

Refugee Women integrating into the Dutch Labour Market

A Thesis on Syrian and Iraqi Women's Employment
Integration Experiences and the Influences of Political
Discourses

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Introduction

Since the end of the 1990s, the general aim of the Dutch integration policy is to have newcomers participating in society as quickly as possible, preferably through paid work. In 2018, the Dutch minister of Social Affairs and Employment stated that doing paid work is the ultimate goal of the Dutch integration policy.¹ Nevertheless, relatively few newcomers have found a job, which becomes clear from the several gaps in the employment rates in 2017 and 2018. A first gap concerns migrants. Seven percent of the ethnic minority groups that live in the Netherlands since around the 1960s and 1970s - those of Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese, Aruban and Antillean origin - is unemployed, compared to two percent of the native Dutch population.² Secondly, a refugee gap in employment rates exists. After living fifteen years in the Netherlands, the labour participation of refugees (57 percent) is considerably lower than that of labour migrants (70 percent) and the native population (80 percent).³ Lastly, a third gap on the labour market is related to gender. After living fifteen years in the Netherlands, only 45 percent of the female refugees has a paid job of more than eight hours a week, while this is 75 percent for native women and 62 percent for the rest of the non-western women in the Netherlands.⁴ Despite the government's effort to integrate newcomers quickly into the labour market, it appears too difficult for refugee women to find employment.⁵

In 1990 Frits Bolkestein, a Dutch politician from the liberal party People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), published his article *The integration of minorities should be dealt with toughness*. This resulted in the mainstreaming of the idea that Western and Islamic values are incompatible. The cultural background of newcomers originating from countries in which Islam is the major religion, was increasingly seen by Dutch public opinion as a factor problematizing migrants' integration into the Dutch society. In 2017, during the most recent national parliamentary elections, the right-wing Party for Freedom (PVV)

¹ "Main line Change statement Citizenizing," Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, last modified July 2, 2018, <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2018/07/02/kamerbrief-hoofdlijnen-veranderopgave-inburgering> .

² "Labour participation; migration background," CBS, Statline, accessed 23 October 2019, <https://opendata.cbs.nl/statline/#/CBS/nl/dataset/82809NED/table?dl=23EFC> .

³ Mieke Maliepaard, et al. "A Question of Time? The integration of asylum migrants: a cohort study," *Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum* 3 (2017); Inge Razenberg, et al., "'Mind the Gap': obstacles and possibilities for the labour participation of refugee women," *Kennisplatform Integratie & Samenleving* (February 2018): 9.

⁴ Razenberg, "'Mind the Gap'," 10.

⁵ "Integration," De Rijksoverheid, accessed January 10, 2020, <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/regering/regeerakkoord-vertrouwen-in-de-toekomst/4.-nederland-in-de-wereld/4.6-integratie> ; Razenberg, "'Mind the Gap'," 3.

became the second biggest party, indicating that negative perceptions of migrants from Islamic countries have persisted to exist up until today. These perceptions and "a fear of cultural differences" make it difficult to find a job for refugees from the Middle East, where most people adhere to Islam.⁶

This context, combined with the aforementioned refugee and gender gap, resulted in this thesis focusing on women originating from Islamic countries. This thesis serves as a case study in the literature on the labour market integration of refugees in the Netherlands by centring on refugee women originating from Islamic countries. Specifically, I interviewed women originating from Syria and Iraq because, in the Netherlands, most newcomers coming from Islamic countries arrived from these two countries.⁷ It aims to contribute to the existing literature by having a gender and postcolonial approach through the presentation of the views of refugee women on their employment integration and by examining how these experiences were influenced by the political discourses in national coalition agreements. This thesis is not an analysis of concrete policies. However, it does examine the general discourses of agreements between the governmental parties on issues related to newcomers. This analysis is of importance because these discourses ultimately created real policies, forming the experiences of refugee women's labour market integration. Although not too elaborately, this thesis offers a postcolonial critique on the assumptions underlying Dutch integration policies.

The main objectives are to assess how refugee women from Islamic countries experienced their labour market integration, how this is influenced by political discourses on newcomers and which obstructing factors the women experienced during this process. The results are eventually compared to the already existing body of literature on the topic. From these goals, the following main question emerges: how do Syrian and Iraqi refugee women experience their integration into the Dutch labour market in the period from 2000 to 2019? Since these women are "both agents of change and sources of continuity and tradition" after settlement in the host country, it is important to understand their labour market integration experiences because these in turn are a part of refugee women's general integration into the Dutch society.⁸

⁶ Halleh Ghorashi, et al., "When is my Dutch good enough? Experiences of Refugee Women with Dutch Labour Organizations," *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 7, no. 1 (Winter, 2006): 68.

⁷ VluchtelingenWerk Nederland. "Refugees in numbers," accessed October 23, 2019, <https://www.vluchtelingenwerk.nl/feiten-cijfers/cijfers-over-vluchtelingen-nederland-europa-wereldwijd>.

⁸ Susan Forbes Martin, *Refugee Women* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004), 13.

First, in order to answer the research question, secondary literature was used. Policy and academic papers were conducted in order to get an understanding of the obstructing factors and chances that (female) refugees experience in their labour market integration worldwide and in the Netherlands. Secondly, interviews were conducted in the period from November 2019 to February 2020. These interviews served two purposes, 1) to identify and analyze the women's perspectives on their labour market integration, and 2) to observe if and what trends there are in the (experiences with) labour market integration in the period from 2000 onwards. Ten semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with refugee women individually to form a detailed picture of the achieved education and work experience in the country of origin, what obstructions and possibilities they met concerning obtaining a job from the moment they arrived in the Netherlands, and what their dreams and ideals are concerning labour participation.

Terminology

When researching and writing on a topic it is crucial to be clear about definitions. Therefore, the most important concepts and words related to the labour market integration of refugee women in the Netherlands are clarified. In the Netherlands, the words 'autochthonous' (native Dutch) as opposed to 'allochthonous' (non-native) are quite mainstream in the political and academic debate. They are, for example, used as categories by the national statistical office Statistics Netherlands (CBS), which influences policy development.⁹ Moreover, CBS makes a distinction in 'allochthonous' between first generation migrants (those who are born in a foreign country and migrated to the Netherlands) and second generation migrants (who are born in the Netherlands and are the children of those who migrated). Furthermore, CBS makes a distinction between western and non-western migrants. These categorizations are confusing and superficial since, first, the binaries between the native population and everyone who has a migration background and, second, the definitions of 'western' are blurred. For example, Indonesians are considered western by the CBS while Surinamese are seen as non-western. This creates dichotomies between 'natives' and 'non-natives'. Therefore, in this thesis the word 'native' is used instead of 'autochthonous' and 'migrant' or 'refugee' is used instead of 'allochthonous'.

⁹ "About Us," Statistics Netherlands, accessed at August 14, 2020, <https://www.cbs.nl/en-gb/about-us/organisation> .

The word 'citizenizing' (*inburgering*; becoming a citizen) is used in the Netherlands to describe the compulsory trajectory that migrants and refugees have to finish with an exam in order to receive the Dutch nationality. The exam consists of passing the second lowest level of Dutch (A2), Knowledge of the Dutch Society (KNM) and Orientation on the Dutch Labour Market (ONA).¹⁰ Moreover, those who finish the trajectory are obliged to sign a participation agreement stating one will live up to the "Dutch core values freedom, equality, solidarity and participation".¹¹ The trajectory of citizenizing/*inburgering* is often translated as 'integration'. However, it is not the same but rather a part of integration. Integration is much broader and is defined as a reciprocal process of adaptation between the native and non-native population, through which all ethno cultural groups keep their cultural integrity and aim to participate in a large social network of groups.¹² The citizenizing trajectory is the government-imposed official part of integration and is called integration trajectory in this thesis. Related to the concept of integration is assimilation. This is defined as the process when newcomers adapt and transform their culture to the native Dutch culture.¹³

Refugees are persons who has "well-founded fear" in his home country of persecution on the grounds of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or belonging to a particular ethnic or social group, and who receives no protection in his own country.¹⁴ Not every asylum seeker in the Netherlands is a refugee. An asylum seeker is someone who asks for protection in another country by requesting asylum. Those who receive an asylum status are refugees.¹⁵

¹⁰ "What is citizenizing?," VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, accessed August, 14, 2020,

<https://www.vluchtelingenwerk.nl/feiten-cijfers/procedures-wetten-beleid/inburgering> .

¹¹ "Participation agreement in short," Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs, accessed at August 14, 2020,

<https://duo.nl/zakelijk/inburgering-ketenpartners/participatieverklaring/over-de-participatieverklaring.jsp>

¹² John Berry, "Intercultural Relations in Plural Societies: Research Derived from Multiculturalism Policy," *Acta de investigacion psicologica* 3, no. 2 (2013): 1128.

¹³ John Berry, "Intercultural Relations in Plural Societies: Research Derived from Multiculturalism Policy," *Acta de investigacion psicologica* 3, no. 2 (2013): 1128.

¹⁴ VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, "When is someone a refugee?," accessed at August 29, 2020,

<https://www.vluchtelingenwerk.nl/feiten-cijfers/wanneer-ben-je-een-vluchteling#:~:text=Een%20vluchteling%20is%20iemand%20die,eigen%20land%20geen%20bescherming%20krijgt>.

¹⁵ VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, "When is someone a refugee?," accessed at August 29, 2020,

<https://www.vluchtelingenwerk.nl/feiten-cijfers/wanneer-ben-je-een-vluchteling#:~:text=Een%20vluchteling%20is%20iemand%20die,eigen%20land%20geen%20bescherming%20krijgt>.

Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial literature

From the literature review in Chapter 1 it will become clear that a postcolonial perspective on the labour market integration of refugee women in the Netherlands is lacking. This research builds its theoretical framework on work in the field of postcolonial and (postcolonial) feminist studies. Postcolonialism has its roots in anti-colonial struggles and is a critical body of knowledge that questions (Western) mainstream discourses.¹⁶ Rather than a theory, postcolonial work critically engages with a particular set of problems related to colonialism and its legacies, such as academic studies that are “unapprised of non-Western views and unrecognizing of the values and practices of non-Western cultures”.¹⁷ Postcolonial work particularly questions the dominant discourses related to the modernization theory, which underlies many sociological and migration studies. Therefore, I will shortly elaborate on the modernization framework before explaining the postcolonial critique on it. Lucy Mayblin describes the modernization theory as follows:

“the view that societies around the world are slowly progressing toward modernity in the image of Europe and the former white settler colonies.”¹⁸

The modernization framework is based on certain conceptualizations of time, geography and the individual, according to Mayblin and Rachel Silvey et al. According to a modernist understanding of time, Western societies were pre-modern until they experienced an Enlightenment, became capitalist and democratic, and let scientific reason gain importance over religion. The West supposedly transformed at a particular moment in history, around the eighteenth century, from a traditional to a modern society. The geographical dimension of the modernization framework suggests that some areas in the world did experience an Enlightenment, and others did not.¹⁹ This understanding of geography is underlying, for example, in classical migration studies where the concept of ‘place’ takes a central stance. Classical migration scholars assume that migration (to a different ‘place’) comes with positive

¹⁶ Lucy Mayblin, “Postcolonial Theory,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Political Sociology: Two Volume Set*, ed. William Outhwaite, et al. (London, SAGE Publications Ltd, 2018), 157.

¹⁷ Mayblin, “Postcolonial Theory,” 157; Vanessa Iwowo, “Post-Colonial Theory,” in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Action Research*, ed. David Coghlan, et al. (London, SAGE Publication Ltd, 2014), 632.

¹⁸ Mayblin, “Postcolonial Theory,” 163.

¹⁹ Mayblin, “Postcolonial Theory,” 163.

economic development and modernization for the migrant.²⁰ Simply put, the modernist conceptualizations of time and geography lead to an understanding of the world in which non-Western populations are not modern and are assumed to ‘live in the past’; while Europe, or the West, lives in the present and is modern.

