

Refugee Entrepreneurship in the Netherlands: Navigating Structural Challenges and Inclusion

Samaneh Khademi



Institute for
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Refugee Entrepreneurship in the Netherlands: Navigating Structural Challenges and Inclusion

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Refugee Entrepreneurship in the Netherlands: Navigating Structural Challenges and Inclusion

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Refugee Entrepreneurship in the Netherlands: Navigating Structural Challenges and Inclusion

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*Based on the Life Stories of Iranian and Syrian Entrepreneurs
with Refugee Background in the Netherlands*

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Research Background

In this PhD dissertation, I study entrepreneurship among entrepreneurs with Iranian and Syrian refugee backgrounds in the Netherlands, examining how entrepreneurship plays a role in their inclusion and how they navigate structural challenges and opportunities by engaging in entrepreneurship in their new society.

The global number of formally recognized refugees has seen a significant surge since approximately 2005, soaring from an estimated 12.8 million in 2005 to 110 million refugees by 2023 (Desai et al., 2021; UNHCR, 2023). Notably, conflicts in Gaza, Ukraine, Syria, and Afghanistan have been particularly impactful, leading to the displacement of millions in recent years (UNHCR, 2023). This growing number of refugees has drawn attention to the importance of their social and economic integration into the host societies. Entrepreneurship has been recognized as a professional activity to facilitate this purpose (Bizri, 2017; Desai et al., 2021; Wauters & Lambrecht, 2006).

Until the last decade, the majority of studies on entrepreneurship did not differentiate refugee entrepreneurship from entrepreneurship among ethnic and immigrant groups, often regarding refugee entrepreneurs merely as a subset of these larger categories (Waldinger et al., 1990; Wauters & Lambrecht, 2006; Wang, 2010). However, since 2015, the flood in refugee numbers has led to increased recognition of the differences between immigrants and refugee entrepreneurship.

First, immigrants often choose to migrate because of economic reasons, seeking better employment opportunities, access to education, or pursue entrepreneurial endeavors (Desai et al., 2021; Edwards, 2017; Wauters & Lambrecht, 2006). In contrast, refugee entrepreneurs are usually compelled to escape dangerous or life-threatening situations in their countries of origin (Wauters & Lambrecht, 2006; Woetzel et al., 2016). Hence, refugees' migration is primarily motivated by safety and survival rather than economic reasons.

Second, immigrants usually have more time to plan and prepare for relocating to a new country than refugees (Edwards, 2017), which can provide a foundation for their entrepreneurial endeavors. They may benefit from established support networks, financial resources, and information about the business landscape of the host country before their arrival (Wauters & Lambrecht, 2006). Immigrants may often possess pre-existing skills or resources that they intend to leverage in their new country. However, refugee entrepreneurs usually find themselves thrust

into their new environment suddenly, without pre-migration planning. Refugees may also encounter immediate challenges related to language barriers, cultural integration, and limited social and economic networks (Wauters & Lambrecht, 2006, 2008). Also, they may face greater hurdles in accessing financial resources, formal education, and established networks, due to their displacement. For instance, the accreditation processes for refugees' certificates take up a lot of time (Khademi et al., 2023). Often their diplomas cannot be certified at all, and they need to re-educate and be trained again (Ager & Strang, 2008; Bevelander, 2016; Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018). In some cases, these obstacles force refugees to switch to a different field of work (Khademi et al., 2023).

Third, the coercive unplanned flight can cause posttraumatic stress disorder for refugees (Wauters & Lambrecht, 2006). This is why refugees often need more time to adjust to their new situation and adapt to these forced changes in their lives, which impacts their pace and ways to socio-economically integrate in the host country (Bakker et al., 2014; Bernard, 1977; Gonsalves, 1992; Lavison, & Halabisky, 2019).

Fourth, immigrants typically go through formal immigration procedures and may hold various types of visas or permits allowing them to work and reside in the destination country (Edwards, 2017). Conversely, refugees seek shelter in another country and are provided with protection under international law. Consequently, their refugee status comes with certain legal entitlements and restrictions that can pose challenges to employment opportunities (Bizri, 2017; Edwards, 2017). As an illustration, regulations in the labor market and legal frameworks dedicated to asylum seekers can influence the extent and speed of their integration into the host country's economy (Desai et al., 2021; Nijhoff, 2019).

Finally, migrants often have the option to safely return to their home countries (Edwards, 2017). In contrast, refugees having fled persecution in their home countries, typically encounter unsafe conditions that hinder their return. This obstacle complicates their ability to acquire funds, capital, or a labor force for their business ventures from their home country (Desai et al., 2021; Wauters & Lambrecht, 2006, 2008).

The distinctions outlined above between refugees and immigrants result in refugees experiencing varying barriers and opportunities at the structural level, as well as differing abilities to capitalize on resources at the individual level. Consequently, refugees possess different levels of market accessibility compared to immigrants when establishing entrepreneurship.

