties, among other means. The study argues that remaining a refugee was a deliberate, protective response to different forms of insecurity and uncertainty. By highlighting the experiences of exemption holders, the article contributes to scholarship on borders, refugee governance, and protracted refugeehood in the Global South.

Keywords: everyday bordering; refugee cessation; exemption holders; protracted refugeehood; Liberian refugees; Ghana



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1. Introduction

Borders are now conceptualised not only as territorial lines but also as everyday social and formal practices that regulate mobility, belonging, and access to rights [1–3]. Conceptualising borders from this perspective means that borders operate across multiple sites, including schools, workplaces, marketplaces, hospitals, and other community spaces. They shift who is included, delayed, or excluded within host societies [4,5]. The experiences of refugees, as forced migrants, are even more pronounced because they have to interact with immigration management systems, governments, bureaucratic procedures, and social norms of the host countries, which often determine their ability to have access to services, livelihoods, and other solutions [6]. Studies on forced migration indicate that these forms of borders endure well beyond the official cessation of wars and hostilities. In protracted refugee situations, inadequate support from both state and non-state agencies often hinders repatriation and local integration [7–9]. Consequently, numerous refugees, including Liberian refugees in Ghana, live within psychological, structural, socio-economic

and cultural borders long after humanitarian institutions declare displacement scenarios resolved [10–13]. Yet psychological bordering remains under-theorised within border studies, which have traditionally privileged territorial, legal, and security-centric analyses over embodied and emotional experiences of borders [14,15]. This study addresses that gap by examining how trauma and emotional threat can acquire a bordering effect by shaping refugees' perceptions of mobility, safety, belonging, and return [16].

Refugee studies and critiques of durable solutions highlight the limitations of repatriation, local integration, and resettlement in addressing the complex realities of protracted displacement [7–10,17,18]. Research on West African and Liberian refugees shows the distinct challenges they faced, including informal livelihoods, integration difficulties, and ambivalent prospects for return [19–22]. Although refugee economy scholarship has examined labour precarity and informalisation, it has paid less attention to how these dynamics intersect with exemption status and everyday bordering in post-cessation settings. Studies on refugees who remain after the cessation clause is invoked, referred to as residual caseloads, show that this population faces legal ambiguity regarding their status. They also face socio-economic marginalisation in their host country and rely on international networks and informal economies to survive [17,22–26]. Yet across these bodies of scholarship, refugees who have successfully sought exemption are mentioned only briefly, usually as exceptions [9,27]. Although UNHCR's reports treat them as a statistical category, they rarely receive sustained research and policy attention. Thus, their motivations, survival strategies, daily experiences, and the multi-layered bordering processes they navigate are not often analysed, despite their importance for understanding the temporal, emotional, and structural dimensions of protracted displacement [13]. This analytical gap is problematic because exemption holders challenge the linear assumption that formal cessation ends refugee status. It is therefore imperative that studies systematically examine how exemption holders cope with limitations in daily life—whether institutional, socioeconomic, cultural, or psychological.

This case study of exemption holders enables refugee scholarship to examine why some refugees choose to remain refugees and what it is like to live in a host nation after this decision. After fourteen years of civil war in Liberia (1989–2003), more than 42,000 Liberians fled to Ghana, and many of them lived in the Buduburam settlement [11]. In 2012, UNHCR used the cessation clause for Liberian refugees to encourage them to return home or integrate in Ghana [27]. After the 2012 invocation of the cessation clause, many formal services were withdrawn, yet many Liberians continued to live in the settlement. In addition, approximately 350 refugees applied for and were granted an exception from cessation, thereby retaining their refugee status, even though Liberia was officially declared stable [28]. By the time of fieldwork, Buduburam remained a socially vibrant but economically marginalised community characterised by informal housing, limited livelihood opportunities, fragmented social networks, and complex identity politics [22]. Reports indicated that about 15,000 people were living in the camp before its demolition in March 2024 [29]. The decision to remain as refugees amidst the peace process in a home country challenges assumptions that cessation marks the end of the refugee cycle and reveals institutional ambiguity, as a UNHCR official described that those who did not return to their home countries nor integrate formed “a group that we have no policy to target” [30].

The article draws primarily on scholarship on everyday bordering to examine how borders are produced and experienced in refugees' everyday lives. Additionally, structuration theory provides a complementary lens for examining agency and institutional constraint. Together, these perspectives contribute to discussions of borders, (im)mobility, and protracted displacement, while offering new insights into the tangible consequences of

status cessation policies and exemption procedures in West Africa. Specifically, the study asks: (1) Why did some Liberian refugees in Ghana deliberately exempt themselves from the 2012 cessation of refugee status? (2) How do these refugees navigate everyday borders within Ghana's socio-economic, institutional, and cultural environments?

The study makes two contributions to scholarship. First, it frames remaining a refugee after cessation not as a decision anomaly but as a thoughtful decision process and a deliberate protection strategy, shaped by layered socio-economic, psychological, structural, and cultural borders. Second, it broadens the scholarship on everyday borders by drawing on African empirical data to show how borders are enacted and enabled through refugee governance practices, economic interactions, social relations, and cultural norms. The article proceeds as follows. The next section outlines the theoretical, conceptual, and empirical review. This is followed by a discussion of the research design and methods. The empirical sections then examine motivations for exemption and experiences of everyday bordering in Ghana.