Concerning the individual in the modernization theory, they are understood as objects who do not have agency and whose actions are determined by the broader context and by structural processes. In classical migration studies, migrants are either represented as labourers who voluntarily take advantage of economic modernization or as victims of “global capitalist exploitation”.²¹ In both representations, the migrants’ choices are dependent on structures that they have no influence over. Moreover, the identities of individual migrants are neglected and are seen as formed by their migrant communities which in turn are considered as bounded, static and homogenous.²²

Edward Said’s postcolonial work *Orientalism* - published in 1978 and considered to be foundational for postcolonial critiques - shows how Western academy created an image of non-European societies as ‘the other’.²³ Said deconstructs the Western discourse which is centred on the difference between the Orient and Occident and exposes the power relations inherent in the framing of classical scholars. He argues that the Orient, as the Occident, is a product of representations created by Western intellectuals. Said urges us to realize that these representations form both Western knowledge and policies that have material consequences. The crucial message of Said is that the making of systems of representations is closely linked to power and control.²⁴ This postcolonial perspective is used in this thesis to analyze government's representations of newcomers, and how these discourses influence refugee women's labour market integration experiences.

Through the impact of postcolonial critique the understandings of time, place and the individual began to change in migration studies in the 1990s. Related to conceptualizations of place, postcolonial migrant scholars expressed that classical conceptualizations of place “have reflected and reinforced power relations” between the “Third World” and the “West”.²⁵ It was argued that this framing leads to a determination of identity based on place and that it inherited unequal power relations. For example, “the developed” were assumed to live in the

²⁰ Rachel Silvey, et al., “Placing the Migrant,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 89, no. 1 (March 1999): 123.

²¹ Silvey, “Placing the Migrant,” 126.

²² Silvey, “Placing the Migrant,” 124.

²³ Silvey, “Placing the Migrant,” 121.

²⁴ Mayblin, “Postcolonial Theory,” 163.

²⁵ Silvey, “Placing the Migrant,” 123.

West and “the underdeveloped” in non-Western societies.²⁶ To challenge these ideas the voices of migrants became methodologically and analytically essential, an idea I adhered to in this thesis. One of the most important alternative approaches to the modernist understanding of development - assuming that ‘the rest’ is developing towards the West -, was initiated by Gurminder Bhambra. She proposed a new understanding of time and geography through a framework of Connected Histories. This framework recognizes that global developments, with “intertwined histories and overlapping territories”, produced modernity rather than the idea that specific changes in eighteenth-century Europe created modernity.²⁷

Concerning the conceptualization of the individual, postcolonial migration scholars view the migrant as interpretative subjects who have the agency to make their own decisions, rather than as objects steered by structural processes. Postcolonial migration studies criticized the classical representations that homogenized and selectively ignored parts of migrants’ identity. These scholars also view migrants as subjects who individually shape their identity, according to their socio-spatial context. As with challenging classic conceptualizations of geography, in order to better understand migrants’ identities the voices and life stories of migrants became crucial as well.²⁸

Despite the fact that postcolonial critique started around the 1970s, Mayblin argues that “modernity remains the central framework of sociology.”²⁹ Therefore, I will critically examine the systems of knowledge and representations that underlie studies on refugee women's labour market integration “in light of both colonial histories (and their legacies), and of the way in which particular [...] parts of the world are [...] represented”.³⁰

Postcolonial Feminism

Feminist scholars believe that “women (as a group) have less access than men (as a group) to political power, economic resources, and social prestige” and they aim to challenge this situation.³¹ Despite having generally the same aim, postcolonial feminists criticized Western feminism since the 1980s for its patriarchal stance towards ‘other’ places. Mayblin defined postcolonial feminism as the following:

²⁶ Silvey, “Placing the Migrant,” 124.

²⁷ Mayblin, “Postcolonial Theory,” 165.

²⁸ Silvey, “Placing the Migrant,” 123-127.

²⁹ Mayblin, “Postcolonial Theory,” 163.

³⁰ Mayblin, “Postcolonial Theory,” 159.

³¹ Celia Valiente, “Gender and Political Sociology,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Political Sociology: Two Volume Set*, ed. William Outhwaite, et al. (London, SAGE Publications Ltd, 2018), 143.

“an exploration of the intersections of colonialism and neo-colonialism with gender, nation, class, race, and sexualities in the different contexts of women’s lives, their subjectivities, work, sexuality and rights”.³²

Postcolonial feminists, such as Chandra Mohanty and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, criticized the universality and patriarchal stance of the Western feminist claim they would empower and represent women worldwide. Postcolonial feminists argued that Western feminism is based and focused on the European (historical) context and that it neglected the cultural diversity among women. In addition, Western feminism ignored the fact that the experiences of women in non-Western places are different from women in the West. They thus argue that this framework resulted in misguided ways of empowerment for non-Western women.³³ Therefore, Mohanty urges to seek “transnational feminist solidarity” rather than compelling one universal way to empowerment.³⁴ These views are also resonant in Lila Abu-Lughod’s article *Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?* which encourages anthropologists - and (Western) scholars in general - to recognize and respect the differences among women rather than to simplify the image of (Muslim) women to a stereotype.³⁵ Moreover, Abu-Lughod warns Western intellectuals not to “save” Muslim women, hereby viewing Muslim women as victims, but rather to work in equal cooperation in order to challenge global injustices.³⁶

An important concept in postcolonial feminism is ‘double colonization’, referring to the idea that many non-Western women were colonized by both imperial and patriarchal structures. The concept shows that not all women experience gender-based oppression equally. Women from former colonized regions face both sexism and racism. Related to this concept is the analytical framework of ‘intersectionality’, which has been theorized by black feminism, postcolonial feminism and third-world feminism. The term was coined by African American law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw as:

³² Mayblin, “Postcolonial Theory,” 167.

³³ Mayblin, “Postcolonial Theory,” 167.

³⁴ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders. Decolonizing theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 12; Mayblin, “Postcolonial Theory,” 168.

³⁵ Lila Abu-Lughod, “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others,” *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (September 2002): 787.

³⁶ Abu-Lughod, “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving,” 783.

“a form of analysis that looks simultaneously at multiple, intersecting sources of subordination and oppression, usually with a focus on ‘race’, gender and class.”³⁷

Through this analytical tool postcolonial feminist work examines how power relationships are constructed around different categories and how power intersects with, for example, migrant identities and experiences.³⁸

Within migration studies, feminist perspectives, conceptualizations and sites of analysis differ from the classical views in various ways. First of all, classical works conceptualize migrants as gender-neutral objects while feminist studies view them as gendered subjects. Feminist migration scholars understand gender as “socially constructed power relations and identities that shape the possibilities and experiences of migration”, for example the settling process and labour market integration.³⁹ Secondly, feminist studies emphasize the relation between power, identity and place and offer an alternative to the classical views that argue economic pull and push factors determine decisions surrounding the migration and settling processes. Differently, feminist work regards the identity of migrants as central to the forming of these processes. Feminist geographers analyze who has the power to decide which place is accessible to whom, how various communities experience places as inclusive or exclusive, and how the controlling of space indicates and strengthens the privileges and interests of some groups over others.⁴⁰ ‘Space’ could be conceptualized as workplace and result in a study that examines the gendered access to occupations, an issue that emerges in Chapter 3 of this thesis.⁴¹

Thirdly, places that were analytically irrelevant in classical studies became sites of analysis, such as the household. Feminist geographers have emphasized the colonial, national, and racial-ethnic politics of the household. They have showed that “households are not only sites of gender subordination [as Western feminists argue], but can be spaces within which women [...] may find some refuge from the exploitation, harassment, or indignity they face on the job or in “public”.”⁴² The household is constructed differently for and by different groups of women and is related to the specific context, concludes Rachel Silvey.⁴³ This is

³⁷ Mayblin, “Postcolonial Theory,” 168.

³⁸ Silvey, “Placing the Migrant,” 127.

³⁹ Silvey, “Placing the Migrant,” 127.

⁴⁰ Rachel Silvey, “Geographies of Gender and Migration: Spatializing Social Difference,” *The International Migration review* 40, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 70.

⁴¹ Silvey, “Placing the Migrant,” 127.

⁴² Silvey, “Geographies of Gender and Migration,” 68-69.

⁴³ Silvey, “Geographies of Gender and Migration,” 69.

also something that came up during my interviews with the women and will be described in Chapter 3.

Methodology

Much of what refugee women encounter may also be common to what refugee males experience, however, this study focuses on refugee women because labour market trajectories are gendered and women face particular consequences of, for example, culturally-defined discourses.⁴⁴ Moreover, Muslim refugee women (or refugee women coming from Islamic countries) "face a multitude of challenges invoked by their ethnicity, race, migration status, culture and religion".⁴⁵ This thesis is based on a mixed methods approach in order to reach its aims. It combines a discourse analysis of Dutch coalition agreements, interviews with refugee women and a study of the policy studies and academic literature on the topic. From this mixed methods approach it becomes possible to analyze the experiences of the refugee women (through the interviews) and to expose the discourses rooted in Dutch migration policy from 2000 onwards (through analysis of the coalition agreements and the studied literature). Getting a grasp of labour market integration issues in the US and the UK enabled me to provide more apt meaning to the data collected through the interviews. The literature on the US and the UK will be examined in Chapter 1.

After the Second World War, scholars from the subjectivist turn in social research argued that the role of human agency is analytically relevant. According to this argument, interviews enable the social researcher to give an identity and character to people who would otherwise "remain mere names".⁴⁶ Moreover, oral research - with interviews and dialogues with participants - claims an egalitarian purpose as it can bring the people's life closer to the researcher and it gives the study more legitimacy, serving a wider social purpose. Oral history, and oral social research, became a strong movement in particularly the US, UK and Germany post-1945, for example, in order to deal with a painful past, since oral history methods focuses on stories of marginalised people.⁴⁷ Oral history is also long present in feminism as it provides women's stories that would otherwise be omitted in history-writing.

⁴⁴ Jill Koyama, "Constructing Gender: Refugee Women Working in the United States," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 28, no. 2 (September 2014): 273

⁴⁵ Nabil Khattab, et al., "Can Religious Affiliation Explain the Disadvantage of Muslim Women in the British Labour Market?," *Work, Employment and Society* 32, no. 6 (2018): 1012

⁴⁶ Barbara Merrill, Linden West, *Using biographical methods in social research* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2009), 18.

⁴⁷ Barbara Merrill, *Using biographical methods in social research*, 18-21.

Moreover, oral research is used to "gain a better understanding of the concerns and priorities, culture and experiences" of people.⁴⁸ This thesis conforms with the ideas of the subjectivist turn, making use of biographical research by taking the stories of refugee women as its foundation.

Grounded Theory

The grounded theory allows a researcher to focus on issues that remain unclear after having studied the literature on a specific topic, in this case refugee women's experiences with integrating into the Dutch labour market. In accordance with the grounded theory, I have chosen research participants - refugee women - that have lived through the phenomenon that I study - economic integration - and who are therefore considered to be the experts on the issue.

Instead of operationalizing independent and dependent variables, the grounded theory allows participants through interviews to talk about their lives and experiences. The questions I asked are based on the important topics that became clear through the literature review: 1) school and work experience acquired in the country of origin and the Netherlands, 2) competence of the Dutch language, 3) social network, 4) psychological issues and 5) gender roles. In addition, I provided space for the participants to bring up issues that were not accounted for in my questions. The interviews were thus semi-structured. For example, one participant brought up how difficult it was for her to enter a high school in the Netherlands, so I pursued on this issue.⁴⁹

Data Selection and Analysis

Several methods were used in order to get in touch with Syrian and Iraqi women. A first selection method was through using my own network. Through my volunteering work at the Dutch Council for Refugees (VWN) and at Project JAS (Project Yes Refugees) of the municipality of Leiden, I became acquainted with four Syrian(-Palestinian) women. Through my personal network I gathered three respondents. Secondly, I got in contact with one respondent by posting a message on the Facebook group "Irak NL" saying that I was looking for Iraqi refugee women who would want to talk with me about their economic integration

⁴⁸ Hugo Slim, Paul Thompson, *Listening for a Change: Oral Testimony and Development* (London: Panos Publications, 1993), 1.

