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Zubia Willmann Robleda

Everyday negotiations

Agency and structure in the everyday-life of
women seeking asylum in Norway



**EVERYDAY NEGOTIATIONS. AGENCY AND STRUCTURE IN THE
EVERYDAY-LIFE OF WOMEN SEEKING ASYLUM IN NORWAY**

Zubia Willmann Robleda

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Abstract

Seeking asylum is commonly defined by long and undetermined waits and significant uncertainty, which several applicants perceive as disempowering. A growing body of research highlights that applicants encounter their agency significantly limited, which leads to developing dependency on the state, this may often lead to passivity as a result. In public debate and the media, and occasionally in academic literature as well, people seeking asylum and refuge tend to be portrayed as victims of their circumstances. This portrayal has turned into a stereotype of refugees and asylum seekers as almost powerless, without any agency. With the desire to reveal a more nuanced picture of the asylum-seeking process and the refugee experience, this thesis delves into the multiple ways in which women who have sought asylum in Norway negotiate the extensive structural limitations they come across in the process, and how they find avenues to enact their agency. The thesis pays particular attention to everyday, mundane practices, aspirations for the future, and the role of religious beliefs and practices in the women's early stages of arrival to Norway.

The thesis draws on two phases of fieldwork where I conducted individual qualitative interviews complemented with several hours of informal conversations and observations with women seeking asylum in Norway.

The thesis is primarily a contribution to the research on agency and structure in contexts with significant limitations, such as refugee and asylum contexts. I argue that, in such contexts, agency is visible in small, everyday negotiations in relation to everyday practices, including everyday forms of religion and everyday identity struggles. Each article in this thesis illustrates a different way in which the women negotiate the structures and find ways to enact their everyday agency in various spheres of their life. In this way, the thesis highlights the importance of paying attention to everyday mundane practices, especially in situations of significant structural limitations. An emphasis is placed on the pertinence of examining the religious sphere of people's lives, as it may not only contribute to their resilience but also to their agency in more general terms- given its central role in self-identification practices and dealing with stigmatized identities. Aside from making it possible to notice the interplay between agency and structure, it also provides understanding as to how the various contexts in which people find themselves, influence their aspirations, and how these aspirations are pursued. Finally, this thesis shows that asserting aspirations, particularly, albeit not exclusively, in asylum and

refugee contexts, may be seen as a practice of self-identification used to deal with stigmatized identities.

Abstrakt

Å søke asyl innebærer ofte en lang og ubestemt ventetid og betydelig usikkerhet, noe som flere søkere oppfatter som umyndiggjørende. Et voksende forskningsfelt fremhever at asylsøkere ofte finner sin handlekraft begrenset, noe som gjør at de utvikler et avhengighetsforhold til staten, som videre fører til passivitet. I den offentlige debatten og i media, og noen ganger også i den akademiske litteraturen, blir personer som søker asyl ofte fremstilt som ofre for deres omstendigheter. Slike skildringer/narrativer har skapt en stereotype rundt asylsøkere og flyktninger som nærmest maktesløse og uten handlekraft. Med et ønske om å bidra til et mer nyansert bilde av asylprosessen og opplevelsen av å være flyktning, setter denne avhandlingen fokus på hvordan kvinner som har søkt asyl i Norge forhandler på ulike måter de omfattende strukturelle begrensningene de møter i denne prosessen. Avhandlingen legger særlig vekt på hverdagsliv, hverdagslige praksiser, ambisjoner for fremtiden og rollen religiøs tro og praksis spiller i en tidlig fase av kvinnenens liv i Norge.

Jeg har gjennomført individuelle kvalitative intervjuer med kvinner som søker asyl i Norge i to ulike faser. Oppgaven bygger på disse intervjuene i tillegg til flere timer med uformelle samtaler og observasjoner.

Oppgaven er først og fremst et bidrag til forskning om forholdet mellom aktør og struktur i en kontekst som innebærer betydelige begrensninger, som for eksempel flyktning- og asylkonteksten. Jeg argumenterer for at handlekraft i slike sammenhenger er synlig i små, hverdagslige forhandlinger innenfor ulike hverdagspraksiser, inkludert hverdagslige former for religion og hverdagslige identitetskamper. Hver artikkel i denne oppgaven illustrerer ulike måter kvinnene forhandler med strukturelle rammer på og, slik, finner måter de kan utføre sin daglige handlekraft på, relatert til ulike livsområder. På denne måten fremhever avhandlingen viktigheten av å ta hensyn til hverdagslige praksiser, spesielt i situasjoner med betydelige strukturelle begrensninger. Det legges vekt på betydningen av å undersøke den religiøse sfæren i folks liv, da denne ikke bare kan bidra til å gjøre dem motstandsdyktige, men også til handlekraft generelt - gitt den sentrale rollen den spiller i selvidentifiseringspraksis og håndtering av stigmatiserte identiteter. Avhandlingen gir også en forståelse av hvordan de ulike kontekstene mennesker befinner seg i, påvirker deres aspirasjoner og hvordan disse aspirasjonene blir fulgt opp. Avslutningsvis viser denne avhandlingen at å uttrykke

aspirasjoner, spesielt i en asyl- og fluktkontekst, men også generelt, kan sees på som en praksis for selvidentifisering som brukes til å håndtere stigmatiserte identiteter.

List of publications

- 1) Willmann Robleda, Z. (2020). Re-Inventing Everyday Life in the Asylum Centre: Everyday Tactics Among Women Seeking Asylum in Norway. *Nordic Journal of Migration Studies*, 10(2). pp. 82–95.
- 2) Willmann Robleda, Z. (2020). Compass, Continuity and Change. Everyday Religion Among Women Living in Asylum Centres in Norway, *Religions*, 11(3), 125.
- 3) Willmann Robleda, Z. Aspirations as Self-Identification Practices for Rebuilding Spoiled Identity. An In-depth Phenomenological Study of Women Seeking Asylum in Norway. (*Under review*)

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1. Introduction

“Agency and creativity are seen as embodied human capacities that respond and adjust to day-to-day living in shifting times, circumstances and environments, and as such transform senses of self and well-being as highlighted in the experience of migration”
(Grønseth, 2013, p.4)

Long waits and great uncertainty generally characterize the process of seeking asylum. Many people have experienced such process as disempowering (Seeberg, Bagge & Enger, 2009; Vitus, 2010), leading some scholars to denounce certain asylum systems for leaving applicants with limited agency and, as a result, inducing dependency and passivity among them (Korac, 2003; Lamba & Krahn, 2003). For decades there has been a tendency both in the media and, at times, in academic literature to portray people seeking asylum and refuge as powerless victims of their circumstances (Horst, 2007; Malkki, 1996). It has been argued that in advocating for assistance, aid, and media coverage for people in asylum and refuge situations, different actors, such as NGOs, governments, and academics, have contributed to the generalizations of people in such circumstances. Such generalizations and characterizations are often used uncritically, leading to more harm than good (Horst, 2007). Labeling results in removing people’s individual characteristics and stories, reducing them to what the label represents. In this case, the label “refugee” is often associated with powerlessness and victimhood (Zetter, 1991, 2007). Simultaneously, these representations of people in such circumstances emphasize their need for protection and their dependency on someone else’s help (Ludwig, 2016; Horst, 2007). This feeling of dependency, coupled with limited opportunities to make decisions about one’s own life, due to the restrictions that come with their legal status, can add to people’s sense of disempowerment (Quinn, 2014). In addition, the media often depicts “refugees” and “asylum seekers” as poor, having lost their homes and other material possessions, as well as family members and communities. Too much focus on this need for help and assistance often leads to an underestimation of their capability for agency and resilience (Masquelier, 2006). Being labeled a “refugee” or “asylum seeker” seems to remove the other identities that the person may

have had before such labels were imposed upon them, i.e., teacher, mother, athlete. All other identities of the person are overshadowed by the ascribed label of “refugee/asylum seeker.”

This label acts as a reminder to the individual and society of the past experiences of persecution, flight, or violence, highlighting their experience of victimization and dependency on others’ help (Ludwig, 2016). Referring to people as “forced migrants” emphasizes their limited ability to control their circumstances and puts them in opposition to so-called “voluntary migrants,” who are seen as independent and in control of their future. Such unilateral dependency highlights the inequalities of the relationship, which is linked to the “stigma of charity” (Masquelier, 2006). This victimization has arguably been heightened by the vast amount of research that has focused on refugees and asylum seekers’ traumatic experiences and the effects of these on their mental health (e.g., Ellis, 2010; Abraham, Lien & Hanssen, 2018). In particular, a large body of research has shown the detrimental effects of lengthy asylum procedures and detention on the mental health of asylum seekers and refugees in various contexts (Porter & Haslam, 2005; Silove, Steel & Wattersm 2000; Laban et al., 2004; Steel et al., 2011). These effects are due to both the nature of having to stay confined in detention centers and the centers’ actual conditions. Academic researchers’ tendencies to place emphasis on the trauma and mental health issues of asylum seekers and refugees, although done out of concern for them, have also contributed to the stereotypical image of “them” as traumatized (Marlowe, 2010; Pupavac, 2008). It has been argued that such stereotypifications result in “othering” by highlighting the stark differences from “us,” referring to those giving help and protection, or the members of the host society (Grønseth, 2013).

Abu Lughood (2006 in Georgiadou, 2013) argues that “ethnographies of the particular” can serve as a way to refute those “othering” representations by inspiring sympathy and familiarity for the protagonists of such ethnographies. As scholars, we are prompted to deeply engage with people’s everyday worlds through an “ethics of care.” It is believed that by paying attention to the ordinary stories of refugees and asylum seekers, through the lens of everyday life and mundane practices, we can move away from the predominant focus on trauma and victimhood (Marlowe, 2010). In this way, we can acknowledge “the aspects that are common and mutual based on an understanding of a shared humanity” (Grønseth, 2013, p. 2).

This project developed out of the wish to look beyond the generalizations and misrepresentations of people seeking asylum and refuge, to move away from overemphasizing their legal status and neglecting other aspects of their lives and identities. Hence, in this thesis,

I explore the ways in which nine women who have sought asylum in Norway negotiate¹ the substantial structural limitations they encounter in the asylum process, and how they carve out space for their agency. I do this by paying particular attention to three aspects of their lives during the early stages of arrival²: 1) their everyday negotiations found in mundane practices, 2) their aspirations for the future, and 3) the role of their religious beliefs, practices, and identity. I also focus specifically on how the participants construct and experience their everyday lives as human beings, instead of overemphasizing their “refugeeness.” This is not to say that these women are free from obstacles or structural limitations related to their legal status when constructing their everyday worlds. Instead, this perspective sees the participants embedded within particular socio-political and historical contexts, which set limitations on their aspirations and actions (Georgiadou, 2013).

This thesis also pays special attention to the role of religious beliefs and practices in the everyday lives of these women while living in the asylum centers. It does so given that asylum centers are unique environments due to the limited space and privacy and filled with anxiety given the uncertainty, among other characteristics of such context. Despite the growing amount of research focusing on religion in migration contexts (Hagan & Ebaugh, 2003; Khawaja, White, Schweitzer & Greenslade, 2008; Ni Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010; Sleijpen et al., 2016), fewer researchers have paid attention to the role of religion in everyday life in asylum centers. There has been a growing interest in religion as it is lived, in the everyday and in places not commonly associated with religion (Ammerman, 2007, 2013; McGuire, 2008). However, as Dessing, Jeldtoft, Nielsen & Woodhead (2014) argue, academic literature in Europe continues to focus on “hypervisible” forms of institutional religion, particularly in relation to minority religions such as Islam. In these cases, most interest has been on issues of integration, emancipation, and radicalization, as well as on the institutionalization of Islam (and other minority religions) in Europe. Fewer researchers have been concerned about getting insights into everyday religious practices and meaning-making for minority religions’ adherents (Dessing, Jeldtoft, Nielsen & Woodhead, 2014).

As mentioned above, aspirations are also a central aspect of this thesis. Given that aspirations are found in the intersection between structure and agency (Boccagni, 2017), they allow us to explore the ways in which people in circumstances of severe restrictions carve out

¹ With negotiate, I refer to how the women manage to deal with the challenges they encounter.

² With “early stages of arrival,” I refer specifically to the process of seeking asylum in Norway and to the early stages of resettlement in a Norwegian municipality.

space for their desires, and with that, their agency. In other words, focusing on people's aspirations and how they go about pursuing them makes it possible to determine the barriers and limitations they encounter in this process and how they negotiate these to secure a meaningful future. Additionally, paying attention to the ways in which people in asylum contexts assert and pursue their aspirations allows us to gain insight into their self-identification practices. These may be ways in which they seek to deal with imposed identities such as the "refugee/asylum seeker" label that lead to stigma.

Furthermore, although aspirations do not necessarily determine people's actions and future trajectories, they are interesting to pay attention to as they may significantly affect them. Gaining insight into women's aspirations while seeking asylum may make it possible to grasp the ways they incorporate themselves into the new society and their new homes (Boccagni, 2017; Meeteren, 2012b). Additionally, paying attention to asylum-seekers' aspirations allows them to be portrayed less as passive victims of their circumstances and more as active agents seeking to establish a purposeful life for themselves and their families (Ghorashi et al., 2018).

By exploring the themes mentioned, in this study I have sought to "addresses the human condition" by paying attention to "the human capacity to expand and transform experiences within everyday life" (Grønseth, 2013, p. 3) and to start a life and build a home in a new place.

1.1. Why women?

In recent years, women seeking asylum and refuge have received particular attention from politicians and policymakers. They have focused on these women's low participation in the labor market and pointed to this as an indication of their lack of integration. As a result, migrant women (especially those with "non-western" backgrounds) have become what some refer to as an "integration target". That is, several policies and programs have been developed with the purpose of integrating migrant women (Gedalof, 2007; Roggeband & Verloo, 2007). In addition, "the migrant woman" is often portrayed by politicians and in public discourse as a problem, defined by her linguistic isolation, limited awareness of cultural difference, and her entanglement in the "backward practices" of arranged marriage and gender subordination. She is often defined as an obstacle to integration as she can "pass [the 'backward practices'] on to her children" (Gedalof, 2007, p. 9). In addition, women (together with children) seeking asylum or refuge have often been portrayed as the most vulnerable of all and, therefore, the most powerless (Malkki, 1996). In these circumstances, women's vulnerability is further heightened

as they are often rendered dependent on their husbands or the male head of the family (Bloch, Galvin & Harrell-Bond, 2000).

In the case of religious women, particularly among those who are Muslim, “Western” media and academic scholars commonly misrepresent them as compliant receivers of religious doctrine and lacking agency. The explanation is usually that they are either practicing under the pressure of patriarchal norms or with “false consciousness,” which refers to a person’s inability to realize that they are suffering from oppression and inequality (Avishai, 2008, p. 411). Thus, considering all of the points above, choosing a woman-centered approach seems appropriate and paramount. Nevertheless, I agree with the argument that women-centered approaches can be problematic as they tend to put too much emphasis on gender as the main factor for discrimination or neglect, and it can lead to further marginalization of women and their experiences (Reed, 2003). However, I aim to avoid falling into such a situation by conducting an in-depth analysis of how their multiple, intersecting identities influence the women’s experiences in their new home and their ways of dealing with the challenges they encounter (Eijberts & Roggeband, 2016).

1.2. Research questions

The following two main research questions guide this study:

- How do women seeking asylum negotiate³ the structural limitations and (thus) enact their agency during the early stages of arrival in Norway?
- How are their aspirations for the future and their religious beliefs and practices involved and intertwined in these negotiations?

With the early stages of arrival, I refer more specifically to the process of seeking asylum in Norway and the early stages of resettlement in a Norwegian municipality.

Additionally, to answer the main research question, I have chosen several sub-questions that help to narrow the focus of the research. The first two questions refer to the context of the asylum center. The third question refers to both the context in the asylum center and the early stages of resettlement in a Norwegian municipality. The questions are in sequential order.

The first question explores everyday agency more widely in the asylum context; therefore, it appears first.

- 1) What are the particular everyday agentic tactics that the women employ to deal with the challenges they encounter in everyday life while seeking asylum, and what empowers or constrains the development of these tactics?

The second question follows next because it explores the role of religion, which is a more specific topic.

- 2) What is the role and significance of the women's religious beliefs and practices in everyday life in the asylum center, and what are the changes they experience in this new context?

The third question comes last as it has the longitudinal perspective of exploring aspirations over time.

- 3) How are women's aspirations influenced by the different stages of the asylum-seeking process in Norway, and which role do their aspirations play in the ways in which they deal with their (stigmatized) identities?

Finally, it is necessary to briefly describe the program within which this thesis is written before delving further. This thesis is being submitted to VID Specialized University's Ph.D. Program in Theology and Religion. It contributes to this program with its interdisciplinary perspective, bringing in approaches from religious studies, migration studies, anthropology, sociology, and gender studies, among others. With this, and more particularly with its focus on everyday life, including everyday religion and meaning-making, the study adds to the growing trend within religious studies of increasingly broadening its focus. Other central elements explored in this thesis are individual and institutional practices, the global-local nexus, and the meetings between religions and cultures, which are also some of the core components and aims of the Ph.D. Program⁴.

⁴ See the program description here: <https://www.vid.no/site/assets/files/12803/studieplan-ph.d-i-teologi-og-religion-engelsk-versjon-2018-2019-vid.pdf?nc=1539848502>

1.3. Defining the use of the terms “asylum seeker” and “refugee”

In this section, I provide definitions for the two main terms that I use throughout this thesis: “asylum seeker” and “refugee.” I understand “migrant” as an umbrella category, within which there are different kinds of “migrants,” including those labeled “asylum seekers” or “refugees.” There may be times that I discuss “migrants,” referring to the general “category” of someone “who moves away from his/her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons” (IOM, 2016). When I refer to “asylum seekers” or “refugees,” I seek to indicate their more specific circumstances, which I explain in the following paragraphs.

“Asylum seeker”

“Asylum seeker” is the bureaucratic and social label ascribed to a person who has requested protection in another country and whose application is yet to be processed. Each asylum application should be treated individually, with an individual interview (UNHCR, n.d.). In several countries, especially in Europe, people seeking asylum tend to be accommodated in asylum centers, and depending on the country, they tend to experience several restrictions on their rights, such as their right to work and access health services (Brekke & Vevstad, 2007).

“Refugee”

“Refugee” is the bureaucratic and social label ascribed to someone who has been forcibly displaced from their home country and seeks refuge from another country. They have crossed an international border and have been granted asylum in another country (Rogers, Castree & Kitchin, 2013). According to the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees from 1951, a “refugee” is “a person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion...” has been granted refugee status (UNHCR, 2019). Although this convention does not mention being granted refuge due to fleeing conflict or war, many countries grant refugee status for this reason. That is the case for many Syrians, who gained refugee status in Europe due to the civil war in their country.

As we see from the definitions above, bureaucratically speaking, a person seeking asylum goes from being labeled “asylum seeker” to being labeled “refugee” once she/he has

been granted asylum. In this thesis, I tend to refer to the participants as “women seeking asylum” or “women who have sought asylum,” even when they have already received asylum and would be considered “refugees.” This is merely to indicate in which way they arrived in Norway, given that someone who is labeled a refugee can have come to Norway through direct resettlement and, thus, not have had to experience living in an asylum center (“resettlement refugee”).

1.4. The Norwegian context

In the following section, I present the context within which this research is set. I start by presenting a brief history of immigration to Norway over the last 50 years, approximately. I also briefly discuss the development of the current asylum and refugee reception system in Norway. The second part of this section delves into such an asylum system and the integration/settlement system for refugees (*Introduksjonprogrammet*) after they have been granted asylum in Norway.

1.4.1. Immigration to Norway

In the 20th century, Norway, like many other countries, received exiles from the Second World War with open arms. Up until the mid-1970s, Norway welcomed refugees from the former Soviet Union and Chile without any restrictions, and it was entirely legal to live, work, and settle in Norway. However, from the late 1970s, all migrants and visitors had to receive approval by the Norwegian authorities to enter the country, and asylum seekers’ right to work was limited, making them financially dependent on the state (Seeberg, 2015).

Around the mid-1980s, the country saw a significant increase in asylum seekers. The number of people seeking asylum rose from 829 in 1985, to 2711 in 1986. In 1987, that number more than tripled, with Norway receiving 8613 asylum seekers. This was the largest number of asylum seekers Norway had ever received in one year (NOU, 2011). They came from various countries, such as Sri Lanka, Iran, Ethiopia, and other countries where people were being persecuted (Seeberg, 2015). The following year, in 1988, the Norwegian Directorate for Immigration began establishing the reception center system that is in place today (NOU, 2011). During the 1990s, people from the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Somalia, among others, sought asylum in Norway (Seeberg, 2015). Between 1990 to 2015, the annual

number of asylum seekers remained almost constantly under 10 000. In the decade between 2005-2015, refugees composed 10 to 20 percent of the immigrant population in Norway, which in turn made up 13 percent of Norway's total population in 2015 (SSB, 2015). In that decade, the Somalis were the main nationality seeking asylum, until 2012, when the number started decreasing significantly. The number of Eritrean asylum seekers, on the other hand, increased significantly during that decade. The number of asylum seekers from Afghanistan and Iraq to Norway has been more or less steady during those ten years. The number of Syrian asylum seekers, which were very low in the first half of the decade, started to increase exponentially from 2011 and onwards (Østby, 2016).

In mid-2015, the number of asylum seekers coming to Norway started increasing drastically from month to month, and by the end of the year, 31 150 people had applied for asylum (Bergh et al., 2017). One-third of them were Syrians. Other major groups were Eritreans, Afghanis, and Iraqis (Østby, 2016). More than three-quarters of all applicants were men and boys, and less than a quarter were women and girls (UDI, 2017). Approximately half of all applications in 2015 were rejected (Østby, 2016). The large number of asylum seekers coming to Norway that year resulted in major changes in the reception system. The authorities had to establish several new asylum centers to house all of the newcomers. In 2015, there were 165 asylum seeker reception centers and 100 temporary centers for emergency accommodation (UDI, 2016).

However, this picture changed rapidly in 2016, when only 3 460 sought asylum in Norway⁵. The country had not received so few asylum seekers since 1997. Nevertheless, in 2016, the number of women and girl applicants was higher than the previous year, comprising almost one-third of all asylum seekers (UDI, 2017). In the following years, the number of asylum seekers Norway received remained low, which led to the closure of a large number of asylum reception centers in the country. Of the 265 centers that were active in 2015, a mere 40 centers, hosting 2535 asylum seekers, were operating by the end of December 2019 (UDI, 2020a).

⁵ This was due to several European countries restricting their immigration policies and even closing their borders and the EU agreement with Turkey to help them stop large numbers of refugees reach Europe (Mohdin, 2016). Norway is also known for deporting refugees back to Russia in 2016, who, in turn, sent them back to Syria and other countries people were fleeing from (Crouch, 2016).

1.4.2. The Asylum System in Norway

Since 2015, when asylum seekers arrive in Norway and report to the police that they are seeking asylum, they are transported to the “arrival reception center” (*Ankomstsenteret*) in Østfold, in the East of the country. This center was established in 2015 during the “refugee crisis.” The website of the center’s operator, Hero mottak, explains that centralizing arrivals in this way is best as it allows asylum seekers to “relate to one place” and requires “less transport and waiting”. Unlike previously, all registration procedures are now done “under the same roof” (HERO mottak, n.d.).

After arriving at the arrival reception center, those seeking asylum have to go through a health screening and an interview with the police, in which the police register their fingerprints, record their name, age, and address and collect their passport or identity documents. They usually spend up to two days here. Afterward, they are generally transferred to a “transit reception center” (*Transitmottak*), where they can spend up to several months. During this time, the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI) screens the applications for “Dublin cases,” which refers to individuals who have been registered in another European country before coming to Norway. In Dublin cases, Norway returns the applicant to the country they were first registered in as soon as possible. The asylum applicants that are not “Dublin cases” get their application processed by UDI. For this, they have to take part in a more extensive interview with UDI (which usually lasts several hours depending on each case). After their asylum interview, most applicants are relocated to an ordinary reception center (*asylmottak*) while UDI considers their application (NOAS, n.d.).

