Mobility, vulnerability and agency

Deconstructing gendered representations of refugees

By Bess Doornbos

Submitted to Central European University

Department of Gender Studies

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Erasmus Mundus Master's degree in Women's and Gender studies

Main supervisor: Dr. Elissa Helms, Central European University

Support supervisor: Dr. Lisa Dikomitis, University of Hull

Budapest, Hungary, 2015

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I explore the different ways in which refugees are represented and imagined through using excerpts from Dutch media, examples from within my personal circle and observations from volunteer work. Within these changing social settings, the same gendered notions operate to achieve a dichotomous portrayal of refugees. I have identified four themes that play a crucial role in this process, namely (im)mobility, passivity, vulnerability and (non)agency. These concepts have traditionally been associated with one of the genders. Men and the masculine have been codified as mobile, active, strong and capable. In contrast, women and the feminine have been identified as immobile, passive, vulnerable and lacking agency. Through these associations, gendered notions 'do' the gendering and result in specific feminised or masculinised perceptions of refugees. This dissertation constitutes an attempt to trace the gendered representation through the many layers of society, show the persistence of these patterns of meaning and illustrate how they have affected the experiences of those concerned.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to dedicate this thesis to both of my grandparents. Going back to university was a difficult decision to make since it did not match social expectations. Thank you, *grote opa en oma*, for supporting me at every possible step along the way (even when it meant choosing a topic for this thesis of which we sure share different opinions). I have thoroughly enjoyed the regular Tuesday evening dinners and hope there are many more to come. Second of all, I want to show my love and appreciation for my partner who agreed for us to spend two years apart from each other in order for me to pursue the GEMMA program. Exploring other cities together during the weekends you came to visit has been enjoyable although it was not always easy to live separately. Thank you for being at the other side of the phone at the rough moments. The last mile is the longest and it has been hard for me to finish this project. I am so happy that my sisters have encouraged me, especially during these frustrating last miles, and have showed constant faith in my abilities. You have taught me what love and support means. <3 Of course, this dissertation would not have been possible without the participants in the interviews. Thank you for opening up and sharing the sometimes difficult stories with me. Lastly, and I hope this does not discourage the reader from reading this piece of work, I have to admit that I am not good with words. Writing in English has been a true challenge. Aditi, Denise, Eve, and Laila: I appreciate your efforts to improve my written style.

Budapest, October 2015

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INTRODUCTION

Almost a year ago, I chose to write my final thesis for the GEMMA master program on refugees in the Netherlands. I did not foresee for it to become such a much debated item in the months that followed. The refugee 'crisis' is everywhere: in local, national and international media, on facebook, in political debates, in art, and as a theme in conversations among friends and family. With the political situation in Syria and Eritrea, Europe has experienced an increased influx of refugees. In the Netherlands this has practically meant a rise in asylum applications from 14.395 in 2013 to almost 24.000 in 2014. In 2015 so far around 15.000 new applications were submitted and around 8.000 refugees arrived through family reunification. Although not as high a number as in the 1990s, this is a considerable increase.[1] The Netherlands was unprepared for this increase and is struggling with accommodation for the refugees. Refugee issues have become more visible in media and politics. It also gained the attention of the Dutch public and provoked divergent opinions. I hope my analysis will be useful in untangling what is happening in the Netherlands at the moment and which factors shape the perception and experience of refugees.

Theoretical framework

What it means to be a refugee is not a static given but changes through time and space. Malkki (1996) has for example described how the identity of being a refugee for Hutu in Burundi arises from their specific historical and cultural context. She has contrasted this meaning to the perception of refugees by humanitarian aid workers. However, in public discourse refugees themselves hardly have the opportunity to define refugeeness in their own terms (Leudar *et. al.*, 2008: 188). These inequalities should be situated in the power relations of refugees vis-a-vis institutional contexts which 'include international and national law, the policy and management discourses and practices of politics and immigration, the social welfare system, the media, and social science research' (Threadgold, 2006: 223, 229).

The category of refugee is socially constructed, which means that they are represented in particular ways in discourse (Goodman and Speer, 2007: 167). These representations function to achieve specific goals, they perform 'ideological work' (Threadgold, 2006: 226) and in this sense are 'always fundamentally a political action' (Goodman and Speer, 2007: 179). In creating and representing a collectivity of people in a particular way, the way this group is treated is justified. For example, refugees can be presented as 'legitimate or illegitimate, deserving or undeserving, and welcome or unwelcome in this country' (Goodman and Speer, 2007: 167). Indeed, 'categories are never just

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[1]http://statline.cbs.nl/Statweb/publication/?DM=SLNL&PA=80059ned&D1=1&D2=0-3,6,8,14,19,29-30,50,52,62,66,l&D3=0,5,10-34&VW=T [last accessed October 4, 2015].

neutral descriptors, used to report objectively on some state of affairs. Rather, the act of categorizing people into groups can work to accomplish particular tasks' (*ibid*.). Therefore, those categories are not just representations. As Threadgold notes 'they are performative, they enact and produce asylum, and they have material effects on real asylum and other lives' (2006: 227). For example they 'form the context for policy making and implementation' (Johnson, 2011: 1017). Or, looking at a more familiar context, they shape how Dutch citizens engage with asylum seekers. As Johnson beautifully summarizes:

> It is through the dynamics of representation- of rendering certain constructions visible and legible in the public sphere- that the categories that shape our social world are made meaningful. Categorisations of people and events, social relationships and institutions form the content of the social and political structures that shape our lives. They form the foundational understandings that are the basis upon which we engage with the world- even if that engagement is to contest these categories. They have meaning, and it is through the collective process of meaning making that knowledges and understandings are developed. This process must have a foundation, however, and it is in the public representation of categories that this begins (2011: 1017).

Representations are not only found in written form. They also concern visual images which might be considered as much, or even more, effective because photos are considered reflections of reality (Johnson, 2011: 1017).

In this thesis I will explore the different ways that refugees are represented and imagined through using excerpts from Dutch media, examples from within my personal circle and observations from my volunteer work. Within these changing social settings, the same gendered notions are put to work to achieve a specific portrayal of refugees. To be clear, I am not describing specific discourses. My point is to unearth how notions of mobility, passivity, vulnerability and agency are central to dichotomous thinking on refugees and emerge in differing contexts. Moreover, I would also like to map how these perceptions feature in the accounts of the refugees I interviewed. This constitutes an attempt to trace the gendered representation of refugees through the many layers of society, show the persistence of these patterns of meaning and illustrate how they have affected the experiences of those concerned.

Research question

The content of this dissertation developed from the opposing accounts that exist on refugees. What struck me most during the process of learning about refugees in the Netherlands was the two extreme attitudes towards this group. I encountered these representations with the people around me, in my volunteer work, in policy and in the media. In the Netherlands asylum seekers are often the subject of

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negative attention and are perceived as a threat in both economic and cultural terms. Threatening asylum seekers are commonly depicted as young males. I had known this attitude in politics and in the opinion of people around me. However, I was less familiar with the contrasting account: the perception of refugees as absolute victims in need of protection. These 'genuine' refugees are usually imagined as female victims. I was puzzled about these conflicting ways of representing refugees. These observations shaped how my thesis developed and led me to approach the subject from a gendered perspective. How exactly did it matter whether the portrayed individuals were men or women? These contemplations led me to pose the following research question:

How are representations of refugees/asylum seekers gendered and how do these representations accomplish their gendered effects?

After reading an article by Hyndman and Giles (2011) the contradictory tendencies as mentioned above started to make sense to me. The authors describe how refugees who stay in camps in the global South are differently perceived from those who decide to migrate further to the West. The former are subjected to a feminising regime, while the latter are interpreted as a masculine menace:

> We contend that refugees from long-term camps and other protracted situations are feminized based on 1) their location; and 2) their legal lack of status. By contrast, refugees on the move to more affluent states in the global North are positioned as potential threats to 1) security; and 2) the welfare state. We are particularly interested in the construction of difference between these two groups, noting that those who stay still are viewed as genuine, immobile, depoliticized, feminized, while those on the move are potential liabilities at best, and security threats at worst. Refugee protection and state security are framed as contrary projects (Hyndman and Giles, 2011: 363).

These differing processes of feminisation on the one hand and masculinisation on the other do not affect either men or women. In contrast, it concerns the attribution of certain characteristics to specific groups of people in order to accomplish a 'gendered construction of difference'. As such, it leads to 'essentialized identities' (*op. cit.*: 363-364). As Hyndman and Giles elucidate:

> [T]he feminization of a phenomenon refers to a shift in gender relations toward those considered 'female' or feminine. However, it need not refer to women; men can be at once emasculated through job loss or loss of status as a breadwinner, and feminized if they become, for example, stay-at-home fathers (2011: 363).

Hyndman and Giles contrast the identity of the two groups of refugees, the genuine victim and the threatening refugee on the move, that are a result of these gendering mechanisms. Simplified gendered differences of what constitutes the feminine and the masculine, have often been effective in producing binaries (*op. cit.*: 367). As Spike Peterson argues, these binaries based on male-female differences are 'evident in all collective meaning systems where the hierarchical dichotomy of gender is foundational to symbolic ordering and discursive practice' (1999: 40). One can think for example of the distinction between public/private, culture/nature and reason/emotion (*op. cit.*: 36).

In this thesis I will build on the insights mentioned above. Both processes of feminisation and masculinisation in the social construction of refugees are explored. In the untangling of these tendencies I have identified four themes that play a crucial role in categorizing refugees, namely *(im)mobility*, *passivity*, *vulnerability* and *(non)agency*. These concepts have traditionally been associated with one of the genders. Men and the masculine have been codified as mobile, active, strong and capable. In contrast, women and the feminine have been identified as immobile, passive, vulnerable and lacking agency. Through these associations, these gendered notions 'do' the gendering and result in specific feminised or masculinised perceptions of refugees. I have devoted one chapter to each of these gendered concepts. To be clear, I am not arguing for essentialised gender identities and distinctions. Instead, I am carefully exploring how the stereotypes on refugees are constructed and on which gendered assumptions they rely.

With this thesis I hope to contribute to the asylum discussion by systematically combining the literature that is available. Academic texts usually mention one of the gendering mechanism but not in relation to each other. I have not come across many articles that have put these two processes of gendering together and explored dialogically. The four factors on which the gendering is based, have not been untangled in this way. Through this compilation I want to demonstrate the pervasiveness of the binary to which refugees are subjected. Furthermore, I wish to give an idea of what the consequences are of these imaginations in terms of policy. But I would also like to trace some effects in terms of identity: how do these ideas manifest themselves concretely with Dutch citizens and in the experiences of refugees who come to the Netherlands?

Overview Chapters

In this thesis I will argue that the representation of refugees is highly gendered. This gendered work is accomplished by attributing certain characteristics to refugees. The chapters are built around four qualities, namely mobility, passivity, vulnerability and agency. These are gendered notions that help to feminise or masculinise asylum seekers. Besides processes of gendering, mechanism of othering are central to the representation of refugees, most often expressed by the ethnicity, religion or class of the figure of the refugee. Hence, different identificatory axes work together.

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Chapter one will zoom in on the idea of *(im)mobility*. It will explore how refugees on the move are differently perceived than those that await in refugee camps in the global South. As soon as these populations start moving, specifically towards the West, they are framed in particular ways to express a threat to national welfare and culture. In representations young, dark skinned, hooded men embody this threat to the nation most efficiently. Through nationalist theories I will shed light on some of the symbolic dimensions involved. Chapter two focuses on the idea of *passivity*. My informants have contrasted their previous *active* life to that in the asylum seeker residence centres. This chapter builds on the previous one and explains how the construction of asylum seekers as a menace have worked to justify measure to manage the refugee applicants. Restrictions to work, study, move, and privacy have led to enforced passivity. This policy therefore *creates* the feminized dependant subject. This image of refugees have become institutionalised to the extent that specific policies are implemented to relieve residents of their passiveness. Chapter three explores how the figure of the refugee is intertwined with notions of *vulnerability*, best captured by an image of a desperate woman. In humanitarian discourse this connection is often made to insure donations and to justify assistance. To achieve this association the refugee is usually represented as an (African) mother. I have repeatedly encountered this association between refugees and the need for protection at different moments during the research period. Furthermore, the alleged vulnerability of the refugee has led to experiences of infantalisation in the host country. Chapter four addresses the concept of *agency*. Agency has been theorized a lot in feminism and has come to the fore in many of my GEMMA classes. Hence, it was no surprise that it popped up in my analysis too. I use agency in this last chapter to describe the distinction that is made in Dutch society between asylum seekers, actively in search of a better life, and refugees, as passive bearers of their circumstances. The genuine refugee allegedly lacks agency and should be grateful for whatever is offered to her. This results in an absence of entitlement for refugees.

All four chapters are closely intertwined and the concepts of mobility, passivity, vulnerability and agency overlap in multiple ways. I have separated them for analytical purposes but in reality they are inextricably linked. In my conclusion I hope to reflect on some of the interconnections. Furthermore, the conclusion will try to integrate some of the most recent developments in refugee issues in the Netherlands and the European Union at large.

Relevant actors
To understand asylum in the Netherlands, it is important to mention some of the actors that play a role in this field. Their names will occur regularly in my analysis. The most important in the context of asylum seeker residence centres is COA, short for *Centraal Orgaan opvang Asielzoekers* (Central

Agency for the reception of Asylum seekers). COA manages the reception centres and the asylum seeker residence centres (AZCs). On their website the task of COA is defined as follows:

> We are responsible for the reception, supervision and departure (from the reception location) of asylum seekers coming to the Netherlands. (...) COA, an independent administrative body, falls under the political responsibility of the Ministry of Security and Justice. COA gives account for its operations to the Ministry.[2]

Thus, although COA is an independent organisation it is contracted to fulfill a task as dictated by the government. In this context they can be referred to as a 'bridging organisation' creating a connection between the refugees and the host government (Lawrence and Hardy, 1999 as quoted in Gastelaars *et. al.*, 2002: 12). Hence, COA is not a facilitating or housing agency only. Most of the employees are also social workers, preparing residents for either Dutch society or for returning home (Gastelaars *et. al.*, 2002: 13). These responsibilities of COA result in ambivalence in the relation with the residents. COA is needed for assistance in all matters of daily life. Yet, for example if the asylum procedure has come to a (negative) end, COA will evict refugees from their premises. COA also has the responsibility to keep the asylum applicants available for the procedure and are in this sense an extension of the government. This is expressed, among others, in the compulsory registration for refugees once a week in the centres. Furthermore, personnel of COA is allowed to enter the common facilities of the apartments without further notice. A guy I met in the AZC I worked in often functioned as a translator for his fellow nationals. I saw him and others making the same joke multiple times: knocking our door or a piece of furniture to announce his arrival accompanied by the words 'COA!'. This example symbolizes the intrusiveness and the constant presence of COA in the daily life of the residents.

The second main actor of relevance is *VWN*, short for *VluchtelingenWerk Nederland* (Refugee Work Netherlands), also the organisation I volunteered for. This is a national non-governmental organisation which for a big part runs on volunteers (more than 6000 of them, and 600 paid employees). They have offices in the majority of the asylum seeker residence centres from which they support the residents, mostly with legal aid and family reunification procedures. They are also based in the major Dutch cities from which they assist acknowledged refugees with integration. They offer integration tests and classes that are compulsory for newcomers, they help settling in when it comes to registration within the municipality and provide language lessons with volunteers. Lastly, *VWN*

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[2]https://www.coa.nl/en/about-coa [last accessed October 4, 2015].

organizes different projects, for example to assist refugees in finding work, and they lobby and have public campaigns targeted at increasing understanding for the situation of refugees.[3]

Lastly, I will sometimes refer to the *IND* which is the acronym for *Immigratie- en Naturalisatiedienst* (Immigration and Naturalisation Services) and is part of the Ministry of Security and Justice. This organisation processes all immigration applications and, as such, also decides on the asylum procedures.[4]

Wordchoice

The term asylum seeker refers to a person who applies for asylum in another country (Goodman and Speer, 2007: 166). A refugee is someone who is officially recognized according to the Refugee Treaty. As stated above, in the Netherlands the IND is responsible for this decision.[5] As I will explain throughout this thesis the word asylum seeker has a strong negative connotation in Dutch speech, and the term refugee also has specific meanings attached. In an attempt to remove general suspicion towards asylum seekers, in this thesis I have alternated between the words asylum seeker and refugee. Furthermore, I have chosen to add the notions of refugee applicant (Goodman and Speer, 2007: 179) and asylum/refugee claimant (LaCroix, 2004) to lift the self-evidence of existing terms. I understand that there is no neutrality in terms; as Leudar *et. al.* note there exist no 'impartial way of categorizing' respondents (2008: 188). However, since the latter terms are relatively unknown in public speech, the associations attached are hopefully less ingrained in society.

Methods

This dissertation is based on interviews with refugees and experts, volunteer work at a location of *VWN* in one of the asylum seeker residence centres and a research diary. In this section I will explore the details of the research process.

To collect data, I have interviewed nine refugees. My interview guide developed throughout the research period. I started out with a list of topics and potential questions about life in asylum seeker centres. However, I soon started to broaden my scope. Experiences in the reception centres were still the guiding line in my interviews, but I also found out that other dimensions were more important to my respondents. Conversations took the form of semi-structured interviews (Bernard, 2002: 205) but developed from a set of possible questions to a more theme centred style. However, this less structured style of interviewing worried me: would I be able to tie all the interviews together in the

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[3]http://www.vluchtelingenwerk.nl/wat-wij-doen [last accessed October 4, 2015].
[4] For more information see www.ind.nl [last accessed October 4, 2015].
[5]www.vluchtelingenwerk.nl/feiten-cijfers/wie-asielzoeker [last accessed October 4, 2015].

end? Looking back I wished I would have been confident enough to pursue a more open-ended approach by centring on a single question, namely on the experience of being a refugee in the Netherlands.[6]

I complemented these interviews with volunteer work. I registered for a VWN volunteer position in a local asylum residence centre. The local manager of VWN allowed me to accompany the other volunteers in their daily activities in assisting the refugees, most often with their asylum procedure. Through this weekly activity I learned a lot about daily life in asylum centres and gained insight into the approaches of the volunteers. During this (participant) observation I kept a research diary to remember everything that had happened throughout the day. I always had a notebook with me to jot down thoughts. At the moment, I am still volunteering for VWN but now function as a staff member. I have noticed, in assisting the clients myself, how little space and time is left to reflect on what exactly is taking place. I am gratified that during my research period I was able to observe from a more distant position in order to better catch the dynamics between employees and clients.