⁴⁹ Carl Auerbach, et al., *Qualitative Data: An Introduction to Coding and Analysis* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 13-16.

for my Master's thesis. Lastly, I made use of the snowballing-effect that led to my referral to additional respondents by two original respondents.

The interview data consists of ten interviews with individual refugee women. Their true names are not given in this research in order to protect their privacy. Eight of the women live in the province South-Holland and two live in the cities Utrecht and Almere. It should be noted that Muna initially arrived in the Netherlands as a family migrant, newly married with an Iraqi man who already lived in the Netherlands. She left the Netherlands when she received her Dutch nationality in 2008, but returned in 2014 when the situation in Iraq deteriorated. Even though I know she has never been a refugee, I incorporated her in this thesis because of 1) her Iraqi origin, 2) the given she has not learned Dutch, gained work or study experience in the Netherlands and did not build up a strong social network prior to 2014, and 3) the fact she practically fled from Iraq in 2014. Therefore, she has very similar experiences to integrating into the Dutch labour market as the other interviewed women. For the sake of convenience, she is viewed as the other refugee women in the rest of this thesis.

The respondents' age ranged from the beginning of their twenties to late fifties and thus all belong to the working age population. Eight interviews were face-to-face and two were carried out by phone calls, because we did not have the possibility to meet. During four interviews, a translator repeated the Arabic answers to me in Dutch. Of the remaining interviews, one was conducted in English and five in Dutch. The interviews took place in various settings, all decided upon by the participant. The interview with Jazira took place in a shisha/narghile bar in Leiden. Jazira seems to be a confident and strong young woman, who talked about difficult issues such as Islam in relation to gender issues and depression. She did this with ease while being surrounded by young men with a migrant background watching soccer on TV. Jazira wanted to meet in the centre of Leiden so that she could meet with a guy after the interview without her parents knowing. The interview with Jazira was the first of my meetings with the participants and her openness took my nervousness away, something that fortunately did not come back in the later interviews.

Haleema I met in a restaurant in a village near Leiden. While she talked elaborately about her feelings of being excluded from high school on the basis of her national origin and being a Muslim, I realized I, as a native, felt slightly uncomfortable or ashamed for her having to have had this experience. This I did not communicate to her, but I did tell her to feel sorry for her. I think this resulted in her feeling more comfortable with me leading to a more in-depth interview. A couple of months later, I met Mahneera, an old acquaintance of

Haleema, in a cafe in Almere. She had a radiant personality and let me meet her new-born baby and husband after the interview.

The interviews with Dunia and Reena took place over the phone. This felt different from meeting face-to-face because questions were answered more directly, without any possible extra useful topics that I did not ask for. Nevertheless, I believe the women were honest and open with me. Aisha, Razia and Bahar I met in a municipal building where they received Dutch classes a few times a week so that their teacher could translate their answers to me. Talking with Aisha and Razia was relatively difficult because they seemed shy and gave short answers. They seemed not used to talking about their personal life (with a native Dutch woman). Interviewing Bahar was different as she was at ease, making jokes and hereby creating a relaxed atmosphere as it was rather funny to figure out her jokes due to the language barrier.

The interviews with Muna and Sadia were held in their house, both apartments in functional gray buildings in a neighbourhood in Leiden where relatively many newcomers live. Muna offered me cake and we sat down on the couch in the living room. It felt like she got motivated through the interview to start looking for work experience or study, since she asked me many things about doing a Master's after the interview. Moreover, a few weeks later she told me over the phone she had found the volunteering job in the hospital she wanted. During the interview with Sadia, we sat down on the couch with her husband and her daughter Jazira, who translated for me, and ate home-cooked Arabic snacks. Because I already knew the family through my volunteering work, there was a good atmosphere. It seemed Sadia enjoyed talking about her teaching classical Arabic in Syria and the Netherlands.

Having described the experience of interviewing the women, I will now describe the methodology of analyzing the interviews' transcripts. The method of coding is used to analyze both the interviews and the coalition agreements. A coding method is "a procedure for organizing the text of transcripts, and discovering patterns within that organizational structure."⁵⁰ The method includes several steps. First, I selected the text that is relevant to my research concern so that the transcripts and coalition agreements became more manageable to analyze. Second, I focused on topics that were discussed by more participants or returned in the coalition agreements, so called 'repeated topics'. Third, studying the repeated topics it became clear that some of them have something in common, forming certain characteristics.

⁵⁰ Auerbach, *Qualitative Data*, 31.

Describing these characteristics in the case of the interviews, I used the words of the participants as much as possible aiming to provide “the bridge between the researchers’ concerns and the participants’ subjective experiences.”⁵¹ A few participants narrated experiences that were not expressed by others, but because some of these stories were nevertheless important I included these in Chapter 3 as well.

Positionality and Limitations

The topic of this research came to me through the volunteering work with refugees I do since 2018 and through which a paradox caught my interest. While Dutch people are often afraid that 'refugees steal our jobs', almost no refugee I knew had a (paid) job.⁵² Therefore, I came to the research issue of refugee women’s experiences with economic integration. Naturally, it is important to carry out research in an ethical way. According to Martyn Hammersley and Anna Traianou, research ethics refer to “a form of occupational ethics: it is about what social researchers ought, and ought not, to do *as researchers*, and/or about what count as virtues and vices *in doing research*.”⁵³ Hammersley et al. name a few intrinsic values that are important to doing research.

Intrinsic values - objectivity, dedication and independence - “constitute, or they derive from, the goal towards which the activity is directed, and shape judgments about what is required for that goal to be pursued effectively.”⁵⁴ Thus, it is first important to determine the research goal before one can implement intrinsic values. Traditionally, the task of a qualitative researcher was believed to be to produce knowledge. However, I align myself with contemporary qualitative researchers who argue that the task comes down to supporting certain practical goals, such as “promoting social justice by challenging social inequalities”.⁵⁵ In order to reach this aim, objectivity is, or remains, essential. Objectivity means that personal convictions are downplayed as far as possible and that irrelevant sources or actors do not influence the researcher. The aim of challenging social inequalities fits this research project and is a result of my personal relations with and sympathy for refugees. Although I have attempted to be objective my sympathy might have framed this research project. This Master’s thesis will probably not have a great impact on equalizing social chances. However,

⁵¹ Auerbach, *Qualitative Data*, 40.

⁵² "Scared of refugees, but what are we afraid of? ", AD Nieuws, accessed at August 14, 2020, <https://www.ad.nl/buitenland/vluchtelingenvrees-maar-waar-zijn-we-bang-voor~a1fe208b/> .

⁵³ Martyn Hammersley and Anna Traianou, *Ethics in Qualitative Research: Controversies and Contexts* (London: SAGE Publications, 2012), 36.

⁵⁴ Hammersley, *Ethics in Qualitative Research*, 37.

⁵⁵ Hammersley, *Ethics in Qualitative Research*, 37.

I still hope that this study might enhance the awareness of society in general about the position of and debates and discourses on refugee women.

Not only has a person's assumed social role an impact on the belief of what one ought to do; it influences the relationship between people as well. Reflecting on my social role I am aware of the fact that I am a young woman. In my interview with Muna, this fact influenced the conversation positively when she mentioned that she did not feel shy speaking Dutch to me because she considered me relatively young. Therefore, she did not feel ashamed of language errors and she could freely express herself during the interview. Moreover, although I met many refugees on a weekly basis through my volunteering work and have a background in Middle Eastern Studies, I am aware of me being a Dutch person who has never visited Syria or Iraq. Therefore, I expected it to be sensitive to interview the women and ask about gender and employment issues. Fortunately, it became clear to me that talking about their experiences in (past) employment was not sensitive or controversial for the women.

Dedication, the second intrinsic value, indicates that researchers direct their study so that it makes an evident contribution to the existing literature. Lastly, according to the third intrinsic value, independent researchers should stand against external pressures that aim to influence the research process.⁵⁶ During the process of setting up and writing this study, I attempted to work according to these intrinsic values as much as possible. Unfortunately, I was not in the position to interview as many women as I initially wanted. However, the data gathered through conducting ten interviews still provides a narrative because most of the women experienced the same obstacles during their integration in the labour market. Moreover, analyzing the language of the three respondents that spoke Arabic was slightly difficult, because I do not speak Arabic and the translator might have unintentionally inflected the answer. Despite this I was still able to grasp what the respondents wanted to say about the need of women to work and gendered employment sectors.

In the following part, Chapter 1, the existing literature on the labour market integration of refugee women is reviewed. In Chapter 2 the coalition agreements of Dutch national political parties that were created between 1998 and 2017 are analyzed. Chapter 3 analyzes the ten in-depth interviews I have held with Iraqi and Syrian refugee women. Lastly, a conclusion and discussion of the results are given, accompanied by some recommendations for further research.

⁵⁶ Hammersley, *Ethics in Qualitative Research*, 46-49.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

The economic integration of migrants has long received much academic interest internationally and in the Netherlands. However, before the influx of refugees into Europe in 2015, these studies merely dealt with labour and family migrants, omitting the experiences that are specific to refugees.⁵⁷ The studies that did analyze the refugees' situation often focus(ed) on the classical migrant-receiving countries, such as the United States and the United Kingdom.⁵⁸ In the US, for example, only a few studies deal with refugees' labour market integration because no official sources distinguish between refugees and other migrants.⁵⁹ In the Netherlands, studying the refugees' labour market integration was considered as irrelevant by academics because refugee integration policies fell under general integration policies applicable to all newcomers since 1998. Policies did not differentiate between refugees and, for instance, family migrants; and therefore the literature dealt with newcomers as one group, merely differentiating to age and country of origin.⁶⁰

Considering the little research done on refugees' employment it is interesting that refugee women's labour market integration was considered as relevant to study in the US, UK and the Netherlands. Before 2015, two studies on refugee women's employment in the US and the UK and four studies on refugee women and the labour market in the Netherlands were published. Three of the four studies about the Dutch situation were published in Dutch, indicating that other European countries have also published on refugee women's employment in the scholars' native language. This indicates that the topic has been studied mostly from a policy perspective, relevant to national and local policymakers and politicians and not to international academics.

Independent from the labour market, it is remarkable that refugee women have been studied often from a medical approach, regarding these women in relation to health issues.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Thomas de Vroome, et al., "The Employment Experience of Refugees in the Netherlands," *International Migration Review* 44, no. 2 (2010): 376.

⁵⁸ On the US: Vaishali Mamgain, et al., 2003; Jonathan Codell, et al., 2011; Lori Beaman, 2012. On UK: Alice Bloch, 2007; John Willott, et al., 2013; Ruth Healey, 2014; Jenny Phillimore, et al., 2006; Louise Waite, et al., 2013; De Vroome, "The Employment Experience of Refugees in the Netherlands," 376-377.

⁵⁹ Ramya Vijaya, "Comparing Labor Market Trajectories of Refugee Women to Other Immigrant and Native-Born Women in the United States," *Feminist Economics* (2020): 6, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13545701.2020.1759815>.

⁶⁰ Only the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) discussed the position of refugees as distinct from other newcomers in 2007, but solely in a paragraph of a survey on the labour market discrimination of non-western 'allochtonen'. Iris Andriessen, et al., *Discrimination monitor non-western allochtonen on the labour market 2007* (Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2007), 171-172.

⁶¹ Marian Tankink, et al., "Silence as a Coping Strategy: The Case of Refugee Women in the Netherlands from South-Sudan who Experienced Sexual Violence in the Context of War," in *Voices of Trauma. Treating*

The early academic interest in refugee women, compared to refugees in general, can be explained by the start of postcolonial feminism in the 1990s. This movement criticized classical white feminists for omitting the voices of non-white/western women and having little understanding of their agency and values.⁶² Postcolonial feminists showed that classical feminist theories encompassed misleading stereotypes of Arab women, associating them with Orientalist imagery that emphasized victimhood.⁶³ This critique urged the academic world to study non-Western women, such as refugee women, explaining why refugee women were initially studied more than refugees in general.