Living in asylum centers is voluntary in Norway. Asylum seekers are allowed to seek their own accommodation, but they have to be self-sufficient, as they do not receive the bi-monthly financial support from the state (approx. 1000NOK). There are few of these cases. If the asylum seeker has particular characteristics or needs such as being an unaccompanied minor or has physical or mental issues, he/she will be relocated to a “specialized reception center,” although some reception centers may have buildings where they accommodate those with particular needs (NOU, 2011; Weiss, Djuve, Hamelink & Zhang, 2017).

The living conditions in the different stages of arrival vary greatly. The current “arrival reception center” in Østfold is an immense industrial hall where asylum seekers are accommodated in large tents, usually with their families or, if alone, with fellow asylum seekers of the same sex. The capacity of the tents is around 20 to 40 beds (Bergh et al., 2017). In the “transit reception centers,” asylum seekers are usually accommodated in rooms shared with

others of the same sex, with up to 10 people per room in some cases. If they are a family, they get their own room, but bathrooms are shared by all (Hauge, Støa & Denizou, 2017). These conditions allow for extremely limited privacy.

The ordinary reception centers may look quite different from one to another. There are two main distinct types: the “centralized” and the “decentralized.” The “centralized” centers are organized in a campus-fashion, usually with low-rise buildings where the asylum seekers are accommodated in different groups. These centers’ buildings are commonly barracks separated in flats, usually former military camps, hotels, or elderly homes (Hauge, Støa & Denizou, 2017). Families are generally accommodated in one building, occasionally together with single women with and without children. Single men are placed in a different building or on a different floor. Some centers have separate buildings for unaccompanied minors and asylum seekers with special needs. The center’s administration is usually in a separate building.

Families usually get their own apartment with a kitchen and bathroom included, although there are some centers where this is shared with other families. Asylum seekers coming alone (single men/single women/unaccompanied minors) usually share apartments with one or more people of the same sex, depending on the type of center. In some centers, two residents share a room, kitchen, and bathroom with several others. These “centralized” reception centers are generally distanced from urban and population centers, either in the countryside or industrial areas on the outskirts of cities or towns. This makes it challenging for residents to have contact with the local inhabitants and engage in activities (Hauge, Støa & Denizou, 2017, Weiss et al., 2017).

In “decentralized” centers, residents live in shared apartments spread out in the local community/town/village. This form of reception center is believed to ensure a higher quality of life for its residents than the “centralized” centers. However, as in the centralized centers, the flats in the “decentralized” centers are usually low-standard, given the limited budget of the centers (Hauge, Støa & Denizou, 2017).

Asylum seekers are allowed to apply for a work permit as long as they have had their asylum interview, and there is no doubt about their identity, meaning that they have a passport or another form of identification, something few have. Asylum seekers used to be able to choose if they would like to attend 175 hours of a Norwegian language class and 50 hours of a Norwegian culture class (UDI Regelverk, 2017). Since September 2018, this has become compulsory. Depending on the reception center, the administration, and the center's operator, the residents are offered certain activities, usually sports, walks, language practice, and seasonal festivities.

Once in the ordinary reception center, asylum seekers have to wait until their case has been processed. The length of waiting for their application to be processed varies from case to case. In 2017, the year I started my fieldwork, the average wait was 321 days for those who received a positive answer (UDI statistics, e-mail to author, October 28th, 2018).

There are four types of answers an asylum seeker can get regarding their asylum application. They can receive a three-year residence permit as a refugee if UDI believes that it would be dangerous for the applicant to return to their “home” country. People who are not entitled to protection as a refugee may be granted a residence permit on strong humanitarian grounds. This is usually given to people who are seriously ill, are victims of human trafficking, or have strong ties to Norway. The asylum seeker must usually have a passport to get such a residence permit. An applicant may also receive a limited residence permit, which allows them fewer rights than the other permits. It is often necessary to have a passport to extend such a residence permit, or make it a permanent (NOAS, n.d.). Finally, an asylum seeker can also receive a rejection of their application. This occurs if UDI decides that they do not need protection and would not be in danger if they return to their country of origin.

If the asylum seeker is granted a three-year residence permit either as a refugee or on humanitarian grounds, the process of resettlement (*bosetting*) begins. It can take several months until a municipality accepts to take the refugee in and provide him/her with private accommodation. Once settled into the municipality, the refugee is provided with a monthly salary, from which they have to pay for their accommodation and other expenses. They are obliged to attend the Introduction Program and Norwegian Language Education for Newly Arrived Immigrants, a full-time program that usually lasts two years (Lillevik & Tyldum, 2018). The purpose of the program is to “meet participants’ need for basic qualification,” which includes “Norwegian language training, insight into Norwegian social conditions and preparation for employment or education” (Regjeringen, 2016).⁶ Participants have the possibility to participate in internships to practice their Norwegian and get work experience (Lillevik & Tyldum, 2018). The Norwegian Directorate for Integration and Diversity (IMDi) aims for 55 percent of the program participants to either be working or studying after finishing the introduction program (Guribye & Espegren, 2019). Statistics show that 63 percent of those

⁶ My translation from Norwegian: “Introduksjonsordning og Norskoppl ring for Nyankomne Innvandrere skal dekke deltakernes behov for grunnleggende kvalifisering. I dette inng r norskoppl ring, innsikt i norske samfunnsforhold og forberedelse til yrkesliv eller utdanning.”

who finished the program in 2017 were either working or studying one year later. Of those, 72 percent were men, and 48 percent were women (SSB, 2019).

Settled refugees can apply for a permanent residence permit before their temporary residence permit expires. In order to do this, there are several requirements, including a minimum income of 246.246 NOK⁷ in the last twelve months. The financial support they receive while participating in the introduction program is considered income, but this only adds up to about 180.000 NOK per year. Thus, they have to earn the remaining 60.000 NOK through employment, as other welfare benefits are not considered income. There are a few exceptions, however. If the refugee has had a full-time job for the last twelve months, even if they have not met the minimum income, or if they have received a student loan of at least 121. 220 NOK in the last twelve months, they can still receive a permanent residence permit (UDI, 2020b).

Due to time limitations, I do not follow the study participants until the time when they can apply for a permanent residence permit. However, it is necessary to bear in mind what the prerequisites are for gaining such a permit, as they may, to some degree, influence the participants' decision-making in regard to their plans and aspirations of the future.

1.5. The structure of the extended abstract

In this thesis' extended abstract (*kappe*), I discuss in detail the choices I made in relation to the theoretical framework and methodology. I have not had space to cover this in the individual articles due to their word limit. In addition, I discuss how the results of the three articles are interconnected and form this thesis as a whole.

In the introductory chapter of this thesis, I have discussed the rationale for the choice of topic. I have then presented the main research questions and sub-questions that guide this thesis, followed by a brief discussion on how I employ the terms "asylum seeker" and "refugee." The chapter ends by providing an overview of the Norwegian migration context and asylum system.

In Chapter 2, I present the existing literature that is central to the topic of this thesis. Chapter 3, delves into the methodological choices and issues that have come up during this research, as well as the design of the study and analysis. This chapter also includes a discussion on the philosophy of science behind this thesis. In Chapter 4, I discuss the main theoretical perspective that I have drawn on in this thesis, as well as other theoretical discussions I have

⁷ This amount is updated yearly approximately

used in the different articles. In Chapter 5, I provide a summary of the three articles that comprise this thesis. Finally, Chapter 6 presents the main findings of each of the articles and discusses how they contribute to the thesis as a whole and to the existing literature.

2. Previous research on asylum seekers and refugees

This chapter presents the existing literature relevant to the topics and research field of this thesis. First, I discuss previous research that has explored the experiences of seeking asylum more widely. This is followed by a presentation of the body of literature that has looked into resilience and coping with the challenges of the asylum and refugee contexts, and of living in asylum centers more specifically. I also discuss the literature on the role of religion in asylum and refugee contexts, followed by a presentation of research focusing on aspirations in migration contexts, particularly in asylum and refugee contexts. This chapter aims to provide an overview of the studies I have engaged with and show the gaps in the literature, which my thesis seeks to fill.

2.1. Experiences of seeking asylum

In the last decades, research on the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees has become increasingly common in Northern Europe and Scandinavia (Berg et al., 2005, 2006; Berg & Lauritsen, 2009; Brekke, 2001, 2004; Eitinger, 1981; Knudsen, 1986, 2005; Lauritsen & Berg, 1999; Slavnic, 2000; Valenta, 2008; Vitus, 2010; Andrews, Anvik & Solstad, 2014; Hauge, Støa & Denizou, 2017). This literature review focuses primarily on studies conducted in Norway or countries that, like Norway, have a highly structured asylum reception system, meaning that asylum seekers stay in reception centers while their application is processed. Many of these studies have focused on the clientification and passivisation of asylum seekers and refugees as well as their loss of previous social status, among other topics (Berg, 2012).

Several researchers have described the process of seeking asylum as a liminal phase, in which asylum seekers no longer have their previous status but have not yet acquired their new one either (Engebretsen, 2006). Asylum seekers find themselves in circumstances of great uncertainty and insecurity, often defined by “temporariness” and a lack of control over their circumstances. In addition, although asylum centers are established to serve as temporary, short-term accommodation, people are often housed there for extended periods of time (Berg, 2012).

Migrating and having to flee can have a significant impact on both physical and mental health. Hence, many refugees tend to deal with both physical and mental health issues, due to either the experience of flight or previous life circumstances (Berg, 2012). In some groups, it is

believed that more than half of those that get a residence permit in Norway have psychological issues that may require treatment (Sveaass, 2001). On top of that, the experience of long waiting times in the asylum centers can potentially aggravate such issues (Berit, 2012; Seeberg et al., 2009).

Already in the 1990s, research conducted in Norway started pointing out that the structure of the reception system creates clients out of asylum seekers, instead of promoting self-reliance. This clientification seems to be a result of the passive receipt of economic support from the state (Berg, 1990; Solheim, 1990). Being introduced to such a system from the first day in Norway results in feelings of helplessness and passivity among asylum seekers, a mindset that is difficult to emerge from later on (Solheim, 1990). Asylum seekers get used to receiving aid, instead of being induced to become independent and contributing. These effects are shown to have negative consequences on their integration process (Lauritsen & Berg, 1999; Brekke, 2001; Berg & Sveaass, 2005).

Later research has shown that long waiting times, lack of a job or meaningful activities to engage in, financial issues, and limited access to psychosocial support has a negative effect on refugees and asylum seekers' quality of life and health (Lauritsen & Berg, 1999; Slavnic, 2000; Brekke, 2001; Berg & Sveaass, 2005). Some scholars have argued that these experiences may also impact the refugees' motivation to integrate and learn the host country's language. Given the substantial uncertainty they experience, they may be unsure of the purpose of learning the host country's language (Lamba, 2003; Seeberg et al., 2009; Waxman, 2006).

The spaces in which asylum seekers are accommodated are also said to play a significant role in their well-being (Hauge, Støa & Denizou, 2017). Some scholars argue that European asylum centers may be understood as a part of the asylum and immigration policies, that is, their location and structure is said to be purposefully established by the authorities (Szczepanikova, 2013). In fact, reception centers are often purposefully found in isolated locations, far away from the population centers and segregated from the rest of the society. It is argued that this keeps "them" outside, given that they do not belong (Hauge, Støa & Denizou, 2017; Horst, 2004).

The day-to-day life in these reception centers is said to be reduced to eating and sleeping, little more. Given that few residents are able to acquire a job, they usually do not have many meaningful activities to engage in while waiting in the centers (Diken & Laustsen, 2003; Seeberg et al., 2009; Vitus, 2010). Language classes are often one of the only activities they are able to participate in. Research from the Norwegian context shows that these classes provide a routine and a purpose for some (Andrews et al., 2014; Valenta & Berg, 2010).

Furthermore, asylum seekers may also experience the common difficulties that come with living in a new and foreign society, including adapting to a new language and culture. They may also experience discrimination or stigma due to becoming an ethnic or religious minority (Quinn, 2014).

2.2. Resilience and coping in asylum and refugee contexts

As the following literature review shows, several researchers have started to focus on the strength, resilience, and strategies of forcibly displaced persons to cope with the everyday challenges in the host society. This focus is necessary given the excessive emphasis in past academic discourse on the challenges refugees and asylum seekers encounter, their negative experiences, and their trauma. Some of these studies have focused on young refugees and asylum seekers. Although this is not the same age group that this thesis is looking into, I believe their experiences are worth considering as they allow for a comparison with other age groups.

Several studies have shown that a common strategy among refugees and asylum seekers of different ages is that of suppressing traumatic memories and distracting themselves with everyday activities (Goodman, 2004; Sleijpen et al., 2016; Sulaiman-Hill, 2012; Ní Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010). Other studies show refugee women using classes and jobs to keep their minds off the past (Goodman, Vesely, Letiecq & Cleaveland, 2017). Young refugees have been found to cope by drawing from feelings of collectivity and a sense of shared experience (Goodman, 2004). Others cope with their circumstances by perceiving themselves as independent and self-reliant, which provides feelings of empowerment (Ní Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010).

Research among refugee and undocumented migrant women in the US has highlighted the importance of their support systems, such as their partner, friends, and acquaintances who shared the same language and nationality, in developing resilience (Goodman et al., 2017; Lenette, Brough & Cox, 2013). A study from the UK emphasizes the role of women asylum seekers and refugees as creative agents in improving their lives in the host country. In her study, Hunt (2008) demonstrates how the women sought a variety of ways to move on with their lives, some bought a car, others found support groups, some signed up for university classes, and others found a job or voluntary work. Engaging in work, whether voluntary or paid, was an especially positive experience, as it would often put their education and expertise to use and help them recover from the loss of status they had experienced (Hunt, 2008).

Multiple studies have shown that young refugees find motivation by devising clear goals for the future and aiming to build a better future for themselves (Goodman, 2004; Sleijpen et al., 2016; Ní Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010). Similar research has also argued that hopelessness contributes to depression, and being hopeful and focusing on the future cultivates well-being by creating a structure to follow (Khawaja et al., 2008). Furthermore, for some young women seeking asylum in the UK, engaging in education is a way in which they sought to establish a “normal” life. In addition to allowing them to plan and think about the future, it provided them with employment possibilities and socio-economic mobility (Sirriyeh, 2010).

Research among young asylum seekers and refugees showed that they generated stability and some degree of certainty in their uncertain day-to-day life by maintaining some form of continuity. This was often done by maintaining a lifestyle and habits similar to those they had before displacement. Continuity has been argued to be an essential element of identity, enabling one to maintain a “continuous sense of self” (Ní Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010). However, other young refugees have tried to adapt quickly to their new environment by adopting the local customs and clothing style as a way to achieve social acceptance and feel more integrated (Almqvist & Hwang, 1999, Sleijpen et al., 2016; Ní Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010).

2.2.1. Coping with everyday life in asylum centers

In the following section, I discuss the few studies that address resilience and coping in asylum centers and those focusing more specifically on women.

A study among women in an Austrian refugee camp found that despite the many restrictions to their freedom of movement, privacy, and activities, the women’s daily occupations (volunteering within the camp) were guided by their fierce hope. For many, such work also distracted them from their problems. Furthermore, despite having little money, the women continued buying makeup and cosmetics to maintain their appearance, as this was an important identity marker that they did not want to let go of (Steindl, Winding & Runge, 2008).

Research among Eritrean women living in Norwegian asylum centers shows how important the support from fellow Eritreans was in dealing with the uncertainty and endless waiting. Being surrounded by supportive and positive staff at the asylum center also contributed to the women’s coping (Abraham et al., 2018). Similarly, young women and girls in the UK and Finland tackled boredom and fostered homeliness by creating a community with other young women and girls living in the asylum center and engaging in various activities (Kohli &

Kaukko, 2018). A study featuring a young woman seeking asylum in Denmark found that getting in contact with fellow refugee youth helped her increase her communities of belonging and create social ties. As a result, this helped her fight feelings of loneliness and gain confidence and stability (Verdasco, 2019).

2.2.2. Dealing with stigmatized identities among migrants

Few scholars have explored how individuals deal with the stigma of the “refugee/asylum seeker” label. In her research on Oromo refugee youth in Canada, Kumsa (2006) found that while some youngsters sought to reject the “refugee label” altogether, others would distance themselves from it. They did this by highlighting their ethnic identity or citizenship in the host country as the most important label they wanted to be identified by (Kumsa, 2006).

Another body of work has explored the day-to-day coping mechanisms of immigrants and people with a migrant background (Kibria, 2002; Madood, 2002; Sackman, Peters & Faist, 2003). Some of these studies have found that ethnic groups resist imposed identities by maneuvering between multiple identities when in contact with both native locals or co-ethnics (Kibria, 2002). Others prefer to adopt new, hybrid identities to combat imposed identities, as in Madood’s (2003) study of “Muslims of Britain.” In Sackman, Peters, and Faist’s (2003) research on “Turks of Frankfurt,” they found that identity was defined in relation to local belonging and ethnic belonging. Other studies have demonstrated that young refugees, in particular, believe that gaining a university degree will help them get rid of the refugee stigma and be regarded as a “normal” citizen (Hakami, 2016; Harris & Marlowe, 2011).

Valenta’s (2009) study on immigrant’s strategies in their interactions with local natives in Norway, draws on Goffman’s work on identity and stigma and indicates that immigrants use several kinds of stigma management strategies. Among some of these strategies is that of “compensation,” where immigrants behave in a certain way to disconfirm the stereotypes native locals may have of them. Others would cope by making fun of events they felt discriminated or stereotyped, so as to minimize the humiliation. Placing the focus on another aspect of their social identity and away from their ethnic identity, for example, by focusing on their occupational position, was another strategy seen in Valenta’s (2009) study. Others avoided certain places and situations in which they knew their ethnic identity would stand out. Overall, according to Valenta’s (2009) study, the particular strategies each immigrant employed to deal

with stigmatized ethnicity were very much influenced by individual particularities as well as the prevailing circumstances.

As these three sections of the literature review have shown, many studies tend to place young asylum seekers in the center of their research. A greater focus on other ages and life phases, as well as further attention on women, is needed to see whether experiences differ depending on people's age, life phase, or gender, among other identities.

2.3. The role of religion in asylum and refugee contexts

When people move, their religious beliefs, practices, and ideas are also affected, and they change and adapt to the new environment. As migrants come in contact with their new surroundings, their religious identities also undergo certain modifications (Jensen & Juul Petersen, 2019). The majority of previous research has explored how migration experiences influence religious beliefs, practices, and identities (Becker-Cantarino, 2012; Beckford, 2015; Frederiks, 2015), as well as the role of faith-based organizations in offering support to migrants (Kirmani & Khan, 2008; Wilson, 2011). A smaller body of literature has focused on how many individuals in asylum and refugee contexts gain strength to cope with the difficulties of migration through their religious beliefs and practices.

Sleijpen and colleagues (2016) have conducted a comprehensive literature review of the sources of resilience among young refugees and have established religion as one of the main elements. It seems that religion helps them with various aspects of life in the host society. Firstly, it guides their lives in the new and unknown surroundings, acting as a practical and moral guideline in the new and unfamiliar conditions. It also gives meaning to their experiences and circumstances, helping them cope with the challenging aspects of displacement (Sleijpen et al., 2016). In other studies, refugees have been found to draw from their religious beliefs and practices, not only as a source of distraction but also to gain strength and a sense of control over their lives (Earnest, Mansi, Bayati, Earnest & Thompson, 2015; Ní Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010, Tiilikainen, 2003). Religious faith has been shown to offer refugees support when recuperating from war trauma, as the ritual practices of worship, meditation, and prayer are said to diminish both psychological and physiological stress (Gozdziak, 2002).

For some, dealing with the uncertain and challenging circumstances of displacement and resettlement was made easier by believing that God was in control of their fate and,

therefore, whatever happened to them was God's will (Khawaja et al., 2008; Goodman, 2004). For others, practicing the same religious rituals as they did in their country of origin gave them a sense of continuity, even when their everyday life felt unstable and unfamiliar. Religion not only provided them with support through their relationship with God but also with the members of the religious organization they attended (Sleijpen, Boeije, Kleber & Mooren, 2016; Earnest et al., 2015; Ní Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010). A wide range of literature has demonstrated the invaluable role that religious organizations play in the early stages of migrants' arrival, providing them with social, material, and sometimes financial support (Hagan & Ebaugh, 2003; Chafetz & Ebaugh, 2000; Hirschman, 2006; Foner & Alba, 2008). Furthermore, having a group of people with whom one shares similar beliefs in a new environment is believed to potentially increase group solidarity as it may foster a common sense of identity among believers (Gozdziak, 2002). Research among Muslim Syrian refugees in the US shows that being proud of their Muslim identity was vital for their well-being, as it was followed by feelings of strength, humility, and comfort (Hasan, Mitschke & Ravi, 2018).

A study of female Muslim refugees in New Zealand and Australia found that the women's religious convictions and sense of solidarity with their Muslim sisters gave them strength when dealing with discrimination and stigmatization (Sulaiman-Hill, 2012). In her study on Somali refugee women in Australia, McMichael (2002) found that Islam provided the women with "an enduring 'home' that is carried through displacement and resettlement" (p. 171). McMichael (2002) argues that the women created a home in displacement "through the everyday workings of Islam" (p. 179).

2.3.1. Religion in refugee accommodation and asylum centers

Little research has been conducted on the role of religion in asylum centers. The literature exploring the role of religion in refugee camps and humanitarian contexts in the Global South is somewhat more extensive. Although refugee camps in the Global South differ significantly from asylum centers in Europe, a brief discussion of some of this research has been included in the review. It allows for a comparison of the experiences in such different contexts.

Research in refugee camps in the Middle East has shown the importance of religious faith and practice in helping individuals come to terms with their situation and fostering hope (Darychuk & Jackson, 2015; El-Khani, Ulph, Peters & Calam, 2017). Research among women in Palestinian refugee camps has revealed that their religious faith enables them to look beyond their individual needs and develop a sense of collective responsibility with other refugees

(Darychuk & Jackson, 2015). Syrian parents in refugee camps in Syria and Turkey showed a relentless trust in God, which was in stark contrast to the lack of trust in any other kind of support (El-Khani et al., 2017). In this study, many of the parents described feeling relieved when putting their trust and the responsibility for their circumstances in God's hands, surrendering their sense of control. However, it is argued that placing this trust and responsibility on God is not an example of passivity. Instead, it is a source of encouragement in their struggle to make their situation better, especially concerning the care of their children. As described above, their faith guides their behavior towards others and motivates them to be good parents in such challenging circumstances. Furthermore, it contributes to their hopes and optimism about the future, in particular about returning to a "free Syria," where they can raise their children in peace and restore their lives (El-Khani et al., 2017).

One of the few references exploring the role of religion in asylum centers is Jensen and Juul Petersen's (2019) edited book on religion in the Danish asylum system. There are a few contributions in this book that are relevant for this thesis. In the chapter by Sara Lei Sparre and Lise Galal, they identify that for Middle Eastern Christian asylum seekers, participating in a religious community in Denmark can contribute to their social integration by helping them deal with discrimination and other exclusionary mechanisms. It also provides them with feelings of belonging. Another significant contribution for this thesis is the chapter by Eva Maria Lassen. She asserts that religion in asylum centers is a human right and discusses the state's legal responsibilities in guaranteeing this right. Most relevant for this thesis, however, is the contribution by Zachary Whyte. He ascertains that religion helps many asylum seekers deal with their lack of understanding of how the asylum system works. In addition, it instills a certain degree of agency and a feeling of control in many of the asylum seekers. Pia Nielsen's contribution also touches upon this. She discusses the major role that religion plays in supporting asylum seekers who are converting to Christianity. Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen and Gitte Buch-Hansen explore the complex motivations asylum seekers have for converting to Christianity and explain religion as "a material and existential way of survival" (Jensen & Juul Petersen, 2019, p. 12).

2.4. Aspirations in asylum and refugee contexts

In the past decade, there has been growing academic interest in the aspirations to migrate (Carling, 2002, 2014; Czaika & Vothknecht, 2012; de Haas, 2010; Wang & Collins, 2020). However, less attention has been placed on migrants' aspirations as imaginations of their future

in their host country (Boccagni, 2017). A relevant study on migrants' aspirations is Boccagni's (2017) work on migrant domestic workers in Italy. He argues for the need to explore migrants' aspirations to understand their integration process and their transnational links, both of which impact their agency. Additionally, Meeteren (2010, 2012a, 2012b), in her research on irregular migrants in the Netherlands, argues that it is necessary to examine migrants' aspirations to understand the kinds of social and transnational (social, political, and economic) activities that they engage in.