2. Theoretical, Conceptual and Empirical Review

The following paragraphs review the theoretical, conceptual, and empirical scholarship informing the study. The review draws primarily on scholarship on borders and everyday bordering to examine how exemption holders encounter and navigate bordering processes in their host country. Structuration theory provides a complementary lens for understanding agency within these processes. It also engages with scholarship on forced migration, durable solutions, and residual caseloads.

Earlier scholarship in political geography conceptualised borders as permanent territorial lines that mark the beginning and limits of state sovereignty. Within this conceptualisation, Prescott [31] framed borders as legal territorial demarcations central to state control. Taylor [32] advanced the container theory of the state and analysed borders as rigid boundaries separating nations from the outside world. Anderson [33] does not completely deny that borders are physical lines on a map. Instead, he explains that borders also have symbolic meaning. They help create a sense of national identity and establish who is an insider or an outsider to the state. However, scholars like Agnew [34] have criticised the idea of a territorial trap. He argues that political sovereignty, identity, and social processes may not always be neatly aligned with state boundaries. From a different but related perspective, Paasi [35] conceptualises territories and their boundaries as historically and socially constructed through institutional and socio-spatial processes.

In this broader shift in border scholarship, Newman [2], Walters [6,36], and Balibar [1] argue that globalisation and transnational migration have transformed borders from singular territorial sites into dispersed regulatory practices. Newman [2] argues that states are increasingly controlling migration patterns and mobility through governance practices and economic and social policies rather than solely through physical borders. Along the same lines, Walters [6,36] has shown how border governance operates through regulatory instruments, including work permits, visas, and other documentation regimes that determine mobility and access to protection. Balibar [1], meanwhile, challenges the notion that borders have fixed locations, conceptualising them as heterogeneous and ubiquitous—hence the proposition that “borders are everywhere”. These borders, according to him, determine who has access to resources and rights and who does not belong, through physical controls such as passports and checkpoints. He also argued that symbolic borders such as nationality, ethnic dialects, gender, and social and cultural norms exclude people within societies far more than territorial maps.

Mezzadra and Neilson's [37] concept of “border as a method” pushes the border debate further by framing borders as productive mechanisms that organise global capitalism,

regulate differentiated labour, and structure mobility regimes. Thus, borders are not just lines on a map but are also tools governments and institutions use every day to control how people move, work, and access opportunities. These controls help shape livelihoods and determine who can participate in the particular labour sector, who can travel, and who can belong. Within this debate, the concept of everyday borders has become pivotal. Yuval-Davis et al. [5] define everyday border as the routine institutional and social practices through which belonging and non-belonging are continually produced and reproduced. These include identity checks, welfare eligibility assessments, employment screenings, and school admissions.

Scholars on borders, however, have cautioned against using the idea of everyday border too loosely and widely; they argue that if we describe everyday difficulty and exclusion as a form of border, it may blur the ability to clearly distinguish between material border sites, such as checkpoints, airports, and detention centres, and more metaphorical, diffuse forms of social and institutional exclusion, such as lack of access to services, bureaucracy, and discrimination, thereby weakening analytical clarity [4,38,39]. While theoretically generative, critics further argue that the concept of everyday borders and its approach can be overly abstract and insufficiently grounded in lived experiences, potentially downplaying the ongoing role of state power and coercive infrastructures in migration control [40,41]. Together, these perspectives reconceptualise borders as social and institutional practices that structure everyday life. These broader theoretical debates provide a foundation for understanding how borders operate, specifically in contexts of forced migration.

In this context, studies of everyday borders show that refugees encounter layered borders that extend beyond formal entry checks. Structural borders are evident when requirements such as resident permits, refugee card renewals, and institutional delays determine who can legally reside, work, or move within host countries [6,42]. Ager and Strang [43], in their refugee integration framework, demonstrate that access to housing, employment, education, and health services is mediated by refugee governance mechanisms that act as everyday borders to full membership in society. Omata [44] found that refugees in the Buduburam refugee camp were caught between UNHCR efforts to promote voluntary repatriation and the lack of full socioeconomic and cultural rights in Ghana.

After the cessation clause was invoked in 2012, many Liberian refugees who remained but did not opt for local integration as a durable solution were unsure of their legal status. They hoped to repatriate to their homeland but lacked a practical route to reintegration [12,27]. This institutional dilemma exemplifies what Walters [45] calls border/control, in which institutional uncertainty and limited policy options act as tools of governance that influence refugee mobility and restrict reintegration choices. Notwithstanding these constraints, recent work has also highlighted refugees' agency. For instance, Skran and Easton-Calabria [46] demonstrate that refugees can still establish informal enterprises and social networks by navigating structural and policy gaps. Similarly, Betts et al. [47] found that refugees mobilise informal markets, international networks, and entrepreneurship to navigate restrictive governance environments. In such cases, these structural constraints can also become sites for negotiation. While they present challenges, they enable refugees to draw on their inner resources and social networks to establish themselves. This duality highlights the interplay between the bordering constraints refugees encounter and their capacity to exercise agency in navigating them [48].

Economic borders also shape refugees' dependence on informal economic sectors [44,49]. Mezzadra and Neilson [37] demonstrate that borders function through "differential inclusion", restricting livelihoods by making refugees work in fragile, low-wage conditions. According to their aspiration mobility framework, these restrictions are directly linked to current livelihood options and future mobility paths, as they force workers to navigate

structural borders within the political space. Additionally, studies in Uganda [49] show that refugees remain concentrated in low-income, informal-sector economic activities despite entrepreneurship skills training and livelihood programmes. Similarly, in Ghana, Omata [44] finds that refugees in the Buduburam refugee camp continue to face these structural constraints that hinder upward mobility, even when remittances and vocational skills are available. Cultural and linguistic borders continue to influence refugees' daily lives through language barriers, accent-based discrimination, and limited social inclusion. This affects their access to information, social networks, and other opportunities [21,43]. In Europe, Yuval-Davis et al. [5,50] demonstrate how fashion choices, accent, and religion lead to subtle yet persistent exclusion. Antwi-Boateng and Braimah [51] found that Liberian refugees in Ghana face discrimination because of their accent, negatively impacting their market interactions. Viewed through an everyday bordering lens, such practices can function as cultural borders by marking refugees as outsiders and regulating their sense of belonging.