Recognizing the field of refugee entrepreneurship, in the present PhD dissertation I investigate entrepreneurship among entrepreneurs with Iranian and Syrian refugee backgrounds in the Netherlands. Adopting a critical entrepreneurship studies approach (Essers et al., 2017; Tedmanson et al., 2012), I go beyond the concept of socio-economic integration to explore the inclusion of refugee entrepreneurs. By addressing the intersectional positionalities of refugee entrepreneurs, I will illustrate the ways they navigate structural challenges and opportunities through entrepreneurship in their new society.

In this chapter, first I will highlight the existing gaps in the literature and underscore the scientific relevance of this study. Second, I will present the central research question alongside the sub-questions outlined in each subsequent chapter. Third, I will explain the concepts and theoretical debates underpinning this dissertation. Fourth, I will shed light on the societal significance of this research by introducing the two groups of refugee entrepreneurs studied in this dissertation, namely entrepreneurs with Iranian and Syrian backgrounds residing in the Netherlands. Fifth, I will illustrate how the Dutch context has evolved over the last 40 years with regard to societal discourses and integration policies. Finally, I will provide an overview of the methodology employed throughout the study, as well as the structure of this dissertation.

Scientific Relevance

Recently, there has been an emergence of literature on refugee entrepreneurship (Alrawadieh et al., 2019; Bizri, 2017; Else et al., 2003; Fong et al., 2007; Gold, 1988, 1992; Meister & Mauer, 2018; Obschonka et al., 2018; Shneikat & Alrawadieh, 2019; Wauters & Lambrecht, 2006, 2008). The existing literature on refugee entrepreneurship primarily centers on the economic integration of refugees into the labor market (Miltenburg & Dagevos, 2021). While integration is multifaceted, the concept is commonly used to assess refugees' adaptation to the host society, considering factors such as language proficiency, engagement with the receiving society, labor market participation, and educational pursuits (Eijberts & Ghorashi, 2017; Ghorashi, 2021).

However, the role of entrepreneurship in the inclusion of refugees remains largely unexplored, despite recent attention to the concept of inclusion in societies and organizations in general (Eijberts & Ghorashi, 2017; Ghorashi, 2021). Studying inclusion among refugee entrepreneurs goes beyond merely economic integration

to encompass their sense of belonging and acceptance in their host society. The concept of inclusion offers insights into how refugee entrepreneurs, with their various intersectional positionalities, are recognized and embraced within a society, as perceived by refugees themselves. Deploying the concept of inclusion in (refugee) entrepreneurship enriches this literature by providing a nuanced understanding of the experiences of refugee entrepreneurs. The concept of inclusion also enhances our comprehension of the societal dynamics and structures that either facilitate or hinder the incorporation of refugees into entrepreneurial ecosystems. Hence, in this dissertation, I shift from the concept of integration to the notion of inclusion, which will serve as the main concept and focus of this PhD. By studying the experienced inclusion of refugees through entrepreneurship, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the societal dynamics revolving refugee entrepreneurship and sheds light on the processes that foster greater inclusivity and acceptance in the receiving society (see Chapters 3 and 5).

Furthermore, the current literature does not adequately capture the interactive dynamics between individuals and structural influences (Bakewell, 2010; Giddens, 2014; Khademi et al., 2024). Refugees are often depicted as a vulnerable group forced to flee their countries due to uncontrollable circumstances, leading to a narrative that sidelines their agency (Harima, 2022). Similarly, the literature on refugee entrepreneurship tends to neglect their autonomy as entrepreneurial actors (Abebe, 2022). Studying the agency of refugees in regard to the structural context not only challenges stereotypes, but also underscores the valuable contributions of refugee entrepreneurship as a socio-economic activity that fosters inclusion within the host society. However, the responsibility for integration and inclusion does not solely rest on refugees; the significance of structural factors must also be acknowledged (Bakewell, 2010; Giddens, 2014). Hence, a comprehensive understanding of the agency of refugee entrepreneurs necessitates a balanced structure-agency approach (Bakewell, 2010; Giddens, 2014). This approach examines the interaction between individual level factors, such as the agency of refugee entrepreneurs, and structural-level elements, such as governmental policies, economic fluctuations, government regulations, cultural norms, and societal perceptions of refugees, among others. Utilizing a balanced structure-agency paradigm, this dissertation enriches the refugee entrepreneurship literature, highlighting how refugee entrepreneurs navigate the structural complexities of the host society through entrepreneurship as to carve out their place in the labor market (see Chapters 2, 4, and 5).