The issue of migrants' aspirations has been understudied in the Scandinavian, and particularly the Norwegian context. A few studies have been conducted on the educational goals and aspirations of youth with immigrant backgrounds (Fekjær & Leirvik, 2011). Other studies have explored the labor market integration of highly educated migrants in Norway, focusing on the aspirations, expectations, and reality they encounter (Holter, 2015; Orupabo, 2013).

International studies focusing on the aspirations of individuals in asylum and refugee contexts are similarly sparse, yet slowly increasing. Among these studies, there is a tendency to focus the attention on young people. The reason for this, it seems, is due to the prevalence of research into aspirations, especially regarding education, in Childhood and Youth Studies and Developing Studies (Kao & Tienda, 1998; Kao and Thompson, 2003; MacLeod, 2008; Grant, 2017). Although some of the influences on youngsters' aspirations are related to their age and life stage, many of these could also play a role in adults' aspirations. Therefore, the following sections briefly explore and discuss this body of literature.

Research has shown that life before migration is of particular relevance in determining how forced migrants assess their present in the host country. The literature establishes that the conditions young asylum seekers and refugees lived in prior to migrating have a significant influence on their aspirations (Tlhabano & Schweitzer, 2007). In particular, experiences of war, conflict, and disruption of their normal lives seem to influence their vocational aspirations (Vervliet, Vanobbergen, Broekaert & Derluyn, 2015; Tlhabano & Schweitzer, 2007; Anjum, Nordqvist & Timpka, 2012; Allsopp, Chase & Mitchell, 2015). Among adult asylum seekers, their previous socio-economic background and work experience before arriving in the host country play a major role in their future aspirations (van Heelsum, 2017). However, many other elements need to be taken into consideration when exploring their aspirations: gender, age, family circumstances (both in the host country and the country of origin), previous experience in the labor market, and previous experiences in general before arrival in the host country (Khattab, 2003; Kiche, 2010; Allsopp et al., 2015; Hatoss, O'Neill & Eacersall, 2012; Hatoss & Huijser, 2010).

Research has demonstrated that having to deal with uncertainty around the immigration status, finding accommodation, accessing health care services, and financial stability makes it particularly difficult for young asylum seekers to think about their goals and aspirations (Gateley, 2014). Others have shown that refugees' family circumstances in the host country have a significant effect on their aspirations (Anjum et al., 2012). The difficult socio-economic situation and the (often gendered) family responsibilities in the host country can also lead asylum seekers and refugees away from their aspirations and, in turn, cause them to reevaluate their goals (Hatoss & Huijser, 2010; Nunn, McMichael, Gifford, & Correa-Velez, 2014; Stevenson & Willott, 2007; Wright & Plasterer, 2012).

Other scholars argue that socio-economic background is less significant to aspirations than social capital and the perception of the opportunity structure (Verlivet et al., 2015). People's social capital and networks are believed to be essential for turning aspirations into more concrete goals and plans (Crivello, 2015; Khattab, 2003). In their research among irregular migrants in The Netherlands and Belgium, Meeteren, Engbersen, and Van San (2009) suggest that if someone's aspirations were not achieved, this did not mean that they do not have social capital, but rather not the right form of social capital. This might be why highly educated refugees tend to fare better in the host country's labor market, as Bygnes (2019) and Bakker, Dagevos, and Engbersen (2017), among others, have argued.

Furthermore, research among refugees in The Netherlands has found that refugees' wishes or considerations to return to their place of origin are related to their integration in various domains (Di Saint Pierre, Martinovic & De Vroome, 2015). This study points toward perceived discrimination as a major factor contributing to refugees' considerations of returning to the place of origin. Although their economic situation and degree of social integration in the country also played a role, discrimination seemed to be one of the most influential factors (Di Saint Pierre, Martinovic & De Vroome, 2015).

In her study, Bygnes (2019) explores the experiences of highly educated Syrian refugees over the course of their first few years in Norway. The author shows that these refugees experience loss of status and hopelessness due to the slow bureaucratic process and feelings of being stuck in the early stages of their arrival. However, over the course of two to three years, their classed resources (capital and status) allowed them to partly regain their middle-class lifestyle. Their classed resources provided them with an important form of continuity in exile (Bygnes, 2019).

As we have seen, although there is growing interest among researchers on aspirations in migration and asylum contexts, in particular, there is still a need to gain further insight on

aspirations in the unique contexts of asylum centers. Further research is needed to explore how these aspirations develop over time and in regard to circumstances. Additionally, attention should also be placed on how people in such circumstances go about pursuing these aspirations.

2.4.1. Aspirations and religion

Religious beliefs and faith among refugees and asylum seekers are believed to be of great importance to maintain a sense of normalcy, leading them to cultivate hope and take control of their lives by starting to be able to envision and design their desired future (Anjum et al., 2012). Hence, practicing one's religion and attending religious congregations and activities can contribute to increased hope and, thus, aspirations for the future. This hope may lead asylum seekers to actively fight the feelings of passivity often induced by the asylum system and aid them in starting a meaningful new life in the host society (Anjum et al., 2012). Refugees have expressed that, through the practice of daily prayer, among other activities, they feel they are working towards their desired future. Praying allows them to forget their daily struggles and focus on working on their hope for a better future (Ni Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010).

Furthermore, religion is often seen to be of special importance to provide meaning to the everyday life of devotees in such despairing circumstances. Finding meaning is connected to the imagined future and aspirations, as it leads to making sense of what a person has gone through in the past, what she/he has in the present, and focusing on where they could or want to be in the future. In this way, meaning conflates with identity, as it provides a purpose to keep going, which is usually closely related to a persons' goal formulation (Puvimanasinghe, Denson, Augoustinos & Somasundaram, 2014).

Moreover, refugees' religious practices have been found to lead to increased contact with people from the wider host community, especially with other refugees or former refugees who have gone through similar situations and now have a good life. These experiences allow them to put their situation in context and be hopeful for their future as well (Earnest et al., 2015). Yet, to gain a better understanding of the role of religion in aspirations and its relation to the settlement in a new environment, further attention is needed from scholars (Anjum et al., 2012).

The following chapter explores the methodological considerations of the thesis.

3. Methodology

In this chapter, I delve into the methodological choices made during this project. The chapter is divided into three main sections. In the first section, I reflect on the philosophy of science that has guided this research and on issues of reflexivity, positionality, epistemology, and the insider-outsider divide. In the second section, I provide a detailed description of the research design, the methods used, the selection of participants, the recruitment process, and an account of the two phases of fieldwork. Finally, this chapter concludes with some reflections on the ethical issues encountered and the considerations taken during this project.

3.1. Reflections on the philosophy of science

My goal with this study was to gain insight into the participants' experiences while living in asylum centers and, later, resettling into a Norwegian municipality. Thus, this research is inspired by the social constructionism⁸ paradigm, which is, in itself, a rather extensive paradigm with multiple perspectives. I sympathize with its idea that "social order is ... a human product, or more specifically 'an ongoing human product', ... not something inherent in the 'nature of things'" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000, p. 26). At the same time, social order creates individuals through the internalization of social norms and knowledge (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000). In other words, there exist many different realities, which are assembled from one's lived experiences and interactions with others, as well as from the specific historical and cultural norms one is surrounded by (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This research's methodology is influenced by phenomenological thinkers, in particular, those within the anthropology tradition, as this chapter explores. Interestingly, social constructionism is, in fact, said to have its source in phenomenological reflections.

There are a variety of approaches to phenomenological research, yet all share the aim of studying human experience as it is. As Hannah Arendt describes, it means paying attention to "the little things" in life, in which "the secret of reality lies hidden" (1968 in Jackson, 2013,

⁸ There is a debate and confusion about the use of either "constructivism" or "constructionism." Some use them interchangeably, while others argue that they are two different perspectives. I employ the term "constructionism" following Charmaz's (2014, pp. 187–89) definitions.

p. 213). Phenomenologists argue that to comprehend human life, we need to focus on the everyday, mundane occurrences and experiences, as small as gestures and behavior among people in general. This approach advocates for that which is unique and unreplaceable. Phenomenological research focuses on lived experience to comprehend its particular meaning. It entails reflecting on past experience, so retrospectively (Manen, 2016). Thus, it was mainly those mundane experiences (and practices) in the everyday lives of the women seeking asylum that I was interested in exploring in this project.

Furthermore, phenomenological theorists, such as Alfred Schutz and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, have inspired the lens of “everyday lived religion” (Ammerman, 2007; McGuire, 2008).. The approach of “everyday lived religion” is primarily known for its controversial turn towards studying “the religion of ordinary people that happens beyond the bonds and often without the approval of religious authorities” (Ammerman, 2014, p. 190). However, it also seeks out to explore “the material, embodied aspects of religion as they occur in everyday life, in addition to listening for how people explain themselves... [including] both the experiences of the body and the mind” (Ammerman, 2014, p. 190). Therefore, taking a phenomenological approach seemed natural when examining the women’s religious beliefs and practices through such lens

Meredith McGuire, one of the principal scholars within “everyday lived religion,” explains how the term “lived religion” is inspired by “Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological approach to human consciousness as rooted in embodiment” (McGuire, 2008, p. 216). In other words, Merleau-Ponty argued that we do not experience our bodies as mere objects but, in fact, as “part of the perceiving subject” (McGuire, 2008, p. 216). Hence, understanding people’s religious practices and experiences as “lived religion” makes it possible to identify how their practices are linked to human emotions and embodiment (McGuire, 2008).

In *Things as They are* (1996), anthropologist Michael Jackson claims that the “truthful” detailed descriptions of the mundane that phenomenology advocates for should be seen as a form of justice to the intricacies of lived experience. In addition, the ability to put one’s self in other people’s shoes and try to see the world as they see it is believed to be an act of ethics and, hence, love (Jackson, 2013). Similarly, others have argued that love and care are preconditions to understanding another person or thing; they are the starting points for comprehension of the human experience (Manen, 2016). Drawing from these ideas, my research aims, in a way, to do justice by bringing the voices of women seeking asylum into the academic discourse by describing their everyday experiences. This is particularly relevant, given that the voices of asylum seekers, in particular female ones, have often been neglected in both public and academic discourse.

However, there are certain issues with claiming to present the experiences of the participants as they are. I agree with phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (1962 in Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), who claims that we can never fully comprehend the other person's experience as they have lived through it, as we have only seen it or heard it "displayed." Desjarlais claims that "instead of assuming that 'experience', 'emotions', or 'narratives' are existential given ontologically prior to certain cultural realities," we need to be critical towards the context in which they have been formed (1997, p. 17). Hence, it is necessary to bear in mind the context in which the narration of lived experience is conducted and the contexts within which such experience takes place (Desjarlais, 1997). Desjarlais (1997) warns of the problem of viewing lived experience as the most authentic category of investigation given the moral claims such a view implicates. Scholars that advocate for the experience-near research aim to keep accounts of experience as authentic as possible, claiming that doing otherwise would run the risk of violating their authenticity. However, Desjarlais (1997) argues that assuming such authenticity leads researchers to ignore debates around the ontology and epistemology of being and knowing and leads them to present the experiences of those that are being researched as facts (Desjarlais, 1997).

Moreover, because phenomenology and the study of experience is a product of Western culture and philosophy, we have to start by exploring and questioning these same categories. For this reason, Desjarlais (1997) argues for a critical phenomenology. He sees the value in phenomenologically studying people's lifeworlds, but with a critical lens. This entails not only observing and describing what people experience, think, or feel but also questioning why they do so and the cultural and political forces that may be involved. Desjarlais claims that studies that employ critical phenomenology are necessary as they give "insights into how political, economic, biological, and cultural forces intersect in constituting a person's or a group's lifeworld" (1997, p. 25). Thus, although participants may be seen as the experts of their own experiences, we as researchers can and should critically examine these experiences and their accounts of them. This does not mean that our interpretations of their experiences and narratives are the "truth," they are merely one of many ways of reading their experiences, which is very much motivated by our positionality as researchers (Dukas, 2014). In fact, for Gadamer (1975), the purpose of interpretation, or hermeneutics as he called it, is not to discern the "truth" that the author of a narrative (participant) meant with it. Instead, the aim is to find the "truth" such a narrative has for the reader (researcher/interpreter), that is, how it makes sense for her. The reader's analysis is meant to provide meaningful insights, not to be seen as superior to the author's/participant's narrative, but rather as a complement to it.

Despite the issues of taking lived experience and its narration for granted, it is still an essential approach to understanding human lives. Scholars have argued that discarding subjective experience runs the risk of neglecting participants' lives as lived, as this "runs dangerously close to forms of Othering" (Desjarlais & Throop, 2011, p. 96). For Abu-Lughod, the re-telling of the stories of the participants in ethnographic studies is to "write against culture by working against generalization" (2008, p. 13). Thus, because a phenomenological approach leads to focusing on exploring participants' experiences and lifeworlds through recording their own voices, it seeks to ward off the common conceptions and representations of such "groups". Additionally, it allows for exploring the negotiations that people continuously engage in with their "culture" instead of seeing them as its captives (Abu-Lughod, 2008). Therefore, despite its interpretative aspect, phenomenology allows for a focus on the accounts of experience as a way to empower those whose hardships have been ignored and neglected by politics and society, as is the case of the participants in my study (Knibbe & Versteeg, 2008).

I draw from the ideas of Abu-Lughod, and the other abovementioned anthropologists, as I focus on the women's narratives of their experiences as a way to counter the generalizations about this legal and social group (female asylum seekers) and about women from particular countries and cultural/religious backgrounds. Thus, I adopt phenomenology as a stance towards my research and toward the participants, as a methodology. I use it in a way that seeks to honor each participant and her experiences. It is an ethical stance to do so, as it pays attention to their life history and the "mundaneness" of their everyday lives in the asylum centers, to which few have previously paid attention to.

3.1.1. Reflexivity, positionality, and feminist epistemology

As a woman with Spanish and Austrian ethnicity and citizenship that allows me to stay in Norway without a visa or permanent residence permit, my privileged position is something I was always aware of during my fieldwork with the women seeking asylum. I was especially aware of it in moments when I could not come to visit them because I was travelling abroad, either to a conference, course, or to visit family and friends. I always felt uncomfortable telling them where I had been. I felt as if I was bragging about my privileged mobility while they could barely travel within Norway.

For decades, feminist researchers have highlighted the need to reflect on one's standpoint and positionality as a researcher, as well as that of the research participants. This is paramount, they argue, to understand the power hierarchies in the research setting and avoid harming participants by neglecting their positionality (Haraway, 1988; McCormick, 2012). Particularly in research with asylum seekers and refugees, the fact that the researcher usually has citizenship rights and access to official representation while those that are being researched do not, is said to have a significant effect on the research (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2010). Most research on migration in Western Europe is conducted by white nationals, and research participants tend to be racialized minorities experiencing restrictions due to their ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, or religion. This is no coincidence. Knowledge production in institutional contexts has, for centuries, been defined by white men. Only in the last thirty to forty years has academia seen more participation of women. However, today, universities in Western Europe, and the Global North in general, remain largely dominated by white national elites.

Furthermore, knowledge produced in the Global North still holds hegemony over that produced in the Global South (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2010). Therefore, it is paramount to pay attention to the power relations between researchers and research participants. Reflecting on this in my study is essential given that the context is a European country (Norway), and the focus is on the experiences of women seeking asylum. Such phenomenon, which is often referred to as “third world” refugees in the “first world,” is a hierarchical way of sorting the world and is firmly rooted in the colonial racial hierarchic system, in which the Global North is seen as developed and civilized and the Global South as primitive and uncivilized (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2010). Such discourse argues that, when coming to the Global North, refugees and migrants from the South need to integrate, or rather assimilate, into the culture and way of living of the North; otherwise, they will be ostracized and marginalized (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2010). Thus, I draw on decolonial and feminist methodologies to help me remain aware of not reproducing such hierarchies and structural inequalities in my research and interpretations (Huisman, 2008; Jacobsen & Landau, 2003; Temple & Edwards, 2002). By reflecting on my positionality and how it may influence the research, my intention is for my interpretations and analysis to be better understood and to avoid them being misused or misinterpreted (Adamson & Donovan, 2002; Mignolo, 2009).

Additionally, although I do not wish to speak for the women in this study, I still “use” their voices to make my interpretations and analyze their experiences within a certain theoretical framework. As researchers, we still have the power to decide what is relevant to our

study and what to include. Due to this, we may be accused of “colonizing” the voices and “reinforcing patterns of domination” (England, 1994, pp. 80–98). As Alcoff explains:

the practice of speaking for others is often born out of a desire for mastery, to privilege oneself as the one who more correctly understands the truth about another’s situation or as one who can champion a just cause and thus achieve glory and praise. (1991, p. 29)⁹

To avoid this, we have two solutions. One option is to abandon the research altogether, given that we are not a member of the group being researched, as many have done before (Alcoff, 1991). The other option is to continue the research, but make sure that we take responsibility for what we say and how we represent the participants’ voices (more on this in the next section) (England, 1994).

Nevertheless, reflexivity alone cannot eliminate the power imbalances between researcher and participant, as they are historically, geo- and body-politically rooted (England, 1994). As DeVault states “moral purity in feminist...qualitative research...is simply unattainable” (1996, p. 39). Thus, I engage in this research despite such issues, because, as feminist researchers have argued, research has to contribute to fighting against oppression, for which we (academics) have a political responsibility. Disregarding oppressed groups’ struggles and their experiences by avoiding doing research with them may harm them more than the potential harms involved in research, as they may remain in the shadow and oppressed for longer (Düvell, Triandafyllidou, & Vollmer, 2009).

As feminist researchers, we have to work hard to achieve reciprocity and aim to minimize the hierarchies between the participants and ourselves. This can be done by upholding strong values of respect towards them and their experiences, staying as true to them as possible, and refraining from making narrow and essentializing interpretations that may be used to oppress them and discriminate against them even further (Mechanic & Pole, 2013). Finally, to prevent “discursive colonization” in this study, as argued by Mohanty (1988), it is paramount to highlight the participants’ agency in the way they shape their experiences and change their

⁹ Moreover, Husiman (2008) argues that academia has a tendency to pressure researchers towards publishing quickly and in large quantities. This can, in turn, make the researcher be less ethical when meeting the participants, resulting in them selfishly using people’s experiences as mere data to move up in the academic ladder (Huisman, 2008).

environment. We must avoid depriving them of their agency by imposing essentialist interpretations (DeVault & Gross, 2012).

3.1.2. The insider-outsider spectrum

As mentioned above, the ethno-national characteristics of this project's research participants and of myself are not only different but they are also stained by colonial legacies (Global North researcher and Global South participant) – something that should not be overlooked. At first glance, I would be considered an “outsider” to the participants' experiences. However, scholars have warned that focusing on ethno-national characteristics arguably contribute to reproducing essentialism, creating an “us” and “them” (Carling, Erdal & Ezzati, 2014). As Carling, Erdal, and Ezzati (2014) have disputed, focusing on the ethno-national origin as the only marker of identity can lead to methodological nationalism. In a migration context, there are several identity markers that may be used in the insider-outsider divide and being aware of other differences or commonalities is, as Carling, Erdal, and Ezzati (2014) put it, an ethical and methodological responsibility of the researcher. We ought to explore the intersectionality of our identities and see it in the sense of “intercategorical complexity.” For example, a researcher may initially be an “insider” to the participants, given her ethno-national origin being the same as theirs, yet she may come from a higher socio-economic class than her participants. Hence, the initial “insider” status based on the ethno-national component is quickly contested by the class component. Therefore, when undertaking research in the context of migration, as this project does, one must bear in mind all forms of identity markers, from ethnicity, nationality, class, gender, migration history, language, profession, family history, and many others. Carling, Erdal, and Ezzati (2014), therefore, argue that, as researchers, we have to be more aware of all these “intercategorical complexities,” as they may create more fluid positionalities.

In my case, I am neither “ethnically Norwegian” nor do I have Norwegian citizenship. I initially came to Norway as an education migrant and later returned as a work migrant. Therefore, to a certain extent, I have experienced what it is like to be an “outsider” to the Norwegian society, new to the language and society. Due to my light hair and skin color, my participants might have thought that I am Norwegian. I believe it was important for me to introduce myself, explain my hybrid nationality/ethnicity (Spanish/Austrian), and highlight that I am also a migrant in Norway.

At the same time, I kept in mind that I am privileged by being an EU citizen and, therefore, have the right to stay in Norway, unlike the participants of my research. Nevertheless,

once I told the participants that I am not Norwegian and that I also struggled to learn the language or find a job, I experienced their attitude towards me change. I felt that they became less careful in the way they expressed their frustration with the Norwegian asylum system and society. With those that were around the same age as me, I felt that they were more comfortable and open to talk about certain things. They also seemed more comfortable in asking me questions about myself and my private life, leading to a more “equal” relationship.

I think there are also several factors that made my relationship with some of the participants more comfortable and closer than others. One important factor was the language. With most participants, there was a language barrier. We often needed an interpreter to have a conversation, which did not go further from “small talk.” Secondly, the age, level of education, or the socio-economic class, and whether or not we were in a similar life phase (similar age, no children, etc.) that influenced the kind of relationship we ended up developing.

There are three women with whom I became particularly close. All three had attended university and had professional careers. With two of them, I became closer than with the third, since their age was close to mine, they had no children, and they spoke English well, so we could communicate well without needing an interpreter. With the third, at first, we always needed an interpreter to talk to each other, but there was still some sort of common understanding. She had also started a PhD before having to flee her country, so we had that in common. However, she was older and had children. Even though she learned Norwegian quickly and we were able to speak without an interpreter in our last meetings, our relationship was more formal compared to those with the two other women. Thus, it was primarily commonalities in language, class/education level, and age/life phase that resulted in having closer relationships with some women versus other. My identity as a researcher and this more fluid positionality within the “insider-outsider” spectrum shaped the kinds of relationships I had with the participants. This, in turn, had an influence on the research process and findings. As Mohia (2008) argues, social science needs to be understood as relational, as the product of human interaction.

As a final word of caution, it is necessary here to mention that, despite my more fluid positionality within the “insider-outsider” spectrum, I have remained strongly aware of the differences in the level of difficulty between beginning a life and career in Norway as an asylum seeker who is “visibly” Muslim or with a visibly different ethnicity and someone who is an EU citizen and has European ethnicity and is not a Muslim, such as myself.

3.1.3. Reflections on representation, scholarship, and advocacy

Another issue that, as researchers, we have to bear in mind when studying issues that are politicized, is that we encounter people's current struggles, such as meagre living conditions and lack of basic necessities, especially when we talk to groups or individuals who are stigmatized. As social scientists, our role is to be critical of power dynamics and imbalances and the way these may negatively affect certain social collectives. Thus, we may end up facing ethical dilemmas, torn between the moral duty to help and advocate for their rights and our professional duty to maintain distance and refrain from ideological statements (Düvell et al., 2009). Some have even come to question the possibility of the latter, asking whether "one [can] possibly develop the distance, the techniques and methods to describe and analyze issues impregnated with need, with fear, irrationality and emotion? In other words, is there a hopeless and irredeemable conflict between scholarship on the one hand and advocacy on the other?" (Cohen, 1998 in Voutira & Doná, 2007, p. 166). Some claim that it is important to find a balance given that as academics, we have responsibilities towards various actors, including the research participants, the funding institutions, and the wider society. For other scholars, there may be a problem in the limited way we conceptualize advocacy. The dilemma with ascribing to advocacy and scholarship simultaneously may be solved by rethinking and problematizing what we understand as advocacy (Voutira & Doná, 2007). For example, similarly to the field of subaltern studies, in forced migration research, engaging in scholarship means simultaneously engaging in advocacy, as paying attention to the subaltern's experiences may change the power dynamics for their benefit (Voutira & Doná, 2007). In particular, the purpose of "refugee-centered" research is to place the voices of forced migrants and their narratives of their experiences in focus and examine them with the indirect or direct intention of impacting policy and the work of practitioners (Doná, 2007). Here we have to remember the previously mentioned warning by Bakewell (2008) to be careful of doing *policy relevant* research.