In this literature review, the empirical approach of Rama Vijaya to the long-term labour market participation of refugee women in the US is discussed first. What follows is Jill Koyama's study about how refugee women's labour market trajectories are gendered in the US. Hereafter, Frances Tomlinson explains how refugee women in the UK remain 'outsiders' of dominant spheres through the multicultural and diversity policies of organizations. Subsequently, the critique of Michelle Lokot on NGO's gender narrative on Syrian refugees follows. Her critique is applicable to three of the four studies on refugee women in the Netherlands that were published before 2015. The first overview on the barriers that refugee women in the Netherlands face, published in 1999, will be mentioned shortly, after which the three other studies are examined. Finally, the three most recent studies on refugee women's employment in the Netherlands are reviewed.

Refugee women integrating into the American and English economy

Rama Vijaya's main question was statistical, comparing the long-term employment participation of refugee women with that of other migrant and native American women. In the initial years after their arrival in the US, refugee women have a lower labour market participation than other migrant women and native women, but over time they are outpaced by refugee women. Vijaya shows that the economic participation of refugee women is not influenced by the low participation in their country of origin. Refugee women thus seem to

Psychological Trauma Across Cultures, ed. Boris Drozdek (Boston: Springer, 2007), 191-210; Maria Schoevers, et al., "Self-rated health and health problems of undocumented migrant women in the Netherlands: A descriptive study," *Journal of Public Health Policy* 30, no. 4 (2009): 409-422; Marian Tankink, "Speaking of being silent," (PhD diss., Pharos, 2009).

⁶² Naomi Zack, *Inclusive feminism: A Third Wave Theory of Women's Commonality* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 1.

⁶³ Jane Hiddleston, "'The Woman Who Said 'No'": Colonialism, Islam, and Feminist Resistance in the Works of Assia Djebar," in *Literature and the Development of Feminist Theory*, ed. Robin Truth Goodman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 230.

adapt quickly to the new labour market. However, the gender norms of the country of origin do influence - as do the norms of the host society - the economic outcomes for refugee women.⁶⁴ While Vijaya's perspective on the long-term economic participation of refugee women is optimistic, she shows that refugee women's wages remain lower than those of other migrant and native women, indicating structural inequality in the American labour market.⁶⁵

Where Vijaya shows the empirical increase of working refugee women over time, Koyama and Tomlinson examined the discursive processes employment integration. Using an actor-network (AN) perspective Koyama displays how the labour market integration of refugee women in the US is gendered by material objects - such as job applications and recipes - and culturally-defined discourses.⁶⁶ Koyama shows employers and resettlement agencies have stereotypical ideas about refugee women being "familiar" with cooking and having "a willingness to defer to authority". This makes that the majority of refugee women around in New York work in the food industry.⁶⁷ Koyama also shows that views about refugee women doing "women's work" were preponderant among refugee men, who held tight to their ideas of women having to do the gross of the domestic work.⁶⁸

Refugee women's labour market integration and experiences in the UK are studied from a cross-cultural management and organizational behaviour approach by Tomlinson. Refugee women want to be seen as equals but are treated as strangers by the dominant spheres of the host society. In order to reach their aim, refugee women used volunteering as a possibility "to participate in community activism, to escape isolation, to contribute to organizations that had assisted them and to develop their skills".⁶⁹ However, volunteering proved to be of little help in finding sustainable paid jobs, resulting often in insecure work, because cooking and childcare may be seen by members of the host society as an "extension of their natural role and not regarded as voluntary work at all".⁷⁰ This coincides with Koyama's finding that refugee women's work in the food industry was seen as familiar and fitting by employers and resettlement agencies.⁷¹ Tomlinson shows that there are "multiple axes of unequal power" at work, excluding refugee women on the basis of their ethnicity,

⁶⁴ Vijaya, "Comparing Labor Market Trajectories," 1-2

⁶⁵ Vijaya, "Comparing Labor Market Trajectories," 26

⁶⁶ Koyama, "Constructing Gender," 273

⁶⁷ Koyama, "Constructing Gender," 267-268

⁶⁸ Koyama, "Constructing Gender," 269

⁶⁹ Frances Tomlinson, "Marking Difference and Negotiating Belonging: Refugee Women, Volunteering and Employment," *Gender, Work and Organization* 17, no. 3 (May 2010): 292.

⁷⁰ Tomlinson, "Marking Difference and Negotiating Belonging," 292.

⁷¹ Koyama, "Constructing Gender," 269

religion or refugee status. This comes to the foreground through organizations' diversity policies that fixates refugee women into 'the other' category.⁷²

The gender discourse on Syrians present among NGO's is criticized by Lokot. This narrative holds the idea that Syrian women are now, for the first time, the head of the households. Associated herewith is the word 'traditional' which is used to describe "women who never worked, had little education and were primarily responsible for caring for their husbands and children".⁷³ NGOs, but also the pre-2015 Dutch literature as we will see, tend to either focus on steering women to 'emancipation' or on women that are (seen as) deviating from the 'traditional', like higher educated Syrian women. Lokot critiques the narrative for being too simplistic as it lacks to take into account the influences of class or the type of urban or rural environment in which the women lived on their experiences. Lokot urges NGOs to completely understand the complex realities of gender norms of refugee communities. Not only patriarchal power should be calculated but also power existing in relations between mother and son or between women and their mother-in-laws.⁷⁴

Pre-2015 literature: Emphasizing the Existence of "Emancipated" Refugee Women in the Netherlands

Having reviewed the international literature, the studies on refugee women's integration into the Dutch labour market are now conducted. The specialist on the issue is Marjan de Gruijter, who is schooled in anthropology and Islamic studies. She is the (co-)writer of five out of the seven studies published on the topic. Before going into the three studies published before 2015 and to which Lokot's critique is applicable, it is important to briefly describe the first study on the topic. The study from 1999 was commissioned by E-Quality, an institute that aimed to inform politicians and policymakers on emancipation and diversity.⁷⁵ It shows that the institutional level complicated refugee women the most in their process of obtaining a job. Therefore, Maayke Botman states, knowledge at municipalities and other relevant organizations should be increased on the specific difficulties that refugee women face.⁷⁶

⁷² Tomlinson, "Marking Difference and Negotiating Belonging," 293

⁷³ Michelle Lokot, "Syrian refugees: thinking beyond gender stereotypes," *Forced Migration Review* 57 (February 2018): 34

⁷⁴ Lokot, "Syrian refugees," 34-35.

⁷⁵ Maayke Botman, *Labour market integration of Refugee women. An inventory* (Den Haag: E-Quality. Experts in gender en etniciteit, 1999).

⁷⁶ Botman, *Labour market integration of Refugee women*, 1-3, 16

Almost twenty years later, this is a recommendation that is still presented in the most recent publications on the topic.

All of the other studies published before 2015 focused on the labour market integration of higher educated refugee women. This seems to fit with postcolonial feminism since the authors conceptualize refugee women not as victims, but as independent actors that shape their own life choices. However, the underlying framework indicates gender stereotyping because the studies focus on the women that 'deviate from the traditional' refugee women. It seems the authors wanted to present a counter-narrative to popular (negative) discourse and stereotypes on refugees. This discourse comprises the idea that Middle Eastern (Muslim) women are low educated and cannot or are not allowed to work. In order to discourage this idea, the authors focus on the refugee women that enjoyed high education. Moreover, it counters the perspective of medical studies on refugee women as victims of trauma and other health issues. By solely focusing on higher educated refugee women, the authors do not do justice to the reality since many refugee women did not go to or finish school.⁷⁷ A great part of the refugee women in the Netherlands is thus neglected in the academic world before 2015.

Two publications of the project *Barrier or Career?*, commissioned by the University Assistance Fund (UAF), were published in 2005 and 2007 and aimed at the labour market integration of higher educated refugee women. Marjan de Gruijter and Sandra ter Woerds let refugee women speak for themselves and thus regard their voices as analytically relevant, matching with the theories of postcolonial feminism. Five main obstacles to the labour market were identified, namely 1) the integration trajectory, 2) (re)qualification of international diplomas, education and work experience, 3) orientation on the labour market, 4) volunteering work, and 5) the personal circumstances of higher educated refugee women. Obstacle 1) is specified to, amongst others, long asylum procedures; the fact that language training is not specified to the women's initial level; and the little connection between the integration trajectory and the labour market. Obstacle 2) contains that many refugee students experience difficulties with looking for internships. The fact that employers, municipalities and social services have insufficient knowledge about (higher educated) refugee women and the existence of discrimination and prejudices belong to obstacle 3), a barrier that was also identified in the first study of 1999. Moreover, organizations are centred on their own social network by recruiting volunteers, reducing the chances for (higher educated) refugee women

⁷⁷ Marjan de Gruijter, et al., "Employment perspectives of higher educated refugee women. Municipal infrastructure for reintegration in Amersfoort, Rotterdam and Utrecht," *Verwey-Jonker Instituut* (2007): 5

to gain work experience in the Netherlands (obstacle 4)). Lastly, obstacle 5) is specified to, amongst others, mental health issues, the absence of possibilities to not take care of their children, and the absence of a strong social network.⁷⁸

The second publication of the project *Barrier or Career?* focused on reorganizing the municipal infrastructure in order to improve the labour market position of higher educated refugee women.⁷⁹ De Gruijter and Rob Lammerts studied the cities Utrecht, Rotterdam and Amersfoort and show that municipalities often have little or no insight in the number of refugees that are eligible to integrate into the labour market, let alone the number of higher educated refugee women. An important barrier is that with the request for welfare payments, no residential status is registered. Therefore, it is not clear for municipalities what kind of attention is needed for (higher educated female) refugees and the group does not occupy a special position for attention in municipal policies for employment integration. Finally, the training opportunities at municipalities are limited and do not suit the educational level and work experiences of higher educated refugee women.⁸⁰

The third study focusing on higher educated refugee women's employment integration is *'When is my Dutch good enough?' Experiences of Refugee Women with Dutch Labour Organizations*. Halleh Ghorashi and Maria van Tilburg criticize the basic assumption in the Dutch dominant discourse on integration, namely "that knowledge of the Dutch language when combined with education is the key factor for integration into society."⁸¹ Through its methods of in-depth interviews, questionnaires and participant observations the authors take the experiences of higher educated refugee women as central and make them analytically relevant. Two paradoxes in the Dutch basic assumption on integration are identified. First, knowledge of the Dutch language may be important, but it is not an automatic link to finding employment. Rather, it is the focus of the culturalist discourse on language that makes employers reluctant to hire refugee women:

“[...] it is not the language itself that blocks integration into Dutch society, but how it symbolizes negative images of new migrants.”⁸²

⁷⁸ Marjan de Gruijter, et al., “Chances and obstructions at societal participation of higher educated refugee women. A preliminary research to the project ‘Barrier or Career?’,” *Kennisplatform Integratie en Samenleving* (2005): 37-48.

⁷⁹ De Gruijter, “Employment perspectives of higher educated refugee women,” 12.

⁸⁰ De Gruijter, “Employment perspectives of higher educated refugee women,” 65-66.

⁸¹ Ghorashi, “When is my Dutch good enough?,” 51.

⁸² Ghorashi, “When is my Dutch good enough?,” 67.

This imagination especially impacts people originating from Islamic countries. The second paradox in the Dutch dominant discourse on integration concerns education. While the discourse considers having had education in the Dutch system as crucial, the government's policies and regulations seriously hinder the refugee women's entrance into the educational system since they are often too old to apply for student loans. Ghorashi et al. stress that the government should shift away from instrumental means - i.e. education and language training - to solve refugees' backlog in employment participation and instead should fight culturalist and assimilative discourses on integration.⁸³

Since the scholars analyzed the Dutch discourse from before 2006 and interviewed women who arrived in the Netherlands between 1984 and 1997, this thesis can be regarded as a follow-up by examining the current situation. The women in the study of Ghorashi et al. were, for example, probably more isolated than women who arrived more recently because, amongst other reasons, these women did not experience the consequences of the "Law *Citizenizing Newcomers*" (*Wet Inburgering Nieuwkomers*) that was enacted in 1998. This law rules that all migrants with residence permits are required to take and pass a course that includes education in Dutch, knowledge of Dutch society, and career orientation. Before 1998, it was the migrants' responsibility to take Dutch language courses and fewer refugee women opted for participation in the integration trajectory, resulting in more isolation from the host society.⁸⁴

Post-2015 literature: Refugee Women's Employment Integration from a Local Policy Perspective

Only more than ten years later, the next studies on refugee women and the labour market were published, namely in 2018 and 2019. In *'Mind the Gap': barriers and possibilities to the labour market participation of refugee women*, solely municipal employees and social workers (hereafter called 'professionals') identify the barriers and possibilities that refugee women face. The authors did not speak to individual refugee women, thus the study provides an analysis of how 'professionals' related to refugee women's employment regard the women's labour market integration.⁸⁵ Razenberg et al. divided the barriers into, on the one hand, the women's background characteristics and, on the other hand, policy and its

⁸³ Ghorashi, "When is my Dutch good enough?," 67-69.