Moreover, the existing literature has predominantly overlooked the role of multifaceted identities among refugee entrepreneurs, including gender, class, age, and religion in shaping their entrepreneurial endeavors. However, refugee entrepreneurship is profoundly influenced by different intersectional identity categories, that change across time and transnational contexts (Chreim et al., 2018, Essers & Benschop, 2007, 2009, Essers et al., 2010, Ozasir Kacar & Essers, 2019). This research accordingly adopts intersectionality as a comprehensive analytical tool that considers the diverse facets of refugees' identities in the formation of their entrepreneurship. Additionally, this dissertation presents a dynamic analysis, exploring how these intersectional identities and positionalities transform across different timeframes and contexts, influencing refugee entrepreneurship (Anthias 2008) (see Chapters 2 and 4).

In response to the identified gaps in the current literature on refugee entrepreneurship, I will conduct an analysis that integrates the three critical conceptual domains of inclusion, agency-structure, and intersectionality (and as a refinement of this, also translocational positionality). Doing this, I intend to illustrate how the intersectional identities of refugee entrepreneurs- such as gender, class, age, religion, and ethnicity- have changed over time and contexts and how they inform processes of ex/inclusion and agency through refugee entrepreneurship within structural limitations and opportunities (see Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5).

Research Questions

The main question of this research is:

How do entrepreneurs with Iranian and Syrian refugee backgrounds experience inclusion according to their intersectional positionalities, and how do they navigate structural challenges and opportunities through entrepreneurship in the Netherlands? The following sub-questions are addressed in the subsequent Chapters of this dissertation to facilitate answering the main research question:

1. How is entrepreneurship informed by the various intersectional positions of refugees? And how do refugees exert their agency based on these intersecting identities? (Chapter 2)
2. How does entrepreneurship play a role in the inclusion of Iranian refugee entrepreneurs in Dutch society? (Chapter 3)

3. How do Syrian refugee entrepreneurs in the Netherlands exert agency through entrepreneurship given the possibilities and constraints of their translocational positionality and structural context? (Chapter 4)
4. How are the inclusion and agency of entrepreneurs with Iranian and Syrian refugee backgrounds being informed by the evolving Dutch context over time? (Chapter 5)

By addressing these questions, I aim to enhance our understanding of how refugee entrepreneurship is informed by intersectional positionalities and how refugee entrepreneurs experience the process of inclusion and agency through entrepreneurship. In pursuit of this objective, I concentrate on two distinct groups of refugees within the Dutch context: Iranians, who immigrated before 2000 (see Chapter 3), and Syrians who immigrated after 2015 (see Chapter 4). Hereby, I set the stage for a comparative study aimed at discerning differences and similarities in their experiences (see Chapter 5). I will explain the reason for a comparison between these two groups, but first, I will highlight the key theoretical debates and concepts applied in this dissertation.

Concepts and Theoretical Debates

In the following section, I will discuss the theoretical concepts used in this study, categorizing them into five main sections. First, I will address the concepts related to refugee entrepreneurship, including 'refugee', 'entrepreneur', 'refugee entrepreneurs' and 'refugee entrepreneurship'. Second, I will explore the notions of 'integration' and 'inclusion' in refugee entrepreneurship. Third, I will examine the structure-agency debate in refugee entrepreneurship and 'mixed-embeddedness theory'. Fourth, I will analyze the concepts of 'intersectionality' and 'translocational positionality' in the field of refugee entrepreneurship. Finally, I will demonstrate the interconnectedness of intersectionality, agency, and inclusion in refugee entrepreneurship, illustrating how my discussion is grounded in these concepts.

Refugee, Entrepreneur, and Refugee Entrepreneurship

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, under the Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951, p.1), refugees are individuals who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution based on factors like race, religion, nationality, membership in a specific social group, or political opinion, are outside their country of nationality and are unable or unwilling to return due to this fear (UNHCR, 1951).

An entrepreneur refers to “an individual who identifies opportunities in the marketplace, allocates resources, and creates value” (UNCTAD, 2012, p.1). Hence, entrepreneurship embodying the role of an entrepreneur, entails the ability “and willingness to undertake conception, organization, and management of a productive new venture, accepting all attendant risks and seeking profit as a reward” (UNCTAD, 2012 p.1). This definition encompasses a wide range of entrepreneurial activities including microenterprises, small to medium-size enterprises (SMEs) high-growth firms, and self-employment. Refugee entrepreneurs are people who have been involuntarily displaced (Abebe, 2022; Ram et al., 2022), yet they actively engage in creating or expanding economic activity by identifying and capitalizing on opportunities for new goods, services, or markets (OECD, 2017).

As previously mentioned, refugee entrepreneurship is a growing and relatively young field within entrepreneurship studies. Heilbrunn and Iannone (2020) categorize studies on refugee entrepreneurship based on patterns of refugee migration, revealing three distinct waves of studies. The first wave, extending up to the mid-1990s, concentrates on refugees from WWI, WWII, and the former Soviet Union who resettled in their host countries. Studies within this wave notably examine Jews escaping persecution and populations from the former Soviet Union, particularly their engagement in entrepreneurship across North America (Gold, 1985, 1988, 1992). These studies collectively reflect the geopolitical transformations prompted by WWI. Although this body of research comprises only a few studies, it established the foundation of refugee entrepreneurship studies (Heilbrunn & Iannone, 2020).