Furthermore, Harrell-Bond and Voutira (1992) argue that for research to be ethical, there needs to be a reciprocal relationship between anthropology and the participant. They ask questions such as: "What can refugees do for anthropology? and "What can anthropologists do for refugees?" (Harrell-Bond & Voutira, 1992, pp. 7-9). This, in turn, enables one to see "the refugee" as a resource rather than a problem and, in this way, merges advocacy and scholarship, one being constitutive of the other (Voutira & Doná, 2007). Thus, by reconceptualizing what can be considered advocacy, we are able to see that it may, after all, not be so opposed to the professional duty of the researcher to "[inform] society about the phenomenon in a manner that

does not contribute to discrimination against [vulnerable] groups but, instead, improves understanding (Düvell et al., 2009, p. 3).

The way I view advocacy in my research is by focusing on the experiences (*life as told*) of the women seeking asylum in Norway, because their narratives and voices have not often been heard, not in the public discourse, media, or academic discourse. Advocacy in my research does not mean taking the participants' side no matter what and leaving out a critical engagement of the factors that are involved in the stories they tell or their experiences. My aim is to provide them space to tell their stories. For some, this may seem like advocacy as it, in a way, involves raising awareness of their socio-political situation. However, is that not what we scholars aim to do? We aim to raise awareness about discourses, experiences, and collectives in society that are latent. We seek to go deeper into the field to explore the different factors, narratives, and nuances there are in order to increase understanding of the different perspectives of different social actors. That is my aim with this project.

3.2. Research design and research process

This thesis is based on fieldwork conducted among women seeking asylum in Norway. The research consists of two phases. In the first phase, I conducted interviews and spent time with the women while they lived in asylum centers. In the second phase, I followed some of the women from the first phase into the early stages of settlement in a Norwegian municipality. I carried out follow-up interviews and had informal conversations with them. In total I followed them for about one and a half years.

This sub-chapter describes how this project came about, what questions it was led by, and the methods that were used. I also delve into the various decisions that I made along the way regarding methods and recruitment. I provide details on how I went about finding the participants, how I followed some of them over the course of one and a half years, and the challenges I encountered in the process. Afterward, I explain how the interviews were conducted and the challenges I ran into conducting them. Finally, I explain the analysis process and conclude with a discussion of some of the ethical considerations that I encountered during my fieldwork and, consecutively, the choices I made in relation to these.

3.2.1. In-depth, semi-structured interviews

When I started this project, I wanted to explore several issues related to the experiences of women seeking asylum in Norway. First, I wanted to know who the women were, what their lives were like before coming to Norway, and what made them leave their homes and families to come to Norway. I was interested in what they experienced when they arrived in Norway, how the process of seeking asylum was for them, and what it was like to live in an asylum center. Furthermore, I wanted to find out about the challenges they faced in their everyday lives in Norway, and how they dealt with them. I also wondered about the role of their religious beliefs and practices after arriving in Norway. Finally, I was curious about what their future plans and aspirations were, and I wanted to explore those over time, as their circumstances changed. I was interested to see whether their aspirations changed or evolved and what elements lead them to change.

To answer these questions, I thought the best thing to do was to ask the women seeking asylum themselves. I join others in arguing that it is through the participants' accounts that we are able to understand their particular experiences of living in the asylum center and dealing with the asylum system (Eastmond, 2007). The participants are experts in their own lives and, therefore, the most capable and appropriate points of reference. For that reason, I decided to do my fieldwork among women living in asylum centers in Norway, trying to follow them into their early stages of settlement in a Norwegian municipality after having received a residence permit.

Initially, I chose to conduct qualitative interviews, in particular, individual semi-structured interviews. This is a method in line with the phenomenological approach of the study as it allows the participants to express their perceptions, interpretations, and meaning-making of their experiences (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 1987). Furthermore, semi-structured interviews are flexible and give both the researcher and the participant space to make modifications during the interview. They allow the participant to highlight themes and issues that they feel are most important to talk about. For the researcher, they permit us to adjust the questions and ask follow-up questions as necessary (Kvale, 1996; Wengraf, 2001).

In my interviews, I had a list of questions that I wanted to have answered, but their formulations and order changed from interview to interview. I would start with one broad question, asking each woman to tell me about herself. Doing this gave her space to start the interview in whichever way she wanted. Sometimes, that was the only question I needed to

ask, prompting the participant to talk for half an hour. Other times, I had to ask many questions. Taking into consideration the power imbalances between the researcher and participant, this method seeks to make it more equal by giving the participant certain control over what they want to tell and how.

The approach taken towards the interviews was inspired by the life story/life history approach (Spradley, 1979; Atkinson, 1978), which seeks to view each participant's "life-as-a-whole," that is, to understand "not only one life across time but how individual lives interact with the whole" (Atkinson, 1978, p. 4). The life history approach is an in-depth, qualitative approach to research which seeks to highlight the importance, value, and uniqueness of each life as well as acknowledge the common human qualities that we all share (Atkinson, 1978). Thus, life history is specifically chosen in this study to make space for each participant's story, given that the life stories of asylum seekers and particularly women are very rarely recorded and given the space they deserve, as previously discussed.

3.2.2. Towards ethnographic fieldwork

In the early stages of the project, I did not think doing ethnographic fieldwork would be feasible, as I thought that spending a lot of time at the asylum centers would not be possible. I had volunteered in an asylum center during my master's degree program, and I knew that they did not always have common spaces where people could "hang out" and where I could talk to people and conduct participant observation. I was also uncertain as to whether or not the participants would feel comfortable enough to invite me into their accommodation to spend time with them and see what they did during their day. However, after the first interviews, the women that I talked to seemed to be eager for me to visit them again, so I started thinking about the possibility of taking an approach inspired by ethnographic fieldwork, albeit being aware of the barriers I could encounter along the way. So, I started visiting most of the women regularly, approximately once every few weeks, and spent several hours with them. After each of these meetings, I would jot down my reflections in my fieldwork journal. Initially, they would receive me as a visitor, serve me a drink and something to eat, and then we would sit and talk about whatever came up. I would let the conversation flow in whichever direction the woman wanted. As we became more familiar with each other, the women seemed to relax more and go about their normal days when I visited. They would excuse themselves to pray or go pick up the laundry. Sometimes, some of them took me with them to visit friends within the asylum center or go to the center's office to run an errand. However, with most, we spent time in their rooms.

According to what they told me, this is also what they did most of the time in the asylum center, sit on their sofa, talk, drink tea or coffee, eat, watch TV occasionally, or look at some videos, little more. Hence, these visits, and the time I spent with the women, started to look more and more like participant observation.

In the second phase of fieldwork, I also spent some time with the four women that I followed into their early stages of settlement in the municipality, in addition to the interview time. In the first visit, they would usually invite me for lunch or dinner, and we would spend time in their new houses, which they would give me a tour of. Some would also show me around their new neighborhood and the places they usually went on a weekly basis, like the language school, the shop, and the walking areas. Two of the women lived far away from where I lived, prompting them to invite me to stay with them over the weekend, which I did.

However, although I was able to spend some time with the women during both phases and have several informal conversations, in addition to the formal interviews, I also experienced several challenges that made it difficult for me to conduct a more in-depth ethnographic study. These challenges were related to entering and staying in the “field” and, most importantly, gaining the women’s trust to be able to visit them often and spend an equal amount of time with each woman. I discuss these challenges in greater detail in the following section.

Nevertheless, I believe that the time I spent with the women in their new homes, with their families and (occasionally) friends, having informal conversations and, in some instances, seeing them go about their days allowed me a glimpse into their everyday lives. Being able to build trust over time allowed me to witness and hear things that I otherwise might not have been able to. Moreover, it allowed further freedom and possibility for the participants to address issues that they saw as valuable and that may have not come up in the interview, given its more structured nature. Thus, given that my interest was in the everyday lives of the women in the asylum center, I think that combining the interview with informal meetings with each participant allowed me to get deeper insight into their days than I could have from the interviews alone. As Blommaert and Jie explain, “ethnographic fieldwork is aimed at finding out things that are often not seen as important but belong to the implicit structures of people’s life. Asking is indeed very often the worst possible way of trying to find out” (2010, p. 3).

I am aware that it may be problematic to refer to my method as participant observation and ethnography. Participant observation is, for many, believed to be ethnography’s method, defined as “a method in which a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture” (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002, p. 1). According to this

definition, and many other definitions available of participant observation and ethnography, my approach would not be considered as such. For many, the time I spent with the women would not be enough to call it ethnographic research, as I did not live with them or spend several months observing and participating in their day-to-day lives. As I mention, especially in the beginning, my time spent with them was more in the format of a formal visit, instead of them going about their day and me joining them.

Moreover, although I was not able to join the women in their day-to-day over an extended period of time, I did have contact with almost all nine women for over a year, either face-to-face or over the phone. With the four I was able to follow up with, I have maintained contact with them even after having finished the fieldwork. Having contact with the women over time, although it is not the same as participant observation, did allow me to gain some insight into their changing circumstances, moods, and aspirations. Because my approach was very much inspired by ethnographic methods and epistemology, I do refer to it more widely as “ethnographic fieldwork.” In this thesis’ articles, due to a lack of space, I was not able to go into detail about what I meant with it, as I have done here. I did, however, briefly explain my methods and approximately how often and how much time I spent with the women.

3.2.3. The recruitment and criteria

In the following section, I will chronologically describe the steps that I took, the reflections I had, and the challenges I encountered while recruiting the participants and conducting the interviews.

As mentioned earlier, I wanted to talk to the women seeking asylum themselves, to listen to their experiences and their narratives. My initial idea was to talk to women who had recently arrived in Norway. This way, I would be able to follow their experiences from, more or less, the early stages of arrival and through the asylum procedures, until they would receive the residence permit, move out of the asylum center, and settle in a municipality. The second criteria that I had in mind was that the women had to have a high probability of receiving a permanent residence permit, as I wanted to follow them through those stages. Otherwise, I had no other criteria. I was open to any nationality, ethnicity, religious background, age (as long as they were over 18), and family circumstance. My reasons for wanting to listen to women’s experiences (those that identified and were registered as women) are mentioned in the

introductory chapter (See section 1.1.). Ideally, I wanted to have participants with a variety of backgrounds, to be able to explore their experiences and stories with an intersectional lens.

The easiest place to find participants with those characteristics was in the asylum centers, as this is where most lived and spent most of their time. After receiving the approval by the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI), I had to get in touch with the asylum centers and ask them for permission to conduct interviews with some of the residents. My idea was to start with the asylum centers in the county¹⁰ where I was based, purely for practical reasons. If the search was not successful, I would expand my search to other counties. I contacted the only two asylum centers left¹¹ in the county in October 2017. As mentioned in the context of the study (Section 1.4.1), Norway began closing down most of its asylum centers from the beginning of 2016, given the low number of asylum seekers arriving in the country.

For my research, this not only meant that there were fewer asylum seekers in general, but, as I was told by the director of one of the asylum centers, that the state had started processing the asylum applications faster, particularly those of Syrians. In addition, the process of moving from the asylum center to a municipality after receiving the residence permit became much faster. This meant that those still living in the asylum centers had not yet heard from their asylum application. All of these circumstances meant that I had less time to talk and spend with the women in the centers, especially those from Syria. Furthermore, a large majority of those who were not Syrian had already received a negative answer. If they had not yet heard about their application, they had lower chances of getting a positive answer, making them inapplicable for my research, since I wanted to follow up those that eventually received a positive answer. These circumstances were, in large part, what made the “recruitment” of participants very challenging, as well as the fact that I was only interested in talking to women, who were a minority among asylum seekers.

Upon contacting the two centers in the county in late 2017, one of them answered straight away and called me in for a meeting in early November 2017. The director of the second center kept postponing our initial meeting, until January 2018. It was when I talked to the director of the first center that I realized I would have to change some of the criteria for the participants. He told me that few asylum seekers had arrived in the last half a year, and especially few women. Furthermore, I did some research on how long it takes, on average, for

¹⁰ I have anonymized the county and the names of the asylum centers on purpose, to avoid any participant being recognized.

¹¹ At the peak of the “refugee crisis,” there were around 5 asylum centers of different characteristics (see section on Norwegian asylum system) in this county. Throughout 2017, the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration started closing down centers in the whole country due to the decreased number of arrivals (Otterlei, 2017).

asylum seekers to receive a residence permit and then move to a municipality. The average was about a year, so I realized that I would not have enough time to follow the participants into their early settlement. Therefore, I decided to recruit women that would most likely receive a residence permit or that already had received one, no matter how long they had been living in Norway.

My initial idea was to volunteer and participate in some of the activities offered in the asylum center, particularly those catered to women. With doing this, I sought to gain the potential participants' trust and for them to feel more comfortable around me when conducting the interviews. However, after discussing this with the director of the center, he advised me not to do this. He explained that there were few activities and few women that participated, and many of those who did had a low probability of receiving a residence permit or had already received a negative answer to their asylum application. He suggested that the best way would be for him to put me in contact with women who fulfilled the requirements, this way I could explain my study to them and ask them to participate. The way he went about selecting these women was to look into the list of residents and select those who already had a residence permit and those likely to receive one due to their nationality. For example, Syrians and Turkish had a high probability to get one, due to the situations in those countries and because most asylum seekers from those countries had recently been given residence permits in Norway.

The director of the center suggested that I go to the women's accommodation with an employee who knew the women well and was often around the apartments helping with practical things. I was not very comfortable doing this at first. I felt like we would be entering the women's personal and private spaces and that they might feel uncomfortable or even pressured to participate because they might be ashamed or scared to say no. However, I became more comfortable when I realized that the women seemed comfortable around the employee who accompanied me and were welcoming of him as well as me. I also realized that this method was preferable to other methods, such as calling in a meeting, which would not be as successful as talking to the women in private. I continued, however, never fully at peace with such an approach.

The first contact with the women went as follows: The employee and I would go together and knock on the doors of their apartments (which they shared with their family or another woman). There the employee would introduce me, explaining to them who I was, what my project was about, and asking them if they would be interested in participating. Some of the women would invite us in and offer us something to drink. In these cases, I could explain a bit more and answer any questions they had. If they then agreed, we would exchange contact

information and agree on a date when I would come for the initial interview. Finally, I would ask them if they wanted an interpreter and, if so, in which language. Three of the women I was put in contact with spoke English quite well and one spoke some Norwegian, since she had already been living in Norway for two years. With these women, I was able to explain the project and who I was. However, in two cases where the women did not speak either Norwegian or English, they were more suspicious about the project and ended up deciding not to participate. It was then that I realized how important it is to have an interpreter with me, but then again, I did not know in advance which languages they spoke, so I was not able to recruit an interpreter for that first contact. Some women asked a neighbor or friend to help me introduce myself and the project, and that was of great help. Once they accepted, I would seek out an interpreter in their language of choice.

In the second center, one of the employees who spoke Arabic talked to some Arabic speaking women that fulfilled the requirements and briefly told them about me. If they initially agreed, he would set up a meeting so I could meet the women, introduce myself, and explain the project, with his help as an interpreter. If they agreed, we would exchange contact information and I would contact them to set up a date for the initial interview once I had an interpreter.

Apart from getting help from the asylum centers' employees in recruiting participants, I also wanted to try to find participants without their help. I believe the asylum centers' employees were genuinely trying to help me find participants that filled the criteria, and they were always helpful. Nevertheless, they were, in a way, the "gatekeepers." They could have had their own particular reasons for choosing the women they suggested I ask to participate. For example, they could have selected women who are rather active and have a positive relationship with the centers' employees so that I would hear, and subsequently write about, mostly good things regarding the center and its employees. I am, of course, unaware if this actually happened, but it is always something to take into account when gatekeepers play a role in the recruitment of participants. Additionally, they did not have anything against me trying to recruit on my own.

I tried the snowball method with the women I had already been put in touch with, but it was rather unsuccessful. The women in both centers had limited contact with other residents in the asylum centers. Of the few people they did have contact with, even fewer had a high probability of receiving a residence permit. Some of the women asked their neighbor or friend to participate, but, for various reasons, none of them ended up participating. Some were moving out of the center soon and, thus, had no time to talk to me. Others might have not wanted to

participate for other reasons, such as lack of trust. Therefore, one of the limitations of this study is that the participants were selected by the asylum centers' employees, who acted as "gatekeepers."

3.2.4. The women and the fieldwork

In line with phenomenology's premise, I was interested in in-depth stories providing 'intimate knowledge' (Mair, 1989 in Etherington, 2008). Therefore, I chose to have less participants who I meet with several times, rather than having a larger sample that I only met with once (Creswell, 2012).

Initially, I intended to find around fifteen participants, with the knowledge that when trying to follow participants over a period of time (approximately one and a half years), there are often high rates of withdrawal (Thomson & Holland, 2010). The withdrawal, I estimated, could leave me with approximately half the number of participants in the second phase of fieldwork. However, after about six months, I had only managed to recruit nine participants from the two asylum centers. At this point, I decided to stop recruiting for several reasons. The first was due to how slow and challenging the recruitment process had been. The second was because, among my sample, I already had significant diversity in terms of nationality, ethnic background, religious identity, family circumstances, and educational level. This was a rich sample which would allow me to compare across cases, to a certain extent. The third reason why I decided that nine participants was enough was because I was seeking to conduct a study inspired by ethnography and phenomenology, whose studies tend to have small sample sizes. The aim with such an approach is to go in-depth and write about the specific experiences and opinions of the participants, instead of making generalizations and fast conclusions about people or a phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). The fourth reason was because I had already gathered quite a lot of material from the visits I had made to the women. These considerations made me decide to stop recruiting and focus instead on spending the remaining time left in the fieldwork phase visiting the women that were still in the asylum center.

First phase of fieldwork

Nine women participated in the first phase of field work while living in an asylum center. The women had various nationalities: Syria (4), Ethiopia (1), Sudan (1), Turkey (1), China (1), and

a country in the Horn of Africa¹² (1). Their ages ranged from early twenties to mid-forties. Four were single, had no children, and arrived in Norway without any family. One had a child and husband but had travelled alone. Three others came with their children and husbands, and one came only with her children. Seven of them were Muslims, although from different traditions, one was Syrian Orthodox Christian, and one was a Falun Gong practitioner. Most of them arrived in 2016 or early 2017.

During this phase of fieldwork, I conducted one in-depth, semi-structured interview per participant and tried to visit each of them at least once a month to spend time with them. However, I was not able to spend the same amount of time with each participant, which affected the amount of data and detail that I was able to collect about each woman. This can be seen as one of the study's limitations. This was primarily a result of the vulnerable and unique circumstances of these women. Not all were equally as welcoming of me, a stranger, into their living spaces and their stories, leading some to share much less detailed and lengthy accounts than others. There was one woman in particular who did not seem to want to talk to me about her religious beliefs and practices, hence, for the second article of this thesis, I did not use her as part of the sample. I believe that her reason for not answering questions about religion had less to do with the religion itself and more to do with the circumstances in which the interview was conducted and her and her husband's mistrust towards me and the interpreter. I discuss this issue further in the section on ethical issues.

As mentioned earlier, the recruitment of participants for this study was rather challenging; it took approximately six months to recruit nine women. Due to this difficulty, it was not possible to be too "picky" about their characteristics, including how long they had been in Norway and living in asylum centers or whether they had already received a residence permit. This meant then that I recruited women who were at different stages of the asylum process. The majority had already received a residence permit and three of the nine women were still waiting. This, in turn, did not allow me to follow many of the women from the early stages of seeking asylum. Therefore, I could not make larger comparisons and generalizations, which also could be seen as a limitation. Nevertheless, I was able to follow two women from the early stages (still waiting for an answer to their asylum application) and two from later stages (after receiving the residence permit and before moving out of the asylum center). This gave me the

¹² I have further anonymized this participant's nationality given her very delicate circumstances. Revealing her nationality could make her easily identifiable.

possibility for certain comparisons between each woman's case, which is what I find most valuable when doing in-depth qualitative research with small samples.

Second phase of fieldwork

As mentioned earlier, I was only able to follow up four of the nine women that participated in the first phase of the fieldwork. The reasons for the other five participants dropping out of the study were various. One of the participants received a negative response to her asylum application. I visited her once or twice after receiving the news, but then she never invited me to visit again. I kept in contact with her until the summer of 2019, when she stopped answering my messages. However, I did not include the conversations we had after she received the negative response in my thesis, given that this made me no longer able to follow her into her early stages of settlement.

One of the other women, although I had her number, rarely answered. I always communicated with her through her roommate, who was also a participant. The reasons she gave me for not answering were that her phone was not working well or that she sometimes did not have the money to text back. Although she was always nice and welcoming, I started to suspect that she did not want to have direct contact with me. She received her residence permit some months before I met her in late 2017, but was still waiting to be resettled to a municipality in mid-2019, when I last heard from her. The difficulties of directly communicating with her and the long time it was taking to be resettled made me unable to follow her into her early stages of settlement.

The third woman that I did not manage to stay in contact with already had a residence permit when I met her, and I only had contact with her through her husband, until shortly after they moved from the asylum center. She told me that she did not have a Norwegian phone number and that is why I was to contact her through her husband. I initially thought that was fine, but then I started to think that there may be other reasons why I was not to have her personal contact information, for example her WhatsApp number, which I am almost certain she had. This particular relationship, with her and her family, was unfortunately very clearly tainted by their mistrust. I believe that it began with our first meeting. She did not speak English nor Norwegian, nor did I speak Arabic, so her friend, who spoke some Norwegian, translated for us. She seemed to understand the purpose of my project and we set up an appointment. I found an interpreter who was also a woman and thought we would have a room to ourselves to talk. I suggested a room in the office of the asylum center, or wherever she felt most

comfortable, and she chose to meet in her apartment. However, since we had set up the meeting on a Saturday, her children and husband were at home. Given that it was a one-room apartment, there was not space for us to have privacy and I did not feel comfortable asking for us to be alone, as it would involve the husband and children going out in the cold and rain.

Now that I had an interpreter, I once again introduced myself, my interpreter, and the project and its purpose. The woman and her husband began by telling how upset they were after recently being contacted by the Norwegian Child Welfare Agency, who was going to begin an investigation on them due to the suspicion of the children's teachers that they were mistreating their children. Although, the interpreter and I thoroughly explained who we were, why we were there, and gave them an information sheet in Arabic, they asked us twice whether we were from the Child Welfare Services. I felt that they did not fully trust us. Additionally, the interview was constantly interrupted by the children and the husband answering some of the questions, especially when the woman gave very short answers. I believe that their mistrust of me and the nature of my visit was the reason why they stopped answering my messages shortly after moving out of the asylum center, preventing me from following up on her and her family.

In the case of the fourth and fifth women, the reasons why I lost contact with them are still unclear to me. They had both been very welcoming while living at the asylum center. Once they moved, both to the East of Norway we maintained contact through messages, and for several months I tried to set up a meeting or visit. It could not be spontaneous as it involved me taking a plane to meet them. I almost met one of them once, but a few days before, she told me she was unable to meet me as she had another appointment she had forgotten about. After a few tries, I felt that maybe they actually did not want to meet me and were uncomfortable telling me. Hence, I stopped trying. Since then, I have not heard from them again.

With the four women I did manage to stay in touch with, I conducted one follow-up interview and visited each of them at least one more time. I was able to visit some of the women more often than others. Hence, similar to the first phase, I was not able to spend the same amount of time with each of the four participants. With some, it was due them being resettled in places that were so far away from where I lived that it involved taking a plane, and doing that more than once or twice was not viable. With others, it was due to getting resettled in later stages of my PhD project, when I had to already be writing the last article. One of them moved to a municipality in the North-West of Norway, meaning I had to take a plane to get there, which made it challenging to visit her more often. Hence, I only visited her once, but she invited me to stay with her and her family for two days to spend time with them and that is when I conducted the follow up interview and had several informal conversations. Two other women

were settled in municipalities in the same county I lived, making it easier to visit them. However, with these women, I needed my interpreter to join me, which meant that I also had to take the interpreter's schedule into consideration. Furthermore, these women only moved a few months after I had met them, so I only had time to visit them once or twice, given that I was at the end of my fieldwork and had to start writing the last article. The fourth participant moved to a municipality close to me, in the South-East of the country. When I went to meetings at VID Stavanger, I often went to visit her as well, which led me to spend more time with her than all of the others. The different amounts of time that I spent with each woman in this phase can also be seen as a limitation of this study.