Scholarship on everyday bordering emphasises that borders are not only territorial lines but can also be produced and reproduced through social and institutional practices that include and exclude people. Within this broader understanding, borders can also operate psychologically, as trauma, fear, and perceptions of safety and danger shape how individuals experience spaces and their willingness to enter, leave, or return to them [52,53]. In this study, a psychological border refers to a perceived mental and emotional distinction that separates spaces according to meanings of safety, danger, belonging, and non-belonging, thereby influencing whether individuals are willing to return to Liberia. This differs from an obstacle or barrier, which may simply make movement difficult without producing such a distinction between spaces. Trauma, therefore, is not treated as a border merely because it makes return difficult. Rather, it becomes bordering when memories and emotional experiences of violence produce a persistent distinction between Ghana as a space of relative safety and Liberia as a space associated with danger and insecurity, thereby negatively affecting participants' willingness to return to Liberia. Silove's ADAPT model examines five pillars of psychological well-being: safety, relationships, justice, roles, and meaning. He argues that displacement disrupts each pillar and makes return emotionally and spiritually impossible. Studies have shown that war-related trauma, stress, and disrupted social bonds can persist even long after conflict, shaping perceptions of safety and influencing the decisions about return [52,54]. In West Africa, Roxburgh [55] and Luongo [56] also found that fear of witchcraft accusations and spiritual punishment influences decisions to migrate. Choosing to remain in exile can therefore reflect a strategic protective decision rather than passivity [57]. Giddens's structuration theory [48] highlights this interplay between bordering constraints and refugee agency by emphasising the dynamic relationship between structure and agency.

Giddens's structuration theory [48] offers a complementary perspective on the relationship between institutional constraint and refugee agency. He argues that individuals are shaped by society and institutions, yet they are also skilled agents who can direct their own lives through their actions. The theory therefore accounts for the interplay between individual agency and the structures that shape and are shaped by human action. This is what is known as the duality of structure. Thus, the theory conceptualises social life as produced by this duality, in which institutional rules, legal frameworks, and norms simultaneously enable and constrain action. While individuals act within these structures and resources, they also have the will to decide what to do, thereby producing or transforming them through repeated practice. Although the approach has been criticised for offering limited procedural guidance [58], it is useful in the displacement context because it shows how refugees act intentionally and purposively within asylum, government, humanitar-

ian, and host-state institutions, even as these structures shape the horizons of possibility. While structuration theory provides a lens for analysing the interplay between agency and institutional constraint, border studies offer a framework for understanding how these constraints are spatially and socially organised.

Refugee governance, led by UNHCR, proposes three durable solutions to end the refugee cycle: repatriation, local integration, and resettlement [11]. Nevertheless, the literature shows that these solutions may not necessarily end the refugee cycle, especially in cases of protracted displacement [8,19,59]. Indeed, studies have shown that repatriation may occur even when insecurity and weak governance persist in the home country [17,18,54]. For refugees who choose local integration, due to state policies and unwelcoming host communities, successful integration can be difficult. On the other hand, resettlement is only an option for a small number of refugees [60]. Consequently, rather than ending displacement, these formal solutions, especially repatriation and integration, often create prolonged displacement, leaving refugees in legal, social, and economic uncertainty [61–64].

A smaller but growing number of studies address exemptions, cessations, and the governance of residual caseloads. International guidelines by UNHCR emphasise that refugees with ongoing protection needs or compelling reasons arising from past persecution can apply for an exemption from cessation and retain their refugee status even after the official declaration of the end of refugeehood [11]. Cwik [65] and Schwaryz [66] have argued that these exemptions are essential to prevent premature and unsafe repatriations, especially in the presence of structural violence, social conflicts, or weak state institutions in post-conflict societies. Exemption status demonstrates that continued refugeehood after cessation is formally recognised as a necessary element of the international refugee protection regime. However, research has shown differences in how states implement exemption procedures. O’Sullivan [67] found that some governments have used cessation to end refugee status prematurely, reducing their obligations as host countries, often without a planned assessment of individual circumstances. Similarly, Durodola [23] finds that refugees are poorly informed about exemption procedures because they are not effectively communicated to them, or when they are, the information is ambiguous. This leaves many refugees unaware of their rights to request continued protection after cessation. Among Eritrean refugees in Sudan, Cole [68] found that they were largely unable to assess their eligibility for exemptions because limited staffing prevented staff from educating them about this right. These findings also affirm a broader critique that humanitarian governance and bureaucracies can inadvertently produce exclusion through a lack of information, institutional communication failures, or the prioritisation of administrative efficiency over protection. These governance frameworks become particularly evident in contexts where refugee status has formally ended, but displacement persists in practice.