Following feminist writers, I contend that there is no objective understanding of the world around us (Diamond, 2006: 471). Haraway has asserted that 'knowledge and truth are partial, situated, subjective, power imbued, and relational' and therefore speaks of 'situated knowledges' (Haraway, 1988 as quoted in Hesse-Biber, 2007: 9). By means of my writing style I have tried to shed light on some of these aspects and in particular the coming together of my knowledge. In the chapters that follow I have tried to explain the manner in which I acquired my data and how I interpreted the situations I encountered. For me, I learned as much from setting up the research and the volunteer work, as from the interviews themselves. I have attempted to make transparent to the reader how I drew my conclusions by sketching some of the situations that were relevant for shaping my ideas or that were meaningful for my arguments.

Lastly, I payed attention to what was written about refugees in the period of my research, roughly May till July 2015, and extending into the months of writing. I have not done this in any noticeable systematic way. As part of my daily rituals, also outside of research practice, I checked the Dutch news and Facebook daily. These have provided solid background knowledge on what was on Dutch people's mind. Even within these selective areas of social life, much of what I had encountered in the literature became meaningful. I have incorporated those media articles that illuminate my arguments. My thesis does not concern a systematic discourse analysis on refugee issues. I have tried to shed light on how specific gendered notions function in representations of refugees that circulate throughout Dutch society and emerges in media, policy and narratives.

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[6] This was done for example in the study of Leudar *et. al.* (2008).

Selection of participants

To get respondents, I approached the manager of an asylum seeker centre with the request of bringing me into contact with residents. Unfortunately, COA did not grant me direct access to the residing refugees since it could potentially evoke unrest. I was disappointed about this outcome, but in the end the meeting with the COA location manager became a valuable source of information because of the way in which she denied my request (see chapter two). My next strategy was to contact two other local refugee assistance NGOs but they never responded to the several emails I sent. After these experiences, I was forced to find respondents through my personal network and through snowballing sampling (Bernard, 2002: 185). As a consequence, I have mostly spoken to acknowledged refugees. Szczepanikova has pointed to an advantage of interviewing refugees who obtained refugee status compared to those who are still in the asylum procedure: 'Since they are no longer asylum seekers who need to prove why they should be granted asylum, their position creates more space for ambivalence towards the refugee category attached to them' (2010: 463). I have noticed differences between the participants who were still living in the AZCs and the others. The former were not as critical as the latter respondents. However, it is not only the security of refugee status but also the lapse of time that influences the interviewee's accounts. If the asylum procedure has taken place a long time ago, respondents have had more time to revisit, reflect and evaluate this particular period in their lives and their narratives will change accordingly (Borland, 1991: 63). Specifically, I think, individuals have more time for memories to 'order and arrange them in the form of a story, linking emotion with event, event with event, and so on' (Culbertson, 1995: 179). In other words, their narratives might take a more coherent form.

Even within these limitations, it was difficult to decide who would qualify as a 'refugee'. Initially I decided to restrict myself to refugees who had been in the Netherlands for no longer than ten years. However, sticking to these criteria did not turn out to be feasible. At a certain moment, I came into contact with a young man from Iraq who arrived to the Netherlands more than fifteen years ago. I wrote him off as a potential respondent. Nevertheless, he later texted me that he would be happy to participate because he still regularly looked back on the period he spent in the asylum seeker residence centre. Some memories although experienced many years ago, might have a lasting effect on the refugees and affect their sense of self. As one participant noted 'yes the things you endure, they will always stick with you, they will not go away'. Another factor complicated the selection of informants. A respondent from the former Yugoslavia who arrived in the Netherlands fourteen years ago, and received permission to stay after ten years demonstrated this to me. She told me that had I asked her for an interview earlier, she would have declined. In other words, it was unpredictable beforehand who would classify (themselves) as a refugee ánd would be willing to talk to me about this particular period in their lives.

An issue that is related to this discussion is where or when one *stops* being a refugee, and *starts* being part of the host country as a fully-fledged citizen. When does the label of refugee become redundant? This question emerged after seeing a report on the *VluchtelingenWerk* Facebook page with the title: '*Vluchteling tovert met dwarsfluit*'[7] (Refugee performs magic with traverse flute). What was remarkable, is the way the protagonist is referred to. It concerns a man who fled Iran in 1997 and now lives in the Netherlands with his family. He won a musical competition and is now allowed to play with the national orchestra. Interestingly, the man is still referred to as *vluchteling* (refugee), although he has been living in the Netherlands for almost twenty years. This example begs the question: why and when is someone still referred to as a refugee? Especially in the Netherlands one will always stay an *allochtoon*: someone who or whose parents were born abroad. As opposed to an *autochtoon*, a 'native' Dutch (Ghorashi, 2005: 193). I will touch on the subject of labelling in chapter four which might shed some light on this discussion, especially in terms of entitlement.

Through my network, I ended up with interviewing nine refugees. Additionally, I interviewed four specialists on the topic: two employees of COA, a volunteer for VWN and a doctoral student whose topic concerned life in asylum centres. The interviews lasted between fifty minutes and ninety minutes, the majority was taped and subsequently transcribed. Taping the interviews was convenient for myself, but also had a significant influence on some of my respondents. Some did not seem to pay attention to my mobile phone that was recording the conversation and would stop noticing it after a while. Another respondent started to confide in me and became critical after I switched off the record. In general, I assume that the tape recording has, especially in the beginning, made my respondents more self reflective about their expressions. However, in the course of the interview these feelings moved to the background. To protect their privacy I have anonymised the participants. The names as mentioned throughout this dissertation are pseudonyms.

Furthermore, most of my interviews were conducted in Dutch. The translations provided are mine. I have found it difficult to translate the quotes. Transcribing already is an interpretative activity (Mazé, 2006: 236), translating felt as if I was getting even further away from the original. I have therefore decided to leave all the original Dutch citations in this dissertation as footnotes.

In introducing the participants in my research, I find it hard to categorize them since their circumstances are so different from each other. Three are men and six are women. Three came when they were below eighteen years old. Three recently arrived from Syria. Three already resided in the Netherlands for more than ten years. Some received permission to stay within a year, for some the

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[7] For the full report see: http://www.destentor.nl/regio/dalfsen/vluchteling-tovert-met-dwarsfluit-1.4663961 [last accessed October 4, 2015].

procedure lasted ten years. Two arrived in the Netherlands through a family reunification procedure. Two were still living in the asylum residence centre. One was a rejected asylum seeker, yet unable to return to his 'home' country Iraq. Despite these differences I have found commonalities in the stories of my respondents. For me this was indicative of the pervasiveness of the representations of refugees.

A word on identities

The topic of this dissertation concerns refugees in the Netherlands. I have contacted respondents who I viewed as fitting this category or who perceived themselves as such. Obviously, identity formation is a multilayered and dynamic process. For my research participants this particular part of their identity might gain or lose prominence in different situation throughout different times. Had I inquired into their experiences as students, as mothers or as partners, I might have captured a whole different part of their realities and identities (Nencel, 2001: 213).

This also leads me to explicitly acknowledge that my presence, as a researcher and observer, has influenced the encounters I had (Hesse-Biber, 2007: 16-17). Therefore, I want to emphasize that the ideas as described in this piece of work are mine. They are based on my personal observations and my outlook on the conversations I had. One of the strengths of feminist research has been to point out the power discrepancies in the designing, the execution and the writing of research. Hence, I want to be clear that the text that follows is a product of my interpretation, selection and configuration of the happenings and interviews that took place during the research period. The interviews I conducted were long and a lot of information was provided. The themes as I have written them down are my selection. Others could have foregrounded other themes or have approached the existing data from other angels. In this sense, the 'story we write is our own' (Stack, 1993: 89).

As a result, as researchers we should scrutinize our own biases and assumptions. Since, as Harding states 'the beliefs and behaviors of the researcher are part of empirical evidence for (or against) the claims advanced in the results of research. *This* evidence too must be open to critical scrutiny no less than what is traditionally defined as relevant evidence' (1987 as quoted in Behar, 1996: 29). Especially with participant observation, but to no less extent in interviewing, we should apply this reflexivity, as Wekker urges us to do: 'If in participant observation it is the person of the researcher, which serves as the most central and sensitive instrument of research, it behooves us to be transparent, accountable and reflexive about the different modalities in which the self engages with others' (2006: 4). To begin examining my positionality, I would start with my family history. In the course of my fieldwork I started volunteering for *VluchtelingenWerk* in one of the asylum seeker residence centres in the North of the Netherlands. I selected a centre that was easily reachable by public transport and one that took a more permanent form. After a while, I came to realize that I was doing volunteer work for newcomers, in the same city where my grandparents rebuilt their lives shortly after arriving in the

Netherlands. My grandparents and their children, one of which was my mother, repatriated from the Dutch East Indies/Indonesia to the motherland they had never seen before. I was very close to my grandfather and am well aware of the difficulties of starting all anew in a strange country. It felt like, unintentionally, I had come full circle. From this position I reflected on my observations and it sensitized me for the impact that migration has on families. From this background I was also disappointed in Dutch public opinion on refugee issues and this might have constituted a negative bias in my data towards Dutch public opinion.Although this aspect of family history was important to me, for the participants my 'Dutchness' was more relevant. This Dutch identity does not entail either fleeing, living in uncertainty or starting life all over in a strange place. When one of my respondents asked me: 'what would *you* do?' and compared life of a refugee to the situation of a phone being stolen, I understood that I was perceived very differently through my respondents' eyes. This facet of my identity has surely shaped the answers that were given. It is difficult to untangle in which ways exactly. For one, I think it has led several interviewees to be less critical of Dutch society compared to what they would tell others.

I was biased in my perception of refugees in other ways as well. And how could it have been otherwise? I am too, part of Dutch society and am affected by the prejudices present. On one of my first days at *VWN* I witnessed a client coming to the counter and saying to my colleague "sorry is not enough, no, sorry is not accepted". I recall this moment because I was surprised by the assertive attitude of the refugee client. I realized that I was influenced just as much by the construction of refugees as ultimate victims, passive and grateful. I had to scrutinize my own assumptions too. This also became clear through the interview I had with an employee of COA. I kept inquiring into the problems that AZC staff encountered in their work with refugees. At a certain point it started to slightly annoy the participant and I realized that I was influenced by the perspective of refugees as a *problem*. The stereotypical representation of refugees I had resonated strongly with the dichotomy as argued in this dissertation.

Ethical challenges

Before I started my research I was warned from different parties to handle my respondents with care. I think this is always important, but the warnings made me nervous and I put extra effort in interacting carefully with my respondents. I had decided not to inquire about the reasons for fleeing and the current state of the procedure. I did not want to retrieve possible traumatic memories or to end up in arguments about the juridical position. I thought focusing on life in the centres was a good way to start the conversation, something concrete and descriptive. What I found important was to give potential informants the space to refuse to participate. That is why I contacted them through a mutual acquaintance. This person would ask the potential respondent whether I could contact them directly. If they agreed, I would email or text in advance to ask about a suitable date and time to discuss the

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research further. This way I tried to build in multiple possibilities for participants to decline an interview if they wanted to. The impression I got, was that this carefulness was not needed for most of them. Some of them, for example, called me back before we were able to set a date through email or text contact. I am content that I chose a careful approach but I also think my concern for the well-being of my respondents was thoroughly shaped by preconceptions about the vulnerability of the target group.

What I was also surprised about was that all respondents were curious for the written end product and asked for a copy of the final product. I was planning on sending them a draft version before the submission deadline. I hoped to ask for their opinion and to be able to incorporate their reactions into this dissertation. Unfortunately because of time constraints this has not been possible. I will still send them a (digital) copy and hopefully discuss the results. However, what I take from this general interest is that they are engaged with the issues, prepared to read and reflect on this particular part of their lives.

Sometimes I felt guilty about conducting interviews. I was inquiring into experiences that constituted difficult times in people's life and might have had lasting effects. To force people to think about these particular histories was sometimes felt as a putting a burden on them. I noticed how easy it is to ask, compared to the answering. Because of the distance I had to the topic, sometimes the hardships of my respondents became too much of an object of inquiry. And I lost sight of the human side of things. One respondent for example mentioned how she was proud that her children had not noticed the poverty they found themselves in as rejected asylum seekers. In a reflex, I inquired about the stress: had they not noticed that either? I could have answered that question myself, should have stopped to think first and was ashamed to confront her with such a blunt question. However, even though talking about their lives in our conversations might have been confronting for some, it is also a daily reality that is familiar to them.

What comes to my mind specifically, is the interview with a rejected asylum seeker, Aamir. He was younger than I am and had no possibility to continue with his life in the ways he imagined. I felt so helpless: inquiring into his life without having the power to change anything for him. Aamir complained that everyone during the asylum procedure said 'I cannot help you' and now, after knowing about his situation, I was about to say the same. It felt like I became part of the asylum machine, looking from a distance and having the luxury to retreat after an interview. Some authors have noticed that it is through the division of services and responsibilities that immigration services function (Olierook, 2014). Now I seemed to be a tiny part in the functioning of this ugly whole.

I felt similarly about the volunteer work at VWN with which I am still struggling. The responsibilities are pressing. I have no legal background and spending only one day a week at the office. In other words, I am sometimes hesitant whether, under these circumstances, I am the right person for the job. Also, there is a constant pressure of assisting people but on the other hand a certain constraint in time. Therefore, I find it hard to balance the task: how much effort should you put into the job? This is complicated because you are working within, yet fighting against the Dutch asylum system. Legislation is strict and most guideline are clear. However, how do you get this message across if a client from Syria urges you to call the IND to prioritize his family reunion application because the village where his family stays is being bombed daily. Me and a colleague spent quite some time gathering international news articles describing how this specific town was indeed precisely located in the war zone frontiers. However, it did not make a difference and besides, this is not something you have the time to do for everyone. Yet, there is guilt about, as a respondent put it, the lack of people 'who worked from the heart'.

Another example was when I had my own appointments with clients and a colleague was tutoring me through the conversations. I had a group of four Eritrean men sitting in my office who each had different questions. The first one kept repeating the same question over and over again. I became impatient and my colleague also urged to make an end to this cycle of questions. I decided to emphasize that I had already answered his question and inquired whether he had any other questions he wanted to raise. Basically, I exerted my power and drew a line. Looking back on this conversation I think it is representative of a lot of the situations the volunteers end up in. Yet, I wished I could have solved things differently. What I am trying to get at, is that as an employee of VWN you are part of a field of power in which you get stuck, you are part of, but have limited options in time and power to change.

A note on gender

As I described above the interviews I conducted were with very different individuals. Their position in terms of gender, nationality, age, religion, education, family situation, legal history, and motive of fleeing, are so immensely varied that it is difficult to analyse their situations along these intersectional axes. For example when I looked into the meaning of the asylum seeker residence centre for its (former) residents, accounts differed between individuals. Respondent also had multiple associations with this particular living arrangement. For example, the centre was strongly associated with hope: when one is evicted because of a negative outcome of the procedure, they are literally left at the gates with their belongings, three months of medicines (if necessary) and a daypass for public transport. However, the centre is often referred to by its inhabitants as a 'camp', which encompasses its temporary character, the endless waiting in uncertainty and putting life on hold and possibly even the position of being a second class citizens. For two Syrian women I interviewed, it also represented

protection and was contrasted to life 'outside' in which they would have nobody to fall back on. Other young women, emphasized the unsafety they had felt which partly arose from the presence of many single men and even referred to it as a 'ghetto'.[8] Some respondents looked back on their youth in centres as a big adventure as they were living close to their best friends.[9] The extent to which the centre was experienced as isolation and marginalisation therefore is strongly dependant on gender, age, religious, ethnic dimensions and legal status (Freedman, 2007: 151). So, in my analysis I have instead identified recurring themes that emerged throughout all narratives. These led me to the gendered representation of refugees and the effect this has on the lives of my respondents. Where possible, I have paid attention to potential gendered differences in the experiences of men and women. To explore these dimensions more systematically a study should be conducted with a more restricted target group, for example newly arrived Syrians.

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[8] For the specific female experience of life in Dutch centres, see Kramer and Cense (2004).

[9] See for example the documentary "Asielzoeka's" which is available from: http://asielzoekas.nl/ [last accessed October 4, 2015].

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Chapter 1
MOBILITY: Gender, refugees and the nation

In reviewing literature on the subject of refugee representation in Europe, articles mostly focused on the framing of asylum seekers as a threat. This perceived threat emerges partly from the anxiety about people who are on the move. Below I have quoted Threadgold, who has articulated the perception of this threat perfectly: groups of young, dark men who are waiting at the borders for their chance of invading the country and taking everything that is valuable. Tied in closely with these depictions is gender, which plays a crucial role and operates in multiple ways. The imagined threat is expressed by using nature related metaphors, such as floods and waves. These metaphors function simultaneously to dehumanize refugee applicants. Another strategy is to refer to them as 'illegal immigrant', emphasizing the illegitimate manner in which they have entered European spaces. These representation tactics serve the purpose of further criminalizing refugees on both economic and cultural levels thereby justifying the imposition of restrictive measures.

The gendered representation of asylum seekers

Threadgold has described the representation of asylum seekers in British press in daily news programs (2006: 229) in an attempt to reveal that 'the discursive construction of asylum is all so profoundly gendered, and gendered male' (*op. cit.*: 223). The images that accompanied these news reports were more than eighty percent of the time primarily that of young males (*op. cit.*: 230). These constructions fit the anti-asylum narrative which Threadgold strikingly describes as follows:

> The story is regular, predictable, and cumulative in its effects: constantly *increasing numbers* of *bogus* asylum seekers, *illegal immigrants*, or *economic migrants* who *invade* our *soft-touch* countries/ nations, coming in *waves* and *floods* to overwhelm us, seeking to enjoy all the welfare and other benefits we should be enjoying, depriving us of access to *scarce resources*, and changing the nature of our *culture*. Meanwhile, governments and legislation constantly pronounce the need to protect *borders*, to *control* numbers or to *deport* those whose asylum claims are unsuccessful, and the media proclaim their *failure* to do so. Those who *invade* in *waves* are *criminals*, *deviant*, certainly racially, ethnically other, and probably *diseased*. They may also be *religiouslyother*, linked to foreign *terrorist* threats, and are constructed as objects of *fear* and *agents* of *threat and danger, a risk* to the social body which is imagined as intact, uniform and white: and they are almost overwhelmingly *male* (2006: 226-227, original emphasis).