As of August 2020, I still have contact with all four of these women over WhatsApp, where they update me once in a while on their circumstances.

3.2.5. The interviews and the use of interpreters

The interview and the preparation for it went as follows: After meeting the potential participant and explaining the purpose of the research and the topics that we would discuss, I would set up an appointment for our interview, or take their contact details and contact them when I had found an interpreter. The interpreter was always female and spoke the language of the participant's choice. I would also enquire as to where the participant preferred to meet. I wanted to make sure that the participant felt as comfortable and safe as possible. I asked the asylum centers' directors to use one of their meeting rooms, in case some women preferred to meet me there. Most of them invited me to their apartments for the interview. Just a few preferred to talk in the meeting room of the asylum center. I would start the meetings by explaining more in-depth who I was and the research. The interpreter would also introduce herself, when I had used one.

Before starting the interviews, I would hand out a participant information sheet in the participants' language of choice. After going through it and explaining to her the issues of anonymity and their complete freedom to not participate, or drop out at any point, I asked them to sign the participant consent form, explaining to them the purpose of such form. I also asked them if they were comfortable with me recording our conversation, explaining the purpose of such a recording. I informed them that I would be the only one listening to it and would delete it as soon as I was done working with it.

I started each interview with a wide question, such as, "Can you tell me a bit about yourself?" This let them start the conversation from wherever they wanted. Some women made

a short introduction, often referring to their situation as an asylum seeker in Norway. If they had not provided me too much information about their life before coming to Norway, I would enquire about it. I would ask them to tell me about where they lived and what their everyday life in their “home” country looked like, before and after the war, or issue that led them to flee. I would also enquire about their reason for fleeing, their journey to Norway, and their choice for Norway. Then we would dive into their everyday life in the asylum center and their experiences since arriving in Norway. They would often talk about the challenges they experienced due to seeking asylum and being in a new environment. I would ask them about their religious background, if they were practicing, and what their belief meant to them. I asked about how they practiced back home and in the asylum center, and about any challenges they may have encountered. I was also be interested in what helped them stay positive and hopeful in their everyday. We discussed their dreams, plans, aspirations, and also what they expected from their life after receiving the residence permit and moving out of the asylum center.

In some cases, I had to ask many questions, because the women gave short answers. In these cases, the interview was shorter. In other cases, the women talked for a long time and I had just a few follow-up questions, leading the interviews to last almost two hours. There may be several reasons for these differences, such as the individual character of the person and their feeling of safety and trust towards me and the interpreter, among other reasons that I am unaware of. I usually concluded the interviews by asking the women if they had anything else they wanted to share and how they felt about talking to me.

The follow-up interviews that I conducted with four women usually occurred a few months after they had moved to the municipality, to give them time to settle and gather their initial experiences in their new environment. I started these interviews by asking how the move from the asylum center to the municipality had been, what their daily life looked like now, what the most challenging parts were, and what had changed from living in the asylum center. I also enquired about their current plans and aspirations and asked them to reflect on the plans and aspirations they had told me about in the asylum center, if they were different. After the interviews, I spent some time with the women in their new environment to see for myself what it was like and what they usually did day-to-day.

For six of the interviews in the first phase, I used interpreters because they spoke little to no English or Norwegian or preferred an interpreter. In one of the interviews, the interpreter was a female friend of the participant, who was also a participant in my study, and was chosen by the participant herself. However, after this experience, I decided to try my best to get an external interpreter for the next interviews. I felt at times that the friend-interpreter did not go

into detail in certain parts because the interviewee was talking about something that I had also discussed previously in her interview. I also wanted to avoid any other possible issues that may occur when using a friend of the interviewee as an interpreter.

In total, I had four interpreters: one for Turkish and three for Arabic, all female. I purposefully chose to only use female interpreters since I wanted to make sure the participants felt comfortable, and I thought they would if we were all women. Three of interpreters were students (some on exchange) at the university in my municipality and one was doing her PhD in Norway. I found them by advertising in international student Facebook groups and through my personal contacts. All of them were native speakers and spoke either English or Norwegian fluently. One of them had studied translation and interpretation at a university and another had worked as a certified interpreter in Norway. The third was studying English and Arabic at a university and the fourth had worked as an interpreter and research assistant. I met all of them for an initial interview to assess their language level and experience. I also briefed them on the context in which we would conduct the interviews with the participants. I explained the ethical concerns and I also made them sign a confidentiality agreement before starting the interview. The interpreters would also join me when I went to visit the women more informally. Sometimes, the women would tell me that their friend or husband could translate for us instead, and I agreed since these were more informal conversations, and I wanted to respect the women's choice.

In the second phase, I used interpreters with only two of the women, as the other two spoke either English or Norwegian. In the informal visits, having an interpreter may have made the situation slightly more formal at times, but I always felt that the participants and the interpreters understood each other well and were comfortable around each other.

Nevertheless, as plentiful as the benefits are of using interpreters, there are also certain challenges. One challenge is related to the match between the interpreter and the participant. Research recommends using interpreters of the same sex, culture, ethnicity, religion, class, and age as the participant to avoid misunderstandings, mistrust, and increased power hierarchies (Temple & Edwards, 2002). On one occasion, the interpreter I used turned out to be the former Norwegian teacher of one of the participants, something we only figured out once the interpreter and I went to visit the participant. They seemed to like each other, and the participant felt comfortable. Nevertheless, I did wonder if there was something that the participant omitted or presented in a better light because of this former (power) relationship with the interpreter. Hence, the previous discussion of the outsider-insider spectrum also applies to the interpreter in the sense that, although they share a nationality and language, there may be other factors that

make her have a more in-between position in the spectrum. This is something that the researcher has to take into consideration when recruiting interpreters and, later on, during the interviews and analysis.

Another possible challenge with using interpreters is the difficulty for the researcher to create the kind of rapport with the participant that would lead her to feel more relaxed and comfortable, willing to talk more freely and openly. I did feel that I had a closer relationship with the participants that I had one-on-one conversations and interviews with. As I have mentioned before, this may also be due to the ability to communicate and to commonalities (age, educational level, etc.). Furthermore, with interpreters, there may be less flexibility and spontaneity during the interview. Additionally, using interpreters that are not well trained or briefed may also be challenging as they may not correctly translate terms that may not have a direct translation in the other language (e.g. metaphorical meanings) (Hansen, 1997). This emphasizes the need to either recruit well-trained interpreters or make sure to train and brief them properly before the interview.

3.2.6. Data analysis

Before starting the data analysis, all interviews were transcribed to English. I created a file for each woman and each fieldwork phase. For each woman, I had one document with the transcribed interview of the first phase and the fieldnotes I had taken during my visits while the woman was living in the asylum center. For the second phase of fieldwork, I did the same. I had one document per woman with the transcribed interview and the fieldnotes I had taken after she moved to the municipality. I then went on to code both the interviews and the field notes.

Consistent with this study's critical interpretative phenomenological approach, I drew on the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology for the data. Although IPA was developed within the field of psychology, it has recently been adopted in other fields, especially in the social sciences. This is a particularly fitting approach because its most common method is in-depth qualitative interviews, commonly used in various fields in the social sciences (Smith & Osborn, 2003). It draws from the works of the most known phenomenologists, in particular from three main spheres of philosophy of knowledge: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. The main tenant of IPA is to understand lived experiences and the meanings people attribute to those experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Despite the method being phenomenological, giving that it seeks to understand participants' personal experiences, it also highlights the inevitability of also being interpretative (i.e. hermeneutical).

In particular, my data analysis has been inspired by IPA's step-by-step approach. I conducted this analysis by creating a matrix in a word document with each transcription. I included the interview with each participant and the notes I had made from each participant observation session and informal conversation. After the interview transcriptions and fieldnotes were added to the document, I read and re-read them and even listened to the interview recordings a few times to become acquainted with them further. While doing this, I marked initial themes in the margin of the transcribed interviews and fieldnotes that came up while re-reading them. Basically, I summarized each paragraph of the interview and fieldnotes. The next stage "involves a more analytical or theoretical ordering" of the emergent themes and finding interconnections between them (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 70). In this process, the goal is to differentiate between the themes that will be clustered together and those that will become more superordinate themes. To do this, I went back and forth to the transcripts to make sure that the themes were not straying too far from the words the participant used. I did this with each participant's document individually. Once all transcriptions of the data set were analyzed, I gathered the main themes that came out of all transcriptions and fieldnotes. The point here is to see what the convergences and divergences are within the data.

I made a final table with the main themes throughout all the interviews and fieldnotes. According to Smith and Osborn (2003), there are two factors that need to be taken into consideration when choosing the themes: their prevalence within the data and how well they explain a particular issue. Additionally, although prevalence is an important factor, IPA also highlights the need to pay attention to the stories and themes that are not prevalent. To take into consideration the story that tells something different from the others is equally as important as looking for commonalities among all the stories (Smith & Osborn, 2003). In the Word document that I created for the analysis of each participant's data, I created a table with four columns. The transcription was in the middle column, and in the column to its right, I added the initial comments made in the first readings of the transcription. In the first column to its left, I added the emergent themes, and in the next column to the left, I wrote the main themes. I then used Nvivo purely for organizing the transcript sections under each theme. I used the same procedure for the interviews and fieldnotes I collected in the second phase of the fieldwork.

According to IPA, the analysis does not end here; in fact, an important part of the analysis happens during the writing phase. As Smith and Osborn argue, "the division between analysis and writing up is, to a certain extent, a false one, in that the analysis will be expanded during the writing phase" (2003, p. 76). It is during the writing that the themes become clearer and more nuanced. Smith and Osborn (2003) highlight that during the writing, it is important

to make sure the reader can differentiate between what the participant said and the researcher's interpretation.

It has been argued that "the richness of seeing how an individual's story naturally unfolds" is often lost through a thematic analysis, which tends to disaggregate the data (Tomkins & Eatough, 2010, p. 255). Hence, because the interviews were conducted with a life-history approach (Spradley, 1979; Atkinson, 1978), as I mentioned above, I also drew from this approach during the analysis. I made sure to keep in mind how each theme or verbatim quote by a participant was part of the whole story they had told me.

A note on the role of fieldnotes in the analysis is needed here before moving on to the next issue. As I mentioned earlier, when explaining the methods used in this thesis, the several visits I paid to each woman yielded some fieldnotes. I did not carry out formal participant observation, so my fieldnotes are not a "systematic description of events, behaviours, and artifacts in the social setting chosen for study" (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 79). Instead, the fieldnotes played the following two roles in the analysis. First, spending time with the women, observing (their living spaces and their interactions with their family, friends, and sometimes with employees at the asylum center), and talking to them during these visits provided me with additional contextual information that complemented the information I had gathered during the interview. Second, spending more time with the participants allowed me to get to know them better and further understand their past experiences and their current circumstances. In particular, during the conversations I had with the women in the second phase, I was able to better understand their thought process related to their aspirations, and how they sought to pursue them or what factors were standing in their way. So, in certain aspects, my observations and informal conversations with the women allowed me to add nuance to some of what the women had shared with me in the interviews.

3.3. Ethical considerations

Research with asylum seekers involves several ethical challenges due to the vulnerable situation that they find themselves in. Especially before they receive a residence permit, they are in highly uncertain circumstances, which can have a negative effect on their mental health. Before arrival in the host country, asylum seekers may have experienced violence, persecution, or trauma, which, together with the uncertainty of their future in the host country, can negatively affect their mental and physical health. Talking about their experiences before and after arrival in the host country can be stressful for participants and may even result in re-traumatization.

Therefore, before starting the research, it is necessary to consider whether there may be any potential harm done to the participants, their family, or their community (Adamson & Donovan, 2002; Düvell et al., 2009). For research to be ethically moral, valid, and of quality, researchers need to ask themselves a series of questions prior to commencing the research: What are the reasons for conducting such research? Who is to benefit from it? What are the possible outcomes and potential harms? (Liamputtong, 2008; Vargas-Silva, 2012). As researchers, we have a responsibility to avoid any form of harm to our participants; however, at times, harm, such as re-traumatization, may be unforeseeable and possibly inevitable. Nevertheless, we need to make sure to minimize any potential injury (NESH, 2016).

The data in this thesis was produced in line with the ethical research guidelines of the Norwegian National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH). Additionally, the research project, including the interview guidelines and the informed consent sheets, received the approval of the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD) in October 2017. I also received approval by the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI) to conduct research in asylum centres.

However, in most projects, several other ethical issues may not be anticipated at early stages of the research and require ethical decisions to be made later on. One of the issues that I had to deal with, although not very often, was that of mistrust. This may be because the context of asylum is one of mistrust, starting with that of the host government authorities towards the asylum seeker, and hers in return. Moreover, mistrust is also reinforced when they are excluded from certain parts of society and politics and placed in reception centers in isolated areas far away from the population centers (Hynes, 2003).

To limit their possible mistrust towards me, whenever I met a potential participant, I always tried to make sure that they understood who I was and the purpose of their participation. I tried to be clear in explaining my project and what their participation would entail by providing them this information in their native language. Although, in general, I met with little mistrust, there were some occasions where I did. Such was the case of one of the participants who, despite me explaining to her that I wanted to talk to her alone, had her husband and children present during the interview as I described before. Although this was an isolated case due to the particular family circumstances, I experienced further ethical dilemmas in the follow-up interviews with two other participants. As I mentioned above, the initial interview and visits I had with them while they lived at the asylum center had always gone smoothly. I kept in touch after moving to the municipality; however, after trying several times in vain to set up a meeting, I came to the conclusion that they might not be interested in meeting me again. Therefore, I

decided not to continue insisting. I felt it was not ethically correct for me to keep trying to arrange a meeting if they did not seem welcoming of the idea. Such sensitivity and carefulness are also emphasized in NESH's ethical guidelines "researchers (...) should avoid placing informants under pressure" (NESH, 2016, p.17).

One of the central rules in ethical guidelines is that of ensuring full anonymity, as well as safeguarding personal integrity, securing individual freedom, and upholding self-determination (NESH, 2016). I provided information sheets in the participants' native languages and used interpreters to make sure the participants understood that they would not be identifiable. I explained that, if they consented to recording the interviews, only I would have access to it, and I would delete it once the project was finished. Furthermore, I tried to clearly explain that they were free to decide what gets included in the research and that they could decide to withdraw from it altogether without any consequences. After going through the information sheet and answering any questions they may have had, I asked them to sign the informed consent form. To further ensure confidentiality with the recordings and transcription files, I named each file with the pseudonym that each participant chose for themselves. I never wrote down possibly identifiable information in the transcriptions, such as their real names, age, employment, or education.

I also practiced sensitivity during the interviews. I formulated the questions with ethical guidelines in mind, and, if I sensed they were reluctant to answer a question, I would not pressure them. Instead, I would move to the next question or tell them that it was okay if they did not want to answer. On a few occasions, the participants started crying during the interviews. In these instances, I first apologized if I had said something that had upset them, and then I tried my best to comfort them. I would tell them that we did not need to continue the interview, but in each of these instances, the participant decided to carry on with the conversation anyway.

Another ethical consideration is that, with most of my participants, I spent a considerable amount of time in informal situations during my visits. We would eat, talk, watch TV, listen to music, play with children or pets, and just "hang out". This resulted in the relationship with some of the participants evolving from purely "researcher" and "participant" to something closer to a "friendship". This was a particularly difficult moment for me due to the ethical implications that come with that. I believe that such a development was positive for the project, as the participant would share more of their experiences and thoughts with me. At the same time, although I did enjoy their company, I knew that this was not a friendship on equal terms, as I was still the researcher. Feminist researchers have warned of "attempting to

create a more equal relationship [as it] can paradoxically become exploitation and use ... given that the power differences between researcher and researched cannot be completely eliminated” (Acker, Barry & Esseveld, 1996 in Kirsch, 2005, p. 141). Others have claimed that the undivided interest and attention that interviewers tend to show participants may encourage them to talk about intimate issues (Kirsch, 2005). When doing research with asylum seekers, who are in a “vulnerable” situation, they may particularly enjoy the attention that researchers give them. In this case, the risk may be even more substantial, as they may place too many expectations on the relationship with the researcher. The way that I dealt with this situation was by trying to remind them of our positionalities as researcher and participant. I did this by talking about the research from time to time whenever we met. I would tell them what I was doing with the interview, for example, I would tell them that I was doing the transcription, and later that I was analyzing. I would briefly explain to them how I went about it. At the stage of writing up, I asked them which pseudonym they wanted me to use for them and, once I finished the first article, I took a copy to them, showed them where they were mentioned, and asked them to look at it and let me know if they did not agree with something. Most were happy to receive this copy, but they did not seem too curious about what I had written. A possible reason for this could be that they did not speak English, or their level was not high enough to understand it. In that case, if they showed interest, I would summarize the main arguments of the article, but I found that they were rarely interested in talking about it in detail.

Finally, to this day, I am still in contact with the four women from the last phase. They write to me once in a while, and I try to do the same, asking how they are doing. Whenever I can, I plan to visit them to maintain contact and not just disappear after finishing my research. I believe that maintaining friendly contact for as long as they wish to is a sign of respect and a way to honor the intimate stories that they have shared with me.

In the coming chapter, I discuss the theoretical lenses and concepts I drew from in this study.

4. Theoretical considerations

In this chapter, I provide a more detailed discussion of the multiple theoretical debates that I engage with in this thesis's articles and the project as a whole. I seek to justify and clarify the theoretical considerations for this project by discussing the rationale behind my choices and explaining how the different theoretical lenses illuminate my claims and are related to each other.

A note on the use of theory in this thesis

I believe a short note on the way I have used the theoretical discussions in this thesis is necessary before I delve into them. As I have mentioned in the methodological considerations, this project is inspired by a critical interpretative phenomenological approach to the empirical world. Some phenomenologists (Husserl, [1906] 2000) believe in the possibility and the need to “bracket” one’s worldview and presuppositions to be able to grasp the phenomenon properly. I, however, align with the ideas of phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (1968), who claims “bracketing” is a mere illusion. “Bracketing” is not fully possible, as our particular experiences and socio-cultural predispositions influence our knowledge. However, I have tried to enter the empirical field of my research with as few preconceived assumptions about it as possible, particularly with respect to theoretical approaches. This means that I only delved into the theoretical lenses once I had collected and analyzed the data. After I organized my empirical data into some initial themes, I searched for theoretical lenses that could help frame and give a different explanation and interpretation of my empirical findings. Hence, I used theory in a more inductive approach.

Given that I wanted to explore various aspects of the everyday experiences of women seeking asylum in Norway, I had to use different lenses to shed light on each aspect. Since this project is interdisciplinary by nature and sought to explore different aspects, the theoretical lenses used in the articles are varied; and yet, as this chapter seeks to show, they are interrelated, contributing to shaping the project as a whole.

4.1. The agency and structure debate in social science

This study began with an interest in the everyday life experiences of women seeking asylum in Norway as well, as in their aspirations, goals, and dreams. Yet, almost without noticing, when

drafting the first interview guidelines, I was also asking questions about what the women *did*, as in the practices they engaged in, in their day-to-day lives. Hence, soon enough, it became a research project focusing primarily on the everyday practices of these women. This is why this project is heavily informed by the work of some practice theorists' and why one of the central discussions is that of the interplay between agency and structure. In the following pages, I provide a brief overview of the developments in practice theory and the reason behind the choice of theorists which this study discusses.

One of social scientists' main interests for several decades has been, and still is, the study of human action, in particular "practices," from the mundane practices in everyday life to highly complex patterns of activities in institutional contexts (Rouse, 2006). It was in the late 1970s when the body of scholarly work called Practice Theory started to gain attention. There were several trends and theories in the social sciences that led to this body of work. Some of these were Clifford Geertz's interpretative or symbolic anthropology, Eric Wolf's work on Marxist political economy, and French structuralism, strongly influenced by Claude Levi-Strauss. Although these were all rather different theories, one could say that they had one thing in common: they were all theories of "constraint." In these theories, "[h]uman behaviour was shaped, moulded, ordered and defined by external social and cultural forces and formations: by culture, mental structures, capitalism" (Ortner, 2006, p. 1). Given the predominant focus on constraints, this body of work started to receive critique emphasizing its neglect of human agency. One of the earliest to challenge the constraint perspective within sociology was Erving Goffman (1967, 1959), whose work, along with that of other theorists, received the name of Interactionism. Scholars within this field focused primarily on interpersonal interaction, dismissing all structural limitations. Between these two different poles, Structuralism and Interactionism, is where, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Practice Theory sought to find its place by providing a middle ground (Ortner, 2006).

The three foremost practice theorists were Pierre Bourdieu, with his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), followed by Anthony Giddens' *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (1979), and Marshal Sahlins' *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom* (1981). Instead of seeing the relationship between the social structural constraints and the "practices" of social actors as oppositional, these three theorists claimed it to be dialectical, although in different ways. According to Ortner, "practice theory restored the actor to the social process without losing sight of the larger structures that constrain but also enable social action" (2006, 2). Although practice theorists were conscious of power relations, these were not the

center of their analyses, and each theorist explored power in different ways. Giddens distinguished between two types of power: One he referred to as “domination,” engrained into the cultural and institutional order, and the other he called “power,” as the “actual social relation of real on-the-ground actors” (Ortner, 2006, p. 5).

Bourdieu’s work focuses on power in the form of social relations, but he does not go deeper to examine the particular ways in which power is established through practices or ideologies. His work is centered on his notion of *habitus*, a profoundly engrained structure that determines people’s actions, even leading them to assume being dominated by the structure and others. Similarly, in Sahlins’ work, structural constraints weaved into interpersonal relationships also tend to gain precedence.

Giddens’ theory is slightly different, given that he discusses the idea of the “dialectic of control” (1979 in Ortner, 2006, p. 5). He claims that structures of control are not always all-encompassing; thus, subjects of control have agency and, to a certain degree, some knowledge about the system of control. This allows them, at times, to dodge or resist such control (Ortner, 2006).

This discussion led some scholars to place issues related to power relations and domination in the center of analysis, leading to the “power shift” in the social sciences, headed by theorists such as James Scott, Michel Foucault, Raymond Williams, and others. Their work was related to that of critical studies of race, gender, ethnicity, and colonialism, and these theorist’s work (especially Foucault) played a major role in the work of central scholars in those fields, such as gender theorist Judith Butler and post-colonialist Edward Said. James Scott is considered the father of studies of “resistance,” particularly among slave and peasant resistance movements. Ortner (2006) argues that these three scholars’ works on power can be placed on a spectrum. Scott (1985) is on one end, arguing that power is not entirely invasive, that subjects of domination are aware of it and are able to critique and resist it (either actively or passively). Foucault (1977) is at the other end of the spectrum, claiming power to be omnipresent in the social system, making it impossible to be “outside” of power. Somewhere in the middle is Williams (1977), arguing that although power is quite hegemonic, it is not total, there are certain instances where people subjugated to it may have some knowledge of it.

According to Ortner (2006), it is possible to find great similarities between the early practice theorists and the power theorists in terms of how they see the interplay of structure and agency. She argues that power theories could indeed be seen as different types of practice theories. For example, Bourdieu is similar to Foucault, as he sees *habitus* as a profoundly embedded structure of which individuals are not conscious. Giddens’ ideas are most similar to

Scott's, as he also believed that actors are at least partially aware and capable of reflecting on their circumstances and criticizing and even resisting the system, to a certain degree (Ortner, 2006).

Another practice theorist that is mentioned less often than the ones named above is Michel de Certeau. He is more often mentioned when speaking of resistance, in particular everyday resistance, or resistance in the quotidian. In his book *The Practice of Everyday life* (1984), he argued that concealed within the practices of the mundane, there is creativity and the possibility for resistance, even for the less powerful. Although de Certeau draws both from Foucault and Bourdieu, he also criticizes them, particularly Foucault, for presenting power so all encompassing. De Certeau, like Ortner, is critical of these theorists' ideas that explain that action happens autonomously of "the reflexive subject" (Mitchell, 2007, p. 91). Furthermore, de Certeau argues that in the everyday, discipline is not as pervasive and ubiquitous as Foucault claims (Buchanan, 2000). That is why it is so essential to explore the actions and practices of the quotidian.