The second wave of studies on refugee entrepreneurship shifted its focus to refugees from developing countries who have migrated to developed nations. These studies, conducted from the late 1990s onward, investigate refugee entrepreneurs, primarily originating from African and Middle Eastern countries, as they set up businesses in developed countries (Heilbrunn & Iannone, 2020). Within this wave of research, several European countries, including Belgium, Germany, Greece, Portugal, Sweden, and the UK, have emerged as new focal points for examining refugee entrepreneurship. These studies delve into the characteristics of refugee entrepreneurship, the challenges faced by refugee entrepreneurs, and their overall impact on domestic entrepreneurship in the host society (Wauters & Lambrecht, 2006, 2007, 2008).

The third wave of studies on refugee entrepreneurship addresses refugees migrating from developing countries to other developing countries, particularly

in regions such as Asia and Africa (Almohammad et al., 2021; Atasü-Topcuoğlu, 2019; Bizri, 2017; Heilbrunn & Iannone, 2020; Refai et al., 2018; Shneikat & Alrawadieh, 2019). This wave is largely driven by the substantial influx of Syrian refugees into the neighboring countries, following the onset of the conflict in 2011, with approximately 3,300 million in Turkey, 800,000 in Lebanon and 660,000 in Jordan (UNHCR, 2023). While numerous recent studies in the field of refugee entrepreneurship may not align precisely with the proposed time frames of the three waves, this pattern highlights that certain regions experienced higher research activity during specific periods (Heilbrunn & Iannone, 2020).

The majority of the literature on refugee entrepreneurship in developed host countries (waves 1 and 2) heavily relies on theories from migrant/immigration studies, such as ethnic entrepreneurship and social networks, ethnic enclaves, diaspora theories, mixed embeddedness, and disadvantage theory (Heilbrunn & Iannone, 2020). Meanwhile, studies investigating refugee entrepreneurship in developing countries (wave 3) predominantly utilize theories centered around economic development, institutional theories, camp economies (Alkhaled & Sasaki, 2021; De la Chaux & Haugh, 2020), and livelihood approaches (Heilbrunn & Iannone, 2020). Many theories employed in refugee entrepreneurship overlap with those utilized in immigrant entrepreneurship (Abebe, 2022; Heilbrunn & Iannone, 2020), likely stemming from the emerging status of refugee entrepreneurship as a field. In this dissertation, I seek to contribute to the field of refugee entrepreneurship by combining the three key conceptual areas: inclusion, structure-agency, and intersectionality.

Integration and Inclusion in Refugee Entrepreneurship

In refugee scholarship, the concept of integration typically encompasses a multidimensional, reciprocal process. The integration process entails immigrants' willingness to adapt to the lifestyle of the host society, alongside the receiving society's readiness to facilitate access to employment and services while accepting refugees into the broader social fabric (Bakker et al., 2014). Most studies on refugee entrepreneurship emphasize the positive role of entrepreneurship in fostering integration (Alrawadieh et al., 2019; Meister & Mauer, 2018; Shneikat & Alrawadieh, 2019). While, some studies have illustrated the enclave impact of refugee entrepreneurship, which prevents integration with the new society (Masurel et al., 2002; Rajman & Tienda, 2000, 2004; Toussaint-Comeau, 2005).

Yet, both strands of literature implicitly assume that refugees must conform to the values and norms of the host society as standards for integration. Consequently, refugees with the higher levels of social interactions, cultural knowledge of the

receiving society, language proficiency, and norm conformity are often considered the most integrated (Duyvendak & Scholten, 2011; Eijberts & Ghorashi, 2017). The drawback of this concept lies in its assumption that integration is the most crucial element in forming a secure, vibrant, and cohesive community (Lavison, & Halabisky, 2019). However, to attain a more nuanced understanding of refugees' positioning in society, it is important to delve into their emotional attachments to society and their sense of being embraced by the host society. This aspect is elucidated by the concept of inclusion (Dobson et al., 2021; Slee, 2019).

The inclusion of refugees refers to a process aimed at enhancing social incorporation, by providing increased "opportunities, access to resources, authentic experiences of belonging and wellbeing and voicing respect for human rights" (Dobson et al., 2021, p.4). Inclusion comprises two main aspects: the 'sense of belonging' to a particular group or society (Dobson et al., 2021; Slee, 2019); and the felt sense of acceptance within the host society (Essers et al., 2021). In this dissertation, I adopt the concept of inclusion to explore refugee entrepreneurs' emotional connections to the host society, their perception of acceptance, and the various forms of belonging they construct through entrepreneurship, influenced by their different intersectional identities. Employing this concept allows us to explain the experiences of inclusion and exclusion from the perspective of refugee entrepreneurs. Hence, I focus specifically on how entrepreneurship shapes their experience of inclusion and sense of belonging, rather than solely examining its role in integration, whether positive or enclave effects. I delve deeper into this topic in Chapters 3 and 5.