Although different discourses on refugee claimants are in circulation, the one so clearly described by Threadgold is definitely detectable in Dutch media. I noticed how I myself was strongly influenced by these existing stereotypes when the situation at the improvised refugee camps in Calais was discussed in my local newspaper. It forced me to reflect on my own assumptions. The newspaper I am referring to published a full page report on asylum seekers waiting in Calais to cross to the UK. The article featured a photo which occupied a third of the news space. It showed a group of young, dark skinned men, most of them hooded, running towards a highway, being chased by the police, with a line of trucks waiting in the back. An excerpt from the accompanying text states:

> Every night approximately 1500 to 2000 refugees descend on the terrain of the Eurotunnel. At multiple locations simultaneously. Hundreds of *youngmen* are walking near a bridge, in agricultural fields two *men* move towards the tunnel bent down. Five *men* in a row are shown climbing over a gate near a railway house. On the railway track are dozens of *men* and even children discernable in training suits who walk in a long line to the place where they want to embark illegally' (Renout, 2015).[10]

One would assume that there are no women in the refugee camps in Calais and I took for granted this assumption. However, four days later the issue of the Channel was under discussion again in the same newspaper. This time the article featured a photograph of the tents, a more static picture, which had three women in the foreground doing, what seemed like, some sort of domestic chore. The women were squatting in front of the tents facing something in the middle. At that moment, I realised that my expectations of these camps had also been shaped in profoundly gendered ways. A closer look at the first picture revealed that one woman was visible but her hair was wrapped in a scarf, so she could not be identified immediately. Like the example quoted above, photos of women are featured from time to time. However, whenever the notion of asylum seekers is framed in terms of a threat, the images of young men become the perfect means of illustration. Their masculinity embodies the threat they pose to the (host) nation. Asylum seekers are imagined as an army of men, and entering the country is the battle they face. Reiterated multiple times it functions to sketch the refugee crisis as one of a gendered menace. As Threadgold states: '[t]he recurrence of the image performatively transforms a single event into a regularity, and the enactment of criminal and dangerous masculine identity into a norm' (2006: 230-232). Buchanan, Grillo and Threadgold had exactly the same objection to the way asylum issues were covered in the UK. They do not disapprove of the images that are used by the media, however the one-sidedness of the coverage is what they find objectionable: 'The problem lies with the

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[10] 'Per nacht zouden zo'n 1500 tot 2000 vluchtelingen het terrein van de Eurotunnel belagen. Op tientallen punten tegelijk. Bij een brug lopen honderden *jonge mannen*, in aardappelvelden gaan twee mannen gebukt in de richting van de tunnel. Een poort bij een treinhuisje wordt beklommen door vijf *mannen* achter elkaar. En op de rails zijn van veraf vele tientallen *mannen* en zelfs kinderen in trainingspakken te zien die in een lange stoet lopen, op weg naar de plek waar ze illegaal willen aanmonsteren'.

relentless repetition and overemphasis of precisely those images that reinforce particular stereotypes and a failure to source more diverse images to illustrate the many other aspects to the asylum issue' (Buchanan, Grillo and Threadgold, 2003: 28).

Feminist scholars have fruitfully analysed how and why gender is utilized in nationalist political discourses. This approach is helpful in examining what exactly constitutes the purpose of portraying refugee applicants as masses of men. To begin with, the nation is often personified as a female figure. This connection is tied up with traditional ideas of women as biological and cultural reproducers of a nation and the conflation of women with nature. This reasoning turns the national territory into 'a woman's body and as such is ever in danger of violation - by "foreign" males/sperm' (Spike Peterson, 1999: 48). Within this heterosexist logic, rape is a central concept which signals that the nation's body and borders are violated (*ibid.*). Intruders are seen to 'penetrate' the female borders (Nagel, 1998: 258). Buchanan, Grillo and Threadgold (2003) studied the representation of the refugees who made it to the UK. They noticed how the accomplishment of the refugees damaged national honor. They state:

> The combination of these images with the defining victory sign creates an inescapable impression that these men have 'won' in a 'battle' with the British government and the British people, and are therefore self-congratulatory, not merely happy and grateful to be here. Consequently the reader is 'positioned' as experiencing part of a national humiliation or defeat (Buchanan, Grillo and Threadgold, 2003: 25).

These nationalistic feelings that engender a sense of defeat are very much tied in with the idea of a country that is under siege. The country, which comprises the territory, culture and welfare, is imagined as feminine and needs to be protected from the invading foreign men.

Nationalism studies have also observed how the nation is often compared to the institution of the family. Men and women have traditional roles and positions within these units (Nagel, 1998: 254). In this construction, women's sexuality takes on a prominent focus. Women are first and foremost mothers. As biological and cultural reproducers they are crucial to the stability and survival of the nation (*op. cit.*: 256). Furthermore, women are 'bearers of masculine honour'. They are thought to 'embody family and national honour; women's shame is the family's shame, the nation's shame, the man's shame' (*op. cit.*: 254). Therefore, the protection of the sexual purity of a nation's women assumes nationalist interest. Rape or even the perceived threat of rape comes to be seen as a strategy to assault the enemy indirectly (Spike Peterson, 1999: 49). In other words, the notion of rape is important in two ways: it is used to refer to the violation of national borders but also to express the need for protection.

In a short clip that was broadcasted on television and that appeared on the Facebook page of a group called '*Ik doe GEEN aangifte tegen Wilders*' (I am NOT reporting Wilders to the police) a man is interviewed about an asylum seeker residence centre that was planned 'in his backyard', as he claims. It was liked almost 21.000 times and shared more than 8.000 times. The comments on Facebook mostly refer to how well the speaker captures what is on Dutch citizens' mind. The popularity of the video and the content of the comments show how this particular narrative resonates in wider society. The interviewee starts of by stating that the centre will mostly be inhabited by single men. From this statement he continues:

> I have worked at AZCs myself. (...) I have witnessed what happens and what the values and norms of these men are. Not all of them, I do not want to generalize. But of a lot of men. And how they perceive women as objects. If you do not want to hear this, cover your ears. For a lot of men a woman is an object which means: fuck her and dispose her off. That is how it is and we do not accept this. I have a beautiful wife. I have a beautiful blonde daughter. If something happens to them, they are scarred for life. The perpetrator, you can blow him away [take revenge, kill him] but my child will not be helped. She will be traumatised for her entire life. My wife as well. Me too. And then what is next? Nothing, it will be too late. Who takes responsibility? I am not afraid to say that I am a father. I am willing to give my life for my family. (...) I will die for my family.[11]

In this particular account all the aforementioned ideas linked to a nationalist discourse can be traced. The man in the clip is protesting against the asylum seeker residence centre and was interviewed about his motivations. He notes that his objection to the centre is based on the fact that the centre will be inhabited by single men, among which might be Muslim extremists and ISIS soldiers. The suggested location is not suitable because it is near a residential area, schools and a kindergarten.[12] The men that would reside there have different cultural ideals, especially concerning the way they treat women. They prey on the beauty and whiteness of 'our' women and children, who will fall

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[11] 'Ik heb zelf ook op AZC's gewerkt. (...) Ik heb gezien wat daar gebeurt en wat de waarden en normen van mannen zijn. Niet van allemaal, ik wil niet iedereen over een kam scheren. Maar van heel veel mannen. En hoe zij tegen vrouwen aan kijken, als voorwerpen. Wie het niet wil horen, moet de oren maar dicht doen. Maar voor veel mannen is een vrouw een voorwerp: dat is neuken en weggooien. Zo zit het in elkaar en wij tolereren dat niet. Ik heb een hele mooie vrouw. Ik heb een hele mooie blonde dochter. En als die wat overkomt, dan is mijn vrouw of mijn dochter getekend voor het leven. Zo'n persoon kun je van de wereld af knallen, dan heb je wat. Mijn kind is er niet mee geholpen, die loopt de rest van dr leven met een trauma rond. En mijn vrouw ook. En ik ook. En dan? En dan is het te laat. En wie neemt dan de verantwoordelijkheid? Ik durf te zeggen dat ik een vader ben. Ik durf mijn leven te geven voor mijn gezin. (...) Ik sterf voor mijn gezin'.
(https://www.facebook.com/video.php?v=1638789439723845)[last accessed October 2, 2015].

[12] I have not come across this association of asylum seekers with pedophiles before. But it is worth exploring the othering in terms of sexuality and emasculation that happens here. Nagel has pointed to the 'sexualized nature of warfare' and has specifically noted the representation of the enemy as 'sexual demons' (1998: 257).

victim to these intruders.[13] The former are the real victims in this story and he is here to defend his family. The interviewee clearly positions himself as protector of his wife's and daughter's sexuality. It shows the intertwining of nationhood, with female bodies and intruders as male 'others' preying on the sexuality of the local women.[14]

Mobility

In the nationalist discourse as described above, the nation's territory is constructed as a woman's body and the soldiers are men, either as defenders or as invaders (Spike Peterson, 1999: 49). These depictions rely on notions of gendered (im)mobility. The feminine is associated with passivity, and the masculine is codified as 'mobile and active' (Cresswell and Uteng, 2008: 2). This is a fruitful strategy since (im)mobility is central to traditional gender ideologies. As Hanson states:

> Much of this thinking about how mobility shapes gender ideologies, meanings and practices has its origins in the observation that mobility/immobility stand at the core of traditional gender ideologies, which are infused with notions of space, place and mobility. These ideologies echo the familiar dualism that on one side equates women and femininity with the home, the private, with domestic spaces and restricted movement (which translates into interactions that are routine, quotidian, familiar), and on the other, equates men and masculinity with the not-home, the public, with urban spaces and expansive movement (which translates into interactions that bring excitement, challenges, new experiences, encounters with the unknown) (2010: 9).

This perspective neatly follows the distinction as mentioned by Hyndman and Giles. They discuss the different constructions of refugees, on the one hand, in camps close to their home-country and, on the other, those moving to Europe. Refugees who stay in the refugee camps are viewed as more authentic, the camp is the place where they 'belong', compared to those that travel further (Hyndman and Giles, 2011: 366). They state:

> When individual refugees decide to divorce themselves from the scripts of sedentarist camp life and move on, they become potentially threatening as 'asylum seekers' or 'migrants' who are seen as simply seeking a better life, not necessarily protection. The legitimacy of a refugee on the move, beyond such spaces, changes political valence dramatically, from innocent,

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[13]Remarkably the same interviewee does not seem to argue against asylum seekers (residence centres) in general. The last minutes of the video clip are a bit wary but he also seems to be arguing in favour of different locations for the centres and better integration plans for the 'genuine' refugees.

[14] This narrative reminded me of a well known murder case in the Netherlands. Marianne Vaatstra was found murdered in 1999. She was raped and her throat was slit. The murderer was not identified until 2012. Till that date rumours were that inhabitants of the local asylum seeker centre were suspected of the crime. The perpetrator turned out to be a local farmer (Boon, 2012).

helpless and deserving to politically dangerous, self-interested and undeserving (Hyndman and Giles, 2011: 367).

To recapitulate the argument, ideas about the nation and potential threats to its stability are gendered. They rely on associations of femininity and masculinity. (Im)mobility is central to this process and does a considerable part of the gendering work. Using notions of mobility the feminine (the nation) and the masculine (the own or enemy soldiers) is distinguished. But the same premise of mobility is also twisted around to be used in order to feminize the refugee who stays in the camp as a deserving victim (as I will further explore in the following chapters) and to masculinize the ones that travel further, into threatening actors.

On being illegal

The nationalist theories are based on a conflict between nations or (self) identifies groups of people. Drawing and securing borders around who is in- and excluded is a continuous process. However, the difficulty with refugees is, that they are displaced. They no longer belong to a state, even as this is temporary. This intersection in the construction of the enemy with statelessness makes refugees even more ambiguous. 'The citizen is the norm, and any deviation from this is understood as dangerous, problematic and in need of correction' (Johnson, 2011: 1028). Thus, mobility of non-citizens towards other nations states causes anxiety. These flows of migration are threatening because it defies the static idea of places and where people 'belong'. Douglas would have referred to this as 'matter out of place' (1966). As unclassifiable actors refugees have an unpredictable character. This particular aspect comes to the fore in the portrayal of refugees as illegal immigrants who defy the rules and regulations of nation states.

During the months that I followed media discourse on the framing of asylum issues, I noticed another mechanism in which refugee applicants are demonized. The Netherlands has attempted to reduce the influx of migrants. Firstly, through policy that restricts asylum applicants in their daily life in the Netherlands (Ghorashi, 2005: 182). These measures were introduced to control asylum seekers but also to counter a 'honeypot effect', to make the Netherlands less attractive as a host country (Versteegt and Maussen, 2012: 41). I will discuss these measures in the next chapter. Secondly, multiple measures were taken to prevent asylum applications being filed in the Netherlands. For example, stricter visa requirements, the encouragement to apply for asylum at embassies in the home country and pushing for local refugee camps near the country of origin (Koser, 2001: 60-61). The latter is the miracle solution proposed by lots of Dutch politicians. The most illustrative example at the moment is the four metre tall fence that Hungary is building at the border with Serbia. And Germany, which had temporarily opened its borders is, as most European countries, reinstating border controls. I would like to sidestep the discussion of whether Europe can or cannot deal with the current

numbers of refugees for a moment. A large number of the refugee applicants that are barred at EU borders will most probably be acknowledged as official refugees, should they be able to start an asylum procedure. In the Netherlands, a majority of Syrian and Eritrean citizens get a positive result on their application because of the general situation in their home countries. In other words, refugees who would be designated official refugee status in the Netherlands are prevented from even filing asylum applications. As Schuster states: 'While there has never been a right to be granted asylum, these proposals now disallow even the right to seek it' (2003: 234). These asylum seekers are *forced* to enter the European Union 'illegally', often by smugglers, and are then judged by this strategy. By exerting their agency, their authenticity as genuine victims is damaged. They are categorized as less deserving of help because they did not wait politely for an invitation to apply for asylum. Furthermore, they are not only categorized as less-deserving, the refugees who come to ask for asylum are actively criminalized by reason of their entry into the EU. In a television discussion between a VVD politician, one of the two political parties that forms the current governmental coalition in the Netherlands, and a Dutch migration professor, this approach by the former became very clear. The former argued for assistance to refugees in the regions near the home country. By continuously referring to 'illegal migration', he stated: 'The only possibility to get a ticket to Europe is the *legal* way. So either on invitation because you are a genuine refugee or if you are an economic migrant and there is a shortage of labour' (my emphasis).[15]This line of thinking can be discernable throughout Europe. Hungary has announced to actively prosecute refugees who 'illegally' cross borders. Refugees risk to be sentenced to multiple years of imprisonment. However, even merely terming the asylum applicants 'illegal' carries substantial dangers, since it can potentially lead to further criminalisation. Asylum seekers who have already 'committed a crime' by entering 'illegally' are already suspects and more prone to accusations of committing other crimes (Hubbard, 2005: 59).

Dehumanisation of refugees

The threat that refugees embody is also articulated in descriptions of the number of asylum applicants arriving in the Netherlands. The situation at Europe's borders is described as 'desperate', 'a catastrophe' and 'total chaos'. General metaphors used are 'waves', 'streams', or 'floods' of migrants.[16] Europe is 'being washed away' by refugees. These metaphors refer to the lack of control over nature and its potentially disastrous effects. Especially in the Netherlands, a country beneath sea

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[15] 'De enige mogelijkheid om nog een ticket naar Europa te krijgen is via de legale weg. Dus óf op uitnodiging omdat je een echte vluchteling bent ófwel als je een economische migrant bent er en er is een tekort aan arbeidskrachten' (http://nos.nl/nieuwsuur/artikel/2052186-wie-zijn-de-vluchtelingen-die-naar-europa-komen)[last accessed October 2, 2015].

[16]Threat is usually framed in terms of nature or natural disaster. This is a recurring way of describing migration flows through time and space. In the UK Prime Minister Cameron was recently criticised for using the terminology 'swarm of people' to refer to the refugees in Calais (Elgot and Taylor, 2015). The same thing had happened decennia ago, as an article from the 1938 shows. It described the German Jews seeking refuge in the UK with the headline: 'German Jews pouring into this country' (Brown, 2015). In 1914 the Observer wrote similar lines concerning Belgian refugees: 'Holland was veritably flooded by exiles' (Schrover, 2011: 4).

level, these are powerful comparisons and it is difficult to find articles that do not use this natural terminology (Schrover, 2011: 4). In the Netherlands Geert Wilders was relatively creative in referring to (forced) migrants as an 'asylum tsunami', invoking an image of the Netherlands that has literally been washed away by the number of migrants.[17] This was exactly what Wilders tried to make clear when in parliament he enumerated all the Dutch villages that already have or will have in the near future an asylum seeker residence centre. It took him two minutes to go over all the towns in alphabetical order.[18] In a television commercial aired during the daily broadcasting time for political parties, Wilders tried again and started his speech, in which he argued to send all asylum seekers back for refuge in the neighbouring countries, with:

> Dear people of the Netherlands. We are being washed away by asylum seekers. It is an invasion threatening our welfare and our country. The Hague abandons you in this matter. Prime Minister Rutte leaves our borders wide open to 'gelukszoekers' [people in search of luck/happiness]. We have to save our country.[19]

The emphasis on masses of people on the move de-individualizes refugees and serves to dehumanize immigrants (Leudar *et. al.*, 2008: 188). Or as a geography professor noted in a column in the Volkskrant: 'In discussing the refugees issues we forget that it concerns real people' (Schaap, 2015).[20] To counter these perceptions, organisations such as VWN have attempted to withdraw refugees from anonymity and to render them visible. The re-humanising of refugees is achieved by asserting their victimhood (Leudar *et. al.*, 2008: 197, 199).A recent *VWN* campaign, which competes for NRC's (a Dutch newspaper) charity awards, is a clear illustration of this strategy.[21] It shows a typical page from any newspaper with obituary notices. It features different first names accompanied with the date and place of birth. Place of death is Lampedusa and the date 18th of April 2015, the day one of the boats crossing the Mediterranean Sea keeled over and, as a result of which, several asylum applicants lost their lives. *VWN* explains the ad: 'Lots of refugees drown in their attempt to cross the Mediterranean

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[17] www.pvv.nl/index.php/36-fj-related/geert-wilders/8596-geert-wilders-in-nieuw-filmpje-zendtijd-politieke-partijen-pvv-over-asieltsunami.html [last accessed October 2, 2015].

[18] Another politician reacted appropriately by answering: 'And we thank all those municipalities for their hospitality', followed by applause of a part of that same parliament.