⁸⁴ Ghorashi, "When is my Dutch good enough?," 55.

⁸⁵ Razenberg, "Mind the Gap"; Marjan de Gruijter, et al., "Work first, women later? Labour market integration of female status holders," *Beleid en Maatschappij* 46, no. 1 (2019).

implementation. An important result is that these two barriers strengthen each other. Support possibilities are less accessible and available for women than for men, because women generally arrive later in the host country. Therefore, they rarely find a job and stay at home. Hereby, the division of roles and (stereotypical) ideas of “women with few chances” is unintentionally confirmed for natives.⁸⁶ This, in turn, affects the policy-making and implementation. Razenberg et al. show that when municipalities do not differentiate their labour market integration projects towards gender this leads to a disadvantaged position for women.⁸⁷ The authors claim that tutors of refugee women need knowledge and competences (concerning attitude and skills) in order to be able to work culture and gender sensitive. A success factor is when a tutor forms a bridge through his own (non-native) cultural background between the Dutch society and the origin of the refugee women, according to Razenberg et al.⁸⁸

More explicit than the studies published before 2015, *Mind the Gap* and *On the Road to Employment* state that many refugee women originate from countries where “traditional division of roles are dominant”.⁸⁹ According to this view, men are the family's breadwinners whereas women are expected to take care of housekeeping and childcare. The view is mainly preponderant among lower educated refugee couples. All the professionals believe that married women - especially those with children - are not supposed to work outside the house according to the norms of refugee groups. They also stated that when women do not receive support from their husband it is difficult to study or work. In addition, the conducted professionals claim that social pressure leads women to sometimes state they do not want to work. Related to these norms is that professionals often experience that when women participate in an employment integration project, the registration is cancelled as soon as the husband finds employment. When the husband receives an income, the family does no longer receive welfare payments and the municipality's support according to the Participation Law comes to end. The result is that refugee women lose contact with municipal support services and remain unemployed.⁹⁰

The literature review shows that refugee women have become a more well-studied topic in the Netherlands, especially in the last two years. However, research has mainly relied

⁸⁶ Razenberg, “Mind the Gap”, 4.

⁸⁷ Razenberg, “Mind the Gap”, 4.

⁸⁸ Razenberg, “Mind the Gap”, 20-21

⁸⁹ Razenberg, “Mind the Gap”, 3; Marjan de Gruijter, “On the Road to Employment? Refugee women and municipalities on chances and obstructions concerning labour market integration,” *Kennisplatform Integratie & Samenleving* (September 2019): 9.

⁹⁰ Razenberg, “Mind the Gap”, 13-17.

on the perspectives of employees at municipalities and social services related to the women's employment rather than views of the women themselves. Moreover, studies have focused on giving policy recommendations or have used data that is now outdated. Giving the limitations of the literature, I developed two research issues: 1) to study the experiences of refugee women with their economic integration, 2) to examine how these experiences were influenced by the political discourses.

Chapter 2: Analyzing the History of and the Political Discourses on Integration

In this chapter, the assumptions and expectations of the Dutch government concerning the refugees' (economic) integration in the last two decades will be laid out. The political discourses are identified through analyzing the coalition agreements devised by the parties that formed cabinets. However, because refugees were almost never mentioned specifically in relation to integration - rather to asylum -, I focused on the government's statements on newcomers. The analyses of the coalition agreements are coupled with the critique on governmental policy expressed in the literature.

1998-2002: Positive Imaging and Shared Responsibilities

Before dealing with the coalition agreement of the Kok II government (1998-2002), a short overview of the decades before is given. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Dutch government requested so-called guest workers to do unskilled labour. In the mid-1970s, almost 90 thousand Turks and Moroccans lived in the Netherlands. Since the government expected them to return to their country of origin, it did not form any integration policy. Policies rather aimed at segregation, focusing on maintaining the migrants' communities and identities without stimulating interaction with the native population. Whether newcomers integrated or not was a decision they could make for themselves. A discourse of "tolerance of difference" dominated in society and political incorrectness was not accepted.⁹¹ However, in the 1990s this discourse and the policy of segregation became strongly criticized by mainstream politicians. For example, the major politician Bolkestein of the liberal *People's Party for Freedom and Democracy* (VVD) argued in 1991 that Muslims living in the Netherlands should adapt to Dutch norms and values. The maintenance of Muslims' culture was regarded as not so important, or even as less desirable since it was believed to counter the integration.⁹² The Islamic background of migrants thus became regarded as problematic for integration.

While this view on the Islamic background of newcomers did not appear in the coalition agreement of the Kok II government, integration had become an important political issue. Kok II created the function of minister responsible for integration, the Minister of

⁹¹ Ghorashi, "When is my Dutch good enough?," 63.

⁹² "VVD Year report 1991," Rijksuniversiteit Groningen. Documentatiecentrum Nederlandse politieke partijen, accessed at August 14, 2020, <https://dnpp.nl/pp/vvd/jv/1991>.

Major Cities and Integration. The Kok II government has three characteristics concerning newcomers. First, Kok II presented itself as optimistic concerning the integration of newcomers. It believed that the pluralism of the Dutch “colourful society” could be used as a strength that would benefit the whole society.⁹³ Moreover, it requested the “colourful effort of volunteers” to support integration.⁹⁴ Through the idea of pluralism as a strength and the use of the word 'colourful' the government framed multiculturalism as desirable.

Secondly, because pluralism was regarded as something wanted, the government viewed integration as a reciprocal process with shared responsibilities for government and society and newcomers. The responsibility of government and society translated into several tasks. Compared to the governments in the period after 2002, which almost did not mention positive imaging and fighting stereotypes, the Kok II government emphasized how crucial positive imaging of newcomers was for integration. Kok II therefore propelled public authorities and employers to hire newcomers on functions that were highly visible. The media was expected to show ethnic role models for newcomers and the government would punish discrimination and racism more severely. Another task the government dedicated itself to was creating paid internships where newcomers could gain work experience and learn the Dutch language. Moreover, integration courses would be set up through which newcomers could orient themselves on and learn more about the Dutch labour market and society and learn Dutch.

While the government would offer these courses and internships, it was expected that newcomers would take their responsibility and "grab the chances offered to them" in order to enhance their (economic) self-reliance.⁹⁵ Participating in integration courses became obligatory, but the coalition agreement did not mention consequences for those who did not comply with this stipulation. Moreover, the government would appoint newcomers with “specific expertise and experience within ethnic groups” to tutor newcomers from “their own [ethnic] circle” during the courses on the Dutch labour market.⁹⁶ It was thus believed that newcomers would be better supported by experienced people from their ethnic group. In short, the Kok II government regarded the integration of newcomers as a reciprocal issue that asks efforts from both government and society and newcomers.

A third characteristic is that the coalition agreement of the Kok II government briefly deals with integration issues of asylum seekers specifically. It states that asylum

⁹³ Tweede Kamer der Staten Generaal, "Cabinetsformation 1998," 68.

⁹⁴ Tweede Kamer der Staten Generaal, "Cabinetsformation 1998," 69.

⁹⁵ Tweede Kamer der Staten Generaal, "Cabinetsformation 1998," 36.

⁹⁶ Tweede Kamer der Staten Generaal, "Cabinetsformation 1998," 68-70.

procedures should be improved in order to reduce the insecurity of asylum seekers' living situation. Kok II argued that asylum seekers should be allowed to do paid work because it would facilitate their self-reliance and reduce their dependence on welfare. A fourth characteristic is the statements of Kok II about non-native girls in the Netherlands. The government thought that they are "often confronted with different expectations".⁹⁷ The coalition agreement did not specify what and whose expectations, but seemingly Kok II meant expectations of the girls' (ethnic) community and those of society. For the government the integration of these girls was essential, since they were regarded as of "great importance in the design of social cohesion in a multicultural society".⁹⁸ Concluding, the years of 1998 to 2002 are characterised by having an optimistic view on pluralism, viewing integration as a shared responsibility, and a brief mentioning of the integration of asylum seekers and non-native girls.

2002-2010: Impelling Newcomers in an "Impersonal Society"

Whereas the Kok II government called pluralism a strength of "a colourful society", the Balkenende I-IV governments (2002-2010) viewed integration as a "seemingly unsolvable problem" in a society that had become "impersonal".⁹⁹ The coalition agreements in this period are characterised by four elements. First, the responsibility for an integrated society was placed mainly with the newcomers. While Balkenende I explicitly states it did not aim to assimilate newcomers, it does imply that assimilation was what the government expected from newcomers. By reporting that "differences in ethnic origin, lifestyle and habits place a burden on the daily interaction and living side by side", the government suggests that it is the newcomers' cultures that have to change towards a Dutch culture.¹⁰⁰ Balkenende II (2003-2006) emphasizes that those who want to live in the Netherlands should be able to speak Dutch, be conscious of Dutch values and live after Dutch norms. This is confirmed when it is coupled with the idea of the government that a restrictive migration policy would lead to integration. By allowing less migrants to settle in the Netherlands, newcomers would interact more with natives instead of focusing on the new waves of migrants, so was the idea of the government. Furthermore, Balkenende II (2003-2006) stated that respect and decency are hard to find in an impersonal society, which was viewed as partly caused by the poor

⁹⁷ Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, "Cabinetsformation 1998," 71.

⁹⁸ Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, "Cabinetsformation 1998," 8.

⁹⁹ Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, "Cabinetsformation" (2003), 5.

¹⁰⁰ Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, "Cabinetsformation" (2002), 15.

integration in ethnic homogenous neighbourhoods. It implicitly summoned newcomers reminding them to be “respectful” and “decent”.¹⁰¹

There were few responsibilities concerning integration that the Balkenende I-IV governments saw for themselves and society. Balkenende I would change the housing market so to reduce “neighbourhoods with homogenous population of non-natives”.¹⁰² When non-natives would be spread over more diverse areas, the interaction with natives would increase and the integration enhanced. Moreover, since Balkenende I viewed understanding as a requirement for integration it would set up social sciences courses in high schools dealing with various religions. Balkenende IV (2007-2010) was the first government to explicitly mention work as a means to integrate. It urged employers, municipalities and other relevant institutions to commit themselves to hire newcomers. Moreover, the Balkenende IV agreement emphasized that the tackling of discrimination would become a main goal of the government, because it was seen as “offending, insulting and obstructing the process of integration and emancipation of newcomers”.¹⁰³ Furthermore, the countering of exclusion of newcomers at the labour market would become a priority for Balkenende IV and it was expected to be placed at top of the agenda of companies as well. The public authorities would take on a role model regarding “pursuing a balanced staff policy”.¹⁰⁴ Despite these responsibilities the Balkenende IV saw for the host country, integration was merely seen as a one-way process that had to come from the newcomers initiative in the period from 2002 to 2010.

Secondly, the Balkenende I-IV governments impelled newcomers to integrate by creating consequences for newcomers who did not meet the integration requirements. These consequences were not being allowed a permanent residence permit and a cutting or omitting of welfare payments. Moreover, the Balkenende I government initiated that newcomers had to pay all the costs for the integration courses in advance, of which the half (Balkenende I) or all costs (Balkenende II-IV) would be reimbursed when the newcomer had succeeded. Newcomers were thus risking to lose a great amount of money by trying to integrate. From Balkenende II onwards, asylum seekers only received a permanent status when they had accomplished the integration courses.