Structure- Agency Debate in Refugee Entrepreneurship and Mixed-Embeddedness Theory

Similar to other scholarly fields, such as immigration studies (Bakewell, 2015; Giddens, 2014), the nascent field of refugee entrepreneurship is grappling with achieving a nuanced understanding of the balanced interplay between structural factors- such as societal norms and institutions- and individual agency (Abebe, 2022; Khademi et al., 2024). According to Mahmood, agency refers to "a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable" (Mahmood, 2001, p.210). Such an approach criticizes liberal interpretations of agency, which define it as the ability to act independently and make free choices (Barker, 2005), often leading to an assumption of greater autonomy among refugees than is realistic (Bakewell, 2010). Instead, a more critical approach to agency acknowledges structural constraints on individuals' agency and emphasizes "some degrees of control" individuals exert over the social relations in which a refugee is embedded

(Bakewell, 2010, p.1694). Hence, we need a context-based approach to agency (see Chapters 2, 4, and 5).

In contrast, two dominant approaches in refugee entrepreneurship, the culturalist and structural perspective, still fail to adequately elucidate the realization of agency (Abebe, 2022). The culturalist approach posits that ethnic groups' cultural attributes drive their involvement in specific economic activities, emphasizing how ethnic identity facilitates access to cultural institutions for capital accumulation, family enterprises, and economic collaboration (Abebe, 2022; Gold, 1992). Conversely, the structural approach overlooks refugee entrepreneurs' autonomy, focusing solely on structural limitations (Abebe, 2022). According to this view, refugees establish small businesses due to push factors such as language barriers, limited education, lack of required credentials and licenses, and discrimination (Refai et al., 2018; Wauters & Lambrecht, 2008). Yet, reducing refugee entrepreneurship solely to a response to labor market exclusion is overly simplistic. While refugees indeed become self-employed in reaction to the structural dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in host societies, entrepreneurship also stems from their desire to exert agency (Khademi et al., 2024) (see Chapters 2, 4, and 5).

A widely applied theory in the field is mixed-embeddedness, which seeks to encompass both structure and agency levels (Barberis & Solano, 2018; Kloosterman, 2010; Kloosterman & Rath, 2018). Originating from economic sociology, this theory explores the interplay between economic activities, social structures, and institutional frameworks (Kloosterman et al., 1999; Waldinger et al., 1990). The theory posits that entrepreneurial behavior is not solely dictated by market forces but also by social relationships, cultural norms, and institutional contexts. At its core, the mixed-embeddedness theory includes three fundamental conceptual elements: institutional contexts, opportunity structures, and resources, which interact at macro, meso, and micro levels (Kloosterman et al., 1999; Kloosterman & Rath, 2018). In the context of refugee entrepreneurship, mixed-embeddedness theory can offer valuable insights into how refugees establish and operate businesses within host societies. It illustrates how individual, socioeconomic, and politico-regulatory factors interact to shape the opportunity structures available to refugees, as well as their appeal and accessibility (Abebe, 2022; Khademi et al., 2024; Kloosterman, 2010; Kloosterman et al., 1999; Kloosterman & Rath, 2018; Price & Chacko, 2009).

However, mixed-embeddedness theory has been criticized for its static nature (Anwar & Daniel, 2017; Jones et al., 2014), challenges in operationalization (Anwar

& Daniel, 2017; Ram & Smallbone, 2001), failure to consider individual agency (Abebe, 2022; Anwar & Daniel, 2017), excessive focus on ethnic community factors, presumed uniformity among entrepreneurs, gender-neutrality and a deficiency in intersectional analysis (Ram et al., 2017; Wang and Warn, 2018). In this dissertation, I critically deploy this theory (see Chapter 2). To address the shortcomings of the theory, I combine it with intersectionality, particularly through the lens of translocational positionality. I will further introduce and elaborate these concepts in Chapter 2.

Intersectionality and Translocational Positionality in Refugee Entrepreneurship

Intersectionality is a theoretical framework that originated in critical race theory and feminist studies (Crenshaw, 1990). It acknowledges that individuals hold multiple social identities such as race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, etc., and these identities intersect to shape their experiences and opportunities within society (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 1990). Intersectionality highlights the interconnected nature of inclusion and exclusion that individuals may experience due to the intersections of their various identities (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Gopaldas, 2013).