[19] 'Beste mensen in Nederland. We worden overspoeld met asielzoekers. Het is een invasie die onze welvaart en ons land bedreigd. En Den Haag laat u keihard in de steek. Premier Rutte laat onze grenzen wagenwijd open staan voor gelukszoekers. We moeten ons land redden
(www.pvv.nl/index.php/36-fj-related/geert-wilders/8596)[last accessed October 2, 2015].

[20] 'In de discussie over de vluchtelingenproblematiek vergeten we soms dat het om echte mensen gaat'.

[21] For another campaign to humanize refugees, see: http://www.power-of-art.nl/campaigns/moving-people-2/ or http://movingpeople.nu/ [last accessed October 2, 2015].

Sea by rickety boats. With this campaign VWN wants to show that these casualties consist of real people and that there are survivors mourning their death'.[22]

The specific aquatic terminology is used to dehumanize refugees and emphasizes (forced) migration as a threat. This particular media frame and the rhetoric of politicians resonate with public opinion on the number of refugees coming to the Netherlands. Recent research has shown that the number of refugees worldwide is underestimated by Dutch citizens. It is assessed to be 32 million instead of the 58 million individuals currently fleeing their homes. In contrast, the number that is assumed to arrive in the Netherlands is overestimated: expectations are ten times higher than the actual number (Smeets, 2015). This indicates that the burden of the refugees is imagined to be greater than the responsibility of the Netherlands actually is at the moment. The fear of being swamped is very much alive (Kushner, 2003: 262).

These mechanisms of dehumanisation as mentioned are discursive. However, Dutch policy and practice on procedures of seeking and obtaining asylum has a similar effect on refugee claimants. During the procedure they do not exist in the sense that they are not full members of any society. They are in a way temporarily out of place: fled from their home countries but not (yet) acknowledged in the home society (Ramadan, 2012: 73). They find themselves in a state of betwixt and betweenness. A respondent reflected on the hopes she had during the asylum procedure:

> That, in the future, I (...) would have a passport. That I would have an identity. Because my whole life I just did not have one. So for me it was not just a matter of having a place to live and being happy about that. But it was also that I was finally acknowledged as a person. Because, yes, you have to have a social security number, otherwise you do not exist in the system. And if you do not exist in the system, you do not exist anywhere.[23]

In other words, the manner in which refugees are often described, in terms of natural disasters, exacerbates the image of a threat to the nation. It functions to de-individualize and de-humanize refugees. These discursive strategies fit the actual experiences of refugees in which they become non-existent citizens.

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[22] 'Veel vluchtelingen verdrinken als ze per gammele boot de Middellandse zee over proberen te steken. VluchtelingenWerk wil met deze campagne duidelijk maken dat achter de cijfers echte mensen schuil gaan en dat er nabestaanden zijn die rouwen om hun dood'
(http://www.nrccharityawards.nl/advertenties/124/vluchtelingenwerk-nederland)[last accessed October 2, 2015].
[23] 'Dat ik (...) later wel een paspoort zou hebben. Gewoon een identiteit had. Want mijn hele leven heb ik dat gewoon niet gehad. Dus voor mij was het niet alleen eerst ik mag hier wonen en ik ben hartstikke blij. Maar het was ook eindelijk dat ik werd erkend als mens. Want ja, je moet wel een sofi-nummer hebben, anders besta je niet in het systeem. En als je niet in het systeem bestaat, besta je nergens'.

Conclusion

I have shown how asylum seekers are often constructed as young men violently entering European countries. They are perceived as a masculine threat to the economic stability and the (imagined) cultural unity of the Netherlands. I have explained how notions of mobility, relying on traditional associations on masculinity and femininity, do much of the gendering work. Firstly, it operates to distinguish between refugees who stay in camps and those who travel further. The latter are further codified as a threat by emphasizing the manner in which they 'illegally' entered European spaces. In other words, not only the fact of their movement but also the manner in which they moved is problematised. With this characterisation, the second way in which gender and mobility signify our constructions is revealed. The nation is imagined as female land which needs to be protected from penetration by invaders. These framings depend on a mechanism of de-humanisation which corresponds to the actual experience of being a refugee. In the next chapter I will further focus on the restrictive policies to which asylum applicants are subjected.

Chapter 2

PASSIVITY: Feminising asylum seekers into controllable subjects

As part of my research I volunteered for VWN whose office is based in one of the asylum seekers' centres. At the entrance of the centre a sign reads *meedoeners* (participants). It shows three persons: a child, a man and a woman waving their hands above their heads enthusiastically, as if trying to get the viewer's attention: 'look I am here, I am happy and I am participating'. This particular sign is located next to the red and white crossing gate that blocks the road that leads into the centre. This contrast of a sign indicating full membership of society and the crossing gate as sign of isolation, turned out to be a symbol for AZC politics, as I will show in this chapter. The introduction of asylum seeker residence centres have often been described as part of the restricted approach that the Dutch government has taken towards refugee claimants. Within these centres refugees are forced into passivity by not having the chance to take control of their own lives in terms of privacy, place of residence, work[24], education etcetera. Through these measures, refugees are feminised into a mould of dependence and controllability. This restrictive policy is, firstly, an attempt to neutralize the 'threat' of asylum seekers, as described in the previous chapter. Secondly, it is also meant to discourage refugees from claiming asylum in the Netherlands. Ironically, another policy is designed to relieve the asylum applicant from the passivity they 'suffer' from. Refugees' constructed identity constantly shifts between these contrasting images, of being a threat or a passive victim.

Creation of AZCs: responding to asylum seekers as a problem

At the start of the research period I had an exploratory conversation with someone who offered to tell me about her experiences in an AZC. Over a period of almost ten years she lived in multiple centres throughout the Netherlands. When she reflected on life in these centres, she started by describing the red and white crossing gate. I have visited three different centres and all of them had this barrier. The AZCs are surrounded by fences and the only way to enter is to pass this crossing gate. For my respondent this was apparently an important characteristic and came to her mind first. For me, it is

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[24] In the Netherlands refugee claimants are allowed to work but for a maximum amount of weeks per year and only as long as the procedure is running (www.coa.nl/nl/asielzoekers/wonen-op-een-azc/werk-en-opleiding) [last accessed September 30, 2015]. Sami told me that during his stay in the AZC he found a part-time job. However, when refugees earn wages, they have to pay part of the living expenses. For Sami this meant that at the end of the month he had to pay the COA to work. He decided to turn the job offer down. For a comparison with other European countries on policies regarding work for asylum seekers, see Valenta and Thorshaug (2013).

indicative of how the AZC is considered as an isolated part outside of mainstream society.[25] As described in the introduction, this enclosed area can mean multiple things to its inhabitants.

In literature the character of the AZC is often discussed in terms of the restrictive policy that the Dutch government has pursued since the end of the 1980s. During the beginning of this decade no residence centres existed and refugee claimants had to find their own place to live within Dutch society. Furthermore, they received the same level of social benefits as unemployed Dutch nationals (Ghorashi, 2005: 187). In 1987 the Dutch government introduced asylum seeker residence centres as temporary bases where refugees had to stay until placement in regular houses were found. Since 1996 AZCs have become the regular place where asylum seekers have to await the results of their procedure in order to ensure their availability during the procedure (Geuijen, 2000 as quoted in Gastelaars *et. al.*, 2002: 13).[26] It is also preventing 'asylum seekers from settling into a community or locality until a decision about their asylum claim has been made' (White, 2012: 316). According to Ghorashi, these stricter regimes developed in parallel with the emergence of the word asylum seeker. Together they indicate a shift in the general approach to refugees. The introduction of this particular term and subsequent change in policy was related to, firstly, the increasing negative public opinion on asylum seekers and especially the concern for the 'bogus' ones. And, secondly, with the increasingly restrictive measures the hope was expressed to discourage refugees to come to the Netherlands (Ghorashi, 2005: 182).[27] Since most aspects of refugees' life take place within these compounds, Geuijen has characterised the residence centres as 'arenas' in which different groups of actors exist who all struggle to satisfy their own interest (see also van der Horst, 2004: 39). The 'negotiated order' that is a result of this, reflects the power differences that are present within AZCs between the managing team, the employees and the residents (1998 as quoted in Gastelaars *et. al.*, 2002: 17). The unequal power relations between the refugees and the organisation are expressed by multiple rules and regulations creating order and control (Geuijen, 1998: 265). Various writers have referred to this process in which '[t]he camp (...) is a place where refugees can be concentrated, controlled, made dependent, and depoliticized' (Lewellen, 2002: 178).

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[25]However, it does not mean that relations with the outside world are nonexistent. As White rightly argues, these centres are 'a bubble, isolated from a wider world; however, it was also a porous space crisscrossed by institutional and familial linkages from other spaces and places' (2012: 324).

[26]Asylum seekers in the Netherlands fall into different categories based on their legal status and personal characteristics. Subsequently, different housing is offered to different groups (see www.coa.nl/nl/over-coa/opvanglocaties/soorten-opvanglocaties)[last accessed September 30, 2015]. With the amount of refugee applicants arriving in the Netherlands at the moment, COA is slightly changing its housing policy and encouraging official refugees to stay outside the centres with relatives or acquaintances to increase beds available for the newly arriving refugees
(www.vluchtelingenwerk.nl/actueel/nieuws/vluchtelingenwerk-nederland-positief-over-zelfzorgarrangement)[last accessed September 30, 2015].

[27] She refers to this 'restricted reception policy' as the 'indirect measure' to discourage asylum applicants to select the Netherlands as their destination. The 'direct measure' constitutes the 'restrictive entry policy' (Ghorashi, 2005: 182).

For me, an illustration of these regimes of control are the security measures within the centres. These are regulations to which I am still not used and sometimes, as means of resistance, intentionally try to break. Upon entering and leaving the AZC, visitors need to register by the reception desk: usually an identity card is required for this. Employees, even the volunteers at *VluchtelingenWerk*, are obliged to carry walkie talkies. Furthermore, doors to all offices are locked. The reception is manned by a security company and at night, when COA employees leave, they are in charge of the centre. Research has shown that the less familiar people are with other (ethnic) groups, the more suspicious they become towards these strangers (Lubbers, Coenders and Scheepers, 2006: 247). Isolated places with invisible residents create suspicion among the surrounding neighbours (Meloen *et. al.*, 1998 as quoted in Gastelaars *et. al.*, 2002: 18). These observations have led me to contemplate: who is protecting whom and from what? The security measures, are they intended to protect the refugees from the outside, the residents from each other or the Dutch from the refugees?

Reversing causality: the feminisation of refugees

The experience of being a refugee is highly gendered. This fact has been studied in specific ways. As Gass noted, studies on masculinities and migration have often focused on the limited possibilities that male refugees have for fulfilling their traditional masculine roles, both economically and socially (2014: 116-117; see for example Turner, 1999). Gass extends this argument and demonstrates another dimension of the gendered experience of asylum claiming. She applies a Foucauldian approach (*op. cit.*: 118) to describe how the category of asylum seeker is not merely a legal one but involves a process of subject formation (*op. cit.*: 127). The author describes how Swiss policy on asylum seekers feminises male claimants and affects their 'sense of manhood'. By providing this perspective, Gass turns the general way of reasoning upside down by arguing that social assistance to refugees is not a response to a category of helpless people but, to the opposite, policy *creates* dependant refugees (*op. cit.*: 119). Gass elucidates:

> [I]t is assumed that if you are a "true refugee" you are helpless, and for that reason you need social assistance. By providing another perspective, we may begin to understand that, in fact, helplessness is rather a product of social assistance. (...) [P]olicies related to asylum seekers seek to produce helplessness and dependency, both characteristics typically assigned to femininity, stripping men of the "masculine" traits of independence and the ability to provide for oneself and one's family (*op. cit.*: 125).

In the previous chapter I have described how the asylum seeker is often perceived: central to representation is their threatening character. Swiss policy consists of creating dependant subjects and should be considered a reaction to this particular construct (*op. cit.*: 119). In this process, refugees are

inscribed with traditionally feminine characteristics such as passivity (*op. cit.*: 116). Designed to produce controllable subjects, Gass states:

> (...) if we argue that the masculinity of male asylum seekers is indeed considered threatening to host countries, and that the quintessential "ideal refugee" should be docile, helpless, "feminine", and thus controllable, we may therefore conclude that the goal of policy regarding asylum seekers is the creation of that "ideal refugee" (*op. cit.*: 119-120).

In other words, through the restrictive policies in Western countries refugees have experienced a process of feminisation. These policies are aimed at controlling refugees and turns both women and men into dependent victims. According to Gass this is most visible in restrictions to work and study, and in limitations to make independent choices (*op. cit.*: 127).

Three of my respondents reflected on their time in the residence centres and were indignant about the lack of holiday they had. For me this seemed like a trivial issue. However, when the theme occurred in multiple accounts I started to think about its significance. Among others, the lack of holidays might be a metaphor for the intrusiveness and pervasiveness of the asylum procedure in all aspects of life. Refugee claimants could not get a break from it and leave it temporarily behind. This expression illustrates that one has no control over destinations, or how life develops. Geographically it stands for a lack of mobility. Symbolically, it refers to a restriction in making your own decisions felt in all areas in life, all the time.One of my respondents summarized her experience during the asylum procedure as follows: 'For me, if I reflect on my development during my life, it consists of ten years of imprisonment. Those years were taken from me because you could not do anything during that period. You could not develop yourself in any sense'.[28] When I continue to ask her for the most important thing to understand about refugee life she urges me not to blame refugees for their inactive life but to critically examine the system that *forces* them into these passive lives:

> I mean, when people are stuck in the procedure for so long, sometimes you really want to... Like, during that period I really wanted to go to school. I wanted to pursue an education. However, I was not allowed. You just couldn't. Either you were an rejected asylum seeker or you were living in an asylum seeker residence centre. Either way, it could not happen. (...) I hope that people realize this. It is not dependant on the people but the situation is to blame. It is about how a situation develops at that particular moment in time.[29]

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[28]'Maar voor mijzelf, als ik echt [denk] over mijn groei in leven, dan is dat toch wel 10 jaar, gevangenis zeg ik dan altijd. Die zijn mij afgenomen want je kon niets in die tijd. Je kon jezelf niet ontwikkelen of wat dan ook'.
[29]'Ik bedoel in hele procedure, als mensen zitten zo lang, eh, soms wil je heel graag... Zoals in die tijd wilde ik heel graag, naar school. Wou ik opleiding volgen, maar dat mocht niet. Want dat kon je niet. Dan was je

My respondent indicated that her life stood still and she could not organize her life in ways that she had wanted to. It felt like she was locked up in prison. Employees of the centres recognize these feelings of idleness. About the difficulties of life in AZCs for residents one staff member stated:

> I heard multiple times from different groups of residents: "my life is on a standstill. I am not doing anything. I am waiting till I can continue with my life". That is how it is experienced. That is horrible. I mean, when I hear this, I wished I could do something about it. Things are just limited.[30]

These quotes concern the situation of refugees during the time of their procedure. In her study, Gass also focused on a reception centre in Switzerland and conducted interviews with asylum seekers only. However, I would argue that her analysis applies equally well to recognized refugees who are in the process of rebuilding their lives in the Netherlands. The situation of forced passivity can potentially be extended to cover the integration of acknowledged refugees. With the cut in government expenses, the majority of programmes to assist recognized refugees find their way in society are cancelled (Voorn, 2015). This leads to a more indirect cause of passivity because of the marginal situation refugees end up in (Klaver *et. al.*, 2014). I spoke to a Syrian refugee, Sami, who could not have formulated his experience better and which strongly resonates with the aforementioned. In the beginning of our conversation he praised the Netherlands for the help he had received. Although when he continued, he admitted that the reception did not quite match his expectations:

> And also we expect maybe more. Not because we are refugees here, no. *But when they give us more, we'll give more.* (...) When I give somebody more, if he understands what I am doing for him, he will give me more. Like, give more, he will work more, he will try to be dependent on himself, to learn more, ok? (my emphasis).

He went on to explain what he was referring to: he was very disappointed that he and his family were placed in a non-university town. He has a university degree and left a successful career in Syria. He really wants to pursue another Master's programme in the Netherlands and is enthusiastically learning the language for this. However, being placed in a bad neighbourhood, in a city not of his choice, with minimal unemployment benefits and without the perspective of finding a job, his future plans were slowly crumbling down. In other words, refugees can end up being marginalised in society without a

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uitgeprocedeerd of zat je in AZC of wat dan ook dus dan kon je niet. (...) Dus dat mensen wel beseffen dat dat niet altijd ligt aan personen maar wel aan situatie, hoe de situatie op dat moment is ontwikkeld enzo'.

[30] 'Bewoners, ik heb meerdere keren gehoord van verschillende groepen: "My life is on a standstill". Ik doe niets meer. Het is wachten totdat ik verder mag met mijn leven. En zo wordt dat ervaren. En dat is vreselijk. Ik bedoel, als ik dat hoor denk ik ook van, weet je ik wou dat je wat kon. De dingen zijn ook gewoon beperkt'.

fair chance of building a better future. As Ghorashi notes with her respondents: 'They feel that they are not given the chance to show what they are capable of' (2005: 191). In our conversation Sami contrasted his life in Syria to the circumstances in the Netherlands and he utilized the word 'active' multiple times to distinguish between the past and present. He was not able to lead the same *active* life he had in Syria in terms of work, friends, and leisure time activities. He invested some time in his hobby, baking pastries at home. This was necessary because, as he said, 'I do not want to die' which indicates the gravity of his imposed passiveness.

In her dissertation Szczepanikova has detailed how in asylum seeker residence centres, continuities and ruptures in traditional gender roles occur (2004). Although I have not spoken to sufficient refugees to provide a generalized account, men seem to have more trouble adjusting to this forced passivity. Three of my female respondents divorced the husbands that migrated with them. They referred explicitly to how they were better able to adapt themselves to their new circumstances and especially to their new position. The differences in flexibility caused friction in their relationship. They told me their husbands had more difficulty with having to start all over. One of the participants reflected on the experience of her ex-partner:

> Yes, he had difficulty with leaving the country, his home country, first of all. Or actually, our home country. Where did we end up? He was not allowed to work or anything else. The whole role of being a man, I think… We never discussed it and he never talked about it. But I did notice that he had a hard time with this.[31]

My female respondents pointed to the fact that their male partners had more difficulty with adjusting. Possibly because of their 'traditional' masculine roles but also because their standard of living is often lowered and future ambitions and expectations are shattered.[32] This process of emasculation was mentioned by one of my male respondents. Aamir stated: 'You are the man. You want to work yourself and you want to provide for your family'.[33]

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[31]'Ja, hij vond moeilijk om land te verlaten, als eerste, zijn eigen land. Of ons eigen land. En waar we zijn beland en dat hij niet dan mocht werken of wat dan ook. Die hele rol van man-zijn is dan denk ik… We hebben nooit echt over gehad en hij heeft nooit echt gezegd maar dan merk ik wel in die tijd dat hij heel moeilijk vond'.