According to Grønseth, de Certeau talks about a kind of "everyday agency" that is to be found in "everyday negotiations and dealings" (2013, p. 3). Such agency and human capacity to create is to be found in mundane and habitual practices and behavior. Furthermore, these are capacities that are embodied in humans and that adapt to the current circumstances and environment and, with that, to the changing opportunities and constraints that come with it. Hence, the context to a large extent determines the conditions in which agency and creativity appear (de Certeau, 1984). This was particularly relevant for this study since the context (that of seeking asylum and living in an asylum center) is often perceived to leave little room for people's agency to be acted upon.

4.1.1. The agency and structure debate in migration studies

As mentioned before, this thesis is an interdisciplinary work, primarily set within religious studies, while bringing in approaches from migration studies. Therefore, it seems appropriate to briefly sketch out the discourse of agency and structure within this academic field. The discussion of agency and structure within migration studies has been mostly focused on explaining the migratory process. Castles, de Haas, and Miller (2013) provide an overview of migration theories in their book *The Age of Migration* and have organized them according to the paradigm underlying them. On the one hand, we find the "functionalist" and, on the other, the "historical-structural" theories (Castles, de Haas & Miller, 2013, p. 27). Functionalist

theories “see society as a system, a collection of interdependent parts (individuals, actors), somehow analogous to the functioning of an organism, in which an inherent tendency toward equilibrium exists” (Castles et al., 2013, p. 27). Among these theories, we can find the push-pull models (Passaris, 1989), which “identify economic, environmental, and demographic factors which are assumed to push people out of places of origin and pull them into destination places” (Castles et al., p. 28). We also find the neoclassical theory of migration, which views migrants as rational decision-makers, choosing to migrate by doing a cost-benefit calculation (Castles et al., 2013, p. 29).

Among the historical-structural theories, we find the “globalization theory” (see Petras & Veltmeyer, 2000), which explains migration processes as a result of globalization and its increase in cross-border flows of all things, including people. In this paradigm, there is also the “segmented labor market theory” (see Piore, 1979), which argues that international migration is a result of demand for high-and low-skilled labor by “modern capitalist economies” (Castles et al., 2013, p. 35). Theories both within the “functionalist” and the “historical-structural” paradigms have been criticized for not providing an appropriate explanation of the complex process that is migration. Neoclassical theories have been critiqued for leaving out the historical perspective, the structural constraints, and the role of the state from the analysis, and for presenting people as rational actors. Historical-structural approaches, on the other hand, have taken the structural constraints too much into consideration. Hence, all of these perspectives tend to have either a black or white view on the role of human agency, either through presenting migrants as rational beings or by being too deterministic. As a result, the amount of research taking migrants’ agency into account in a more nuanced way has steadily increased in the last four decades. Current research attempts to “[describe] the various ways in which migrants try to actively and creatively overcome structural constraints such as immigration restrictions, social exclusion, racism and social insecurity” (Castles et al., 2013, p. 37). Some of the resulting theories are network theory (see Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci & Pellegrino, 1999), transnationalism (see Basch, Schiller & Blanc, 1994), and migration systems theory (see Mabogunje, 1970). These theories have mostly focused on the meso-level and, thus, neglect the macro-level, which is also important to consider in the analysis of migratory processes.

More recently, a scholarly body of work has emerged from the aspirations-capability approach developed by Carling (2002) and de Haas (2002). This approach argues that development processes (income growth, better education and infrastructure, and access to information, etc.) contribute to people’s ability to migrate. Simultaneously, it considers the increased awareness about opportunities abroad which lead to increased aspirations to migrate.

The aspirations will increase as development increases, up until the gap between the opportunities at home vs. the opportunities elsewhere significantly narrows. This body of work has also contributed to the discussion on using terms such as “forced” and “voluntary” migration. Instead, it suggests creating a continuum, ranging from the high to low constraints on migration processes, “in which all migrants have agency and deal with structural constraints, although *to highly varying degrees*” (Castles et al., 2013, p. 51, emphasis in original).

As we have seen above, migrants, and in particular asylum seekers and refugees, have often been portrayed as having limited agency and control over their lives. This has, in part, been a result of the advocacy work (also among scholars) to have the rights of refugees further acknowledged and secure funding for helping refugees (Horst, 2007). In fact, scholars may have previously not discussed the agency of refugees and asylum seekers as it could weaken their case for being granted asylum and refugee status (Bakewell, 2010). However, as shown earlier, there is a growing body of research indicating the multiple ways in which refugees and asylum seekers enact their agency (e.g. Horst, 2007; Grønseth, 2013; Bendixsen, 2018; Chase, 2010; Chatty, 2009; Ghorashi et al., 2018).

Some research recognizes that the particular situation of in-betweenness and “at the border,” in which asylum-seekers and refugees find themselves, come with tremendous challenges, such as uncertainty, suffering, and losses. However, they also argue that such circumstances also engender agentive capacities, in particular to craft new lives and selves as well as work towards their own well-being (Grønseth, 2013). The reason why such “in-between” situations can activate existential agency is because they represent a “radical break from the known; they presage new possibilities of relatedness that often transcend specifically interpersonal ties” (Jackson, 2009 in Grønseth, 2013, p. 10). Ghorashi, de Boer, and ten Holder have argued the condition of asylum seekers to be similar to that described by Victor Turner as liminality. They find themselves “*in-between structures* of the past and the future combined with the lack of routine, obligations and responsibilities,” which allows them more freedom when reflecting upon their past, and, in turn, “makes them more resourceful in thinking and acting outside the given structures” (Ghorashi, de Boer & ten Holder, 2018, p. 385). This is not to say that they are not affected by the structural constraints. On the contrary, they have limited agency to influence their legal and social circumstances. However, the authors seek to show the doubleness of asylum seekers’ agency, as the lack of agency in one respect, enables a form of agency to act “outside the normalizing societal structures” (Ghorashi, de Boer & ten Holder, 2018, p. 385).

4.2. Everyday practices and resistance

In this project, I draw on these previously mentioned works, but I chose to use Michel de Certeau's *everyday tactics* as a tool for analyzing the creative, yet mundane, forms of action the women take while living in asylum centers. I do this while simultaneously acknowledging the power structure that constricts their capacity to take too much control over their current lives, given their legal status as asylum seekers. *Tactics* and *strategies* are central concepts in de Certeau's (1984) work for analyzing everyday life and the way in which individual actions are connected to each other in multiple ways. For him, strategies are determined by the assumption of power; they are always hegemonic and act as disciplining mechanisms. With the term tactics, he refers to those practices that are regulated by a lack of power, usually the "practices of the weak or subaltern...[who] must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into 'opportunities'" (de Certeau, 1984, p. 17). De Certeau shows how such tactics are put into practice by giving an example of a subaltern group.

For instance, the ambiguity that subverted from within the Spanish colonizers' "success" in imposing their own culture on the indigenous Indians is well known. Submissive, and even consenting to their subjection, the Indians nevertheless often made of the rituals, representations, and laws imposed on them something quite different from what their conquerors had in mind; they subverted them not by rejecting or altering them, but by using them with respect to ends and references foreign to the system they had no choice but to accept. They were other within the very colonization that outwardly assimilated them; their use of the dominant social order deflected its power, which they lacked the means to challenge; they escaped it without leaving it. (de Certeau, 1984, p. 117)

However, one of the issues with de Certeau's notion of everyday tactics of resistance, is that it is rather vague, in particular when it comes to intended or unintended practices. That is why it is useful to add insights from James Scott's (1990) work on everyday resistance, given that he provides a more concrete framework (Heredia, 2017). He refers to everyday resistance as acts with the intention to survive, diminish the effects of the methods of control of the powerful, or even trick the system (Scott, 1990). Scott contends that these "hidden, disguised everyday practices (of the less powerful) [...] can threaten the power without publicly challenging it" (1990 in Almala, 2014, p. 131).

One of the critiques of the everyday resistance framework has been that its definition is rather broad, making it challenging to determine the intent behind such acts of resistance. This is mainly because acts that have survival as its purpose can easily be confounded with coping mechanisms, and for many, those are not seen as acts of resistance (Heredia, 2017). According to Scott, “only those survival strategies that deny or mitigate claims from appropriating classes can be called resistance” (1985, p. 301). Hence, within the everyday resistance framework, there need not be a conscious and clear intent or motivation to overthrow the system of domination for it to be an act of resistance. De Certeau claims that self-centered acts or acts where subalterns prioritize themselves over the claims of the authority are “an alternative socio-political ethic” (Heredia, 2017, p. 65). Here, I am reminded of Black feminist theorist Audre Lorde’s words: “Caring for [oneself] is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” (Lorde, 1988, p. 86).

Furthermore, Scott, similar to de Certeau, claims that intentionality may lay in the unconscious, as “a collective memory and culture of insubordination to authority” (in Heredia, 2017, p. 63). Moreover, de Certeau’s tactics, like Scott’s acts of resistance, seek to transform the imposed spaces into opportunities through creativity. The hegemonic power might not be directly attacked, as it is more commonly with resistance, but this can also be achieved by undermining, re-appropriating, and ignoring authority. Resistance then is an act or a practice that, in some way, influences an individual’s position of subordination (Heredia, 2017).

4.2.1. Resilience

When I started writing Article I, I was mostly focused on answering the question: What are the tactics that women undertake while living in the asylum center in order to survive and potentially resist the imposed asylum system? It was only after writing the first draft that I realized I needed to also look into how the tactics were developed and what elements determined the kind of tactics they took. This is something that neither de Certeau nor Scott delve into much detail on in their works, so I had to look elsewhere. My reading took me to literature on resilience, and that is where I saw the connection between everyday tactics and the capacity for resilience. The purpose of everyday tactics are to survive and/or resist the challenges being faced, but more specifically for the women, those tactics led them to develop their resilience. I draw on Ungar’s theorization of resilience as

both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to health-sustaining resources, including opportunities to experience feelings of well-being, and a condition of the individual's family, community and culture to provide these health resources and experiences in culturally meaningful ways. (2008, p. 225)

Ungar's work helps us understand that, in order to identify which tactics each participant draws on, we need to explore the opportunities each has and the circumstances in which each is. Drawing from Ungar's argument, we can claim that it is the affective ties with significant others, their educational background, their family circumstances, and others, which contribute to the development of certain tactics to enhance their resilience. Such elements change in relation to the environment they are in and over time; hence their capacity for resilience also changes (Rousseau, Said, Gagné & Bibeau, 1998). The circumstances they are in while seeking asylum in Norway are drastically different from those they were in before. Therefore, it is essential to consider each participant's particular circumstances while seeking asylum and living in an asylum center in Norway to understand what contributes to their resilience.

4.3. The role of religion in everyday life

One of the goals of this study was to explore the significance and role that religious beliefs and practices play in the participants' everyday lives in the asylum center (e.g. Article II). Asylum centers are not usually associated with religion, but, as the body of work on everyday lived religion (Orsi, 2010; Ammerman, 2007, 2013; McGuire, 2008) has shown, it may be found in all sorts of places. I found this to be an interesting lens, which allowed me to focus on religion in the asylum center.

The increasing amount of scholarly work, especially in the last decade, on "everyday lived religion" has considerably changed the academic study of religion. Research in this field has shown how people define their religious identity by their way of living, instead of by a particular doctrine. Moreover, the work of scholars such as McGuire (2008) on "lived religion" has also further brought to light that beliefs and practices, as well as the meanings that people associate with them, are in flux, despite common ideas of them being fixed. This highlights how important it is to pay attention to the changing environment and circumstances people are in. This perspective seems particularly relevant for this project, given its central focus on asylum seekers, people whose circumstances and environment have recently changed drastically.

It is also important to note that the “everyday lived religion” approach does not intend to ignore institutional religion, but rather not make it the main focus, as was done before. Furthermore, this approach to religion does not mean focusing primarily on private forms of religion, but instead on all realms in which religious beliefs and practices may be found (Nyhagen & Halsaa, 2017).

Lived religion focuses on the religious beliefs, practices and experiences of individuals as they are embedded in social relationships that include and span families, neighbourhoods, places of work and leisure, religious spaces, local communities, nation states and global networks ... the lived religion approach investigates religious belief and practice at the micro-level of everyday life. (Nyhagen & Halsaa, 2017, p. 40)

This approach takes into account the lives, experiences, and practices of groups that had previously been overlooked (Woodhead, 2016), such as how Islam is lived in minority contexts (see Jeldtoft, 2011, 2013; Jouili, 2015; Nyhagen & Halsaa, 2017). In this thesis, this approach allows me to take the religious beliefs and practices in the participants’ everyday while living in asylum centers into account, and explore the role they play in such a unique context, one not commonly associated with religion.

4.3.1. Religion as orientation and transformation

As seen above, the “everyday lived religion” lens leads us to explore religious beliefs and practices in relation to the context in which it is practiced. We could argue that one of the main reasons to examine the religious beliefs and practices of the women seeking asylum in Norway is precisely because they find themselves in a new and unique environment, especially due to living in asylum centers. The change of circumstances and context, especially given the characteristics of asylum centers, may influence their religious beliefs, practices, and identity. Along those lines, Levitt (2007 in Ammerman, 2007) has argued that exploring the religious life of migrants is important, as they often provide a different and possibly broader definition of religion, and where it can be found. In other words, we may be able to learn something about religion by studying migrants’ religious beliefs and practices.

In exploring the role of religious beliefs and practices, it has been useful to draw from the work of the Norwegian philosopher of religion, Jan-Olav Henriksen, who takes a pragmatic approach to religion. He suggests asking the question: “What do religions actually do?”

(Henriksen, 2017, p. 197). Henriksen's pragmatic approach is, however, not the same as an instrumentalist or functionalist approach.

Religion and religious resources are not external to people or something they consciously or unconsciously employ to achieve external aims. *Religion is a mode of being in the world* that is internal to people because it has to do with what shapes their identity and their basic points of orientation, and it is linked intimately to how they experience themselves and their world. (Henriksen, 2017, p. 197, my emphasis)

Henriksen argues that human beings require *orientation* in their quest to understand the world around them, to find meaning, and to understand what is most important about life. Religions are often part of an individuals' larger system of orientation; they afford direction when dealing with specific challenges and significant decisions in life. In addition, they help people interpret their experiences and make sense of life in general, as well as their own particular experience (Henriksen, 2017). According to Henriksen (2017, 2016), religions can, in turn, make one feel more at home, as it can provide feelings of belonging by helping identify the familiar among the unfamiliar. This resonates with the "everyday religion" approach, which also sees religion as "how people make sense of their world (...) the 'stories' out of which they live" (Ammerman, 2007, p. 187).

According to Henriksen (2017), religions also provide resources for both personal and social *transformation*. He argues that "the transformative element is a component that enhances religious engagement and contributes important motivation for attempts to change the present situation by means of different practices" (2017, p. 39). Henriksen draws on Tweed's work to spell out religions' realm of transformation, such as that "...religion shapes and is shaped by cognitive (beliefs), moral (values) and affective (emotions) processes" (2017, p. 178). In other words, religions induce a transformation of beliefs, values, and emotions. Hence, common practices of personal transformation to change one's emotional state are rituals such as prayer and meditation. Personal transformation can be more long term, such as a change of one's perspective about a particular thing, as religions also provide guidance and orientation around the (social) world. Religion may also induce transformation as it involves learning and gaining further knowledge of a given religious tradition, and learning results in some transformation (Afdal, 2013 in Henriksen, 2017). Religions may also be involved in changes in religious roles and social status. Finally, social transformation commonly refers to religiously inspired social

movements or struggles. Exploring the transformative component of religion highlights, once more, the inaccuracy of describing religion as merely a worldview (Henriksen, 2017).

The elements in Henriksen's (2017) theory of religions are not entirely novel; there are indeed some similarities with Tweed's (2006) work in *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*. While some scholars (e.g., Dalferth, Long, Kaufman) have mostly focused on the *orientation* aspect of religions, others have paid attention to their aim at *transformation*, although they often refer to it as "salvation" (e.g., Riesenbrot), and not quite with the same understanding as Henriksen's notion of *transformation* (Henriksen, 2017). Hence, Henriksen claims his particular argument is that it is necessary to see religion's resources for orientation and transformation "*as connected and interacting, but not identical*" (2017, p. 2, my emphasis). Furthermore, his argument is drawn from a body of multidisciplinary literature, ranging from philosophy of religion, theology, sociology of religion, and psychology of religion, making it much more substantial and applicable to empirical research.

4.3.2. Religious emotion

To understand the transformative element that Henriksen (2017) refers to, I have drawn on the *theory of religious emotion* by Ole Riis and Linda Woodhead (2010), whose work has also aided Henriksen's development of a theoretical approach to religion. Riis and Woodhead's (2010) approach to religion challenges the tendency to focus on the rational aspects of religion, shifting the attention to its affective feature. They argue that social factors, such as symbols and embodied rituals, which forge – and are forged by – emotions. They join the growing body of research on emotions that challenges the notion that they are merely created within the individual and are purely internal and private (see Ahmed, 2004; Lutz & Abu-Lughod, 1990). Scholars have highlighted the ways that emotions work concretely "to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective" (Ahmed 2004, p. 119). Emotions also work by inciting action in individuals and groups, as they can draw attention and create attraction towards certain objects (symbols) and create repulse towards others. We cannot ignore their power. Furthermore, power is enmeshed within emotions, in particular, those termed "religious," as they "order emotional experience, offer emotional transcendence, and provide powerful inspiration and orientation" (Riis & Woodhead, 2010, p. 94).

Riis and Woodhead "characterize religious emotion in terms of the social and cultural relations that help to constitute it, rather than by reference to a particular type of feeling" (2010,

p.7). They term the religious contexts within which religious emotions come to the fore, “religious emotional regimes,” which define what and how people should feel and how they should articulate such feelings. Such regimes seek to dictate the ways people should act and relate to one another. In turn, as the term “regime” suggests, they are also responsible for forging and reiterating power structures. These regimes are prescribed by institutional authorities, teachers, and parents, both directly and indirectly (Corrigan, 2012). Nevertheless, Riis and Woodhead highlight that emotions should be understood within the framework of agency and structure. This means that people do not blindly replicate the emotional regime as imposed, but rather that actors may also contest and alter them (Riis & Woodhead, 2010). According to Riis and Woodhead

to join a religion is to experience a new way of feeling about self, others, society and the world. Religious people learn to sound the emotional notes approved by the religions to which they belong, and to do so in ways that are authorized by their communities of belonging. In doing so, their emotional lives are formed according to an approved pattern of coherence, not through mere conditioning but through active engagement (...) most religions promise to transfigure emotional lives according to a pattern of order that is embodied and expressed by a religious group, its members, and its sacred symbols, both personal and collective. (2010, p. 11)

Riis and Woodhead (2010) identify three main characteristics of religious emotional regimes: emotional ordering, emotional transcendence-transition, and inspiration-orientation. It is here in particular, where Henriksen draws on for his argument. Emotional ordering refers to how religious emotional regimes provide a guide to “which emotions should be foregrounded, and which should appear only in the ‘backstage’ or not at all. It includes providing guidance, inspiration, and support” to human and material relations (Riis & Woodhead 2010, p. 77). For the religious devotee, they afford order where there usually is emotional chaos. Emotional ordering does not happen automatically, but it requires emotional de-patterning and re-patterning. In other words, the previous emotional regime must be discarded and put aside as false for a new regime to be fully internalized (Riis & Woodhead, 2010). Such emotional ordering is similar to the orientation characteristic that Henriksen (2017) refers to in his theory. However, while the theory of religious emotion focuses more on the orientation within the believer's emotional world, Henriksen expands the orientation to feature broader aspects of the

believer. It is also linked to the notion of religion as transformation, given the need for a change (de-patterning and re-patterning) for the religious emotional regime to have its impact.

Another way in which religious emotional regimes have the capacity for both orientation and (mostly) transformation, is through the characteristic Riis and Woodhead (2010) call “emotional transcendence-transition.” These are moments in which believers go into altered states of consciousness, leaving mundane feelings behind. Individuals usually enter such states out of a wish or need for re-orientation and transformation. This is done through disassociating “from routine patterns of thinking and feeling, to enter deeper into the ‘psyche’ to glimpse new patterns and possibilities, and to return renewed, refreshed, and freed from limiting patterns” (Riis & Woodhead, 2010, p. 88).

The final characteristic of religious emotional regimes is that of emotional inspiration-orientation, which refers to how “religions claim to reveal what is truly sacred, valuable, and meaningful, the emotional orientation they provide often has a particular strong bearing over how adherents live out their lives and what inspires their ultimate loyalty” (Riis & Woodhead, 2010, pp. 89-90).

As seen above, drawing from Henriksen (2017) is useful, given that his theory of religion as orientation and transformation covers all realms of human experience. However, using Riis and Woodhead’s (2010) theory of religious emotions has proven helpful in this thesis as a lens through which to focus more specifically on the inner realm of devotees’ emotions and how they are interconnected to their social surroundings. Furthermore, as seen above, religious emotion is essential to explore, given that it provides “anchorage for meaning and moral identity, and a reference point for mundane interactions and choices” (Riis & Woodhead, 2010, p. 210).

As Riis and Woodhead (2010) argue, this approach is vital as a way to place more attention on the affective aspect of religion. According to them, significant consideration has been placed on religious beliefs and practices, but the role of emotions has previously been rather neglected. The growing interest in the affective aspect within religion can be said to be linked to the growing interest in the everyday lived religion lens, as seen above. Hence, these two lenses are quite compatible with each other.

Finally, Riis and Woodhead’s (2010) theory of religious emotion is an extensive and somewhat complex framework that has received critical commentaries and has yet to be thoroughly tested empirically (Corrigan, 2012; Beckford, 2011). For this thesis, I do not seek to ascribe to the full theoretical framework; however, it has been useful to draw from the characteristics of religious emotional regimes as a lens through which to explore and explain

the role and significance of religious beliefs and practices in the everyday of women seeking asylum in Norway and while living in asylum centers.

4.3.3. Agency in religious piety

As seen above, religious emotional regimes are argued to be situated in the interplay between structure and agency, that is, religious emotions both shape and are shaped by social settings and interactions (Riis & Woodhead, 2010). However, at times, in the way the authors present their arguments, it seems that the religious emotional regimes are much more constraining and pervasive in shaping emotional and social experiences than the other way around, almost leading them to seem functionalist (Beckford, 2011). To ensure the agentic component of practicing religion is not neglected, I have also brought in literature that discusses agency among religious devotees (see Avishai, 2008; Mahmood, 2001, 2005). For a long time, scholarship has viewed pious religious devotees as passive and compliant receivers of religious doctrine, especially if they are women and Muslim or Jewish Orthodox. The primary explanation was that they were either “oppressed or operating with a false consciousness” (Avishai, 2008, p. 411).

In the last decades, sociologists researching gender and religion have produced a large body of work which aims to show the agency of women within the oppressive frameworks. A tendency among these scholars has been to explain agency in terms of either “active resistance” or “strategic compliance” to religious and patriarchal norms (Avishai, 2008; Mahmood, 2001, 2005). Very often have scholars argued that women comply with religious and patriarchal norms for extra-religious gains. Although all these contributions have been extremely valuable for gaining a nuanced and critical understanding of the religious lives of women's religious lives, they have been recently criticized for obscuring the possibility that women may actually form part of conservative religious groups merely for religious purposes (Avishai, 2008).

The work of Saba Mahmood (2001, 2005) on agency and piety has been a gamechanger in the field. She argues that there is a tendency to view agency as synonymous with resistance, yet we may also find agency in actions that comply with norms, and this is only visible if we disconnect the idea of agency “from the goals of progressive politics” (2005, p. 5). Furthermore, she discusses that given that desires are socially and historically situated, no desire can be universal, including that for individual autonomy (Mahmood, 2005). Such values of individual autonomy and choice are standard in secular, liberal societies; hence, individuals who ascribe to them are also complying with the norms (Nyhagen & Halsaa, 2016).