Thirdly, the Balkenende I-IV governments mentioned issues related to Islam. Balkenende I wanted to create a law outlining the limits of religious statements because there

¹⁰¹ Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, "Cabinetscrisis and -formation" (2003), 5.

¹⁰² Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, "Cabinetsformation" (2002), 16.

¹⁰³ Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, "Cabinetsformation" (2006), 22

¹⁰⁴ Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, "Cabinetsformation" (2006), 23

had been uproar about “certain expressions of imams”.¹⁰⁵ Quite in a different line of argument, the Balkenende IV government stated that imam-training programmes are essential for the integration. This government also paid more attention, compared to Balkenende I-III, on fighting discrimination. The coalition agreements of Balkenende I-III only mentioned once words as discrimination, racism, prejudice and imaging, whereas Balkenende IV spoke of it five times. However, this is still not much compared to Kok II which mentioned it sixteen times. Concluding, the coalition agreements of Balkenende I-IV are characterised by placing the responsibility for integration with newcomers, emphasizing the consequences for newcomers who would not succeed in the integration courses, an increased focus on Islam and little attention to stimulate positive imaging of newcomers.

2010-present: Nationalistic Tendencies and Stereotyping Islam

Before presenting the characteristics of the coalition agreements of the Rutte I-III governments (2010-present), I provide some background on the political parties and cabinets. The Rutte I government (2010-2012) consisted of the right-wing party *Party For Freedom* (PVV), the *People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy* (VVD) and *Christian Democratic Appeal* (CDA). Because the VVD and CDA could not agree with the PVV on some issues, this cabinet made a coalition agreement as well as a tolerance agreement. The first included the issues that VVD and CDA agreed upon, the latter consisted of perspectives that all three parties tolerated. These perspectives concerned migration, integration and asylum, amongst others. Because these topics are the most relevant to this research, I focused on the tolerance agreement. The Rutte I-III governments are characterised by three elements. First by their perspectives on Islam in the Netherlands. The Rutte I government states that the VVD and CDA view Islam as a religion, whereas the PVV sees it as “a (political) ideology”.¹⁰⁶ The hostile stance of the PVV towards Islam reappears in the agreement, criticizing the quality of Islamic schools and pleading for a ban on wearing burkas. Subsequently, Rutte II (2012-2016) prohibited the covering of the face in schools, the health sector, public transportation and government buildings.

Moreover, in public spaces the police could force people to uncover their face for identification. Those who wear face covering clothes would not be allowed to receive welfare payments. Since only a few hundred women in the Netherlands wear a burqa, and there has

¹⁰⁵ Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, "Cabinetsformation" (2002), 15.

¹⁰⁶ Parliamentary groups of the VVD, PVV and CDA, "Concept tolerance agreement" (2010), 20

been no related security issues in the Netherlands and surrounding countries, this ban on burqas is merely symbolic politics.¹⁰⁷ The prohibition is a clear statement of the government that it does not tolerate adherence to a strict kind of Islam. Rutte III (2017-present) continued with this symbolic politics, confirming stereotypical ideas about Islam that persist in the public opinion. The coalition agreement states there is no place for “gay hatred, anti-Semitism, [...] honour killings, genital mutilation, child marriages, forced marriages” in the Netherlands.¹⁰⁸ By focusing on a specific side of Islam without providing statistics on how common these issues are in the Netherlands, the government stimulates negative imaging of Islam in the society.

The second characteristic of the Rutte I-III governments is that it hampered integration. Rutte I makes known it would economize “in the field of integration”, such as municipalities offering support to newcomers, and it would not distribute subsidies to organizations that organize activities “that counter the integration”.¹⁰⁹ This suggests that institutions that organize, for example, Islam-oriented activities would not receive subsidies. The government rather aimed at assimilation than at integration. More requirements to accomplish integration courses were added by Rutte I and II, such as the need to acquire a higher language level than before. The government is thus demanding more of newcomers while it does not offer more, but less support by economizing the integration sector. Moreover, Rutte I wanted to abolish the government's “preference/diversity policy” in recruiting staff.¹¹⁰ This would make it more difficult for non-natives to acquire a job.

The third characteristic of the Rutte I-III governments are its nationalistic tendencies. Rutte I requested that newcomers who are able to give up their second nationality should do so. This suggests that the politicians regarded those with a second nationality as not ‘truly Dutch’, or as not solely loyal to the Netherlands. Moreover, Rutte III claims that some people “do not feel at home” because of poor integration.¹¹¹ This implies that the government believes that feeling at ‘home’ can only be achieved when newcomers assimilate. Rutte III states that “in a recognizable Netherlands our language, our flag, our national anthem, our commemorations and our constitution are no symbolic relicts from that past, but signs of

¹⁰⁷ "What does Amnesty think of the law that partially forbids face-covering clothes", Amnesty International, accessed at August 14, 2020, <https://www.amnesty.nl/actueel/amnesty-wet-gezichtsbedekkende-kleding> .

¹⁰⁸ VVD, CDA, D66 and ChristenUnie, "Trust in the future" (2017), 54.

¹⁰⁹ Parliamentary groups of the VVD, PVV and CDA, "Concept tolerance agreement" (2010), 9

¹¹⁰ Parliamentary groups of the VVD, PVV and CDA, "Concept tolerance agreement" (2010), 9

¹¹¹ VVD, CDA, D66 and ChristenUnie, "Trust in the future" (2017), 1.

pride [...]. We have to pass them on to newcomers.”¹¹² Moreover, it points out that being Dutch is something to be proud of and that you have to deserve.

Some side notes have to be made concerning the three characteristics. Regarding the hampering of integration, the Rutte I government started to acknowledge diplomas obtained outside the EU. This measurement helps newcomers to start a study or find a job, and thus to integrate. Furthermore, the Rutte III government saw integration more as reciprocal than the Rutte I and II coalitions, mentioning the responsibilities of the government as well. For example, it states that “labour market discrimination will be dealt with fiercely”.¹¹³ The coalition agreement makes known that “the government as employer will give the right example through an active diversity and anti-discrimination policy”, revoking the Rutte I measure.¹¹⁴ The government also took its responsibility for integration by creating a more efficient asylum system. Asylum seekers with a great chance to receive asylum would go to a smaller reception centre close by the municipality where they would be living. In these centres, language training and integration would start from day one. With the location planning the government would take into consideration the local labour market and the refugees’ qualifications, so that refugees are placed in an environment where finding suitable work would take less effort. Lastly, the government aimed to prevent that refugees and asylum seekers would have to move regularly within the Netherlands so that they could settle more easily.

¹¹² VVD, CDA, D66 and ChristenUnie, "Trust in the future" (2017), 2.

¹¹³ VVD, CDA, D66 and ChristenUnie, "Trust in the future" (2017), 29.

¹¹⁴ VVD, CDA, D66 and ChristenUnie, "Trust in the future" (2017), 54.

Chapter 3: Case study of Refugee Women's Experiences

The women I interviewed have diverse social, cultural and national backgrounds. Before going into the women's labour market integration experiences, I will give some insight in their individual personalities and stories.

Introducing the Women

The women that I interviewed and that arrived in the Netherlands at a young age, all received a pre-university high school education or had studied at a university in their country of origin.¹¹⁵ The interviewed women from Iraq are Haleema, Mahneera and Muna, whom arrived in the Netherlands in the period from 2004 to 2006 at a relatively young age, namely at thirteen sixteen and twenty-one, respectively. When I met Haleema (who is 26 years old when I interview her) is still frustrated when she talks about her first years in the Netherlands. She had just started pre-university high school in Iraq but had to prove herself time after time for the Dutch schooling system. About this I will elaborate later in this chapter. Mahneera (31) had almost finished a pre-university high school education in Iraq. Mahneera has a radiant personality, happy with her new-born, husband, Iraqi friends and job. Muna (36) had just graduated from a Bachelor in Economics. From 2008 to 2014 she lived with her family abroad (amongst other countries in Iraq) and in the period from 2014 to 2019, when I interviewed her, she had been taking care of her daughter and son.

The other interviewed women were Syrian and all arrived after 2014. Also the Syrian women that arrived at a young age were high educated. Dunia (27) was half-way through her studies Civil Engineering in Aleppo, a study she restarted four years ago in the Netherlands. While I interviewed her over the phone, it was clear that she was pessimistic about her professional future, mainly because she believed to have few chances to find a job as a refugee woman wearing a headscarf. The view of Jazira (22), a bright and confident young woman, on life was rather the opposite. In Syria she had almost finished a pre-university high school education and had gained work experience through volunteering at an autism centre and with the Red Cross during the civil war. Jazira has her professional future mapped out, planning to be a psychiatrist in a clinic she already identified. She crossed

¹¹⁵ These women are Haleema, Mahneera, Muna, Jazira, Reena and Dunia.

Europe on her own, with her brother waiting for her in the Netherlands and her parents still in Syria. This was a traumatic experience she clearly just wanted to talk about shortly. Due to the high grades of Reena (27) in Syria she received a scholarship, which enabled her to finish a Bachelor in Sociology and Anthropology at the American University in Beirut. She expressed to be still thankful for her parents, her father being a professor at university, to allow her this opportunity. In Beirut she also volunteered in a Palestinian refugee camp.

The other four Syrian women that I interviewed arrived in the Netherlands in their forties and fifties. Two of them can be considered as low-skilled. Razia (39) quit school when she was fourteen and married when she was 25 years old. It had always been difficult for her to study, she said, but before she was married she dreamt of working for the government. Because her husband supplied her financially she never saw a reason to discuss with him this dream. Aisha (46) comes from a village in the surroundings of Aleppo, where she had worked for five years in the childcare and finished a two-year course in drawing. At the age of 22 she became pregnant and quit her job, after which she occupied herself with doing the household activities. In the Netherlands, she is busy with going to school to learn Dutch and she hopes she will become acquainted with more natives. The two other relatively older Syrian women received more education in Syria and have much work experience. Bahar (45) has been a nurse since she was 21 years old and volunteered at the Red Cross for one year during the civil war. She seems to be a happy and loving person as she states that she loves to help people and that she still cares for her patients up until today. Sadia (56) received a Bachelor in teaching in Syria and has worked for more than thirty years as a primary school teacher in Damascus. She is a person who focuses on the positive side of life, dealing with the experiences of having to flee one's country and losing dear ones through being generous to people and finding support in Allah.

Experiences with the Integration Trajectory

A first characteristic that arose from the interview transcripts is that many women did not understand what the integration trajectory entails and what is legally allowed to do before naturalization. For example, Jazira thought it was not allowed to work, intern or study before refugees have accomplished their integration trajectory, while legally refugees may work even before the start of the integration trajectory. Moreover, the older women understood little about that ONA, the language training and the classes on the Dutch history and society build up to one project, the integration trajectory. In short, they did not know what the

trajectory entails exactly, which is troubling since they must succeed it in order to receive the Dutch citizenship.

A second characteristic is that the older women were positive on the courses and trainings of the integration trajectory, and they claimed to have learned a lot. Especially ONA gave them practical tools which they would deploy when entering the labour market, such as knowing how to write a motivation letter. Moreover, Sadia appreciated the fact that it was possible for her to apply for a special arrangement, which alleviated her by solely obliging her to be present during 600 hours of language training without succeeding the exam. Moreover, this arrangement removed from her the obligation to do ONA trainings. The possibility of this exception was created by the government to alleviate refugees like Sadia, who are having troubles with concentrating due to age or traumatic experiences.

Besides these two characteristics it is important to highlight the experiences of Reena and Mahneera. As mentioned, Reena received high grades in Syria and finished a Bachelor in Sociology and Anthropology at the American University in Beirut. She was critical about the trajectory and expressed that the integration trajectory was too simple for her.

“ONA is so stupid. [...] It was all about [cultural] differences [concerning employment] between countries, which was common sense to me.” - Reena

Reena, who also graduated from a Sociology Master's in the Netherlands, would have wanted ONA to be voluntary so that she could decide for herself to take these classes or not. Mahneera was a minor when she arrived in the Netherlands and therefore did not have to participate in the integration trajectory. However, she expressed that, at the time, she would have wanted to receive more information about the possibilities for her education. In a way, she thus would have liked to be incorporated in an integration trajectory focused on information for young refugees. These two experiences show that the integration trajectory should be more personally customized to individual refugees. When the personal needs and professional background of (female) refugees are taken into account, it is possible to decide what courses are necessary to whom and which are not. This in turn, having the suiting information and courses, could motivate and support refugee women better in their labour market integration.