[32] Although it is impossible to assess, I concluded from the interviews that these three women were also able to achieve more (in terms of career) than their male partner. This would make sense when considered that male refugees might be seen as more threatening than their female counterparts. Refugee women might, therefore, have less difficulty with finding jobs or getting assistance. Concerning the latter argument, Szczepanikova notes how women have been able to 'perform their neediness more efficiently' and therefore help is better accessible to them (2010: 465). However, since I have not talked to the male partners, my work does not allow me to draw this conclusion at the moment.

[33]'Jij bent man. Jij wilt zelf kunnen werken en jij wilt zelf voor je gezin kunnen zorgen'.

The forced idleness can have gendered effects, depending on notions of male and female 'traditional' responsibilities in life and the transgressions of these. I spoke to two Syrian women who were still living in an asylum residence centre. I asked about their life in the centre and whether they ever explored the premises. I was surprised to hear that they enjoyed themselves, mostly spending time inside the apartment with their children. However, they contrasted their experience to that of their husbands. Their partners did all the chores of the day: bringing the children to school, doing grocery shopping. When everything was done, they looked at their watches to discover that it is only noon and no more activities were left for the day. This example shows how 'refugee women in the camp are often more or less fulfilling what was considered to be their feminine role, while their husbands are in a position that they cannot sustain and protect the family as they did at home' (Szczepanikova, 2005: 293-294). Therefore, men might potentially have more trouble with adjusting, since the change is more strongly felt.

The need for activation?

My initial idea was to carry out research from within an AZC. With this objective I contacted an AZC in the northern provinces of the Netherlands. I was given an appointment with the general manager to discuss the possibilities for conducting research. A few weeks later I went to visit her. In my request for admission to the centre for research purposes I described the centres shortly in terms of constraints in 'recreation, work and privacy'. I further suggested that these limiting circumstances can last a while, since asylum procedures can possibly stretch for months or even years. During our conversation, the manager started off by stating that she did not recognize AZC life in my description of the centre. Remarkably, the manager argued that my observations did not correspond to the *reality* of AZCs. Procedures were shortened and, most importantly, COA implemented a policy for *activering* (activation) of the residents. When she asserted this, she fortified her statement by standing up and walking to the wall pointing to a poster of COA with several balloons which represented the policy pillars of COA. I could not read from where I was sitting but the point was that one of the clouds stated 'activation'. The manager had years of experience in running asylum seekers' residence centres, and I guess procedures have shortened, especially for Syrians and Eritreans. But I also strongly feel that waiting is still a characteristic of AZC life.[34]

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[34] It was during my activities for VluchtelingenWerk that I realized how crucial it still is. Some refugees come each week to the office with the same question: is there any news on my application? Although the average waiting time has been reduced in the Netherlands, especially for citizens from Eritrea and Syria, time is still a valuable good. Through my work I heard of a client for whom the procedure of asylum and family reunification took too much time. In the period spent waiting in the Netherlands he lost his wife to malaria. This sounds like a perfectly curable disease but not if you are living in a refugee camp with limited medical treatments. I have heard of cases of Syrian men who received a positive decision on their application and who were in the process of family reunification, but who could not spend another day worrying in the Netherlands about their family that they had left unprotected. Some of them indeed went back. These were men from groups whose procedure takes relatively short time and still the waiting is unbearable for them. Time was of essence since their family found shelter in overcrowded refugee camps, lived in areas that are regularly bombed, or were trying to survive on the

I was intrigued by the denial of the manager of the waiting and even more inquisitive for the word 'activation'. A quick search on the COA website provided further information. The 2013 year report mentioned the month of October during which the COA had received permission from the government to activate the asylum seeker residents (Buitendijk and Kolff, 2013: 36). Apparently it was an important development since it featured as the main topic in the introduction of the brochure:

> Engagement requires an active attitude. This is also requested from our residents. We will converse with all of the residents about their future. Whether the future takes place in the Netherlands or in the country of origin, we expect that our residents will be actively involved in this. This can happen by making the stay at COA as purposeful as possible. For us, this is inextricably linked to being active, daytime activities and contributing to the communities that our centres are. COA has united these efforts in the notion of "activating our residents" (Buitendijk and Kolff, 2013: 4).[35]

I was struck by the visible contradictory nature of Dutch policy. First, everything is taken away from the asylum applicants. Refugee applicants are locked up in isolated residence centres, their activities are severely limited and as such they are hardly part of Dutch society. Furthermore, their future and that of their families is completely in the hands of others, who decide whether they legitimately applied for asylum. These are all circumstances that Dutch policy actively *creates*. Subsequently there is a perceived need to (re) 'activate' asylum seekers. It is the refugee applicants themselves who are 'accused of laziness' (Ghorashi, 2005: 181). It is certainly ironic: the refugees are dependent on others for the most crucial decisions in their lives and COA identifies the urgency to 'activate' them for marginal activities such as sport activities or cleaning the centre (ACVZ, 2013: 8).

Moreover, as the word 'to activate' indicates, it suggests that someone from the outside needs to do the activation. Activation does not concern the permission for refugees to undertake activities and

streets in a country which marks them as illegals. Just the other day we had to tell a group of Syrian men that on the basis of the Dublin convention they had to go back to the country were they entered the European Union and claim asylum there. The tricky thing: it takes at least one to two months before this country of entry gives confirmation on letting them in and even starting a procedure. All in all, the procedure can take a while, especially when you want your family to come over. First there is the procedure, then the family reunion procedure. A client went through all of these steps and made an appointment for his family at a Dutch embassy abroad to pick up the travel visa. The first possible date was February 2016. In other words, there is nothing but waiting, postponing, new dates, new deadlines, new procedures.

[35] 'Betrokkenheid vraagt om een actieve houding. Dit vragen wij ook van onze bewoners. Wij gaan met alle bewoners in gesprek over hun toekomst. En of deze nu in Nederland is of in het land van herkomst, wij verwachten van onze bewoners dat ze daar zelf actief mee bezig zijn. Dit kan door het verblijf bij het COA zo zinvol mogelijk te maken. Dat is voor ons onlosmakelijk verbonden aan actief zijn, dagbesteding en het leveren van een bijdrage aan de woongemeenschappen die onze locaties zijn. Het COA heeft dit samengebracht in "het activeren van onze bewoners"'. As this quote illustrates an active attitude is also important for the Dutch government in terms of cooperating to return to the home country, if necessary.

decide for themselves. Harrell-Bond discussed the help that is offered to refugees in camps in the global south. However, her observations reflect a line of reasoning that can also be detectable in COA policy. It concerns the role of the outsider that is needed to emancipate refugees:

> It was assumed by humanitarian agencies that refugees always require relief and that this assistance must come from outside the host country. Moreover, it was - and continues to be assumed - that left to their own devices, 'third world' refugees would remain perpetually dependent on relief; outsiders are therefore needed to get the refugees to be self-supporting (Harrell-Bond, 1999: 10).

Harrel-Bonds relates this tendency to modernisation theory (*ibid.*). Other writers have also discerned these mechanisms in European residence centres. In her analysis of Czech accommodation centres Szczepanikova mentions the dynamics of control and assistance in daily life. She summarizes the policy of the management of these centres which:

> (...) officially promotes the recognized refugees' independence and self sufficiency. Those who are seen as relying too much on the help of the state and the NGOs are referred to as pathological and having problems with integration. This is a typical strategy employed in camps across the world: although refugees' dependency on assistance is largely produced and nurtured by the institution itself, it is blamed on the individual characteristics of refugees rather than on the system of assistance' (Szczepanikova, 2013: 138-139).

This sense of the need to activate residents was discernable within my workplace too and reflects the image of the feminised resident of the asylum centre who needs outside help in leading her life. One of the first tasks I learned at VWN was filling in family reunification forms. There is not much to it but it needs to be done correctly and in time. Within three months after a positive decision the family reunification form needs to be submitted to the IND. One of the first cases I had was of an East African man who was responsible for quite a lot of family members. Two months had already passed since he received a positive decision on his procedure, so time was of essence. I needed to fill in all the relevant forms, copy them and let a colleague check it. I asked the client if he could come back at the end of the afternoon to pick up the envelope with all the documents I would prepare. The applicant needs to send it in himself. I explained this to him and was sure he understood correctly. Towards the end of the workday he still had not come by to pick up the forms. I decided to go to his room to deliver the envelope but he was not at home. I returned to the office and asked a colleague if she could make sure the envelope would get to him. The week after, and the deadline for family-reunification coming closer, I checked the client's file but could not see any evidence that he actually went to the post office to post the parcel. I went and paid him a visit. Luckily I found him to be home. His

roommates were also at home and someone, whose English was better than my client's, volunteered to translate for me. I asked about the envelope. The client affirmatively nodded and went to his room to get something. He came back and showed me the opened envelope! My colleague had given it to him and he was unsure what to do with it. With the help of a better translator I explained to him again and he agreed to post it the following morning. The week after I checked again and it turned out the IND had finally received the forms. As stated, it is pivotal that the IND gets the files in time. There is no valid excuse for submitting the documents too late. If there are any irregularities the consequence is that one cannot bring one's family to the Netherlands. I was troubled by the incident and discussed this issue with my colleagues. The most common answer was: it is the client's own responsibility. My point is not to evaluate whether or not it is the responsibility of the client. I just want to point out this often heard argument. The work that is done at VWN is demanding, it is a responsibility you *want* to share with your client. However, in the context of the situation I sketched above in which a client indicates to understand what is expected of him but for some reason the message does not come across, this stance can be debatable. It is not hard to imagine that with the differences in culture and language but also with the complicated asylum procedure, refugee claimants might not be aware of (the importance of) certain aspects of the procedure. In this context, it is almost out of place to urge someone to take his or her responsibility. In this I recognize the image of a passive refugee who needs to be encouraged to take responsibility or control of his/her own affairs.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have reflected on the nature of the centres in which asylum claimants reside while they await the decision on their procedure. These isolated, disciplining and limiting centres are part of the restrictive policy of the Netherlands to deter asylum seekers from coming and to turn the ones who do arrive into controllable subjects. Male refugees are emasculated since they experience a loss in their masculine role. This might affect their experience of migration. Refugees are simultaneously feminised through policy managing them into docile bodies. The 'forced passivity' that is a result of this is blamed on the residents and taken as a sign of their incapability. Subsequently, a separate policy is implemented to encourage the residents to take control of their lives through relatively meaningless activities as sports and cleaning the camp grounds. Both the restrictive policy itself and the subsequent attempt of 'activation' *create* and perpetuate the idea that refugees are helpless individuals.

Chapter 3

VULNERABILITY: Portraying helplessness

In the previous chapter, I described how refugees in Dutch asylum seeker residence centres are incorporated into a feminising regime, stripping them of their more powerful masculine positioning. This process of feminisation has also taken place in the discourse of refugee aid organisations. The image of the refugee that is constructed is that of a passive victim in desperate need of outside help. In this imagining 'refugees stop being specific persons and become pure victims in general' (Malkki, 1996: 378). This configuration justifies much of the humanitarian intervention on behalf of the refugee. In this chapter I zoom in on this process and show that this particular victimising imagination of the refugee is very much alive in the Netherlands, both among a large part of Dutch citizens and among the newcomers themselves.

Feminising the refugee into a voiceless victim

Johnson describes how the image of the refugee has drastically changed in the last sixty years 'from the heroic, political individual to a nameless flood of poverty-stricken women and children' (2011: 1016). She studied the representation of refugees in UNHCR's visual material throughout the years and identified certain shifts that have taken place in the depiction of the figure of the refugee. At the time of the Cold War, refugees were imagined as politically active individuals; males who fled the USSR for ideological reasons. The refugee was seen to be 'voting with his feet' (*op. cit.*: 1020). From the 1960s, refugees from Africa and Asia started arriving to Europe and this subsequently changed how the refugee was represented. Indeed, '[t]he popular image of the refugee was no longer only a white European individual giving voice to an affirmative and heroic political agency, but also a displaced person from the global South, poverty-stricken and fleeing violence and war' (*op. cit.*: 1022). The idea of the average refugee now consists of a poor (African) woman or child (*ibid.*).[36] Even among the refugees themselves, this idea of the refugee remains pervasive. In this vein, a reporter of the Dutch national newspaper *Volkskrant*, went undercover in the refugee camps in Calais and asked a group of Iranian refugees how they would solve the refugee issues in Europe. They firmly located the cause of the problem in the poverty and hunger in Africa, rather than other parts of the world. They reasoned that if the UN would spend money in Africa to tackle poverty, there would not be a refugee situation in Europe. The reporter noted: 'I consider it funny that the four Iranian youths

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[36] See for example the newest campaign of VWN which shows a women carrying a child (www.vluchtelingenwerk.nl/doneren/geef-voor-vluchtelingen)[last accessed October 2, 2015]. And the UNCHR advertisement about word choise in asylum issues shows a desperate mother with two children (www.unhcr.org/55df0e556.html)[last accessed October 2, 2015].

associate migration issues only with poverty in Africa. Apparently they themselves are not part of the problem' (Hassan, 2015: 24).[37]

Johnson summarizes this development by naming three related processes, namely the refugee's racialisation (from an emphasis on Europe to the global South), its victimisation (from a 'powerful, political figure to an undifferentiated victim, voiceless and without political agency') and lastly the feminisation of the refugee (from a male to a female refugee figure) (2011: 1016). These shifts in the imagination of refugees function in two ways. Firstly, the gendered images serve to raise support for humanitarian assistance to refugees, both ideologically and financially. Secondly, Johnson highlights how the feminisation of the refugee occurs in order to manage the anxiety that comes with people on the move, as described in the first chapter (*op. cit.*: 1028). To construct the imagined figure of the refugee as female has been crucial in 'creating the vulnerable refugee' (*op. cit.*: 1030): it has done 'much of the "work" that the discourses of victimisation and depoliticisation demand' (*op. cit.*: 1032). Women are generally considered more vulnerable, especially in processes of migration (Lewis, 2012; Eastmond, 1993: 35). Traditional gendered ideas about women as innocent, passive and vulnerable subverts notions of the threatening refugee, de-politicizes refugees and creates a 'paternalistic role of saviour' for humanitarian assistance (Johnson, 2011: 1032; see also Malkki, 1996: 388). Besides UNHCR, other refugee organisations express similar 'imaginative shifts' and can be seen to work with the same stereotypical images (see for example Szczepanikova, 2010: 470). As Harrell-Bond states: '[a]gencies vary in the degree of dignity with which they transmit images of refugees, but all rely on funding from a public which responds to media portrayal of extreme human suffering, starvation and helplessness' (1999: 12-13; see also Malkki, 1996: 386). Logically, the need for help justifies the request for donations. The constructed helplessness is also one of the main motivating factors for volunteers to offer their help. When I spoke to a new volunteer at VWN, I asked her what drove her offer her services at the center. She replied that from her Christian background she wanted to assist 'the widows, the orphans and the refugees'. Statements such as these thus work to reinforce conventional depictions of refugees as vulnerable.

One of the images iconic to refugee issues in the Netherlands is the photograph of a rejected asylum seeker, that the media referred to as Mauro.[38] When Mauro reached the age of eighteen, the Dutch law dictated that he be deported to his country of birth. He and his Dutch foster parents were subsequently involved in a campaign to keep him in the Netherlands. During one of the demonstrations, a picture of Mauro was taken that went viral and became a symbol of asylum seekers in the Netherlands. The

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[37] 'Ik vind het grappig dat de vier Iraanse jongeren de vraag over de migranten problematiek alleen maar met armoede in Afrika associëren. Blijkbaar zijn ze zelf geen onderdeel van het probleem'.

[38] More recently the picture of a crying Syrian dad just arrived on the shore of Kos was shared on social media (http://www.rtlnieuws.nl/nieuws/buitenland/huilende-syrische-vader-het-verhaal-achter-de-foto)[last accessed October 2, 2015].

picture consisted of a dramatic close-up of Mauro's face, his eyes closed and a single tear running over his cheek. I have often heard people around me mention 'Mauros' when they refer to the parallel plight of asylum seeking children in the Netherlands (see also Versteegt & Maussen, 2012: 66). Mauro echoed such sentiments in a recent interview, where he reflects on the viral photograph:

> There is a Mauro that everyone knows from television. However, there is also a different Mauro and, I prefer that one. The Mauro from television, well, I do not like to view myself on television, it is like I am really pathetic. Really, the way they treat you, or perceive you. Like I am a small child. I do not think of myself as pitiful. I never thought of myself in this way. That image was determined by multiple factors. The most important is of course the picture of me with the tear, the crying boy. I feel like people think that captures who I am. It is a shame. I am a cheerful boy. If someone asks you: do you know Mauro Manuel? They will instantly come up with the picture of the pitiful boy. I am afraid I am not able to stop that (Schoorl, 2015: 12).[39]

This particular Dutch example shows how images of refugees resonate with and help create the figure of the asylum claimant as a pitiful and helpless individual. This is often depicted by using female refugees because 'it associates refugeeness with powerlessness and neediness' (Szczepanikova, 2010: 470). Mauro is an example in which refugees are also symbolically feminised by emphasizing their victimhood and helplessness. In doing so, the figure of the refugee has been turned into a vulnerable and voiceless victim void of (political) agency. In this attempt to raise public support for aid to refugees, they have become a mere object of humanitarian assistance (Malkki, 1996: 390) and fully 'depend[ant] on agents of compassion' (Harrell-Bond, 1999: 10).

Getting started: a vulnerable target group?