In Ghana, former Liberian refugees who remained without exemption status have faced legal uncertainties, documentation challenges, unsustainable livelihoods, and limited integration [23]. Similarly, research on post-cessation Liberians in Nigeria shows that refugeehood may persist socially after the formal withdrawal of refugee status, shaping identity, resource access, and experiences of exclusion [22]. These works highlight the socio-economic and institutional vulnerabilities that arise when refugee status ends, but displacement continues. Other research on this population further highlights the long-term nature of their socio-economic insecurities. Gale’s [24] ethnography of Sierra Leonean refugees in the Boreah camp in Guinea shows that those who refused to return to their homeland became institutionally invisible after camp services were discontinued and identity documents expired. Complementary work highlights how these residual refugee populations rely on transnational networks, informal economies, and self-settlement arrangements to survive after a humanitarian retreat [22,25].

3. Methodology

The fieldwork was conducted in Buduburam refugee camp, a former Liberian refugee settlement in the Gomoe East District of the Central Region, Ghana. Established in 1990, the camp served as the principal reception camp for Liberian refugees for more than two decades [69]. The government of Ghana originally created the Buduburam settlement on a 140-acre area to resettle up to 5000 refugees. However, because the armed conflict in Liberia was protracted, the refugee population shifted to settlements near villages such as Kasoa, Awutu, and Fetteh [69]. In 1990, there were 6800 Liberian refugees, comprising 3050 women, 2050 children, and 1700 men [69]. By 1992, the refugee population had increased to 10,000 following intensified fighting in Liberia [69]. In 1993, the population increased further, comprising 6418 women and 7505 men [69]. In 2013, just after cessation, there were 5136 Liberian refugees still in Ghana. Of the 5136 refugees, over 3500 opted for local integration, with up to 350 obtaining exemption from cessation. UNHCR invoked cessation for Liberian refugees in June 2012 [70]. Authorities in Ghana demolished the camp in March 2024, resulting in the displacement of approximately 15,000 individuals [71]. Buduburam refugee camp was selected as the study site because it was established to accommodate Liberian refugees and became the principal settlement and largest concentration of Liberian refugees in Ghana.

The study focused on 15 Liberian refugees who had applied for and obtained an exemption from cessation of refugee status after the 2012 cessation and who were residing in the Liberian refugee camp in Buduburam, Ghana. It included eight males and seven females. The men were assigned pseudonyms A, H, M, N, O, I, J, and P, while the women had pseudonyms B, C, K, Z, D, W, and R. Given the small size of the exemption holders' population and their distribution across the settlement, a non-random sampling strategy combining purposive and snowball sampling was used. Purposive sampling ensured participants met the study's core criteria, while snowball sampling facilitated access to participants not easily identifiable through any formal list or sampling frame. A community leader made the initial contacts by introducing the first author to potential participants, and referrals helped identify subsequent participants. The first author expanded this network until all participants were interviewed, at which point data saturation was achieved. To mitigate the limitations of snowball sampling, particularly its tendency to select participants within similar networks [72]. The study used multiple entry points to ensure respondent diversity. For instance, participant selection criteria included gender, length of stay in Ghana, and other socio-economic factors.

Data collection began in 2017 and ended in 2019 through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews conducted in English. Interviews lasted approximately two hours, allowing participants to recount their histories, motivations, constraints, and aspirations in their own terms. Interviews were conducted at locations and times convenient to participants, given the sensitivity of post-war memories and displacement histories. English proficiency was not a selection criterion. However, because recruited participants could communicate in English, the interviews were conducted in English. This is consistent with previous research at Buduburam, where English has been identified as the main language used within the settlement [73].

All interviews were audio-recorded with permission, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) as outlined by Braun and Clarke [74,75]. The first author and an assistant repeatedly read transcripts and field notes to familiarise themselves with the data. They generated initial codes inductively through line-by-line coding, capturing meaningful features of the data related to experiences of borders, decisions to remain refugees, institutional encounters, trauma, livelihood struggles, and aspirations. These codes were then organised into broader themes reflecting psychological, structural,

socio-economic, and cultural-linguistic dimensions of bordering. Themes were reviewed to ensure internal coherence and analytical clarity, defined in relation to the study's objectives, and interpreted primarily through everyday bordering scholarship, with structuration theory providing a complementary lens on agency and institutional constraint. Quotations were used to substantiate the findings. The study adhered to standard ethical principles, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. The Kennesaw State University Institutional Review Board reviewed the research protocol (Study No. 16-523) and determined it to be exempt from continuing review on 21 June 2016.

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

This section presents participants' demographic details, including age, gender, education, migration history, and household composition. Participants ranged in age from 40 to 52 years, with most in their early to mid-40s. Participant R was the oldest, at 52. None of the participants was born in Ghana. Most of them arrived in Ghana after adolescence, typically between the ages of 20 and 29. Participant K's migration trajectory further illustrates the protracted nature of displacement. She fled Liberia for Côte d'Ivoire in 1994 with her family and relocated to Ghana in 2004 after renewed conflict in Côte d'Ivoire. Except for participant M, who had no formal education, participants had at least secondary education. They also received technical and vocational training in Ghana.

For example, respondent H, who was the only participant with a college degree, said, "I am a college graduate. . . I studied management," and added that he completed two years of radio and television presentation training in Ghana. He also elaborated on the extensive vocational training he received after arriving in Ghana, including Bible schooling and electronics and electrical installation training at the National Vocational Training Institute (NVTI).

Household data show that participants had 21 children collectively. With family structures shaped by conflict and displacement, many participants had children from various relationships. Notably, the findings show that none of the participants had travelled to Liberia after their forced displacement. The absence of return visits among participants suggests that the lack of re-established physical ties with their home country may have been associated with their continued orientation towards remaining in Ghana as refugees.