The notion that there is agency to be found in religious piety is also found in the “lived religion” approach expressed by Ammerman (2013). She argues that “spiritual practices are not merely habits and are not undertaken without some sense of agency... although they do often reflect the imprint of institutions that give them shape” (2013, p. 57). According to Orsi (1997 in Nyhagen & Halsaa, 2017), we need to be aware of the circumstances and structures in which agency is undertaken. Furthermore, for some scholars, relying on God’s will and trusting in him to help and show the way forward is classified as passivity. For others, putting one’s faith in the divine is seen as a conscious choice to “detach themselves from ideals of autonomy and rational choice” (Jouili, 2015, p. 185).

Despite the work of scholars on this topic, the belief that orthodox religious people, particularly Muslim women, are “brainwashed” and oppressed by the religious doctrine and its authorities, is still rather dominant in the public debate (e.g. Rafiq, 2019). Hence, as scholars, we need to put more effort into letting women’s voices be heard. The literature discussing agency within religious piety has been especially relevant in this thesis. It urged me to pay attention to how the women in this study may be enacting their agency when practicing religion or drawing from their religious beliefs, unlike much of the previous literature has done.

4.4. Aspirations

As mentioned above, this project focuses mainly on the everyday practices of women who have arrived as asylum seekers in Norway. Some practices are more mundane and habitual, although this does not mean that they lack purpose, as I explore in Article I. Nevertheless, other actions have more explicit motives and aspirations which they are driven by; hence, this project’s interest in exploring the women’s aspirations.

The notion of aspirations has been discussed in various disciplines, expressly in development studies and studies of children and adolescents in education and the labor market (Crivello, 2015; Kao & Tienda, 1998; MacLeod, 2008; Sen, 1999). More recently, the concept has started to gain interest in the field of migration studies (Carling, 2002, 2014; Boccagni, 2017; Collins, 2018). Given the interdisciplinarity of this project, I have drawn from the discourse in these various disciplines to explore how aspirations are (re-)shaped over time, especially in the context of asylum. Although I have primarily drawn on Boccagni (2017) and Appadurai’s (2004) work on aspirations, in this section, I explore the connections between their works and those of others who have also engaged in the discussion on aspirations.

“Aspiration” is a rather ambiguous word. It has received diverse and inconsistent definitions according to each scholar’s understanding. Some have argued that “aspirations” and

“expectations” are synonymous (Plotnick, 1992; Schneider & Stevenson, 1999; Kao & Thompson, 2003). Others have made a distinction between “aspirations,” defining it as “wishes,” “desires,” “hopes,” and “expectations,” which refer to more concrete “ideas” of expected situations (Frye, 2012). This thesis follows the latter definitions, differentiating “aspirations” from “expectations.” Therefore, I use “aspirations,” “goals,” “desires,” and “ambitions” interchangeably.

Aspirations have also been defined as “future images,” “projected futures,” or “projectivities,” referring to “the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to the actor’s hopes, fears, and desires for the future” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 971). Aspirations are thus situated in the intersection of structure and agency. They are valuable to pay attention to as they let us comprehend people’s “relative autonomy and efficacy in shaping [their desired future],” also referred to as their agency (Boccagni, 2017, p. 15).

Mische (2009), drawing on the work of Alfred Schutz (1967), and similar to Boccagni (2017), underscores how action is deeply embedded in any “project” or “projectivity.” We can fathom this by viewing action not as a fixed event that happened in the past but rather as a “yet-to-be-realized future possibility” (Appadurai, 2004). Consequently, if we equate imagining the future and creating “projects” as another synonym of aspirations, we find human agency and action within the latter as well.

According to pragmatist theorists such as Emirbayer and Mische (1998) and Joas (1997, 2000), aspirations, also referred to as “imagined futures,” have elements of “creative action and personal identity” (Frye, 2012, p. 5). A pragmatist theory of aspirations integrates “practical and moral influences on action, positing that standards of morality drive action by shaping models of the self” (Frye, 2012, p.5). Aspirations and other future projectivities are believed to be essential elements of an individual’s sense of identity (Frye, 2012).

Nevertheless, aspirations and desire, despite having a strong agentic nature, are deeply entangled in the social structures and discourses that individuals are surrounded by (Boccagni, 2017; Collins, 2018). Aspirations thus have a temporal, relational, and situational aspect (Boccagni, 2017). Up until recently, many scholars ascribed to the belief that people’s actions were driven by rational decision-making, and their choices were based on notions of utility-maximization. In the migratory context, it is still often assumed that people’s decisions to migrate are rational and calculated choices (Collins, 2018). The same rationale is often used to explain everyday decisions and actions taken by migrants in the host country. This approach ignores the historical and social factors that stand behind their choices. By focusing on

aspirations, the aim is to put emphasis on the idea that emotions, as well as structural elements, deeply influence decision-making and action-taking.

These structural elements are divided between the micro, meso, and macro elements, which are intertwined. On the micro-level, there are structural aspects such as gender, ethnicity, religious background, family background, socio-economic class, and education. On the meso-level, there are local understandings of what a “good life” should look like in terms of occupation, family, health, morality, and honor (Appadurai, 2004). Among these, there are also religious doctrines and beliefs, which may play a significant role in shaping people’s aspirations and life goals (Kiche, 2010; Jouili, 2015). At the macro level, we find the national and global discourses, often tightly linked to global power relations (Crivello, 2015). Both past and present circumstances and experiences have a significant influence on future aspirations. According to Boccagni, “present life conditions and the attendant aspirations are affected by future-oriented dreams, fears and concerns (perceived prospects, opportunities, risks, dilemmas and uncertainties) which do impinge on migrants’ present lifestyles” (2017, p. 7). Moreover, the circumstances of family and loved ones and their aspirations and desires also play an important role in individuals’ aspirations (Boccagni, 2017). The individual’s particular evaluation of the opportunity structure and their assessment of their capabilities are also said to have an influence on aspirations.

The opportunity structure refers to the politico-legal environment and the economic-institutional environment. The politico-legal environment is all types of policies and laws that regulate the status of non-citizens. The economic-institutional environment refers to the labor market, welfare state, and regulations and policies governing migrants’ access to them (Martiniello & Rea, 2014). A person’s external structure of opportunities and their assessment of it changes over time, influenced by changes in people’s lives (life course) and a greater awareness of their social setting (MacLeod, 2008; Meeteren, 2010, Boccagni, 2017). Additionally, it is believed that one’s “capacity to aspire” is reduced whenever one’s future seems indiscernible (Appadurai, 2004, p. 69).

In order to imagine the future and create aspirations, individuals have to have a certain understanding of temporality. The way temporality is contemplated has an impact on their aspirations and actions. Their perceptions of the past (experiences), present, and their link to the future regulate their attitudes, plans for action, choices, and thus their aspirations (Islas-Lopez, 2013; Boccagni, 2017). As Bal and Willems put it, “...aspirations, ...provide us with an analytical lens, or perspective, on how people make sense of their life worlds, their individual lives, their pasts, presents and futures” (2014, p. 254). Hence, by focusing on people’s desires

and aspirations, we are provided a glimpse into how they are shaped and, in turn, how they influence people's choices and actions. Aspirations, although they do not foretell people's actions, influence them rather significantly. Focusing on aspirations in migration contexts, even retrospectively, is believed to be critical "to make sense of [migrants'] evolving attitudes and life projects vis-à-vis both host and home societies" (Boccagni, 2017, p. 2). Furthermore, focusing on migrants' everyday and the aspirations that stand behind their actions and trajectories may be useful "in order to refine the understanding of integration itself" (Boccagni, 2017, p. 16).

Finally, and what is most interesting for this thesis, is that exploring aspirations over time in forced migration contexts allows us to understand the particular challenges that people in such situations face. Additionally, it also helps us comprehend how do the wider circumstances they are in, influence their aspirations and the strategies they take to pursue them.

4.5. Aspirations, identity, and self-identification practices

As seen above, people's aspirations are closely linked to their identities. Experience and social identity influence people's notions of their potential, which, in turn, shapes their aspirations (Boccagni, 2017; Appadurai, 2004). Identities are constructed within social interaction and are influenced, albeit not determined, by surrounding discourses and narratives. In particular, it is social location and power structures that, to a certain extent, shape identity. Humans, despite being exposed to social norms, also have the capacity to analyze, have aspirations, and act according to these. Additionally, identities, both individual and group ones, are constantly in flux, as they are continuously asserted, reasserted, challenged, and thus changed (Nyhagen & Halsaa, 2017). According to Ammerman "public narratives provide recognized 'accounts' one can give of one's behaviour, accounts that identify where one belongs, what one is doing and why" (2003, pp. 213-214). Ideas of belonging and one's position in the social sphere are interconnected with the narrative construction of identities. The most influential social locations are gender, age, ethnicity, class, and religion (Nyhagen & Halsaa, 2017).

Certain locations, depending on the historical circumstances, may be more relevant than others (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Nyhagen and Halsaa (2017) suggest that religion is becoming more noticeable as a social location due to its gradual politicization. This is resulting in what Yuval-Davis describes as "the politics of belonging," meaning the creating of "us" and "them" distinctions and boundaries (Nyhagen & Halsaa, 2017). In this case, identity constructions can

be imposed on individuals or groups, resulting in having a central role in their social location. In turn, “the relationships between [social] locations and identities can become empirically more closely intertwined” (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 203).

Having one’s identity recognized is essential to feeling accepted. However, this recognition is never secure, given that the environment is constantly changing, and recognition with it (Nyhagen & Halsaa, 2017). In a given society, possessing one of the characteristics that are seen as undesirable often leads to being seen and treated as less than a human. The society considers the individual inferior, which leads to the creation and separation of “us” from “them” (Goffman, 1963; Link and Phelan, 2001). Furthermore, to create such a separation, people “construct a stigma-theory, an ideology to explain his[/her] inferiority and account for the danger he[/she] represents, sometimes rationalizing an animosity based on other differences, such as those of social class” (Goffman, 1963, p. 5). This culminates in discriminatory behavior towards “them,” which, in turn, influences the stigmatized person’s beliefs, potentially negatively affecting their well-being and even leading to depression in some cases (Major & O’Brien, 2005).

When a particular identity is targeted, stigmatized, questioned, or discriminated against, individuals (and groups) may cope with it in various ways. They may seek to keep their identity to themselves and only privately use it (if possible). They may alter their identity or even discard it completely. Alternatively, people may further establish their belonging in the identity/group or turn towards victimization. They may also participate in organized political activity (Nyhagen & Halsaa, 2017; Goffman, 1963). In other words, following Goffman’s theorization, identity must be recreated and rebuilt in order to counter stigma (Goffman, 1963). Practices of self-identification may be considered strategies in which individuals reclaim and rebuild their identity; such strategies denote a substantial agentic element.

As seen above, aspirations are argued to be a core element of a person’s sense of self (Frye, 2012). Hence, if we understand identity as a continually developing self-image or narrative about the self we aspire to, we can also see how aspirations influence people’s identity formations (Joas, 2000; Frye, 2012). This is what Frye (2012), in her study on young Malawian women, shows- that aspirations may, in fact, be seen as assertions of identity. I draw on this idea and argue that claiming one’s aspirations may be understood not only as a way of asserting one’s identity but also as a practice of self-identification, which, when experiencing stigma, may be used as a way of dealing with it through reclaiming one’s identity.

5. Summary of articles

Given that this thesis is article-based, comprising of three articles, I present a brief summary¹³ of each article, with particular attention to the different thematic aspects and approaches they take.

5.1. Summary Article I

Willmann Robleda, Z. (2020). Re-Inventing Everyday Life in the Asylum Centre: Everyday Tactics Among Women Seeking Asylum in Norway. *Nordic Journal of Migration Studies*, 10(2). pp. 82–95.

In this article, I explore the everyday life of women seeking asylum and living in asylum centers in Norway. In particular, I examine the agentic tactics they employ to deal with the challenges they encounter and identify the elements that empower and constrain the development of these tactics. Seeking asylum is often characterized by long waits and great uncertainty, often categorized as an exercise of power. In addition, since the “refugee crisis,” several European countries have started implementing measures to make their asylum systems stricter, as a way to attract fewer asylum seekers. The analysis of this article takes this context as a starting point and draws on ethnographic fieldwork with nine women seeking asylum and living in two different asylum centers in the same region of Norway. For this article, I use the narratives of two women in particular, for a more in-depth study of their experiences and practices. I also use de Certeau’s concept of *everyday tactics* together with work on everyday resistance (Scott, 1990) and resilience as a lens through which to understand the ways the women deal with the challenges they encounter in the everyday in the asylum center. I suggest that, although asylum seekers find themselves in situations of serious repression, there are still sparks of agency in the form of everyday tactics, which contribute to their resilience and with which they seek to survive and possibly resist the limitations of the asylum system. I claim that each woman’s particular background and circumstances while seeking asylum determines the tactics she draws from for her everyday survival/resistance. Some of the circumstances that had the strongest

¹³ The summaries presented here are similar to the formal abstracts found in each of the articles yet, they have undergone minor alterations.

influence on the tactics were the structure of the asylum center, their family circumstances, their educational level, and their religiosity.

5.2. Summary Article II

Willmann Robleda, Z. (2020). Compass, Continuity and Change. Everyday Religion Among Women Living in Asylum Centres in Norway, *Religions*, 11(3), 125.

This article discusses the role and significance the women's religious beliefs and practices play in everyday life in the asylum center and the changes they experience in the new context in relation to these religious beliefs and practices. In Norway, asylum seekers are usually accommodated in asylum centers, where they have few meaningful activities to take part in. They often experience their everyday ruled by uncertainty. Previous research has been conducted on the topics of religion among migrants, but authorities and scholars have paid little attention to the role of religious beliefs and practices among asylum seekers and in asylum centers. This article analyzes ethnographic fieldwork with women living in asylum centers over the course of one year, using "everyday lived religion" as a lens. It also draws on Henriksen's (2017) notion of religion as orientation and transformation as well as on Riis and Woodhead's (2010) theory of religious emotion. I show that, for these women, religion acts as a compass, providing meaning to their struggles and a sense of continuity in everyday life in the asylum center. I also illustrate some of the changes the women experience in relation to their religious beliefs, practices, and identity since arriving in Norway, due to being in a new physical and socio-cultural environment and becoming a religious minority.

5.3. Summary Article III

Willmann Robleda, Z. Aspirations as Self-Identification Practices for Rebuilding Spoiled Identity. An In-depth Phenomenological Study of Women Seeking Asylum in Norway. (Submitted to *Refugee Survey Quarterly*).

This article discusses the aspirations of women throughout the early stages of their arrival as asylum seekers in Norway. The following questions guide the discussion: How are women's aspirations influenced by the different stages of the asylum-seeking process in Norway? What role do their aspirations play in how they deal with their (stigmatized) identities? The first stage examined in this article is the highly structured Norwegian asylum system. Upon arrival, asylum seekers are commonly made financially dependent on the state, which significantly restricts their ability to engage in work or other purposeful activities while they wait in asylum centers, sometimes for years. The other stage is the similarly highly structured state-assisted settlement/integration program, in which refugees have to participate in a full-time program to learn the language, culture, and societal norms before being expected to find employment or begin studying. The article's data is based on fieldwork, where I followed four women over the two stages. During this fieldwork, I took a life story approach. I conducted one initial in-depth semi-structured interview per participant, followed by several informal conversations and observations conducted over numerous visits to each participant while they lived in the asylum center. Once the participant received a temporary residence permit and had settled in the Norwegian municipality, I conducted a follow-up interview and collected informal conversations and observations whenever I visited the participant. My analysis led me to find the following paradox: While living in asylum centers, a stage that is seen as determined by structural limitations, the women seemed more ambitious and optimistic about their futures than they did after settling in the municipality. Here, the women seemed to encounter increased restrictions on their aspirations and thus became demotivated, and some even considered returning to their country of origin. Furthermore, in this article, I also demonstrate that by stating their aspirations, the women seemed to be undertaking self-identification practices, as a way to rebuild their stigmatized identities.

6. Discussion and conclusions

This thesis has aimed to inquire into the ways in which women seeking asylum negotiate structural limitations and enact their agency during the early stages of arrival in Norway¹⁴. It has also explored how their aspirations for the future and their religious beliefs and practices are involved and intertwined in these negotiations. These questions were discussed in varying depths in each of the three articles. In the following discussion, I show how, as a whole, this thesis contributes to a wider discourse on the interplay between agency and structure. More specifically, I highlight how the study adds nuance to how space for agency is carved out in situations where there are significant structural limitations. I do this by paying attention to the quotidian and mundane. This discussion also emphasizes the relevance of exploring people's religious beliefs, practices, and identity, not only as a source of resilience but also agency, given its role in the rebuilding of spoiled identities through self-identification practices. I also discuss the importance of taking people's aspirations into consideration – in contexts with significant limitations – as they allow us to understand what elements influence them and how people negotiate limitations to pursue them. Finally, I show that exploring aspirations provides insight into people's identity formation and self-identification practices to deal with a stigmatized identity.

6.1. Everyday agency in mundane practices

As pointed out in the literature review, much of the existing research on asylum seekers and refugees tends to draw on the concepts of coping mechanisms and resilience. This thesis contributes to this body of work by using the notions of everyday agency (de Certeau, 1984), everyday resistance (Scott, 1990, 1985), and resilience (Rousseau et al., 1998; Ungar, 2006) It explores the experiences of women seeking asylum in Norway from a different perspective, which previous research has not done.

¹⁴ With the early stages of arrival, I particularly refer to the process of seeking asylum in Norway and the early stages of resettlement in a Norwegian municipality. Hence, this study, as mentioned in the methodology section, discusses the findings in those two stages: living in the asylum centre and after being resettled into a Norwegian municipality.

According to de Certeau (1984) and other scholars, it is paramount to pay attention to the everyday life, the quotidian, and mundane practices. It is here, de Certeau (1984) argues, that, even in situations of repression, agency and the human capacity to create is located (Certeau, 1984). Drawing on the work of de Certeau (1984) has allowed me to pay attention to the women's everyday mundane practices, such as cooking, reading, and praying, and discover the ways they enact forms of existential agency, which are found in quotidian activities and are often neglected in academic research.

Furthermore, bringing in the theoretical discussion on everyday resistance (Scott, 1990, 1985) has made it possible to see the women's everyday mundane practices as forms of everyday resistance to the (asylum) system. As Scott (1985) points out, acts of everyday resistance, such as these women's everyday practices, are not necessarily motivated by resistance or rebelliousness against the system. Similarly, de Certeau (1984 in Heredia, 2017) argues that subalterns' decision to put their needs and wants first is an act of resistance by nature, as they tend to go against the goals of the authorities. Hence, as explained in the theoretical framework, I have complimented the work of de Certeau (1984) with that of Scott (1990) on everyday resistance as well as on literature on resilience (Rousseau et al., 1998; Ungar, 2006). This has allowed me to show that, with their everyday tactics, the women seek to survive and thus resist the life (reduced to "just sleeping and eating")¹⁵ that the system imposes on asylum seekers.

I am not the first to draw on de Certeau's concept of tactics as an alternative way to discuss the strategies that migrants take and as a way to highlight their agency within dominating state structures (see Bendixsen, 2018; Allsopp et al., 2015; Williams, 2006; Frisina, 2010). However, de Certeau's (1984) concept has not been previously discussed together with Scott's (1990) work on everyday resistance and literature on resilience (Rousseau et al., 1998; Ungar, 2006) to explore agency in the unique context of asylum centers and everyday life there. In particular, I have drawn on Ungar's (2008) and Rousseau and colleague's (1998) claim that one's capacity for resilience does not merely rely on oneself, but is significantly determined by the opportunities one's situation and environment offer. That is, several elements contribute to one's capacity for resilience, such as emotional links with loved ones, family circumstances, and educational background (Rousseau et al., 1998). Hence, bringing ideas from the resilience literature into the discussion has allowed me to show that a significant element in determining

¹⁵ Several women referred to life in the asylum center as just sleeping and eating and not much more.

the women's everyday tactics (and hence, resilience) is the structure of the asylum system and asylum center. This finding adds additional knowledge to the effect that asylum seekers' accommodations (Hauge, Støa & Denizou, 2017) and the structure of the asylum system (Vitus, 2010) have on their well-being, as previous research in Norway and Denmark has shown.

Drawing on Ungar's (2008) and Rousseau and colleague's (1998) argument has also allowed me to show that each woman's particular circumstances and background are also noteworthy elements involved in defining their tactics of resilience. In particular, I refer to three relevant elements: their social networks while seeking asylum, their educational level and background, and their religiosity. Some of these findings resonate with previous studies from Europe, North America, and Australia that also found that asylum seekers and refugees developed resilience through social support from their social networks (Abraham et al., 2018; Goodman et al., 2017; Weiss et al., 2017; Lenette et al., 2013; Williams, 2006). However, this thesis has found that while social contacts, particularly family and close friends, were sources of resilience for some of the women, others sought to maintain their mental health and enhance and their resilience by staying away from friends, given that most were depressed from having to wait so long for an answer to their asylum application. Thus, this finding adds further nuance to the previously mentioned body of literature.

Finally, this thesis shows that women's religion also played a significant role in defining the everyday tactics they drew on to survive and resist the challenges of the asylum system, adding to their resilience. This finding partly coincides with previous research among asylum seekers and refugees (Tiilikainen, 2003; Ní Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010; El-khani, 2017; Darychuk & Jackson, 2015, Juuls & Pedersen, 2019). I discuss the role of religion in the women's everyday life in the asylum center in further detail in the next section.

6.2. Negotiating limitations and enabling agency: the role of religion

Despite the growing research on religion in migration contexts, few scholars have paid attention to the role of religion in everyday life in asylum centers (see Jensen & Juul Petersen, 2019 for the Danish context). This is surprising given that the number of asylum seekers reaching Europe has increased recently, and many of them are coming from countries where the majority considers themselves religious and practicing. As mentioned earlier in this thesis, there is a significant amount of research focusing on migrants' religious identity, but it has examined more "hypervisible" forms of institutional religion, especially Islam. Less attention has been

placed on understanding religious people's practices and worldviews (Dessing et al., 2014). Through the use of the "everyday lived religion" lens (Ammerman, 2007, 2013; McGuire, 2008), this thesis contributes empirically to the growing body of literature exploring the role of religion for asylum seekers and refugees, in particular for women.

By exploring the role of religion in everyday life in asylum centers, this thesis shows that religious beliefs and practices contribute to resilience and agency in various ways. I have shown how the women's religion is an essential element in the everyday life in the asylum center, as it is their "mode of being in the world" (Henriksen, 2017, p. 197). Furthermore, I have indicated that because of that, it helps the women make sense of their circumstances, particularly the uncertainty and insecurity of the asylum-seeking process. By drawing on Henriksen's (2017) discussion of religion as orientation and transformation, this thesis has illustrated that, for most women in this study, their religion provides them with the explanation that any situation in their lives (including the challenges of seeking asylum) is sent by God, and there is a purpose in it and an end to it, at some point. This would provide them then with a purpose and a meaning in their day-to-day while seeking asylum in Norway, which in turn would contribute to their resilience.

In this thesis, I also show that the women's religious beliefs and practices help them cultivate hope, assisting them in maintaining motivation and perseverance in the pursuit of their aspirations. The women's religious beliefs and practices help them stay positive, albeit not always. They trust that God will provide them with better circumstances, which makes them optimistic about their future, their aspirations and goals. This finding coincides with previous research among young asylum seekers, which highlights that praying led the adolescents to forget their current problems and cultivate hopes for the future (Ni Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010). However, few have consistently highlighted the link between religious beliefs and practices and aspirations for the future, something which this thesis contributes to the existing literature.

Furthermore, through the lens of religious emotions, developed by Riis and Woodhead (2010), this thesis shows that the women's religious practices and rituals help them gain control over and transform negative emotional states. The women knew that engaging in certain religious practices and rituals would bring them peace and help them deal with their difficult emotions during asylum, such as uncertainty, anxiety, and depression. This finding coincides with previous research among asylum seekers and refugees in Europe (Ní Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010; Tiilikainen, 2003; Jensen & Juul Petersen, 2019). However, by using Riis and Woodhead's (2010) theory of religious emotions, I add to previous research focusing the

analysis on emotions in relation to religion, which few have done, especially in the particular context of asylum (see Jeldtoft, 2013).