I mostly found participants through my personal network. After my first interview, the respondent told me that a mutual acquaintance was in close contact with another refugee and her family. Keen to obtain more informants, I send this acquaintance an email to ask permission to contact his refugee friend. He replied the following:

> I had to think hard about your request. With your research you will dig into the past of people. A past that is often marked by misery and grief. I do not expect you to underestimate this but

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[39]'Er is een Mauro die iedereen van tv kent. Maar er is ook een andere Mauro en ja, die vind ik wel leuker. De Mauro van tv, tja, ik vind het niet zo'n leuk beeld om mezelf terug te zien op tv, alsof ik heel zielig ben. Joh, hoe ze dan tegen je doen, of hoe ze je zien. Alsof ik een klein kind ben. Ik vind mezelf ook niet zielig. Nooit gevonden ook. Dat beeld is bepaald door een aantal dingen. Voorop staat natuurlijk die foto van mij met de traan, de huilende jongen. Ik heb het idee dat ze denken dat ik ook zo ben. Dan vind ik jammer. Ik ben een vrolijke jongen. Als je iemand vraagt: ken je Mauro Manuel? Dan komen ze gelijk met die foto van die zielige jongen. Ik ben bang dat ik dat niet kan tegenhouden'.

since I regularly interact with this world, I notice that the sorrow is often even deeper than expected. Therefore, I would like to know more about your research (research goal and question) and the interviewing style. Which categories are you looking for etcetera (personal correspondence).[40]

Surprised about the extent of the information he needed, I sent him a short overview of my research plan. The next day he responded and declined by request. He decided not to ask his friend because he considered it not in her best interest. When I asked if he could elaborate on this decision he sent me a long email back. He wrote that he decided to not expose her to questions because looking back on this difficult situation in her life would cost her energy which is better spent on building a future. A few days later I received an email from another individual, who had heard about my research and wanted to emphasize to me that the subject I chose, life in AZCs, was very delicate.

Both individuals, Dutch citizens, did not work professionally with refugees. However, I valued their opinion since they are both active in political and academic life. I must admit I was left feeling anxious by these warnings and hesitant about whether I should pursue the topic. My target group, refugees, seemed like such a vulnerable group that it was easy to do harm. I wrote in my research diary that day:

> Because of the emails I hesitate whether I should continue with this research. I have always thought to be able to render people visible by conducting research. But I might have chosen too vulnerable a group and maybe should just leave them alone.[41]

When I started talking to refugees through my interviews, the difference between my expectations and practice could not have been larger. I met (wo)men who face or are still facing difficult times but who *acted* to confront their situations. One person had searched for psychological help to deal with the trauma from past experiences and was determined to fight the regular nightmares. Others included mothers who, despite barely speaking the language, made sure they put their children in the most rigorous schools. A so-called 'illegal immigrant' trying to make a living despite not being recognized as a citizen of the Netherlands involved himself in demonstrations. These were individuals who faced

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[40]'Ik moest over je verzoek wel even goed nadenken. Met je onderzoek wroet je wel in het verleden van mensen. Een verleden dat veelal getekend is door ellende en verdriet. Al verwacht ik niet dat je dat onderschat, sinds ik vaker met deze wereld te maken heb, zie ik dat dat vaak nog veel dieper zit als verwacht. Graag zou ik daarom graag eerst wat meer van het onderzoek willen weten (doel- en vraagstelling) en de wijze van interviewen. Welke categorieën zoek je etc.'.

[41] 'Door de emails twijfel ik eraan of ik dit onderwerp wel moet doorzetten. Ik heb altijd gedacht met onderzoek mensen *visible* te maken en dat dat een soort doel op zich is. Ik twijfel nu of ik niet een te kwetsbare groep heb uitgekozen en hen niet had moeten lastig vallen'.

serious constraints but consciously chose certain courses of action that enabled them to make the most out of their situation. Most importantly, these individuals were very much able to speak for themselves, as demonstrated by a decline I received for an interview request. Furthermore, there were two participants who told me they would have rejected my request for an interview had I asked a few years earlier. In other words, the image of the vulnerability of refugees that people around me had emphasized turned out to be more complicated than I initially assumed. In addition to my informants seeming perfectly capable of deciding for themselves whether or not to participate in an interview, they also exhibited strongly worded and opinionated ideas during the interviews. What struck me regarding this was the need of my respondents to share certain stories. One of my respondents started the conversation with 'I know you want to know about the life in the AZC but…' and continued to tell what was relevant to him. Another participant started talking and after twenty minutes asked 'What kind of stories are you interested in?' but before I was able to answer this question continued describing another experience.

I am not arguing that because interviewees elected to share certain stories, that these histories are not difficult (to share). The argument of this thesis concerns the problematic situation refugees find themselves in with regards to how they are framed as vulnerable, non-agential objects by external humanitarian actors. With these observations, I am thus not denying the power-relations that are involved in doing research and interviewing. I do wish to emphasize, however, that the category of refugee was strongly influenced by popular discourse on refugees that is based on the image of individuals facing so much misery that their ability to take care of themselves is damaged. As such, this helpless individual needs to be taken care of by others. I relate these experiences to the discourse described above in which refugees are viewed as mere victims and in this process are feminised, de-politicised and, as this example illustrates, silenced. 'This vision of helplessness is vitally linked to the constitution of speechlessness among refugees: helpless victims need protection, need someone to speak for them' (Malkki, 1996: 388). Within the 'humanitarian policy discourse' as described at the beginning of this chapter, refugees are stripped of their individual historical, cultural and political details and become nothing but 'raw humanity and a pure helplessness' (Malkki, 1996: 390). The experience I described above shows how refugees need someone to act on behalf of them since they are too vulnerable to cope themselves. This is a tendency that my respondents also experienced.

Paternalism and the inability of refugees

The perceived incapacity of refugees for deciding for themselves is something that participants also mentioned in the interviews. The majority of the refugees I interviewed, have spent many years in the Netherlands and are pursuing or completing an education. Others have already worked for years and another, after ten years of procedure, started her first (paid) job. A recurring theme was how the refugees, when they received permission to stay and were thinking about re-education, complained

about not being listened to. They were systematically placed in lower skilled education tracks or work-placements, even when there was proof of earlier work-experience or a higher diploma gained in the country of origin. They all described a struggle of achieving the level of education to which they aspired, of being categorized as lower skilled than they actually were, even when they explicitly indicated they preferred taking a higher level of education. For some, this experience continued during their work or education in which key figures purposely let them fail a course or employees at job-organisations ridiculed them for aiming for certain goals. Jasmina for example describes the following experience in her search for a (paid) job as a social servant:

> I went [and] I was laughed at [when] I came from the employment agency. We had to report ourselves once in a while. (...) The employee ridiculed me: I am not able to speak the language very well and I want to practice a profession which requires language.[42]

A friend of Jasmina's from the same country, encountered a similar situation. He is an architect but was placed in a carpentry job. Jasmina mentioned many other refugee acquaintances with promising capacities who ended up in inferior positions and eventually fell 'ill' because of this mismatching. She described her own struggle with the following words:

> Yes, they wanted to force me to… Luckily… Sometimes people are just stupid with these kind of projects. They wanted to send me to retail business even though I have a higher vocational training in social work combined with eight years of work experience. I wanted to do something that eh (...) suits my level of education.[43]

Another respondent, Ahmed, came here at age seventeen and after finishing the language course made plans for his further education. He describes the situation at the language school which was supposed to support him with his education plans. Instead they tried to redirect him to one of the vocational education programs that they had pre-selected (carpentry, retail business, welding or car engineering). When he told them that he wanted to pursue regular pre-university education, they threatened to call the school he wanted to apply to and tell them about his insufficient language skills and unsuitable age.

> Asylum seekers who came from the residence centre to a language school. This is the start of another struggle against the teachers. For example, people start at the language school. They

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[42]'Ik ging, ik werd uitgelachen. Ik kom uit het arbeidsbureau, we moesten ons in de zoveel tijd melden. (...) De vrouw lachte me uit: ik kan de taal niet goed en ik wil beroep uitoefenen wat alles met de taal moet'.
[43] 'Ja, zij wilden mij stoppen in een… Maar gelukkig… Soms zijn mensen heel erg dom met dat soort projecten. Zij wilden mij de detailhandel school sturen terwijl ik met HBO maatschappelijk werk én acht jaar ervaring ben gekomen. Ik wilde iets doen dat het een beetje meer eh (...) op niveau'.

try hard, learn the language but they are actively opposed. [They tell them:] you have lived in an asylum seeker residence centre for years. Your language is insufficient. Of course the language is not good enough if the guy without residence papers has for years been pushed into a small room. And then he makes it to the language school and tries. Of course his language is not good enough. Well, help him. What they do? Well, you will pursue a carpentry program. You will pursue a welding training. You never hear them say: you have a quality, does not matter which one, we will encourage you to pursue an academic education. That never happens.[44]

Ahmed's experience of being actively sabotaged continued when he was finally admitted to the programme of his choice. He describes an educational career of continuously having to fight against prejudices of his incapabilities. He recounts how he discussed a final report for a compulsory course with his professor:

The first time, I get an insufficient mark because it [the report] entails many grammatical mistakes. I had to improve it, which I did. Second time, I submitted it to her. She then said: it is sufficient now, but you will still fail the course and you will quit with your training in social work. I replied: who says so? She said: I decide. No you will not. And then she continued: No, because Dutch is not your mother tongue I am worried that you will not be able to write good reports. I had the same experience with a colleague who also came from your country.[45]

These incidents in which refugees' capacities were structurally underestimated resonated with experiences mentioned in the literature. For example in the research of Harrell-Bond the attitude of the helpers was often described by respondents as 'patronising and condescending' (1999: 6; see also Ghorashi, 2005: 189; Szczepanikova, 2010: 465). There exist abundant examples: refugees forced to participate in language classes in which students from different levels participated, no customized

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[44] 'Asielzoekers die naar een talenschool vanuit het asielzoekerscentrum zijn gekomen. En dan begint weer een andere strijd tegen de leerkrachten daar. Bijvoorbeeld mensen komen op Alfa college (...). Ze doen hun best, ze leren de taal maar dan wordt tegen hun aan gewerkt. Van nou ja, je hebt jarenlang in een asielzoekerscentrum gewoond. Jouw taal is niet goed. Tuurlijk is de taal niet goed als die man acht jaar zonder verblijfsvergunning ergens in een kamer werd geduwd. En dan komt hij en doet hij zijn best. Tuurlijk is de taal niet goed. Nou, help hem dan. Wat gaan de mensen doen? Nou, je gaat naar timmerman-opleiding volgen. Je gaat lasser-opleiding volgen. Je hoort nooit van de mensen: je hebt een kwaliteit, geeft niet welke, we gaan je [aan]moedigen om op een universitaire of HBO opleiding terecht te komen. Wordt niet gedaan'.

[45] 'Eerste keer, krijg ik onvoldoende omdat er taalfouten in zaten. Toen moest ik het repareren. Toen heb ik het gerepareerd. Tweede keer had ik het bij haar ingeleverd. Toen zei ze: nu is het wel voldoende waard, maar je krijgt als nog onvoldoende van mij. En zo stop je met deze opleiding maatschappelijk werk. Ik zei: wie zegt dat? Ze zei: ik bepaal. Nee jij bepaalt niet. En toen zei ze: nee, omdat Nederlands niet jouw moedertaal is, maak ik me wel zorgen dat jij later geen goede rapportages kunt schrijven. Dat had ik toen met een collega gehad die ook uit jouw land kwam'.

learning path and no attention to the ambitions of the students. I had a hard time making sense of these experiences. Was it blunt racism? Jealousy? Did the Dutch teachers feel threatened by these newcomers? Was it because they did not speak the language fluently and were they therefore put in a lower level? Or was the re-telling of these experience by the participants influenced by the frustration of having to start over, having to work harder than Dutch nationals?

In line with the argument I am trying to make in this chapter, I place these experiences in the context of the general feminisation of refugees, the intertwinement of these experiences with the helpless and passive image of the refugee. The feminised image of refugees is not only discernable in the images that refugee organisations asking for donations employ, it is also an important factor in the *organisation* of refugee aid (Malkki, 1996: 386; see also Szczepanikova, 2010: 461). Harrell-Bond explores the effects of the assistance that is given to refugees, in refugee camps as well as within the European systems of asylum procedures. She poses the question: 'Is it possible that the way refugees are 'helped' is one source of debilitating stress for those who are in a position where they have no alternative but to receive?' (1999: 1). The author acknowledges that refugees might need assistance but is critical about the form this aid takes and the relationship that it creates between refugee and aid-workers (*op. cit.*: 4). Harrell-Bonds explores this 'stereotype of helplessness' on which the giving of aid is based (*op. cit.*: 14). One of the effects is the idea that others are needed to give help. 'The standard image of the helpless refugee also reinforces the view of their *incapability*, motivating people from all walks of life to offer their services' (Harrell-Bond, 1999: 13; my emphasis). This incapable image of the refugees causes the people that work with them, to often assign themselves the responsibility of making decisions for them. Hence, refugees then are seen as less capable people in general, an understanding that is demonstrated when refugees are helped with finding suitable jobs or education. At the end of the interview with Ahmed his Dutch girlfriend joins us and we talk about how they are usually approached as an international couple. She also recognizes Ahmed's situation and notes:

> When we are together, how many times does it happen that people start talking to me? They already assume that he does not comprehend or… When we buy a fridge or whatever. The salesman will interact with me. He [Ahmed] is not a fully fledged communication partner.[46]

This example shows how refugees are feminized, especially in the presence of their conventionally Dutch looking partner. Their non-whiteness signals otherness and their status feminizes refugees into non-capable actors, even during such routines as shopping.

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[46] 'Het is ook gewoon een manier… Als we met z'n tweeen zijn, hoe vaak gebeurt het wel niet dat ze tegen mij gaan praten? Omdat ze er al vanuit gaan dat hij het niet begrijpt of… Dan gaan we een koelkast kopen of weet ik veel. Gaat de verkoper met mij in gesprek. Hij is minder een volwaardige gesprekspartner'.

Rejecting the victimisation

As I described in the introduction, I initially intended to inquire into life in asylum seekers residence centres. This is what I told respondents, and I initially tried to redirect the interviews towards this topic. However, there were some stories that I felt my respondents wanted to share and which, looking back, provided me with valuable information. One of my respondents, Aamir, a rejected asylum seeker in his twenties, started the interview with what sounded like a very adventurous story. It was almost framed as an exciting Hollywood movie. He explained how he was involved in various demonstrations against the IND because of the situation he ended up in. He spent fifteen years in the Netherlands and is not allowed to stay but also not able to go back to his country of origin.[47] What follows is a short abstract to illustrate his style of narration:

> At a certain moment I woke up. Someone brought a translator. This guy from the IND has a loudspeaker. He tells all the boys: "guys, you will be evacuated". I look up. (...) I see policemen, they are putting on their vests. The boys they come with sticks. Unbelievable. (...) We all sat on the floor. Grabbed each other. They pulled us apart, beat us with sticks. It was rough. Everything ended up in the newspaper.[48]

In the interview with Aamir, the majority of time was spent on describing two demonstrations he was involved in and a court case abroad in which to his surprise the judge ruled in his favour. For me this was a clear illustration in which Aamir tried to describe how he took action, how he spoke up, how he fought back. It showed how he worked to 'reject a victim identity and to instead position [himself] as having power and resilience' (Clare. *et. al.*,2014: 83). Of course Aamir very much realized how he found himself in an insoluble situation. As he stated himself:

> Some aspects are fun, some are definitely not nice. Of course my situation is bad. But I cannot change anything. Of course, of course, that bothers me. But what can I change? Nothing. I cannot change anything, you know. (...) My situation is complicated, very complicated.[49]

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[47] For more information on refugees in this situation see the movement 'Wij zijn hier' (www.wijzijnhier.org) [last accessed October 12, 2015].

[48] 'Op een gegeven moment ik word zo wakker. Iemand heeft een talk gebracht. Dezelfde man van het IND heeft zo'n grote ding [megafoon]. Tegen al doe jongens praten: "heej jongens, jullie worden ontruimd". Ik kijk omhoog. (...) Ik kijk omhoog. Ik zie allemaal politie, ze doen vesten aan. Van die jongens komen, met stokken enzo. Niet normaal. (...) We gingen zitten allemaal op de grond. Elkaar vast pakken. Ze hebben ons uit elkaar gerukt, geslagen met stokken. Hard aan toe. Alles is in de krant gekomen'.

[49] 'Sommige dingen zijn leuk daar van, sommige dingen zijn zeker niet leuk. Natuurlijk mijn situatie is slecht. Maar ja, ik kan er niets aan veranderen. Tuurlijk, tuurlijk heb ik moeite mee. Maar ja, wat kan ik veranderen. Niets. Ik kan er niets aan veranderen, weet je. (...) Mijn situatie is moeilijk, heel moeilijk'.

However, he directly moved on to continue with retelling his adventures. Aamir briefly mentions his feeling of helplessness but swiftly continues with his heroic account to shift focus on those moments that he felt in control, that he claimed his rights.

> In the tented camp [place of demonstration], it was fun. I did not feel like it was unpleasant to do. No. It was something you had the *right* to do. The judge ruled that we were allowed to do so. The people were not arrested, that fear was not present. That is why it was very different (my emphasis).[50]

Clare *et. al.* analyzed in which ways African women asylum seekers presented themselves when talking about emotions. The respondents strongly rejected any reason for compassion since pity is accompanied by other associations and leads to 'potentially negative constructions of asylum seekers' (2014: 88). Aware of the negative image of asylum seeker, they positioned themselves in alternative ways:

> Being in need of pity was associated with negative judgments and identities and instead participants repositioned themselves as not requiring pity because they are in control of their lives. When accounts could have suggested vulnerability, such accounts were accompanied with the disclaimer of not being the kind of people that require pity. By rejecting pity, participants could claim empowering positions that elevated their status and credibility (Clare *et. al.*, 2014: 88).

I would argue that Aamir similarly refused the refugee identity that can potentially turn someone in a mere object of pity. Instead, he constructed a story in which he rejected the victim identity that would automatically accompany a refugee's life story by emphasizing how he acted in the face of hardship.

Clare *et. al.* specifically mention how their respondents described 'being strong' in the context of carrying out their responsibilities as mothers (2014: 89). 'By constructing themselves as 'strong' and not needing pity, participants positioned themselves as in control of their lives and thus presented as responsible and capable functioning adults' (*op. cit.*: 91). In this vein, I interviewed three mothers who came to the Netherlands with their children. They talked about their difficult and limited position they were in during the procedure. However, they all simultaneously opposed this account that can lead to a totalizing state of victimhood. The way they expressed the power and resilience they had was through their children. Whatever had happened to them, they ensured they put their children in the

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[50]'In het tentenkamp was op zich leuk. Ik heb mij op zich niet gevoeld van: ow het is kut om te doen. Nee. Het was ook iets waar je *recht* op had. Waarvan de rechter was uitgesproken dat wij het mochten doen. Die mensen werden niet opgepakt, die hadden die angst niet. Daarom was het heel anders'.

right school, were determined their children would not suffer under the circumstances and found comfort in the fact that their children were leading peaceful lives.