The Women's Network

Contact with Public Servants

A first characteristic of the refugee women's comments on their contact with public servants, is that is useful for their labour market integration. Four opportunities or advantages were identified by the women. The first is gaining information about or receiving help with the re-evaluation of diplomas from abroad. For example, Bahar asked her tutor from the municipality about the re-evaluation of diplomas and he helped her with the process. This re-qualification of her nursing diploma would help her to become a nurse again, which she had since she was 21 years old. Bahar also volunteered at the Red Cross for one year during the civil war. As she stated she still cares for her patients in Syria, a re-qualification of her diploma would help her doing what she loves to do: helping people.

The second advantage of having contact with public servants is that it increases the women's social network. Sadia's tutor comes to her home and therefore she feels looked after by him and the municipality. She appreciates that her tutor asks her what she thinks of the school where she received language training, of the neighbourhood where she lives, and if she receives sufficient welfare payments. Moreover, she feels like he understands her situation as an older woman coming from Syria, who does not feel like being in a position to learn Dutch or find a job fast. This kind of contact with public servants provides a sense of security and understanding for refugee women. A third opportunity to labour market integration related to being in contact with public servants, is receiving information about and/or help with requesting a University Assistance Fund (UAF). As mentioned, Dunia restarted the study Civil Engineering four years ago in Amsterdam and was enabled to do this by the financial support from UAF. She was informed about UAF by her tutor. A fourth advantage is that public servants might offer practical help with getting a job. Dunia was alerted about the vacancy for her current job by her tutor and was joined by him to the job interview. Moreover, Reena did an internship at the municipality during her Master's and her co-workers later recommended her to the organization she currently works for.

A few other issues arose during the interviews which are noteworthy. Muna, Razia and Aisha barely have or had any contact with public servants. Muna's husband received an income and therefore Muna was not eligible to labour market integration trainings offered by the municipality. This is a situation that is common among female family migrants, but also by refugee women, who usually arrive later in the host country than their husband who is by

then better prepared for employment. Municipality workers therefore focus more on the men's labour market integration than the women's. Razia and Aisha, who were both housewives in Syria, seem not to have had much contact with public servants because they did not have clear or no ideas about possible future employment. It thus seems that when refugee women do take little or no initiative, public servants pay less attention to them when it comes to finding a job.

Another issue arose from Reena's story who, while was recommended by the municipality for a job at another organization, felt like the municipality was pushing her to find a job when she graduated for her Master Sociology. As a refugee she felt like she could not live up to the expectations of the Participation Law, which obliged her to apply for five jobs a week and follow trainings at the municipality, because "we come from war". Also Razia thought that the government was pushing other refugees too much to find a job as she believed that many refugees were not ready yet to start working. A last crucial experience to note is Jazira's story about the appointments with her tutor, who has a Moroccan origin.

“I really did not find it comfortable to have a conversation with her. [She is] not here to make racist comments about me: ‘Why are you this disrespectful? You are a Muslim so you need to wear a headscarf and a long dress.’ But I do not like that, so why should I wear it?” - Jazira

Jazira told the municipality her contact person was making racist comments and asked for another contact person, “someone who is Dutch or with just a different nationality than Moroccan”. Despite this disclosure to other municipal employees, she did not get a new contact person. Jazira recounts always asking her contact person to tell her about finding a (volunteering) job or study and to suggest ways to improve her Dutch. However, Jazira’s contact person neither came with any recommendations for employment or education nor asked her about her future plans. Jazira concluded the interview with the statement that the municipality failed to get a grasp of the problems that refugees face.

Social Contact

A first characteristic concerning the social network is that all women expressed not to have much or any contact with natives. The main part of the women's social network consist of refugees or other newcomers. A reason for this, concerning the first years after arrival, is that

the women are (too) occupied with the integration trajectory or, for the ones who arrived as minors, specifically with language training. Another reason became apparent through Mahneera's story, namely that newcomers seem to be sooner accepted in low-skilled jobs resulting in fewer chances to enlarge one's social network to natives. Despite Mahneera's intelligence, she only found a job at a fast food restaurant when she was eighteen years old. The main part of her colleagues were of Afghan and Turkish origin.

A different reason was implied by Mahneera too, namely that some women may not wish to have native Dutch friends, she said:

“I do not have Dutch friends anymore, because I already know how to speak Dutch. Having Iraqi friends works better for me because we have the same mentality and culture.” - Mahneera

Having contact with native Dutch persons was a mean to learn Dutch for Mahneera, since the cultural differences were too big for her to bypass when befriending native Dutch.

A second characteristic concerning the women's social network is that meeting with neighbours is often the first contact they have with natives. This contact turned out to be essential for some women. Muna, whose main task is to support her children and whose Dutch is basic, does not go out of the house much and only meets Kurdish people. However, she sometimes meets the Dutch neighbour who informed her about volunteering in a hospital. The neighbour kept on motivating Muna to pursue this volunteering job, which she ultimately got a few months after I interviewed her. Also Aisha said the only native she knows is her neighbour and Jazira got help from her Dutch neighbours by finding a study.

A third characteristic of the women's social network is that they often receive information from other refugees or people with a migrant background. For example, Syrian refugees told Bahar about the possibility to get her nursing diploma re-qualified in the Netherlands. Moreover, Sadia asked people in her neighbourhood's mosque, who are mainly from Moroccan origin, if they could tell her about job opportunities in an Islamic primary school. They informed her she first needs to be able to speak Dutch and do a new teacher's study before being allowed to be a primary teacher in the Netherlands. Because this was not an option for her, they recommended her to teach children in the mosque classical Arabic, a paid job she currently does with much joy.

Other experiences that are noteworthy concerning the women's social network and their labour market integration are those of Reena and Dunia. During her Master Sociology in

Utrecht, Reena found her internship at the municipality through her contact with her professor. This internship ultimately led her to find her current paid job. Her social network thus proved to be important in her labour market integration. Family can also provide refugee women with the needed information. Dunia's brother learned her everything about the integration trajectory courses and finding a study and job. When Dunia frustrated said she does not know any employers, she made a suggestion to enlarge refugees' social network.

“Everyone should have the chance to prove oneself at a job during six months. In this way employers will see that we can do the job.” - Dunia

She raised the idea of having events where employers and higher educated refugees can meet. This would result in the temporary hiring of refugees which could possibly change to a more permanent contract.

Barriers to Entering the Labour Market

Language

A characteristic present among all women is that they spoke extensively about mastering the Dutch language and all of them viewed fluency as a condition to getting a paid job. Mahneera, for example, only started to search for a job when she thought her Dutch was good enough. Muna explained not to send any application letter before having reached level 3 or 4, while the requirement for passing the integration trajectory is level 2. Remarkable is that ONA employees told Muna she first has to reach these levels before being able to find a job. This prevented her from looking for a job sooner while it is theoretically not true. A volunteering job is viewed by some women as a mean to learn Dutch rather than as a condition. Both Muna and Bahar used volunteering as a stepping stone to both language fluency and a paid job.

A second characteristic - present among women who arrived at a young in the Netherlands, namely Haleema, Reena and Mahneera - felt lost about how much of a condition some level of language fluency was or seemed to be for employers in the hiring process, and how important it turned out to be for reaching their educational goals.

“One should not judge someone only on their language fluency. IQ is something different.” - Haleema

This quote shows Haleema's frustration about the fact that no employer - besides the employer that she knew personally - hired her for a side job. This is despite her being in a pre-university high school in Iraq and having this indication as well for education in the Netherlands. While it was more than a decade ago, Haleema still felt angry about this issue during the interview. The same happened to Reena who “was lost and had no hope” because she could not find a job because she did not speak Dutch well enough, despite having a Dutch Master’s degree. Moreover, Mahneera was hindered in her study plans since she wanted to become a doctor but could not keep up with the level of pre-university high school education (VWO-level in Dutch) because of the language barrier.

A third characteristic, present among the relatively older and/or not (higher) educated women, is that the language training was perceived as difficult. Razia, for example, has been living in the Netherlands for almost three years but she seemed unable to speak any Dutch. The fourth characteristic is that the younger and higher educated women found the language training easy. Dunia and Jazira said they were the best students in their language classes and found it easy to learn the new language. The opinions about the difficulty of the integration trajectory's language training thus seems to depend on age and educational level. This related to what was stated before, namely that the integration trajectory should be made more personally customized.

Other Barriers: Personal Sphere

Concerning the private sphere, a first characteristic was that having young children in the years after arrival seemed to form a barrier to the women's labour market integration. Both women who had young children in this period, Muna and Razia, prioritized taking care of their children full-time over working. Muna got pregnant shortly after arrival and waited with looking for a volunteering job until her children were in their mid-teens. She narrated that when she went to her first language training, the teacher told her to go home because she had just had a miscarriage. She was intrinsically motivated to learn Dutch, but a miscarriage, pregnancies and the raising of the children caused delay in her language training. Moreover, her wish to take care of the children made her to not opt for aiming for a higher language degree. For Muna raising her children and thereby deciding not to work, was a different life

path than she had in mind when she lived in Iraq. She had finished her degree in Economics and wanted to work in a bank. On the contrary, Razia chose to opt for the same life choices. Coming from a more traditional environment, it seemed during the interview like she saw no other option than taking care of the children before considering to work.

The second characteristic concerning the private sphere were health issues related to the experiences of being a refugee. Many women implied or explicitly stated they struggled with depression obstructing them to learn Dutch or to find work. As said before, Razia and Reena said the Dutch government has to be patient with them as refugees. This implies they grapple with (varied levels of) trauma. Sadia's experiences of war hindered her concentration that she needs for learning Dutch. She is not able to learn Dutch and therefore did not ask for a requalification of her Syrian diploma, since she has to speak Dutch to be able to become a teacher in primary school.

The third characteristic was feeling "different" from or feeling deprived by natives, which consists of three components. The first component was the feeling of having to prove oneself more than natives. Before being accepted in a high school, Haleema had to do a national exam in order to determine her level. Despite her high grades for this exam, the two schools she contacted did not accept her. The school did not want to send a pupil to higher general continued education (HAVO) who had only lived in the Netherlands for two years. Therefore, Haleema had to do a third year of language training with other refugees.

"I sat day and night in my bedroom, I was studying more than ten hours a day. And after everything, after the [high] grades, she [the school's manager] still said: 'you cannot do this'. Yet, my hard work was not appreciated." - Haleema

During Haleema's Dental Care study at a university of applied sciences, she felt like she had to prove herself every day. This was especially caused by people who laughed at her use of language when she asked a question in class. Also Mahneera stated she certainly had and has to prove herself more than natives at school and at her current job. However, the persons she feels like she has to prove herself for, have changed. At a younger age, she had to ensure herself and her family but now she feels she must prove herself to people that are more at a distance to her, such as co-workers. The second component of feeling different is being positively discriminated, which was observed in the case of Mahneera too.

“Even at my current job I got accepted because I have ‘different blood’. They wanted more variation in their team.” - Mahneera

Mahneera has a lot of contact with customers who have varied ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, the company that Mahneera works for wanted to increase the diversity in their teams. Mahneera did not imply to feel depleted by the positive discrimination.

A third component were feelings of being deprived. For example, Haleema thinks she was not accepted in high schools and did not get a side job for a long time because she wore a headscarf. Moreover, she felt like people wanted to hurt her when they advised her not to aim for high educational goals. Another example is Dunia who narrated that “employers do not trust people from other countries, especially from Syria or Iraq”. Moreover, she expressed that “[refugees] do not have any chance to work”. She reasoned that employers do not trust refugees, because refugees “do not look like them [employers]”. Like mentioned earlier, Dunia therefore suggested there should be an opportunity for refugees to have a temporary job in order to increase employers’ trust in refugees capabilities.