4. Why Some Liberian Refugees Sought Exemption from Cessation

Participants' decisions to seek exemption from cessation were shaped by multiple and interconnected factors. These included the psychological consequences of war and fears of spiritual harm, concerns about security and institutional protection in Liberia, loss of livelihoods and property, and weakened social and kinship networks. Together, these factors shaped participants' perceptions of return and their decisions to remain refugees in Ghana. The following paragraphs examine these interconnected factors in detail.

One of the reasons why participants decided to seek exemption is the psychological consequences of war, particularly trauma, fear, and emotional insecurity—the continuous sense of uncertainty and the lack of safety about the future. They explain that the traumatic events they experienced during the war, including being wounded, being raped, and losing family members, left lasting psychological scars that continue to influence how they perceive Liberia not as a safe home but as a place of chaos, danger and volatile peace. Participants elaborated on how everyday activities, such as watching television scenes involving gunfire, trigger memories of violence they had experienced during the Liberian War; these moments bring intense emotional distress and remind them of the brutal circumstances that led to their forced displacements. The idea of returning to Liberia

represents not only a physical relocation but also a harsh confrontation with the unresolved trauma they have experienced. A female participant explained:

“I took an exemption because of what happened to me in Liberia; I was wounded and raped, and my husband was also killed.” I still feel it, so even when I’m watching television, I don’t like to watch movies with gun shooting, because anytime I hear things like that, it turns my mind back to where I came from, and it’s not easy.”

This account shows how trauma operated as more than an obstacle to return. The participant’s memories associated violence, loss, and insecurity with Liberia itself, while remaining in Ghana provides distance from the place where these experiences occurred. Her response to gunfire on television demonstrates how the distinction between the relative safety of the present and the violence associated with Liberia continued to be reproduced psychologically. Trauma thus acquired a bordering effect by shaping how she perceived the possibility of returning to Liberia and whether that space could again be experienced as home. Fear of spiritual harm further reinforced these psychological borders. Participants recounted stories of returnees who had repatriated to Liberia but subsequently became ill or died mysteriously after returning to Ghana. As one participant explained, “People went to Liberia and came back; some got sick and died.” Although these narratives did not establish a causal relationship between return and illness or death, participants interpreted these experiences within a broader belief that those who remained in Liberia during the war resisted the return of those who had fled, particularly when returnees sought to reclaim property they had owned before the war. Some participants understood this resistance as potentially taking spiritual or supernatural forms of harm, including sickness and death. What mattered in the decision to remain in Ghana as refugees was not whether these perceived spiritual threats could be objectively verified, but whether participants understood them as credible risks associated with repatriating to Liberia. Stories of illness and death circulated as warnings about what could happen to returnees and contributed to the construction of Liberia as an unsafe home. Such beliefs shaped perceptions of threat and reinforced the sense that return carried dangers beyond physical insecurity. Thus, perceived spiritual threats reinforced psychological bordering by deepening the distinction between Ghana as a space of relative safety and Liberia as a space of potential harm.

Beyond psychological borders, participants’ decision to remain as refugees was also shaped by concerns about Liberia’s broader institutional environment. They expressed uncertainty about the Liberian government’s ability to secure and protect them in the current post-conflict context. This doubt was shaped by memories of state collapse, chaos, and the failure of the government to protect civilians during the war. They emphasised that violence, corruption, and weak police presence were still ongoing in Liberia and that this was evidence of Liberia’s continued insecurity reported online or conveyed by friends. The lack of reliable state protection made returning risky for participants who had experienced persecution or loss. Exemption was perceived as a rational response to perceived governance failure. One participant said:

“My friends in Liberia said there is no security and that people are still committing crimes. According to the newspaper, the police in Liberia just killed a boy. These things scare me.”

Participants also examined how the lack of economic and social conditions that could help them rebuild their lives in their home country influenced their decisions about exemption. The data showed that socio-economic and kinship boundaries further limited their ability to repatriate. Other participants explained that they had lost their homes, land, and livelihoods during the war and had no material foundation to rebuild their lives in

Liberia. One woman said, 'I have nothing here.' I have no land, no house, no job. Others described disputes over land and farms seized by others, making a return economically untenable. The loss of social relations compounded these material losses. Participants reported that they had no surviving relatives in Liberia due to the war. One participant captured the social impossibility of return by asking, "Who am I going to? I lost them." The absence of social networks made reintegration difficult because relational ties were deemed necessary for successful and sustainable reintegration, especially for participants with younger children, who needed support to care for them.

A gendered pattern emerges in the reasons for opting out of cessation. Women's decisions to remain as refugees were strongly shaped by experiences of sexual violence, widowhood, loss of children, psychological trauma, and caregiving responsibilities. Their narratives frequently linked exemption to fear of return and the absence of social networks in Liberia. In contrast, men framed their decisions more around educational aspirations and hopes for future resettlement. While trauma appeared in both accounts, women's explanations reflected distinct forms of gendered vulnerability rooted in conflict-related violence and social dislocation, whereas men's accounts linked experiences of insecurity to comparative assessments of safety between Ghana and Liberia. Further, the expression of trauma also appears gendered. Women articulated their psychological distress in deeply personal and emotional terms, referencing rape, grief, and avoidance of violent imagery. Men expressed trauma more indirectly, often through discussions of security, institutional distrust, and structural instability in Liberia. These differing modes of narration suggest that while both genders carry war-related trauma, its articulation is shaped by socially constructed gender norms regarding emotional expression and vulnerability.