Paying attention to the emotional dimension in religious beliefs and practices also allowed me to illustrate how the change in the women's physical environment had an impact on their religious emotions. In particular, I found that the characteristics of the spaces they practiced their religious rituals and prayers in often inhibited them from creating the "right" atmosphere and emotions needed for engaging with the divine (Riis & Woodhead, 2010). The spaces they had to practice in were often small, lacked privacy, and, at times, lacked the necessary decoration or ornaments. I argue that, in the long run, this may influence the women's religiosity. I also show how other aspects of living in asylum centers, in addition to being in a new socio-cultural (religious) environment, influenced the women's religious beliefs, practices, and identity. For example, due to becoming a religious minority (and stigmatized in the case of Muslims), some women experienced various forms of discrimination or limitations to their religious practice. Additionally, due to the isolated location of the asylum center (far away from a bigger city) come could not find the place of prayer or gathering for their religion. With these findings, I add to previous research on changes in religion after migration by exposing the influence that the asylum system and living in an asylum center has on the women's religious beliefs, practices, and identity. Few scholars have previously explored this.

6.3. Changing Aspirations: Negotiations Between Structure and Agency

Another significant finding of this study is that the different stages of arrival in Norway have an influence on women's aspirations for the future. This is due to each stage's characteristics and the circumstances the women are in at each stage. Conducting interviews with a life history approach (Atkinson, 1998) allowed me to pay attention to the women's life course. By doing this, I have shown that, in the early stages of arrival (while living in asylum centers), their aspirations for their lives in Norway are largely shaped by their past life experiences and circumstances (Boccagni, 2017). However, the various circumstances they encounter while seeking asylum and settling in a Norwegian municipality have certain effects on their aspirations, leading the women to re-shape these.

I have found that the level of (un)certainty the women experience at different stages of arrival has a noteworthy impact on their (changing) aspirations. According to Appadurai (2004), high levels of uncertainty about one's future have a negative effect on the capacity to aspire.

Similarly, a study among young refugees in London, UK, found that dealing with stressful issues, such as with the uncertainty surrounding their immigration status, trouble accessing health care, and financial instability, made it difficult for the young refugees to think about their goals and aspirations (Gateley, 2014). Furthermore, previous research has highlighted the important role that family responsibilities play on various kinds of migrants' aspirations (Boccagni, 2017; Nunn et al., 2014; Hatoss & Huijser, 2010; Wright & Plasterer, 2012), decision-making, and actions (Ryan, Sales, Tilki & Siara, 2009; Willems, 2014). In addition to these, I also found that other elements of the women's current life circumstances, especially their social networks, perceived discrimination, and barriers to achieving their goals, considerably influenced their aspirations.

I found that social networks provide the women with information and knowledge about the Norwegian system and society and about what they could expect in the months and years to come. Through the social contacts made in later stages of arrival (after resettlement in the municipality), they also start to gather information and knowledge about the functioning of the Norwegian labor market and educational system. In short, I found that, when seeking to pursue their career or educational aspirations, these networks helped the women become more acquainted with the structure of opportunity and constraint (Martiniello & Rea, 2014). With this additional information, the women seem to assess the future risks and uncertainties (including the emotional component and repercussions for their loved ones). This, in turn, seems to lead some of the women to re-shape their aspirations according to their newly acquired knowledge of the opportunity structure (Boccagni, 2017). In most cases, they change their aspirations to those they thought they were more certain to achieve (cf. Boccagni, 2017). It is at this point that some women's expectations of how they thought their lives in Norway would and could be start to clash with the reality they encounter.

As mentioned, I also found that perceived discrimination had an influence on the women's aspirations. These experiences lead some women to consider returning to their country of origin, even though they had never thought of this before. This partly coincides with previous research among refugees in the Netherlands, which has shown that perceived discrimination may lead refugees to consider returning to their place of origin (Di Saint Pierre et al., 2015). However, my study illustrates that it is not just perceived discrimination that leads to these thoughts, but also whether they encounter increasing obstacles while pursuing their aspirations and life in Norway.

Finally, despite the significant challenges and limitations experienced while living in the asylum center, the women seem to be more optimistic about their future at this stage than

after having resettled into the municipality, when greater optimism would be expected. This, again, may be due to the limited access to information and knowledge about Norwegian society, in particular the structure of the labor market, while living in asylum centers. However, it could also be the highly structured nature of the integration/settlement program (*Introduksjonsprogrammet*), which seeks to have refugees in employment as soon as possible. This, together with the financial requirements for receiving a permanent residence permit and fear of discrimination in the labor market, may lead people to reshape their aspirations or even become discouraged.

6.4. Aspiring and Conflicting Identities

Social interaction, including the surrounding discourses and narratives, plays a significant role in the (re)shaping of identities. The latter two are, however, not entirely determined by the social sphere, given that humans have the ability to critically engage, reflect on, act on, and have desires independent of social norms and discourses. If we understand identity as future-oriented and the “design of a self to which we aspire” (Joas, 2000, p. 131), we can see how aspirations are a core component of one’s sense of identity (Frye, 2012). Furthermore, as with everything, identities are continuously being challenged and are continually changing (Nyhagen & Halsaa, 2017). Drawing on Frye’s (2012) notion of aspirations as assertions of identity, this study takes a more detailed look at the women’s aspirations to show their (aspired) identities. For example, mothers aspiring for their children to have a more stable and “normal” life, may indirectly aspire to the identity of “a better mother,” who is able to provide such stability for their children. Regarding the occupational aspect, the women also aspire for various professional identities. For example, they aspire to earn their own money, be a bus driver, a child welfare worker (*barnevernsarbeider*), or a cook in a restaurant. Not only do they aspire to have a certain profession, but they also aspire to the social location and identity associated with it. As I shall discuss later, this may also be seen as a self-identification practice, of rebuilding their identity that has been “spoiled” when arriving in Norway.

This thesis also discusses the several ways the women deal with the imposed label of “asylum seeker/refugee” or “Muslim” and the negative connotations that they often carry. As explained earlier, people seeking asylum often deal with conflicting identities, coming to terms with imposed identity constructions that differ from the identities one ascribes to personally. Additionally, when seeking asylum in another country, people have left their homes, their occupations, and loved ones behind, meaning that they have, in some ways, also left their

former social location and identities behind. In Article I, the main discussion centers around the ways in which the women carve out agency in their day-to-day in the asylum center to deal with the challenges they encounter. However, in these negotiations, it is also possible to see how the women come to terms with the temporary “halt” of some of their previous identities. Especially for those who had been working outside of the household, it was particularly difficult to leave their professional identity behind. Being restricted from working or doing other meaningful activities, on top of living with the uncertainty of not knowing when or whether they would get back to something that remotely resembled their previous everyday life, was challenging. This is not to say that the change of circumstances for the women who cared fulltime for the household and children was not difficult. However, as they themselves mentioned, the activities they engaged in day to day did not change substantially, although the circumstances had.

I show how some women established their belonging in the asylum seeker/refugee identity (Nyhagen & Halsaa, 2017). In other words, some women accepted the label, albeit only until they received a residence permit and “began their lives again.” Once they were able to provide for themselves again, they no longer accepted the label. Other women, on the other hand, rejected the imposed identity entirely (Nyhagen & Halsaa, 2017). They did not want to be ascribed such label at all and tried their best to highlight how they were not poor or uneducated. They behaved in specific ways to avoid being associated with being a refugee, e.g. smile and try to behave “normally”.

When exploring the role of religion for the women, this thesis shows how they practice self-identification in asserting their identity as “religious” and “Muslim” or “Christian” or “Falun Gong practitioner.” In the case of the Muslim women in this study, that identity is also imposed. The women’s ethnicity and their wearing of a hijab (all the Muslim women in my study wore it) made them visibly “Muslim”. This imposed identity comes with negative connotations that are often thrown about in public discourse about Muslims and Islam. Some women dealt with this particular imposed understanding of their Muslim identity by keeping this identity private. They explained that their religion was a private matter that they did not seek to discuss with anyone, not even their children. Although they could not keep their identity to themselves in the sense that they chose to continue wearing a hijab and be “visibly Muslim”, they chose to keep the rest of their religion a private matter (Nyhagen & Halsaa, 2017). This narrative may also be a strategy to express to the non-Muslim society in Norway that they will not have to worry about them being Muslim, as they will not “bother” or impose it on anyone; they will keep it to themselves. This can be seen as a response from the women to increasing

negative stereotypes about Islam and the worry of secular/non-Muslim majority societies that the religion, with its “violent” and “misogynist” nature (as the stereotypes claim) will spread and take over their society. Other women reacted to the imposed Muslim identity by explaining that Islam taught to love and respect each other, and they sought to prove that to the skeptics in the Norwegian society.

Compared to the two women who were not Muslim, the Muslim respondents seemed to make more of an effort to defend their religion and state their disidentification with the stereotypical idea of Islam (as violent and misogynist) that is often portrayed in Western media and public discourse. For the two other women in this study, one a Falun Gong practitioner and one a Christian Syrian Orthodox, their religious identity was either part of or the main reason they had to flee their home. This was especially the case with the Falun Gong practitioner. In her home country, ascribing to this spiritual belief and practice not only imposed an identity of “traitor towards the state,” as this spiritual practice is deemed “harmful” to society in China (Kipnis, 2001), but could also lead to imprisonment, as it already had for one of her family members. This woman’s initial response to this imposed identity was to flee her home and seek asylum in Norway, where she would later engage in activism, sharing information about the persecution of Falun Gong practitioners in China and about the nature of the practice.

The thesis discusses the central role religion plays in the women’s lives as a “mode of being in the world” (Henriksen, 2017, p. 197) and as central to their identity. For the women in this study, religion seemed to be at the base of everything, a foundation, or “root reality.” Given that their religious subjectivity was central, it had the status of “root identity” (Neitz, 1987 in Nyhagen & Halsaa, 2017, p. 71).

As previously seen, this thesis demonstrates that religion is an indispensable source of resilience in several ways. However, as we have just seen, it is also part of the women’s self-identification process. Furthermore, the ways in which the women assert their aspirations, despite encountering several limitations to pursue them, may also be seen as practices of self-identification. There is a growing body of work discussing how migrants and minorities deal with stigma and discrimination (Beiser, 2016; Walsh & Tuval-Mashiach, 2012). Few researchers have explored the ways refugees and asylum seekers deal with ascribed labels and their accompanying negative connotations (Kumsa, 2006). Hence, this study contributes with further examples of self-identification practices and strategies individuals take to negotiate the imposed label of “refugee/asylum-seeker.” There is also a growing body of research exploring the ways in which migrants and minorities cope with stigmatized ethnic identities and how they re-develop and negotiate their identity in light of the stigmatization (Kibria, 2002; Madood,

2003; Sackman et al., 2003; Valenta, 2009). This thesis adds to this body of work with the perspective of the religious identity. It also contributes to it by paying attention to aspirations as a way to discern the aspiring identities women seeking asylum attempt to pursue as well as embody as part of their self-identification practices. This is something that previous research has not seemed to have paid enough attention to (see Frye, 2012). Finally, I argue that self-identification should also be seen as a way in which the women seek to carve out agency in circumstances where structural limitations are substantial, and where their current social location seeks to determine their identity. Through these self-identification practices, the women seek to take control of their own identity

6.5. Concluding remarks and suggestions for future research

This thesis has been guided by the following overall questions:

How do women seeking asylum negotiate the structural limitations and (thus) enact their agency during the early stages of arrival in Norway? How are their aspirations for the future and their religious beliefs and practices involved and intertwined in these negotiations?

In light of these questions, I have argued that in the early stages of arrival, while living in asylum centers, the women dealt with and negotiated the various challenges they encountered. They enacted their agency through different agentic practices, such as everyday tactics, by finding guidance and fostering hope through their religious beliefs and practices. Additionally, despite the challenges and changes they encountered (in the asylum center) in relation to their religious practices, they also negotiated ways to continue practicing, albeit with less frequency and in slightly different ways. They also dealt with various challenges in the asylum center by figuring out how to pursue their aspirations or reshaping them in light of the limitations, something that was explored both while living in the asylum center as well as after settling into the municipality. Finally, the women also enacted agency by negotiating the imposed identities and stigma attached to them by developing self-identification processes, drawing from their religious identity as well as from their aspirations.

To sum up, this small-scale qualitative study of a group of women seeking asylum in Norway is, on the one hand, a contribution to the discussion on the experience of seeking asylum and the early stages of settling into a Norwegian municipality. On the other hand, it adds to the debate around the effects such experiences have on people's agency and, more

specifically, their aspirations, identities, and religious beliefs and practices in the host country. This thesis has highlighted the need to pay attention to the quotidian and the everyday practices within it to be able to find agency, even in circumstances of significant structural limitations. In particular, this study highlights the importance of paying attention to the religious sphere of people's lives, as it contributes to their resilience and their agency, given its important role in self-identification processes and the rebuilding of spoiled identities. Additionally, this thesis emphasizes the relevance of exploring people's aspirations and how they go about pursuing them over time. This not only allows us to witness the interplay between agency and structure but, more specifically, it provides insight into how the various circumstances people are in influence their aspirations and their pursuit. Furthermore, and as with religion, this study shows that studying aspirations also enables us to gain insight into people's self-identification processes and their dealing with stigma.

More generally, this study contributes to the wider discussion of the interplay between agency and structure and the discourse of identity and stigma management. For this, this thesis takes a phenomenological (interpretative) and life-story approach to the women's narratives, highlighting the importance of taking people's multiple (intersecting) characteristics, their current circumstances, and previous life experiences into account. Overall, this thesis has presented the stories of nine resilient women that have left their homes and many loved ones behind to pursue a better life for themselves and their families. What these stories have primarily shown is that, despite finding themselves within a highly structured system and with several limitations to what they can do, these women's agency is still undeniably visible. Being aware of not romanticizing their situation, I found agency in their everyday actions (including their religious practices) and in how they negotiate and pursue their aspirations and identities.

Finally, some suggestions for further research would be to conduct a similar study with more participants, potentially including both women and men, and individuals of different ages and life phases, to compare their experiences across ages and genders. Further research could benefit from following participants over a more extended period, from early days of arrival to years after finishing the introduction program. This would allow further insight into the experiences at each stage and the influence of each stage. Future research could also gain from paying further attention to the various living conditions of asylum seekers, such as centralized vs. decentralized accommodation, and the influence it has on their experiences and futures. Finally, it would be beneficial to explore and compare the role of religious beliefs, practices, and identities during the different stages of seeking asylum and settling in a new environment in-depth.

Wordcount: 38 347 words

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8. Appendix 1: Article 1

Willmann Robleda, Z. 2020. Re-Inventing Everyday Life in the Asylum Centre: Everyday Tactics Among Women Seeking Asylum in Norway. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 10(2): pp. 82–95. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.251>

Abstract

Seeking asylum is characterised by long waits and great uncertainty, often categorised as an exercise of power. Recently, most European countries have made their asylum systems stricter and, in this way, less attractive to potential asylum seekers. With this context as a starting point, this article explores the everyday life of women seeking asylum and living in asylum centres in Norway. It examines the agentic tactics they employ to deal with the challenges and the elements that empower and constrain the development of these tactics. It draws on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with asylum-seeking women and uses the narratives of two women for a more in-depth study of their experiences and practices. By drawing on de Certeau, it suggests that although asylum seekers find themselves in situations of serious repression, there are still sparks of agency in the form of everyday tactics with which they seek survival and possibly also resistance.

9. Appendix 2: Article 2

Willmann Robleda, Z. (2020). Compass, Continuity and Change. Everyday Religion among Women Living in Asylum Centers in Norway. *Religions*, 11(3), 125.

Doi: <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11030125>

Abstract

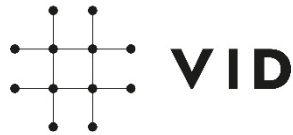
When seeking asylum in Norway, asylum seekers are usually placed in asylum centers, where their everyday life is filled with uncertainty and few meaningful activities. Despite the importance of religion for many residents, little attention is paid both by authorities as well as by scholars to the role of religious beliefs and practices in their everyday life within this context. This article is based on ethnographic research with women living in asylum centers over the course of one year. Through the lens of ‘everyday lived religion’, it explores the role and significance of their religious beliefs and practices in their everyday life in the center, as well as the changes that they experience to these. It argues that religion acts as a compass and provides a sense of continuity in the everyday life in the asylum center. The women also experience certain changes to their religious beliefs and practices due to being in a new socio-cultural environment.

10. Appendix 3: Article 3

Willmann Robleda, Z. 'Negotiating Aspirations and Identity in Exile. An In-Depth Phenomenological Study of Women Seeking Asylum in Norway' (under review) *European Journal of Cultural Studies*

Article manuscript under review

11. Appendix 4: Participant Information Sheet & Interpreter Confidentiality Statement



Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

The Role of Aspirations and Religion in the Integration of Refugee Women in Norway

What is the purpose and background of the study?

This project is part of a PhD degree at the Centre for Mission and Global Studies, VID Specialized University. It will be carried out by the PhD candidate Zubia Willmann Robleda and supervised by professors Gunhild Odden and Kari Storstein-Haug. It will be completed in August 2020 and its main purpose is to understand the experiences of refugee women and their aspirations of their future in Norway.

I would like to invite you to take part in the research study to share your experiences and aspirations for us to be able to understand better the challenges that refugee women face and how they imagine their life in Norway. Your experience shall contribute to a wider debate about the challenges refugee women face.

Voluntary participation

You can decide whether you would like to participate or not, it is completely voluntary. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any point and without need to give a reason. This will not affect the standard of attention or support you receive. If you decide to withdraw, information provided by you will be deleted. The study has been notified to the Data Protection Official for Research, Norwegian Social Science Data Services. Project number 55825.

What will happen to me if I take part? What will I have to do?

Data will be collected through interviews which will take aprox. one hour. The discussion will be informal, I will have a set of prepared questions to guide me through the conversation. Everything will be confidential and anonymous. You are free to leave the conversation at any point and take as many breaks as you want.

The discussion may be recorded if you agree with it, this is so that I can capture your views and experiences easily whilst spending time listening to you during the interview. The recording will not contain your name or other identifying information and the file will be deleted as soon as the transcription is finished. Transcriptions will be kept for two years in accordance with ethics protocols, but they will be in a highly secure environment and password protected always. Some comments from the interview may be used in the final report, but we stress that these will be made without the use of your real name.

For further information or questions contact

PhD Researcher: Zubia Willmann Robleda Zubiawillmann.robleda@vid.no

Supervisor: Gunhild Odden, gunhild.odden@sik.no

By signing this consent form I certify that I agree to the terms of this agreement.

(Signature) _____ (Date) _____

Confidentiality statement for Interpreter/Translator

We would like to ask you to sign a confidentiality agreement to ensure that nothing of what is discussed and mentioned with/by the participants during, before or after the interview(s) is passed on.

I (*name*) am an interpreter/translator in the PhD project “The Role of Aspirations and Religion in the Integration of Refugee Women in Norway” (NSD Project Number 55825) by PhD researcher Zubia Willmann Robleda, from VID Specialised University. Bergen/Stavanger

I promise that I will not pass on any personal information that is discussed before, during and after the interview(s)

Date:

Signature:

12. Appendix 5: Interview guides

Interview guide. Interview I. Fieldwork Phase I

Thank you very much for agreeing to do this interview, your experience and answers are of great value to me so thank you very much for sparing some time. I am aware that some of these questions may be personal and of sensitive nature, therefore if you ever feel like you do not wish to share it with me, feel free to restrain from answering the question. Also feel free to share with me any extra details or experiences that you feel could be relevant to the topic. Thank you very much again for your time.

1. **Life story/Background:** Tell me about you, your life story, from when you were born. Where did you grow up? How long did you go to school for?
2. **Past everyday life:** Can you tell me a bit more about your life back in your country, your everyday? Family, children, work, education?
3. **Arriving in Norway:** How long have you been in Norway? How long did it take you to get here? Do you have refugee status/oppholdstillatelse? How long did it take?
4. **Time in the asylum center:** How has your experience been here in mottak? What have been good things? What have been bad things? What is difficult here? What was your best experience and your worst?
5. **Looking at the (aspired) future:** What are your dreams/goals of the future? in Norway? Why? What are your aspirations about your future in Norway? How do you feel about the future? Do you see yourself achieving them? Where do you see yourself after leaving the mottak? Is it different than your goals? Where would you like to be in 5 years/10 years? What will help you to reach that goal? Who can help you? What obstacles could you find or have experienced in achieving your goals? What worries do you have about the future?
6. **Dealing with challenges:** What helps you stay positive/keep going in difficult moments? What gives you meaning in life? What gives you hope?
7. **Role of religion:** What is your religious background? What does your faith mean to you? Why is your faith important? What role did it play back in your country? And in everyday life in mottak? Has it changed since you came here? Have you had any bad

experiences related to your religion here before or in Norway? What role does faith play in your adaptation, integration in Norway? In achieving your goals?

8. **Role of religious organizations:** Do you go to church, mosque, etc.? What does this mean to you? How does it contribute to your goals? How?
9. **Organizations in the asylum center:** Are there any organizations in the center that have assisted/help you in your goals?
10. **Closing questions:** What do you think could help you to have a better life here in Norway? Is there something that we didn't talk about that you think it's important to say? How did it feel for you to talk to me (us) about these topics?

Interview guide: Interview II. Fieldwork phase II

1. **Move from the asylum centre:** How was the move from the asylum centre to the municipality? How did you feel after moving? How were the first days/weeks after you arrived? Do you think that your time in the asylum centre has affected you? How?
2. **Life in the municipality:** How are you doing these days? What do you do on a normal day here? And on the weekends or your free time? What do you like the most? And the least? What is most difficult now? How are the neighbors? How have they welcomed you? And the municipality? Have you made new friends? Have you found a church, mosque to attend?
3. **Aspirations:** What are your aspirations now? Have they changed? How and why? Where would you like to be in 5/10 years? Do you see yourself reaching those dreams? What obstacles have you found in reaching them so far? What/who is helping you? Or will help you?
4. **The future:** Do you have worries about the future? What helps you stay positive and gives you hope?
5. **Closing:** Is there anything else you would like to share that we haven't talked about?

13. Appendix 6: NSD Approval



Zubla Willmann Robleda
Postboks 184 Vinderen
0319 OSLO

Vår dato: 10.10.2017

Vår ref: 55825 / 3 / EPA

Deres dato:

Deres ref:

Tilbakemelding på melding om behandling av personopplysninger

Vi viser til melding om behandling av personopplysninger, mottatt 11.09.2017.

Meldingen gjelder prosjektet:

55825	<i>Labour market integration of female refugees in Norway, their aspirations and the role of religious organisations</i>
Behandlingsansvarlig	VID vitenskapelig høgskole, ved institusjonens øverste leder
Daglig ansvarlig	Zubla Willmann Robleda

Personvernombudet har vurdert prosjektet, og finner at behandlingen av personopplysninger vil være regulert av § 7-27 i personopplysningsforskriften. Personvernombudet tilrår at prosjektet gjennomføres.

Personvernombudets tilråding forutsetter at prosjektet gjennomføres i tråd med opplysningene gitt i meldeeskjemaet, korrespondanse med ombudet, ombudets kommentarer samt personopplysningsloven og helseregisterloven med forskrifter. Behandlingen av personopplysninger kan settes i gang.

Det gjøres oppmerksom på at det skal gis ny melding dersom behandlingen endres i forhold til de opplysninger som ligger til grunn for personvernombudets vurdering. Endringsmeldinger gis via et eget skjema. Det skal også gis melding etter tre år dersom prosjektet fortsatt pågår. Meldinger skal skje skriftlig til ombudet.

Personvernombudet har lagt ut opplysninger om prosjektet i en offentlig database.

Personvernombudet vil ved prosjektets avslutning, 31.08.2020, rette en henvendelse angående status for behandlingen av personopplysninger.

Dersom noe er uklart ta gjerne kontakt over telefon.

Vennlig hilsen

Dokumentet er elektronisk produsert og godkjent ved NSDs rutiner for elektronisk godkjenning.

Katrine Utaaker Segadal

Eva J. B. Payne

Kontaktperson: Eva J. B. Payne tlf: 55 58 27 97 / eva.payne@nsd.no

Vedlegg: Prosjektvurdering