Intersectionality remains relatively new in refugee entrepreneurship studies (Abebe, 2022). However, this approach can enrich refugee entrepreneurship study in different ways (Romero & Valdez, 2016). By exploring the crossroads of gender, class, ethnicity, age, race, religion, etc. scholars can develop deeper insights into the diverse experiences and strategies of refugee entrepreneurs, as well as structural obstacles they face in their entrepreneurship (Khademi et al., 2024; Salmon & Singleton, 2023) (See Chapter 2). Moreover, intersectionality enables researchers to explore how refugee entrepreneurship intersects with broader social, economic, and political contexts, including refugee policies, labor markets, social networks, and inclusion (Khademi et al., 2024). Intersectionality enables us to analyze the interconnected dimensions of identity and power dynamics that shape the entrepreneurial paths of refugees, influencing their access to entrepreneurial resources (Martinez Dy, 2020).

Despite intersectionality's strengths in delineating individuals' positions within social categories of inclusion and exclusion, it has faced criticism for its perceived static treatment of intersectional components, particularly in the study of migration, displacement, diaspora, and changing environments (Anthias, 2008, 2013, 2020). In response, Anthias (2008, 2013, 2020) introduced 'translocational positionality' into the framework of intersectionality, providing a more dynamic approach (Villares-

Varela & Essers, 2019) to comprehend how individuals' identities, experiences, and opportunities are shaped by their movements across different geographical, social, and cultural spaces (Anthias, 2013, 2020). Translocational positionality underscores the fluidity of identity construction and the ways in which individuals' positions are continually negotiated and redefined in relation to changing contexts (Anthias, 2008, 2013, 2020). Certain identities may gain prominence in a specific time and context, while being less significant in previous contexts (Anthias, 2008).

Despite its potential utility in examining refugee entrepreneurship, translocational positionality remains underexplored in existing literature (Adeeko & Treanor, 2022; Khademi et al., 2024; Salmon & Singleton, 2023). This approach offers a lens through which to analyze how refugees navigate and adapt to diverse social, economic, and cultural landscapes during their journeys and settlement in a new country. In this dissertation, I employ translocational positionality in Chapters 2 and 4, to explore how refugees' multifaceted identities and positionalities —such as gender, class, age, ethnicity, and religion— intersect and evolve amidst displacement, and within the institutional structures in the host society.

Interconnectedness of Intersectionality, Agency, and Inclusion in Refugee Entrepreneurship

The dynamic shifts in refugees' positionality across different times, places, and contexts result in varying experiences of power and subordination. Consequently, different forms of agency emerge, depending on the diverse intersecting aspects of their translocational positionalities and structural opportunities and limitations (see Chapter 4). Refugee entrepreneurs also encounter differing degrees of ex/inclusion. Refugees are more likely to possess the agency to pursue entrepreneurial endeavors in inclusive societies. Such societies actively promote the participation and acceptance of all individuals, regardless of their background. Such structural contexts offer refugees opportunities, resources, and support systems that empower them to engage in entrepreneurial activities. Conversely, in societies where refugees face exclusion and societal barriers, their agency may be restricted, impeding their ability to initiate and sustain businesses (see Chapter 5). Additionally, the exercise of agency by refugee entrepreneurs can contribute to their own inclusion and that of other refugees in society (Khademi et al., 2023) (see Chapter 3). By establishing businesses, refugee entrepreneurs not only improve their own economic situation but also create jobs, contribute to local economies, and challenge stereotypes and prejudices against refugees (see Chapters 4 and 5). This, in turn, can lead to greater acceptance of refugees within the host society, further enhancing their inclusion (see Chapters 3 and 5).

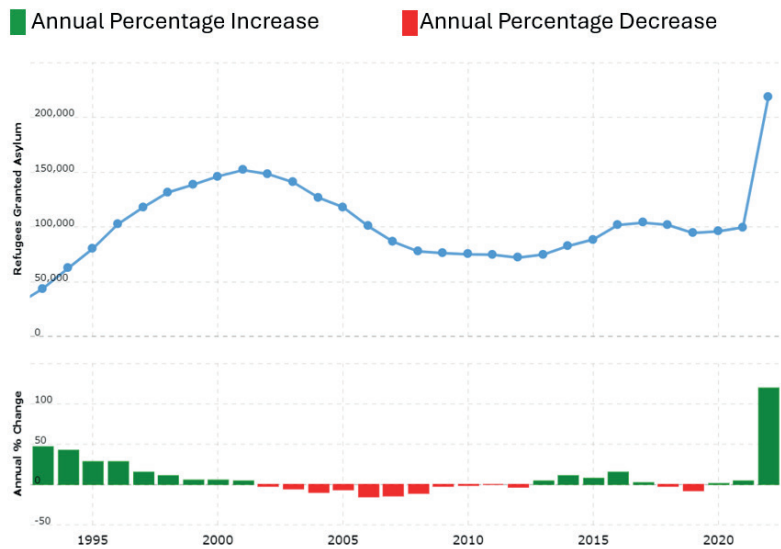
Therefore, I build this dissertation based on the interaction between structural factors and the agency of refugee entrepreneurs. I explore how refugee entrepreneurs navigate structural challenges and opportunities to carve out a new place in the labor market and exert their agency in accordance with their intersectional translocational positionalities. Through this lens, I aim to grasp the dynamic and context-specific nature of refugee entrepreneurship, acknowledging the complexities that arise from the intersections of identities over diverse temporal and spatial dimensions.