5. Everyday Borders in Ghana and How Exemption Holders Navigate Everyday Borders in Ghana

Although Ghana was described as a peaceful and more orderly place to live than Liberia, their everyday lives were shaped by administrative, socio-economic, cultural, and psychological borders. Participants recounted struggles with documentation, even though they were officially recognised as refugees and allowed to stay in Ghana. They described repeated difficulty renewing refugee identity cards and obtaining clear information from the Ghana Refugee Board or UNHCR. One respondent explained:

"Sometimes you go there; they say, 'Come tomorrow.' You go again; they say the person (in charge) is not around." Another summarised the resulting uncertainty: "We don't know our standing. They say we are refugees, but also not refugees."

These practices acquired a bordering effect because they regulated exemption holders' access to documentation, services, and institutional recognition, thereby producing differentiated forms of inclusion and exclusion despite their legally recognised refugee status. In this sense, structural bordering operated through administrative constraints and everyday bureaucratic practices that conditioned how participants accessed and experienced their recognised status.

Participants also described an institutional vacuum in which refugee governance agencies, particularly UNHCR, repeatedly stated they had no budget allocation for them, leaving legally recognised refugees without targeted support. Further, encounters with police and immigration officials intensified anxiety due to a lack of proper legal documents, as one stated. When driving and a police officer stops you, your heart jumps because you don't know what they will say. Rumours surrounding the demolition of Buduburam further deepened insecurity, producing a legal presence without material or spatial certainty.

Beyond these structural forms of bordering, participants also faced everyday economic, cultural, social, and psychological borders that negatively affected their ability to secure

stable livelihoods and meaningful social inclusion in Ghana. Most of them described their livelihood strategies as unstable. They were largely employed in the informal sector, including construction work, petty trading, food vending, hair plaiting, luggage packing, and selling sachet water. Participants combined casual work with remittances, gifts, or church support to meet their daily needs. One participant relied solely on begging due to health challenges. They experienced these unsustainable livelihoods as ongoing rather than transitional. As one woman explained, “Here, you work small, earn small, and tomorrow you must start again.” They lacked a consistent income source; even when they had one, it was short-term and below minimum wage, leading them to describe their living conditions as precarious. Although all participants had received vocational training from state and non-state institutions, none used these skills to secure stable employment because of limited startup capital or employers’ preference for Ghanaian workers. Economic borders were also reinforced through everyday market practices. Participants reported that some traders increased prices once they identified them as Liberians. As one participant observed, “When they find out you’re from Liberia, the price changes.” This practice meant that participants perceived their Liberian identity as affecting the terms on which they participated in everyday market transactions. Price discrimination therefore operated as a form of economic bordering by differentiating participants from Ghanaian buyers and creating unequal conditions of access to goods.

Cultural and linguistic forms of bordering further compounded these economic borders and shaped participants’ daily interactions with host-country members. Female participants reported accent-based discrimination; as one responder recounted, sometimes when you talk, they laugh and say, ‘Liberians always talk funny.’ Cultural and linguistic forms of bordering further compounded these economic borders and shaped participants’ daily interactions with host-country members. Such ridicule marked participants as different through their accent and reinforced their sense of being outsiders in everyday social interactions. In this sense, linguistic differences became markers through which distinctions between Liberians and members of the host community were reproduced, contributing to cultural and linguistic bordering. Language barriers also limited respondents’ employment opportunities. Language barriers also limited respondents’ employment opportunities. For example, one participant left a photo studio job because clients could not communicate in English and therefore expected him to communicate in Twi, a Ghanaian language. Further, women traders reported facing discrimination in the market as Ghanaian buyers were less likely to purchase their goods once they discovered they were Liberians.

Social relations with Ghanaians and host-country members were described as polite but distant, mostly limited to greetings and lacking deeper interaction. One participant described their relationship with host communities as follows: “Oh, we are all one; you know, sometimes you see them around and say hello to them, but I don’t go to their house, and they don’t come to my house.” These dynamics were not limited to interactions with Ghanaians; participants also described internal social boundaries within the Liberian refugee community. The data also show cultural boundaries within the Liberian community. Exemption holders reported being ridiculed as stupid for refusing local integration, strengthening the internal hierarchy of the relationship. These administrative, economic, and social borders also shaped participants’ emotional well-being and sense of security. Participants described increased alertness and emotional exhaustion as they navigated daily life. One man stated, “You must always be careful. One mistake and you are in trouble.” Another explained, “You are here, but you cannot rest your mind.” These accounts show how uncertainty was experienced emotionally in everyday life: participants remained vigilant and struggled to feel secure and settled.

6. Coping Mechanisms Within Bordered Lives

Amid institutional, psychological, social, economic, and cultural borders, and uncertainty about their longer-term prospects despite their recognised refugee status, exemption holders relied heavily on social networks as an informal survival strategy. Participants described informal, short-term, low-paid livelihoods pieced together almost entirely through personal social connections. As one participant explained, “I work as a labourer just to be able to survive until UNHCR comes to give us better solutions.” Another elaborated: “My friends from church and those in town help me to find work, which does not last long.” Coping was framed not only as a channel for improved socioeconomic status or successful integration but also as temporal endurance amid difficulties and uncertainties. Although these networks reduced immediate difficulties with regard to livelihood options, they did not substantially change participants’ short- or long-term vulnerability.