Seized Opportunities to Work

In the previous subsections, the ways the women used to integrate into the labour market were already touched upon a bit. To make these paths more clear, I discuss them one by one. A first path is by pursuing the education the women aimed for. Mahneera’s plan was to go to pre-university high school education, study medicine and become a doctor. However, when she was in the position to enter a high school - after she left the asylum centre and finished language training - she was already eighteen years old. Because of her age and the language barrier, she decided to accomplish science courses not in high school but at the Continuing General Adult Education (VAVO), a school where adults can get their high school diploma. She reached the level of HAVO resulting in her acceptance at the study Medical Laboratory at a university of applied sciences. After her study she found a job as medical analyst in a hospital, a job she is happy with. Dunia used education as well in order to find a job, she is doing Civil Engineering at the university of applied sciences in Amsterdam. Haleema, who got rejected from all high schools she applied for, seized the opportunity to contact a school for secondary Vocational Educational and Training (MBO) herself, without a recommendation from any high school. Like the high schools she applied for, the MBO requested from her to do the national exams while she already had received high grades for

them in the years before. She also had to do an IQ test and had to be interviewed by one of the school's teachers. In the end, she was admitted to the HBO without an high school diploma, a situation that is very rare. The high grades Haleema got for the national exams, she also got during her HBO study Dental Assistant. Despite her supervisor telling her she would not succeed in a HBO school, she applied for the study Dental Care when she graduated for her HBO. Because of her good grades, she was accepted immediately and four years later she was one of the fifty (out of 120) students that graduated without delay. Her initial plan had been to continue with Dentistry at university, but she learned from a university informant that she would have had to do VAVO again for the diploma of VWO. Haleema realized this was not realistic in the end of her twenties, so she was satisfied with her HBO diploma. She found the job she had always dreamed of and became a dental assistant directly after finishing her studies. Also Jazira had the dream in Syria to do university and become a psychiatrist. However, because of the language barrier she currently does a HBO study to work in the mental health care. Lastly, Reena started a Master's Sociology in the Netherlands, which enabled her to work in an organization aiming to increase social cohesion.

A second path to the labour market is to do volunteering work. Reena gave as a volunteer a leadership training for refugee women at a women's organization. For this organization she later started to work for. Moreover, Muna started to volunteer at a hospital in order to improve her Dutch, a skill she ultimately wants to use to find a paid job. Bahar planned to volunteer in the elderly care so that she could become a nurse again. A third path was followed by Sadia, who used her social network to find a job. The imam in her mosque asked who would like to give Arabic classes for children and she signed up. Because she taught classical Arabic for 32 years as a primary teacher, the imam hired her for this paid job.

Perspectives on the Future

Besides the women who already had a job they are satisfied with, all women had some plans about (volunteering) work in mind. With one exception, all the women that aimed at having a paid job ultimately, had a volunteering job or were looking for one before doing paid work. The exception is Aisha, who does not have a concrete idea about what job she wants to acquire and how to look for it. She would like to become a hairdresser or work in the childcare, a sector in which she had worked for five years before becoming a housewife in

the beginning of her twenties. She aims to continue studying Dutch after the finishing of her integration trajectory, so that her fluency is good enough to find a job.

Again with one exception, all the women who wanted to volunteer or who already volunteered wished to have a paid job. The exception is Razia, who quit school when she was fourteen years old and had been supplied by her husband ever since. She is not used to doing paid labour and she wants her husband to continue supplying her. Nevertheless, she decided to volunteer as a teacher's assistant at a school where refugees learn Dutch. And she wants to increase her days of volunteering from one day to two days a week, so that she becomes independent from her husband sooner and she "can return something" to the Netherlands.

The other women who want to find a paid job first aim to gain work experience, learn Dutch or enlarge their social network through volunteering work. These women have a diploma and work experience from their country of origin and had more concrete ideas about how to look for a job in the Netherlands than Aisha and Razia. For example, Bahar was a doctor's assistant in Syria and volunteered at the Red Cross during the Syrian civil war. In the Netherlands she wants to work in the health sector again so she has handed in her Syrian diploma to be re-qualified. Moreover, she talked with the wife of her "buddy" from the integration trajectory about her wish to volunteer in the (elderly) care. Bahar wants to volunteer in the health sector so that she becomes acquainted with the Dutch work context and can return a service to the Netherlands. She thus volunteers in the Netherlands in order to be more prepared for a paid job in the health sector. Muna also volunteers to ultimately find a paid job. However, instead of gaining relevant work experience she uses volunteering work as a tool to learn the language. She wanted to volunteer in a hospital and would like to find a paid job in a function related to Economics because she has a re-qualified Bachelor's diploma in Economics. When she has reached a higher level of fluency she either starts sending application letters or wants to start a (pre-)Master's in Economics.

Gender and the Labour Market

In this last section of Chapter 3, I included the women's comments related to gender and employment because their opinions about this shape their labour market integration experiences. Moreover, this section can be used in order to counter stereotypical ideas about refugee women from the Middle East. The women varied in opinion when looking back on the gender relations in their country of origin. On the one hand, they expressed that women were allowed to do "everything", study and work in Iraq and Syria. Haleema, for example,

said that women "may choose every job they want" in Iraq, and Mahneera emphasized that when both the husband and the wife have studied it was usually the case that both would work. Even if the husband could support his wife, the woman would want to work if she had graduated. In this case, they would deliver their children at their parents' house or at the child care. Also Bahar and her husband were both working in Syria. She stated that they "supported each other" and asked herself why a woman would "stay at home" when she has a diploma. Reena expressed that the women in her family were strong and independent, fighting actively against the regime in Syria.

When I asked Sadia what she thought about working women in Syria, she expressed that "most of the people [in the Netherlands] have a wrong image of women in the Middle East". She stated that the women from this region "are allowed to study and work, [...] now and even in the past". Sadia is thus aware of the common belief in the Netherlands that Middle Eastern women are solely occupied with the household activities. Lastly, Dunia recounted that the number of male and female students was equal in her study Civil Engineering in Aleppo. When she started the same study in Amsterdam, she was surprised to find out that she was the only female student.

On the other hand, the women emphasized gendered differences related to the labour market in Syria and Iraq. For example, Mahneera stated that it was perceived as "not okay" when a girl younger than eighteen would occupy a public function, such as working in a restaurant. She recounted it was not allowed for her to go out alone, with the exception of going to school. Muna narrated that it was not possible for women to become a taxi driver or to do police work, for example, because "there are differences between men and women" in Iraq. And while Sadia stated that women are allowed to study and work, she did express that some Syrian women "cannot work or study because of their culture or family, when they have a close mind". Her daughter, Jazira, was the participant that talked most about her experiences related to and perspectives on gender in Syria.

"I am allowed [by my family] to do what I want, to study and work. In our culture that is actually really special. [Our family does] have an Islamic culture, but we are really not that strict. We can do everything, even when it is not allowed [by Islamic jurisprudence]. We may experience and then decide for ourselves if it is good or not." - Jazira

Jazira's perspective on her, as a girl, working has not changed when she came to the Netherlands. In Syria she believed that everyone, no matter if one is a man or a woman, has "to do something for themselves, their family and the society". Moreover, she believes that work makes girls stronger and better able to deal with difficult experiences and for her it would not matter to work in a sector that is male-oriented. This is different for her mother Sadia, who stated that she would not feel comfortable to work in a sector that is dominated by men. However, she agreed with Jazira that it is important for women to work, because it brings "routine to her life" and it makes that women can contribute to society. Related to job sectors was Razia's surprise when she saw a female bus driver in the Netherlands, something that is "normal" in the Netherlands according to her husband. For Razia it is "fine" when women want to work and she "really supports" Syrian girls and women that are motivated to work in the Netherlands, but Razia does not want to work. On gendered job sectors, Bahar clarified she thinks girls that want to work in a male dominated sector "have a strong character", and that no one "should take a dream away" of a man, for example, who wants to be a nurse. When I asked Aisha about women and work, she just said she supports the fact that men have the same rights as women in the Netherlands.

Concerning looking for a job in the Netherlands, Muna explained she does everything together with her husband, like going to the municipality, the police or the bank. Her husband tells her she "should try to do a study and [to speak Dutch]" and he was motivating her to find a volunteering job. Dunia said:

“For me, [...] as a woman with a headscarf, so not only a woman, it is more difficult to find a job. Because I do not look like them [natives].” - Dunia

This quote shows she was rather pessimistic about her finding a job after her study Civil Engineering because of her appearance.

Conclusion

This thesis has aimed to answer the question how Syrian and Iraqi refugee women experience their integration into the Dutch labour market in the period from 2000 to 2019. Based on the interviews, it can be concluded that all women believed their labour market integration was a difficult process. The most common reason for this was the language barrier. The women considered being able to speak Dutch well as a condition to finding a paid job. Another reason is that they had little contact with natives and a limited social network in general. This prohibited an easy access to crucial information about where and how to look for a job and complicated the women in becoming fluent in the Dutch language. What emerged from the interviews too is that many women had dreams about the job they wanted to acquire in the future. However, it appeared to be complex to form these ideas into concrete plans. For example, Aisha would like to work as a hairdresser but could not reify steps that she would undertake to accomplish this.

While the women did not explicitly state they deal with trauma, it was clear that some struggled with a difficult past obstructing them to find a job or to learn Dutch. Ideally, Sadia would want to become a teacher in a Islam-oriented primary school, but in order to reach this she should graduate from a HBO study in teaching and be fluent in Dutch. Both things she was not capable of because of her concentration issues caused by her experiences of the Syrian war. The interviews also showed that it was easier for women who had received regular education in the Netherlands to find a job than for those who were educated in Syria or Iraq. Haleema and Mahneera found a job immediately after their HBO studies and Reena also relatively soon after finishing her Sociology Master, while Muna, for example, has not found a paid job yet while she has a re-qualified Bachelor in Economics from Iraq. Of course, Muna's situation was also influenced by her wish to dedicate her time to their children.

In *Mind the Gap* Razenberg et al. stated that tutors who can relate to the refugee women's culture from their own background, are a success factor in guiding the women to the labour market. However, Jazira's experience showed that it is not always the case since her tutor of Moroccan origin made comments about Jazira's way of clothing and behaving. This made Jazira feel uncomfortable, resulting in an unsafe environment that does not benefit the labour market integration of refugee women in general. The interviews also show that almost all women think that work is personally important to them. Some of them explicitly said they want to return something to the Netherlands by working. In the case of Jazira, Haleema and Mahneera their idea that work is important did, however, change to feelings of having to

prove oneself to yourself, to the women's family or to (native) co-workers. Those women who did not plan, or did not have concrete plans, to work - Aisha and Razia - found their purpose currently by taking care of their family.

Having concluded on the interview, on the political discourses it can be said that these have hardened in the last two decades. To me as a researcher, this was something rather shocking because I did not realize before how much the discourse on newcomers had changed in the Dutch political system. One clear consequence of a political decision on the women's experiences was identified, namely the arrangement applicable for Sadia. The Rutte I-III government (2010-present) alleviated her and other refugees with health issues by cancelling some of the integration trajectory's requirements.

Besides this clear relation between the discourses and the women's experiences, there are no indications that hardening in discourses have directly impacted the women's labour market integration experiences. Haleema, Mahneera and Muna arrived in the period when the political discourse could be described as "Impelling Newcomers in an 'Impersonal Society'" (2002-2010). The other women arrived when the political discourse could be described as " Nationalistic Tendencies and Stereotyping Islam" (2010-present). This shift in discourse seems not to have influenced the women's experiences. The experiences are mainly dependent on the age at time of arrival in the Netherlands and on where the women have received education (Netherlands or country of origin).

However, Reena and Razia felt like they or other refugees were being pushed by the government to start working when they were not ready for this step (yet). And even though there are no direct and clear consequences on the women's labour market integration, political discourses might strengthen certain ideas that are present in society. Sadia, for example, was aware of the general idea that lives among natives that women from the Middle East would not want to work and/or are not allowed to study and work according to Islamic norms and values. These ideas in society may be encouraged when expressed as well by major politicians, which in turn would limit the women's chances to find work. Further research could be carried out on the impact of policy or political discourses on the chances to find employment for refugee women originating from Islamic countries.

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