In other words, refugees find their own ways of expressing their resilience and self-determination within the discourses of helplessness. For mothers, a legitimate manner is to balance victimhood and resilience though their children. For my male respondents, more active narratives were among the array of possibilities.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored another dimension of the process of feminisation of refugees. I have showed how in the last sixty years the figure of the refugee has been racialised, victimised and feminised. Refugees are depicted as mere victims and as such silent, helpless and incapable. Portraying refugees as female has done much of the gendering work. Women have usually been associated with vulnerability, especially in the context of migration. This depiction has been adopted and perpetuated by the humanitarian discourse on refugees. It has also trickled down into the way aid is provided which is based on 'pity rather than solidarity' (Szczepanikova, 2010: 471). I have traced this particular construction of refugees in people around me, in the media and in the accounts and experiences of my respondents. It has shown how refugees are actively feminised into ultimate victims. As these incapable actors, they need outsiders to protect them. Men and women have found different ways to simultaneously perpetuate and counter these discourses, by identifying their hardship but also by mentioning how they acted from this vulnerability.

Chapter 4

AGENCY: Forcing refugees into sincerity scripts

In the previous chapter I have explored how in humanitarian discourse and organisations the refugee is constructed as a helpless female. This chapter will discuss the same figure but in relation to its complementary character. Together they constitute a binary which refugees are subjected to. This dichotomy consists of the genuine and bogus refugee. I will use Johnson's argument here on this 'gendered nature of refugee representation and how it intersects with constructions of political (non)agency' (2011: 1016). Agency here is loosely defined as 'the capacity to act' (*op. cit.*: 1028). Western thinking has been influenced by a binary consisting of, on the one hand, willful individuals and, on the other, the agencyless. The figure of a genuine refugee falls into the latter category. This chapter will focus on the other side of the binary and will explore how this figure of the economic migrant has forced refugees to identify with constraining stereotypes. The classification of the genuine and the bogus refugee, has come to function to scrutinize all refugees, has put them into a structural position of suspicion and has created certain 'performances of refugeeness' (Szczepanikova, 2010: 463).

The power of labelling: the agency binary

Officially the term asylum seeker is used for those who are still in the process of asylum application. If the asylum seeker receives a positive answer to the application (s)he is officially recognized through obtaining refugee status (Goodman and Speer, 2007: 166).[51] In Dutch society the terms, asylum seeker and refugee, are used interchangeably because most people are unaware of the legal differentiation. This even happens in media reports (Ceelen, 2015). However, in popular Dutch speech, the two terms do hold different meanings. In Dutch society the former term, asylum seeker, has gained a negative connotation: one can even speak of stigmatization (Schuster, 2003: 244). Asylum seekers are, as the word 'seeker' indicates, actively in search of a better life. This is why in Dutch they are sometimes referred to as *gelukszoekers*. This term can roughly be translated as 'someone in search of luck or happiness' but has a strong focus on economic circumstances. Asylum seekers are perceived to possess an aggressive form of agency which is characterized by the fact that they '(...) use any means they can to enter these countries; they do not wait for permission and their claim to enter is based on their needs, not those of the country they seek to enter' (*op. cit.*: 240). As

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[51] For other discussions on the terms, and also the difference with 'migrant', see for example: http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/28/migrants-refugees-and-asylum-seekers-whats-the-difference [last accessed October 2, 2015]. And: http://www.unhcr.org/55df0e556.html [last accessed October 2, 2015]. Or: www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/08/24/is-it-time-to-ditch-the-word-migrant [last accessed October 2, 2015].

such asylum applicants are accused of a twofold strategy: trying to better their economic circumstances but also of trying to disturb the situation of the receiving state and its inhabitants (Johnson, 2011: 1027). In contrast, the word refugee signals a focus on the home country and not the destination, in the sense that the need to flee away from (and not towards) something is emphasized. In the previous chapter I mentioned the figure of the refugee which is represented as a feminised and helpless individual. This victim is totally dependant upon the Dutch benevolence for her survival. As Ghorashi rightly states:

> Images of refugees as helpless people may come from the fact that they are often victims of violence. The implicit use of the concept of forced migration can lead to overlooking aspects of choice, especially limited choice. Disregarding the aspect of choice in exile carries the danger of ignoring the agency of refugees (2005: 185).

This binary logic, asylum seeker *versus* refugee, fits well within prevalent notions of agency in which individuals are depicted as either in full control of their lives or are completely lacking the capacity to act. Bogus asylum seekers choose to come here, genuine refugees are forced to flee (Verkuyten, 2005: 273). In an article O'Connell Davidson discusses anti-trafficking campaigns and notes how migrants are usually portrayed. She states:

> [I]t conceives of migrants as either willing selves, acting on the basis of their own freely made choices, or as forced to submit to the will of another. Some campaigners even describe 'victims of trafficking' as having 'lost' their agency along with their freedom. And here is where we enter territory that's profoundly gendered and aged because adult men are regarded as almost by definition authors of their own destinies, whereas women and children's grip on their own wills is understood to be already fragile and tenuous. They are readily imagined in the garb of victimhood (O'Connell Davidson, 2015).

O'Connell Davidson points out the gendered nature of concepts of agency or lack thereof and signals the 'gendered (...) division between willing subjects or will-less objects' (O'Connell-Davidson, 2015). Either one has the capacity to act or one has totally lost the ability. Men are most commonly associated with the former, women with the latter. As Griffiths notes: 'Men (...) are prone to being conceptualised as active agents: capable and strong, but potentially criminal and threatening (2014).This gendered dichotomy can be transplanted to the distinction between refugees and asylum seekers. Refugee carries the status of victim and asylum seeker is perceived as a perpetrator, an economic immigrant. In other words, those who are in real danger and those who are in search of better (economic) opportunities are differentiated and the notion of agency is crucial in making this division. Both competing images are dependant on each other: the one comes into being through

contrasting it to the other. There cannot exist a genuine refugee if there is not also its opposite, a bogus asylum seeker. There is very little found in between. This dichotomy and the gendered notions of agency on which it is based, it is hardly ever challenged (Szczepanikova, 2010: 462; see also Ghorashi, 2005: 186; Boonstoppel, 2015).

Generating suspicion by focusing on asylum seekers

As described above the notion of the refugee and the asylum seeker have different meanings attached to them. As such, it is notable that the word asylum seeker is the most utilized word in Dutch popular speech when refugee issues are discussed. Goodman and Speer explain how these particular terms are 'simultaneously distinguished and conflated' (2007: 178). Refugees are categorized into genuine and bogus ones. The effect of this classification is that it emphasizes that there are people unrightfully claiming refugee status (*op. cit.*: 166). It points to the fact that there are possible 'manipulators' among them (Ghorashi, 2005: 186). As Leudar *et. al.* state: 'the term "asylum seeker" in both legal and mundane usage opens each incumbent to suspicion as to their motives and honesty. The term is marked as bogus (...)' (2008: 201). As this quote illustrates, the consequence is that all asylum seekers are bestowed with the status of economic migrant, who abuses the asylum system. It is perceived to be the Dutch urgent task to detect these imposters. It is worth citing Goodman and Spear at length here about this issue:

> By categorizing asylum seekers in terms of those who are genuinely fleeing persecution and those who are economic migrants, the public sphere debate becomes one about the legitimacy or illegitimacy of asylum seekers' claims. A system of classification based around legitimacy has the effect of constructing all asylum seekers as immigration 'cheats' and as untrustworthy and dishonest people whom we are right to treat with doubt and contempt. Although it may at first seem entirely rational to separate these two groups – some who claim asylum may, in fact, be economic migrants – the rhetorical effect of this differentiation is, in the overwhelming majority of cases, used to delegitimize and justify the harsh treatment of all asylum seekers, whatever their circumstances (2007: 179).

Returning to the Dutch context, what struck me and what seems to me to be an illustration of the mechanism that I have described above (the distinguishing and conflating of certain terms) was found in the *Volkskrant* of August 15, 2015. This Dutch newspaper had a research company conduct a questionnaire among more than two-thousand citizens. In the article reflecting on the research, a distinction is made between war- and economic refugees (Bakker and Obbema, 2015). In the days after the publication the notion of 'economic refugee' was criticised (Hablous, 2015; Kranenberg 2015). According to the UNHCR convention, a person fleeing his/her country for economic reasons

cannot be officially acknowledged through refugee status.[52] It turned out, as one of the researcher explained in the aftermath, the research team purposefully did not provide a definition of the term 'refugee' in order to obtain answers based on the respondents' perception on what a refugee constitutes. As one of the researchers argues:

> In our own way, we discovered that Dutch people, when they think about refugees, have in mind individuals who are in search of better lives. (...) The economic refugee, indeed, does not exist according to the UNHCR definition, but it certainly exists in public opinion. This influences the representation and the judgement on issues of 'refugees'. This is an important discovery from which readers and politicians should retrieve their conclusions (Kanne, 2015 as quoted in Hablous, 2015).[53]

This example illustrates how in the Dutch context a distinction is made between asylum seeker and refugee. This distinction is simultaneously conflated. Goodman and Speer's argument applies very well to the Dutch context. Even the notion of refugee has been contaminated by the general perception of the asylum seeker in search of better economic opportunities.

Refugeeness and acceptable behaviour

I have realized that it is very difficult to get away from the preoccupation with the credibility of the refugee. I remember my very first day at VluchtelingenWerk. I escorted a colleague during his office hours in which clients can come by and request any legal or social assistance. I was eager to learn about the state of affairs and posed all the questions that came to my mind. I cannot recall the exact case but I remember asking at a certain point whether my colleague ever doubted the stories his clients told him. As he correctly pointed out to me, this was not of his concern. His job was to assist the refugees in whatever possible way. I realized at that particular moment that I was also preoccupied with categorizing asylum applicants into either the genuine or the cheating. This is remarkable since many scholars have argued that 'there is no clear-cut distinction between voluntarily/economic and involuntarily/political refugees' (Hollands, 2001: 309). This is clearly reflected in the asylum figures. Statistics show there is no unambiguous answer to the question of who is considered a genuine refugee. Of Eritrean claimants for example, 95 percent were granted asylum in Norway. In France that same number of acknowledged Eritrean refugees was around 15 percent (Siegfried, 2015). Another example is provided by Hardy who looked at the number of Ghanaian refugees that were officially

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[52]This discussion denies the possibility that poverty should be a humanitarian reason for fleeing, and can be the base for refugee status. But that is beyond the point here.
[53]'Op onze manier hebben we achterhaald dat veel Nederlanders in hun oordeel over vluchtelingen eigenlijk mensen voor ogen hebben die proberen een betere levensstandaard te vinden. (...) De economische vluchteling bestaat inderdaad niet volgens de UNHCR-definitie, maar wel in de publieke opinie. Dit beïnvloedt het beeld van en het oordeel over 'vluchtelingen' sterk. Een belangrijke bevinding waar lezers én politici hun conclusies uit kunnen trekken'.

acknowledged in the asylum system of the UK and Canada. The UK was reluctant to acknowledge Ghanaian asylum applicants as refugees. In Canada 30 per cent of Ghanaian claimants were accredited refugee status (Hardy, 2003: 477). He summarized: 'knowledge concerning who and who is not a refugee is somewhat arbitrary' (*op. cit.*: 476).

I suspect that the refugees themselves notice this 'culture of disbelief' (Freedman, 2007: 177) too. At a certain point my colleague and I received a Syrian girl during consulting hours. She narrated how her home village was bombed and how certain groups caused terror among the population. She promptly showed us a video on her mobile phone and before I realized that a (dead) body was being dragged behind a vehicle. I discussed the incident with my colleague and she claimed that this had happened to her before: clients without prior warning sharing shocking videos. Sharing the horrific situation the remaining family is left in can emerge from an emotional need or can possibly be 'used' to show the urgency of the asylum or family reunion procedure. But I would also suggest it is an indication of the 'culture of disbelief' the refugees find themselves in. The binary as described above combined with the subsequent association with the bogus asylum seeker, generates general suspicion towards refugees. It forces them to behave in certain ways to break this air of mistrust.

Various writers have referred to the experience of being a refugee or refugee subjectivity as 'refugeeness' (Gass, 2014: 118). For Szczepanikova the term refugeeness points to the array of possible behaviours that are available to refugees. In an endnote she elucidates this concept:

> I refer to 'refugeeness' as a social construction of what is considered to be typical for people labelled as refugees. This construction changes over time and varies in relation to different beholders and performers. Refugeeness is by no means a set of given psychological or social features. It is constantly being re-created and performed in social interactions (Szczepanikova, 2010: note 1).

Szczepanikova is right to acknowledge the 'disempowering effects of these representations' (*op. cit.*: 462) resulting in more or less permissible performances. However, and just as importantly, she also emphasizes that, these refugee scripts are not determined. I share her concern and do not wish to give an essentialized account of behaviour. Individuals can use, interpret, adjust, or resist (Nencel, 2001: 210) the content of what refugeeness looks like. Just as the refugee organisations utilise the imagery of helplessness to counter the dehumanizing political language and to collect money to provide assistance, so do the refugees tactically use the stereotypes themselves to obtain access to resources (Szczepanikova, 2010: 472). However, I do wish to indicate in which ways refugees possibilities can be structurally limited. The remaining part of this chapter will be devoted to reflect on some aspects of these 'refugee scripts' (Harrell-Bond, 1999: 7) which can force refugees in precarious situations.

'True' refugees do not complain: differing needs for refugees

I and other students visited an AZC for a tour organized by the youth wing of a political party. Before the tour started our guide remarked that she was not sure about granting the request for a tour of the centre. The housing at the centre badly needed renovation, which was supposedly scheduled, and she did not want to leave a bad impression about the state of the centre. She admitted she showed us one of the 'better' looking apartments. I heard some of the visitors discuss the living conditions amongst themselves. The argument with which the majority of them agreed was the fact that the housing might not be sufficient, at least the refugees are in a safe place. Since I started working for *VluchtelingenWerk* I visited multiple rooms and I am still astonished by the living conditions. Even most inhabitants call the centre a 'camp' possibly referring to the temporality but most probably also to the quality of living. An apartment consists of multiple rooms and there are two to three people in one room. Each apartment includes a common sitting area, kitchen and bathroom. The interior is basic, outdated and badly in need of renovation. Besides the state of the room, privacy is completely lacking and is often mentioned by the inhabitants (Geuijen, 1998: 263-264). The students assess the quality of the housing in terms of the relatively safety of the refugees compared to the home country they fled from. I have heard some of my colleagues reasoning in identical ways. After one of the refugees came to complain about the house that he was assigned to, I heard my colleagues discuss the event by saying: 'If you look at where they come from, they should be happy with what they get here' or 'What is more important: money or safety?'. Even one of my respondents showed the same argument. He told me about the moment when his wife and newborn child came to join him in the AZC. COA could not put them in the same room. As a solution, he and his roommate unofficially swapped rooms in order for my interviewee and his wife to sleep in the same room. They put their child on the floor on a bunch of pillows. He concluded by saying: 'So it was OK, I was, I am telling myself I am always lucky. Because it was a safe place, not like those people who is living in the streets'.

This line of reasoning can be easily extended to deny refugees the same rights, such as living conditions, to which we find Dutch citizens entitled. Refugees should put up with less because what they receive is already an improvement compared to the situation faced at home. 'True' refugees would not mind the current situation and they should be content with whatever is offered to them (Harrell-Bond, 1999: 7; Ghorashi, 2005: 186). Kirkwood describes how refugees that complain are in danger of undermining their credibility as 'genuine' refugees. For if they would have been in real danger at home they would have been satisfied with safety alone in the host country. Refugees end up in a precarious situation: 'no matter how bad their situation here, "complaining" may suggest that the situation they fled was not sufficiently bad to warrant asylum' (Kirkwood, 2012: 97). This mechanism silences refugees and hinders them in demanding full rights. This point of view is strengthened

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because the situation in asylum seekers' residence centres is considered temporal. It is a space where human rights, such as as the right to work, movement, schooling, etc., are supposedly temporarily suspended and this makes its bad quality more acceptable (Hyndman and Giles, 2011: 367-368). However, as time passes, and there are still a lot of refugees who spend years in AZCs awaiting the decision on their asylum application, 'the degree to which it is a humane and genuinely humanitarian space declines' (*op. cit.*: 373).

The need for gratitude and the absence of entitlement

In an essay for a module of my university training I did a discourse analysis on the organisation I am now volunteering for. I studied VluchtelingenWerk material on their website, their Facebook account and the magazines their monthly donors receive. What struck me was the statements of the volunteers in which gratitude was a recurring theme. One of the testimonies of the volunteers, a soccer coach, on the Facebook page stated:

> Helping out in most cases does not even cost a thing. If I notice that the fridges at the boys' house are empty again, I will invite a few over for dinner. They will receive a plate of food and play computer games with my kids. When they leave they will thank me for the incredible evening. That gratitude, the Dutch could learn from this.[54]

The soccer coach praises the Eritrean boys for their gratitude, a characteristic that the Dutch lack. In the winter edition of the foundation's magazine another volunteer, Henk Maas, is interviewed. He speaks about his experience in helping a migrant family to get accustomed to Dutch language and society, and also employs this narrative of gratefulness. He concludes the interview with referring to the family's history and the low income they have to make a living of. However, despite these conditions, Henk asserts: 'They never complain and they thoroughly appreciate the small things' (VluchtelingenWerk magazine, 2014: 11).[55] In both of these narratives the gratitude of the refugees is explicitly expressed, and by extension the volunteer's benevolence is acknowledged. In the course of my research I read testimonies of volunteers for VWN. One of them who worked in an AZC was interviewed and compared refugee children to Dutch kids: 'I have also worked with Dutch kids during a summer camp, but these [refugee] children are more grateful'.[56]

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[54] "Vaak hoeft een handje helpen trouwens niet eens iets te kosten. Als ik merk dat de koelkasten bij de jongens weer leeg zijn, nodig ik er een paar uit om te komen eten. Ze krijgen een bord en spelen computerspelletjes met mijn kinderen. Als ze weggaan bedanken ze me, omdat ze zo'n ontzettend fijne avond hebben gehad. Die dankbaarheid, daar kunnen Nederlanders nog een puntje aan zuigen."

[55] 'Ze klagen nooit en weten de kleine dingen écht te waarderen'.

[56] 'Ik heb ook gewerkt met Nederlandse kinderen op een vakantiekamp, maar deze kinderen zijn veel dankbaarder' (https://onnenblog.wordpress.com/)[last accessed October 2, 2015].