Societal Relevance

In 2022, the Netherlands granted asylum to 218,457 refugees, marking a significant 119.37% increase compared to the previous year, 2021 (Macrotrends, 2023). With the refugee population steadily rising and their involvement in (social) entrepreneurship across the country, there is an urgent need to further study refugee entrepreneurship in the Netherlands. The country has a rich history of hosting refugee migration movements. Following the Second World War, the Netherlands welcomed refugees from Eastern Europe (Bakker, 2016). The 1970s saw a diversification of the refugee population, with arrivals from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Notably, Vietnamese boat refugees constituted the largest refugee group by the end of the 1970s (Jennissen, 2011). Figure 1 depicts the Netherlands' refugee statistics from 1993 to 2022.

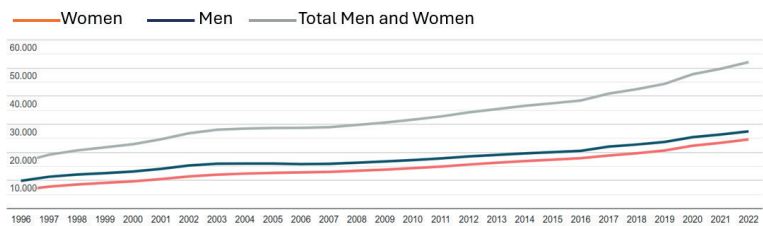
According to the Statistics Netherlands (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek-CBS), there has been a notable increase in first-time asylum requests from Syrians and Iranians during recent years (CBS, 2024), with expectations of this trend continuing. Both groups of Syrian and Iranian refugees exhibit similarities and differences that render this study relevant. The migration of Iranian asylum-seekers to the Netherlands is not a new phenomenon. In the 1980s and 1990s, following the Iranian Revolution of 1979, a significant number of Iranian refugees sought refuge in the Netherlands, forming the initial wave of Iranian refugees (Bakker, 2016; Ghorashi, 2003). Subsequent waves of Iranian immigration have continued to this day. As of 2022, the number of residents with a migration background from Iran (comprising both first and second generations) in the Netherlands stands at 52,099 (Allecijfers, 2024a). Figure 2 illustrates the number of residents with a migration background from Iran in the Netherlands from 1996 to 2022.

Figure 1: Netherlands Refugee Statistics



Source: © 2010-2024 Macrotrends LLC

Figure 2: Residents with a migration background from Iran in the Netherlands

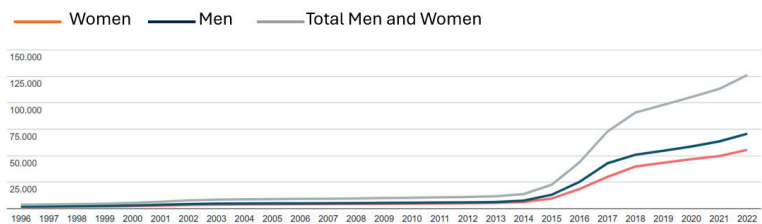


Source: Allecijfers (2024a)

In 1996, during the peak of Iranian migration to the Netherlands, there were only around 3,600 Syrians in the country (Figure 3). However, the number of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands dramatically increased after 2014 coinciding with or as a result of the ongoing war in Syria, soaring from 13,700 to 126,260, by 2022. This figure is more than twice the size of the Iranian community (Allecijfers, 2024b). Consequently, the Syrian refugee population largely comprises newcomers, in contrast to the Iranian group, who are well-established refugees. Figure 3 shows the number of residents with a migration background from Syria in the Netherlands from 1996 to 2022.

According to the Allecijfers report (2024b), 83.5% of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands are under the age of 45. In contrast, the percentage of Iranian group in this age is 67% (Allecijfers, 2024a). This data suggests that the Syrian group is significantly younger than the Iranian group, which could indicate greater potential social and economic dynamism within Dutch society. Furthermore, approximately 84% of individuals with an Iranian background in the Netherlands have attained tertiary education (Dagevos et al., 2022), whereas, only about 21% of the Syrian refugees in the Netherlands have completed higher education (Dagevos et al., 2018). Additionally, by 2018, 22% of Syrian refugees aged 18-30 were enrolled in Dutch higher education (Dieleman 2020).