Additionally, social media platforms, particularly Facebook, enabled reunions with old friends who sometimes provided financial support. These friends were mostly former refugees resettled in developed countries. One participant explained, “Sometimes I go on Facebook and see the people who have resettled. . . sometimes they bless me with 100 Ghana cedis (9 USD).” While such connections on social media platforms were important and critical to their day-to-day survival, they underscore reliance on informal goodwill rather than a rights-based policy approach from refugee governance institutions in Ghana.

Among parents of young adults and tertiary-level students, aspirational considerations sustained endurance in Ghana. These participants consistently emphasised that they chose to remain in Ghana, despite the difficulties, because they believed their children’s educational opportunities were brighter here than in Liberia. In this case, Liberia was perceived as lacking the stability and educational infrastructure necessary to support children’s long-term prospects. Furthermore, participants viewed exemption as a way to preserve future opportunities to resettle in a developed country. The hope of resettlement gave meaning to remaining a refugee and waiting, even as many acknowledged that mobility pathways to such countries remained largely closed. Exemption thus functioned as a strategy to maintain legal protection while sustaining hope for future possibilities. As one participant stated, remaining a refugee meant “waiting for God to open a way”. Another participant explained: “There are some advantages when you choose exemption. . . after three years, every refugee who has a serious problem should be located and given resettlement.” Although these aspirations influenced decisions to remain in Ghana as refugees, they did not constitute borders because they did not produce exclusion nor restrict participants’ ability to return to Liberia. Rather, they reflected how participants evaluated the relative opportunities of remaining in Ghana or repatriating to Liberia.

7. Discussion

7.1. Borders, Exemption, and the Decision to Remain

Building on the findings, this section is organised around the study’s two objectives: (1) why some Liberian refugees sought exemption from cessation, and (2) how exemption holders navigate everyday borders within Ghana.

The findings show that psychological borders rooted in fear, trauma, and emotional insecurity were central to the decision of participants to seek exemption. Memories of violence during the war, reinforced by fear of spiritual harm, influenced how participants perceived post-conflict Liberia. Liberia remained associated with unresolved traumatic memories and experiences of violence. In this sense, trauma functions as a border that reshaped perceptions of the safety and well-being of Liberia. These findings resonate with Miller and Rasmussen [52], Teye [25], and Sullivan [64], who showed that unresolved trauma continues to shape refugees’ mobility decisions, even long after conflict has ended.

For participants, choosing to remain as refugees reflects Turner's [76] description of agency embedded in life history and emotional geographies, rather than resistance to voluntary repatriation and integration.

Further, the findings show that fear of spiritual harm contributed to psychological bordering by reinforcing participants' perceptions of Ghana as a space of relative safety and Liberia as a space of potential danger, thereby influencing their decision to remain in Ghana rather than return to Liberia. Similar patterns have been documented in other parts of West Africa, where fears of witchcraft accusations and spiritual punishment have been shown to influence the decisions of migrants [55,56]. In these instances, remaining in exile was an agentic response to perceived spiritual and social threats. This aligns with Griffiths' [57] argument that decisions to stay can reflect deliberate risk management rather than inaction. Additionally, these findings echo Akello [77] and Um [18], who emphasise that social and spiritual fears shape migration trajectory decisions as much as economic and political considerations.

Structural borders in Liberia also influenced participants' decision to remain refugees in Ghana. Participants expressed mistrust and uncertainty about Liberia's security institutions' ability to protect them. These concerns reflect what structuration theory conceptualises as the duality of structures. That is, refugees' decisions within institutional environments that both constrain their return home and enable action to remain in Ghana [48]. Compared with the findings, weaknesses in security institutions in post-conflict Liberia and protection constraints affected participants' willingness to return, whereas asylum and exemption mechanisms in Ghana enabled them to remain. Thus, exemption decisions were not merely passive responses to institutional failures but also strategic choices shaped by the interaction between refugee agency and institutional conditions in both Ghana and Liberia. Choosing exemption, therefore, represented a strategic risk assessment rather than mere resistance to return.

Social and economic borders reinforce participants' decisions to remain in Ghana. Many participants have lost properties, lands, and farms during the war. Returning to Liberia would mean having no assets to anchor their lives and livelihoods. Further, participants also expressed a lack of social ties and social capital that could help them earn a living in Liberia. This made a return socially and materially difficult. These accounts illustrate how a breakdown of social networks and a lack of assets in post-conflict environments can transform a home into an uninhabitable space. Similarly, Hammond [54] and Hardgrove [21] also emphasised the importance of family and social networks in shaping return decisions. Taken together, these findings reveal the layered nature of everyday bordering experienced by exemption holders. Layering refers to the simultaneous and interconnected operation of different forms of borders rather than their existence as separate constraints. For example, documentation uncertainty interacted with limited employment opportunities, while linguistic and cultural exclusion further restricted access to livelihoods and social relationships. These socioeconomic and institutional insecurities, in turn, contributed to psychological stress and uncertainty about the future. Thus, exemption holders did not encounter a single border at a time; rather, structural, socioeconomic, cultural-linguistic, and psychological borders overlapped and reinforced one another in everyday life.

Demographic patterns further deepen this interpretation. Gender, in particular, shaped how participants experienced and interpreted these borders. Women's decisions to seek exemption were closely tied to gender-based violence, caregiving responsibilities, and the loss of family networks, reflecting forms of vulnerability that are both conflict-related and socially reproduced. In contrast, men's decisions were more frequently framed through comparative security assessments, educational aspirations, and strategic considerations of future mobility. This suggests that exemption decisions are shaped not only by layered

borders but also by gendered experiences of risk, responsibility, and future orientation. These findings corroborate Hardgrove [21], whose study of Liberian refugee women in Buduburam demonstrates how family and caregiving demand, socioeconomic vulnerability, and experiences of violence and trauma during the Liberian civil war shaped women's perceptions of return to Liberia.