In my essay I related the gratitude of the refugees to the identity of the giver, to the altruism of the Dutch. During the process of writing this thesis I came to realize that the identity of the refugee that is sketched here, is just as important. As has been extensively documented in anthropology, the gift is not an unambiguous gesture. It usually requires reciprocity and creates a relationship of certain expectations. Indeed, '[t]he act of receiving places the recipient in a position of obligation, an inferior position vis-a-vis the benefactor until the gift has been reciprocated' (Harrell-Bond, 1999: 12; see also Hanson-Easey and Augoustinos, 2011: 263). Hyndman and Giles strikingly describe this relation between the host and the refugee as one of 'philanthropy or humanitarian obligation, not entitlement' (2011: 367). Harrell-Bond alerts us to this potentially dangerous strategy: the ascribed gratitude signifies that refugees should be thankful for *any* help they receive and they cannot claim their full rights (1999: 6).

The theme of gratefulness came across in my interviews as well. Most of my respondents expressed discontent with certain aspects of the asylum process in the Netherlands. However, they were quick to add that they were also very much grateful to the Netherlands. The interview with Ana for example, started with an inquiry into how she looked back on the period in the asylum seeker residence centre and starts her answer with 'Well, I can tell you that those thoughts are not always pleasant or nice'.[57] She continues to describe the sphere of the military-like camp, the lack of privacy, the dirty shared facilities and the bad quality of food. However, she is quick to trivialise her experiences by summarising the before mentioned saying: 'So, we received all the essential things, in the centre. Actually you cannot ask or *demand* more. And you know that it is temporary that you live there. That it is not your own house' (my emphasis).[58] Towards the end of the interview I ask her directly into this dilemma of gratefulness and discontent at the same time and she reacts:

> You cannot point to one person or blame a single individual. You cannot... (sighs) You should not… I think that applies to life in general: you have to take things positively. Because we, and with we I mean us asylum seekers, went through a lot and are going through a lot. If you stay in that mood, you will become nothing but depressed.[59]

As is shown in this example respondents solve the problem of not being able to criticize the host country by referring to systems and not criticising individuals. This is a possible way to circumvent the restrictions on expressing discontent about the treatment of refugees.

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[57]'Ehm, nou ik kan je wel vertellen dat dat niet echt altijd prettige of fijne gedachten zijn'.

[58]'Dus alle essentiële dingen kregen we, hadden we in het centrum. Dat kan je niet meer vragen of verwachten. En dat weet je dat dat tijdelijk is, dat je daar woont. Dat het niet je eigen huis is'.

[59]'Dat kan je niet op één persoon of iemand aanwijzen dat is zijn of haar schuld. Dat kan niet (zucht). En ik denk dat moet je eigenlijk... Dat is altijd met het leven en alles in het leven: je moet positief dingen uithalen. Want dan hebben we toch, en dan zeg ik we dan bedoel ik asielzoekers, hebben toch veel meegemaakt en we maken ook veel mee. Als je in die sfeer blijft, dan wordt je alleen maar depressief'.

One of the interviews I conducted was with a Syrian refugee, Sami, who had just settled in his own house in the Netherlands. His story perfectly illustrates this sense of lack of entitlement combined with the compulsory gratitude. I asked him about his future plans. He told me about his wish to pursue academic study and after finishing it, find a suitable job. He continued by explaining that he wanted to end up in a position 'to give back what Netherlands gave me, you know? Because I refuse to depend on others'. I inquired whether he was referring to the unemployment benefits he was receiving. He elucidated that the compensation concerned the safety that the Netherlands offered him and his family. Sami was looking for the word that fit what he was trying to communicate to me. He grabbed his mobile phone that was lying on the table in front of us and was silent for a few minutes. With his smartphone, he tried to translate the word from Arabic to English. After a while he turned his mobile towards me and the screen showed the word 'reciprocate'. He clarified: 'But it is not money but something good for the country. This is what I am looking for. They give us a lot. The best thing is that we are safe'. This is another form in which the gratefulness emerged in my interviews and which also reflect the script that refugees reiterate. Sami feels he needs to pay back what the Netherlands gave him. This idea of contributing to the country relies on the same logic as described above: refugees are not entitled to certain basic rights but are indebted by receiving. Kirkwood also found this argument among his respondents and notices how this line of thinking falls back on the same logic of differing rights for refugees. He notes how the argument 'draws on individualistic notions of contribution and payback rather than broader notions of international legal and moral obligations' (2012: 107).

Conclusion

In previous chapters I have described the feminising regime that refugees are subjected to. In this chapter I have highlighted how this pitiful figure is part of a binary in which the genuine refugee and the bogus asylum seeker are distinguished. Agency is used here to create the division. Women are traditionally associated with passivity, while men are predominantly inscribed with the capacity to make choices. The word asylum seeker should be analysed in this context. It reflects the connotation surrounding bogus asylum seekers: individuals illegitimately in search of a better life elsewhere and malevolent towards the host society. In contrast, genuine refugees have a lack of choice and are pure victims of their circumstances. They miss the ability to act, among which to demand for rights. Therefore, it pressurizes them into showing their gratefulness for the receival of any assistance and denies them entitlement to basic human rights. Refugees in the Netherlands move within this gendered binary and as such, find themselves to some extent perpetuating 'the charity script of the needy and grateful' (Harrell-Bond, 1999: 7). I have found these tendencies in different forms, namely the difficulty to express inadequacies in the host country, the obligation to feel grateful, for example concerning the quality of the housing, and the notion of pay-back to the host country.

CONCLUSION

Studies on gender and migration have often involved a focus on changing circumstances for performances of 'traditional' masculinity/femininity or the differing effects of migration on men and women. In this thesis I have tried to accomplish an analysis based on a more abstract level than just thinking in terms of men and/or women: *how are representations of refugees intrinsically gendered*? In executing this task I have focused on gendered notions of agency, mobility and vulnerability.

While conducting research on refugees I was astonished by, what seemed like, opposing accounts on refugees. As I described in my introduction this thesis is a product of these representations as I encountered them during my research period. It is not only built on the interviews I conducted but also in a broader sense on observations before, during and after the research period. I have described the greatest contrast in the popular portrayal of refugees in chapter one and chapter two. They are either depicted as a malevolent mass or as pure victims- either Dutch citizens seriously need to protect themselves or the newcomers are entitled to protection. I have shown how refugees are often constructed as either a masculinized threat or a feminized victim. Western societies often think in binaries (Spike Peterson, 1999: 41) and my research is a clear illustration of this. However, these competing representations are not as far removed from each other as one might think. It would be more correct to think of them as two different sides of the same coin, both depending on similar mechanism of othering, gendering and dehumanisation. This dichotomous line of reasoning is pervasive and traceable throughout all layers of society: in the media, is civil society, in NGO life, in policies. In this conclusion I hope to summarize the arguments but also make new connections that, because of the layout in separate chapters, were not explicitly mentioned. Towards the end of my writing process the refugee 'crisis' gained even more prominence and things seemed to develop in unexpected ways. People near to me seemed to change opinion on asylum seekers and moved from extreme criminalisation to victimisation. At first, I was surprised about these reversals but I soon realised that it was an illustration of the argument I was making. At the same time, Syrian refugees do somehow complicate the picture and I would like to use this final chapter to reflect on a few of those issues.

In this thesis I have contrasted two ways that refugees are often framed. These different available portrayals are feminising and masculinising strategies that serve to accomplish specific (political) goals. The asylum seeker endangering the economic and cultural stability of the Dutch state, is portrayed as a dark-skinned male- a calculating individual preying on personal benefits to the detriment of the host society. It is the Dutch urgent task to expose these ingenuine refugees and to protect the nation from these incoming malevolent men. In contrast, I have described the figure of the

asylum seeker as featured in humanitarian discourse as African 'womenandchildren' (Enloe, 1993 as quoted in Szczepanikova, 2010: 472). They are a symbol of bare humanity (Malkki, 1996: 390) in dire need of protection. The authenticity of their victimhood is determined by the immobility of the refugees expressed by staying near the country of origin. These genuine refugees lack agency by not searching for a better life in Europe. They are more vulnerable, since they stay in difficult circumstances and not pose demands besides protection. These are contrasting imaginations intertwined with specific gendered notions of mobility (chapter one), activity (chapter two), vulnerability (chapter three) and agency (chapter four). All four of these concepts have traditionally been associated with the male or female gender. Men are conceptualised as mobile, active, strong and capable. Women are associated with immobility, passivity, vulnerability and lack of agency. In specific constructions, these gendered characteristic are put to work to achieve the feminisation or masculinisation of subjects, in this case refugees. In this dissertation I have untangled these notions to describe them separately. However, in reality they are closely related and strengthen each other. For example, *agency* entails the capacity to *move*, *mobility* is a form of *activity* and *vulnerability* is often codified as *passiveness*. It is for analytical purposes that I have chosen to identify and separate them. Lastly, I have been most intrigued about how these polarized masculine and feminine qualities exclude each other (Spike Peterson, 1999: 39). For example, one can not be vulnerable and agentic at the same time (Allsopp, 2015).

A striking similarity in these differing constructs is the ethnicity of both figures. Both are characterized by dark skin. In the previous chapters I have not explicitly addressed the process of 'othering' that is relevant to the representation of refugees. However, it is clear that *both* images heavily rely on a mechanism of 'othering', emphasizing the distinction between 'us' and 'them'. The migrant 'alien'- and this word is literally used in the Netherlands to refer to undocumented migrants-are marked by their racial otherness and stand for a deviating identity (Ghorashi, 2005: 192-193). This perceived otherness functions as a fruitful basefrom which to inscribe the contrasting identities.

The majority of the current refugees requesting asylum in the Netherlands come from war-torn Syria. These Syrian refugees *do* complicate the argument. They challenge the current stereotypes on asylum applicants but at the same time the binary and its argumentative power stays intact. The photograph of the body of the Syrian toddler washed up on the shores of Turkey had a big impact throughout the Netherlands.[60] It made clear that the asylum seekers arriving by boat were not only evil intentioned *men* looking for a better life but also consisted of women and children seeking refuge. This surely shook up existing preconceptions and revealed the 'true' victimhood of some of the asylum claimants,

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[60]For the photograph see Hopkins and Waugh (2015). The picture affected some opinions but not of others. Prime Minister Rutte, for example, was asked about the consequences of this specific case on Dutch policy. He responded by referring to the issue as one of 'immigration' (Gruiters, 2015).

made easier by the IS as mutual and barbaric enemy.[61] After the picture was published on almost every website and newspaper in the Netherlands, a peak in the grassroots initiatives that were organised to 'help' refugees was observed. Most campaigns involved the collecting of secondhand clothing and toys despite the urge from organisations that financial contributions were more welcome. There were so many Dutch citizens involved in the collecting of these items that a stop was announced. As a consequence, I heard of multiple friends and family members with second hand products at home that they could not get rid of. The gratefulness that is central to a reciprocal relationship of assistance, is a constant and recurring theme. I definitely see the danger here of falling back upon ideas of the ungratefulness of refugees and perpetuating the binary of the genuine and bogus asylum applicant. It is very easy to fall back on these discourses. These new initiatives and the centrality of gratefulness also illustrate how the identity of the self is interwoven in structures of aid: the Netherlands as moral actor coming to the rescue of helpless women and children. The dramatic pictures of refugees evoke strong emotions but simply giving aid does not stimulate a thorough engagement with the giver's responsibility in the state of worldly affairs (Huson, 2015). Refugees seem to remain an *object* of aid and therefore end up in an inferior victim position vis-a-vis their hosts. Finally, acknowledged refugees will turn into legal *allochtone* citizens at some moment. Currently, structures of racism in the Netherlands have received attention and are being scrutinized. The reality of 'everyday racism' (Essed, 2002) in the Netherlands hints at the limits of Dutch tolerance and suggests that involvement with 'others' might be limited to 'giving aid'.

The binary as I described and all the attached notions of mobility, vulnerability and agency manifest themselves along the lines of gender, ethnicity and age in dynamic ways. While the picture of the Syrian boy caused a stir in the Netherlands, a picture of a dark-skinned baby girl that emerged earlier did not have that same effect. The picture consisted of a screen shot from a documentary showing a drowned baby floating on her belly on the Mediterranean Sea. Quite the opposite, someone even mentioned that they wanted to use it as a screensaver to be able to look at that satisfying picture, of the *gelukszoekers* who did not make it to Europe, on a daily basis (Klomp, 2015). How these identificatory and intersectional axes are (ab)used, weighed and played out are unpredictable. The 'whiteness' of the Syrian refugees might work in their favour in order to gain victim status, as the comparison of the two drowned babies showed. However, Syrian religious 'otherness' might contribute to the general suspicion on their motives for migration (terrorism?). The binary of the genuine and bogus refugee, arises from traditional ideas on gender but also further affects existing gendered expectations. Syrian men might have difficulty with fitting the refugee image while Syrian women might be more easily seen through a victim lense by ideas of the oppressed Middle Eastern woman (Ghorashi, 2005: 193; van Baalen, 1997: 427). This might lead to the perceived necessity to

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[61]Although in December 2014 IS was responsible for over five per cent of civilian death and Assad for eightyfive per cent of civilian casualties (Masi, 2015).

'save women from their own men' (Spike Peterson, 1999: 50). I have already begun to discern this tendency when a staff member of COA explained to me the centrality of 'honour' among the AZC male inhabitants.

The Syrian refugees also show how pervasive the binary of the malevolent asylum seeker and the vulnerable refugee is. And although one can move from the one to the other, it is almost impossible to evade the dichotomy all together. There has been a lot of misunderstanding and hostility towards Syrian migrants who sometimes come from well-off families, are highly educated and, most importantly, have Iphones. They therefore do not fit into the general victim category (Karskens, 2015). Because, yes, how can someone in possession of an Iphone possibly have the need for protection? These arguments are mostly a reaction to the perception of the refugee as an economic migrant and a financial threat. Why do they come here and take things from us if they have enough money to live elsewhere? The reasoning still revolves around the financial situation of refugees and of Dutch society. So although the political situation in Syria is acknowledged, the general suspicion and characterisation of *gelukszoekers* [people in search of luck/happiness] remains and new ways are found to scrutinize them and question their legitimacy. With the exacerbation of the refugee 'crisis', research on the Dutch attitude towards refugees was conducted and they confirmed the preoccupation with these themes (Boonstoppel, van Ewijk and van Elfrinkhof, 2015: 22). Secondly, this example of refugees with expensive smartphones, shows that refugeeness and ideas of vulnerability not only concern gendered and ethnic dimensions but also involve strong class-based assumptions.

The four chapters of this thesis are strongly intertwined. In this conclusion I will attempt to draw some existing parallels between the chapters. In chapter two I have observed how Dutch policy alternates between seeing the refugee population as in need of protection or as a danger from which the state needs to be protected (Wacquant, 2009 as quoted in Versteegt and Maussen, 2012: 21). From whichever binary position is argued, the asylum applicants remain an (economic) burden on society. Hence, the framing of migration as a refugee *crisis*. This is actively *created* by Dutch policy through the idleness in which the refugee claimants are forced. Through these restrictive measures the refugees are kept dependant on the state and the category of helpless victims is perpetuated. This state of affairs can potentially be utilized to construct an image of refugees as parasites of the welfare state. The policy, in which refugees are forced into passivity to create controllable subjects, arises from the image of refugees as potentials threats to the stability of society. As such, the refugees are stuck within the binary and oscillate between the contrasting conceptualisations. An alternative approach, and I mention it because the current perspective is so ingrained in our worldview, would be to look at the potential of the refugees coming here, as for example in the context of future labour shortages (see for example Noack, 2015 or Porter, 2015).

The metaphors that are used through time and space to describe the movement of people are also similar in describing refugees as through ideas of either humanitarian neediness or political threat. By emphasizing the numbers of the flows of people through natural metaphors, the refugees are de-individualised. In the case of humanitarian discourse this represents refugees as an agencyless mass and assures their status as victims and the subsequent need for assistance. For political purposes, the natural metaphors sketch a society under siege, for which restrictive measures and restricted policy, such as closing the borders, are necessary. In other words, both images of refugees rely on a mechanism of *dehumanisation*. This is achieved by metaphors of masses of refugees which reduces them to either bare or aggressive humanity.

Gendered notions of agency run through all these constructions of asylum applicants. They are used to distinguish between the genuine and bogus asylum seekers: real victims are totally choiceless. Hence, agency is continuously utilized in making this distinction: true refugees stay close to their country of origin, true refugees do not pick a certain European country as their destination, true refugees accept every help that is offered to them and do not demand more than protection. It is used to further criminalize asylum applicants who cross borders 'illegally'. Refugee applicants with agency are conceived as threatening since, as non-citizens, they should not have entitlements. Furthermore, in the idea of the necessity to 'activate' refugees, as stated in COA policy, it all comes together: the representation of both the threatening asylum seeker but also of the helpless refugee, the reality of the feminising regime of asylum life in the Netherlands and the subsequent policies and the attitudes that are a result of this. Refugees need to be shown how to exhibit agency while they are simultaneously put in a passive position.

To conclude, it is fair to argue that the binary positions constitute two different sides of the same coin. Since both competing images depend on similar themes and mechanism in terms of gender, agency and dehumanisation, they are far apart, yet interconnected. As is shown by the recent focus on Syrian refugees, 'two seemingly contradictory emotions with regard to foreigners' are detectable which seem to constitute a polarising process in Dutch society (Versteegt and Maussen, 2012: 20). There is a growing concern about migration in the Netherlands, as is reflected in different questionnaires and in political debates. It also shows in the growing popularity of the right wing party *PVV* which is estimated, in case of elections, to become the country's largest political party.[62] However, at the same time, a growing call for humanitarian help can be discerned, as with the emergence of multiple civil initiatives to assist refugees. In other words, also in the current European situation concerning refugees, one can argue that the binary is still relevant and initiatives are often build on these competing discourses. Both constructions depend on 'othered' identities and are therefore easily

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[62]http://nos.nl/artikel/2060372-peilingwijzer-zeldzaam-sterke-stijging-pvv.html [last accessed October 4, 2015].

translatable into each other. As Szczepanikova notes on the perceived helplessness of refugees: 'It is not only stigmatising but also easily convertible into refugeeness being perceived as potentially threatening "otherness" and uncomfortable neediness' (2010: 473). The binary as such is not yet deconstructed and arguments are still based on refugees as either victims or perpetrators.

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