7.2. Navigating Everyday Borders in Ghana

Although participants described Ghana as safer and more peaceful than Liberia, they still experienced everyday bordering within Ghana. Structural bordering was most evident through documentation challenges, unclear communication from refugee governance institutions, and inadequate institutional support, which generated uncertainty about their longer-term situation despite their recognised refugee status. These experiences reflect what Walters [45] describes as 'border/control', in which bureaucratic ambiguity itself functions as a mechanism of governance that regulates mobility and access to rights. This finding also corroborates Balibar [1], who argues that such symbolic borders can sometimes delineate people from resources more than territorial borders do. Further, such institutional bordering aligns with Ager and Strang's [43] argument that institutional gatekeeping mediates access to rights and services, even where legal status is formally recognised. The rumoured demolition of Buduburam further highlights the spatial dimensions of the everyday borders. Despite the settlement's longevity, the prospect of state-backed eviction rekindled insecurity and disrupted future planning, reinforcing Rumford's [3] argument that borders are continually redrawn through local governance decisions. These findings suggest that, after formal refugee status is obtained, everyday borders remain in place and continue to control the lives of the residual population.

Socio-economic borders were evident in participants' confinement to informal and unstable work. Although all participants received some form of vocational training in Ghana, these skills still confined them to low-wage, informal occupations. This aligns with Betts et al. [49] and Omata [44], who show that refugee livelihood options are constrained by economic bordering processes that limit the conversion of skills into secure employment. The limited income from vocational training and employment reinforces Easton-Calabria and Omata's [64] critical finding that vocational skill acquisition alone does not overcome refugees' structural exclusion from high-wage employment. These socio-economic borders created a condition of immobility in their economic status, echoing Hage's [62] concept of stuckness: being physically present yet socially and economically immobilised. These patterns also reflect what Mezzadra and Neilson [37] describe as differential inclusion, in which migrants are incorporated into labour markets but occupy precarious, marginal positions.

Cultural and linguistic borders also shaped everyday interactions. Language barriers, accent-based discrimination, and limited social relations with host societies reinforce outsider status for participants. These experiences corroborate Hardgrove [21] and Antwi-Boateng and Braimah [51], who found that everyday social practices delineate Liberian refugees in Ghana. Similarly, Yuval-Davis et al. [5] demonstrate how the host country's cultural and religious expectations exclude migrants far from territorial borders. Socio-economic constraints were also strongly gendered. Women were more concentrated in activities such as water selling, food vending, and hair plaiting. Men, by contrast, engaged in physically demanding labour such as construction and luggage carrying. This pattern shows how gendered divisions of labour and unequal access to networks shape socioeconomic opportunities.

In response to these borders, exemption holders relied on their social networks, including church communities and transnational connections, as a coping strategy to support

their livelihoods or simply to obtain living allowances. Aspirations for better educational opportunities for their children and future resettlement outside Ghana also played an important role in helping them endure the constraints they encountered during their stay. In this case, aspiration functions as what Brun [61] calls active waiting: a future-oriented strategy through which refugees maintain hope while navigating structural limitations.

At the same time, exemption holders demonstrated resourcefulness and agency by repeatedly engaging with refugee governance institutions to understand and interpret policies relevant to their situations, while also mobilising social networks to navigate bureaucratic procedures. In structuration terms, although the institutional environment constrains their agency and imposes boundaries, it also reveals their assertiveness and helps them cultivate the ability to engage with institutions responsible for their well-being. These interactions with refugee governance organisations revealed gaps, inconsistencies, and uncertainties surrounding post-cessation governance. Furthermore, access to these networks also reflected gendered inequalities. Male participants appeared more connected to transnational networks linked to resettled former refugees and received remittances framed as reciprocal or network-based support.

8. Conclusions

The article answers the first research question by showing that participants sought exemption partly because they distrusted Liberian institutions' capacity to guarantee their safety. Further, their decisions were also shaped by unresolved trauma from civil wars; fear of insecurity in Liberia; spiritual harm; loss of livelihood and social network in Liberia; and concerns about how to build their lives after staying in their host country for so long. Moreover, the study answers the second research question by demonstrating that exemption holders in Ghana coped with everyday borders through continuous engagement with the bureaucratic refugee governance system, informal livelihoods, social and international networks, assistance from religious communities, and continuous aspirations for a better education for their children and future mobility to developed countries. Despite being legally granted refugee status in Ghana, participants continue to experience bordering in Ghana through documentation challenges, exclusion from formal labour markets, language discrimination, limited social interaction, and uncertainties surrounding the legal and socio-economic future.

This study's findings are relevant to refugee governance institutions, border studies, and scholarship on protracted displacement. First, they show that the cessation of refugee status does not necessarily mark the end of refugeehood or displacement. Instead, the findings show that even after formal conflict ends, the lived experience of displacement can persist through psychological, socioeconomic, and institutional insecurities that are produced and reinforced through everyday bordering processes. The study builds on everyday bordering scholarship by showing that bordering operates not only at territorial lines but also through administrative, cultural, and economic practices of inclusion and exclusion, as well as psychologically, when memories of violence produce enduring distinctions between spaces of relative safety and perceived danger. Third, the study shows that refugee protection should extend beyond the legal recognition of exemption holders as refugees to consider their lived experiences, including psychological well-being, social networks, and the realities of long-term integration.

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