Figure 3: Residents with a migration background from Syria in the Netherlands



Source: Allecijfers (2024 b)

Regarding labor market participation, both first and second generation individuals of Iranian descent had a participation rate of almost 64 % in 2020 (Dagevos, et al., 2022). Conversely, among the Syrian group, while the initial integration into the labor market was slow in the years following the acquisition of residence permits (Lubbers & de Valk, 2020), the rate of employment has shown a gradual increase. In 2017, only 11% of Syrian status holders were engaged in paid work, a figure that climbed to 34% in 2019 (Damen et al., 2022). By 2022, over half (55%) of Syrian status holders were employed. Moreover, not only are these individuals increasingly gaining employment, but they are also working longer hours and securing more permanent positions (Maliepaard et al., 2023). Comparatively, the employment rate in the Netherlands among the general population aged 15-74 stood at 69% in 2020 (Dagevos et al., 2022). These statistics highlight the more established status of Iranian refugee/immigrant group in the Netherlands compared to the Syrian group, which primarily consists of newcomers.

Despite originating from Islamic backgrounds, Iranian refugees residing in the Netherlands often demonstrate a tendency towards secular convictions, with

only 33% identifying as religious (Dagevos et al. 2022). Additionally, they show less adherence toward practicing Islam compared to other Middle East groups (Dagevos et al. 2022; Entzinger, 2014; Hilhorst, 2010; Honari et al., 2017). Similarly, Syrian refugees display notable religious diversity. The majority (85%) do identify as religious, with 76% identifying as Muslim (Dagevos et al. 2018). However, there is also representation from other faith groups, with 13% identifying as non-believers, 8% as Christians, and 1% belonging to other faiths groups (Damen et al., 2022).

In terms of trust in the political and institutional system, first-generation Iranian refugees exhibit remarkably positive opinions. Almost 83% express trust in the government, nearly 49% feel represented properly in the Dutch parliament, and perceived discrimination is very low, at almost 17%. According to Dagevos et al. (2022), this high level of trust is also observed among recently arrived Syrian refugees. The scholars suggest that for both groups, their frame of reference remains largely influenced by their country of origin, where the nature of the political systems has shaped their perceptions. The comparison between their country of origin and the Netherlands, significantly influences how they perceive the Dutch political landscape, its opportunities, and its institutions (Dagevos et al., 2022).

As observed above, while both Syrian and Iranian migrants immigrated to the Netherlands primarily as refugees, they diverge in several key aspects. The differences, coupled with the evolving Dutch context over the past four decades, have resulted in these groups experiencing the Dutch context differently. Over this time frame, Dutch policies for refugees and immigrants have undergone significant transformations, influenced by various factors such as shifts in political landscapes, international events, economic conditions, and societal attitudes toward migrants and refugees (Van Meeteren et al. 2013). Additionally, the Dutch government has periodically revised immigration laws and regulations to manage immigration flows, address security concerns, and adapt to changing socio-economic conditions. These revisions often have included amendments to residency requirements, family reunification policies, and labor migration schemes, often reflecting shifts in political priorities and public opinion (Van Meeteren, et al. 2013).

In the following section, I will delve into the Dutch context, scrutinizing cultural and political discourses, and immigration and integration laws, with a specific focus on their relevance to the entrepreneurs with Iranian and Syrian refugee backgrounds..

Dutch Context

Multiculturalism and Culturalism Discourses

The Netherlands has been noted for its transition from a tolerant integration policy to a more restrictive assimilationist policy (Vasta 2007, Vertovec & Wessendorf 2010). Kennedy (2006), highlights the Netherlands' historical reputation as a 'gidsland' (a leading nation) from the 1960s to the mid-1980s, characterized by progressive stances on sexuality, euthanasia, drug use, and an inclusive approach to cultural diversity (Ghorashi, 2018). During the 1980s, Dutch policy embraced a multiculturalism discourse, prioritizing support for minority groups and respecting cultural diversity (Duyvendak & Scholten, 2011; Khademi et al., 2023; Ghorashi, 2018; Slootman, 2018). However, as Slootman (2018) argues, this approach was driven more by pragmatic instrumentalism, than genuine cultural appreciation, primarily aimed at facilitating the return of Turkish and Moroccan immigrant workers to their home countries. Nevertheless, the Dutch pragmatic approach shared similarities with multiculturalism in its acceptance of a certain level of cultural and religious diversity, as long as it did not threaten integration and national cohesion (Slootman, 2018).

By the 1990s, the multiculturalism discourse shifted towards an integration discourse focusing on refugees' social and economic participation as independent and agentic citizens within the labor market (Khademi et al., 2023; Ghorashi, 2018, Slootman, 2018). Mutual adaptation and combatting discrimination became shared responsibilities of both the minority and the majority group (Scholten, 2011; Slootman, 2018). However, a more exclusivist narrative began to emerge during this decade, intensifying post-9/11 and other terrorist attacks. This shift coincided with the rise of the radical right, which associated "allochtonen" (non-natives) with violence and terrorism (Duyvendak & Scholten, 2011; Eijberts & Ghorashi, 2017; Geurts et al., 2021; Ghorashi, 2018, Slootman, 2018). This discourse framed cultural diversity as a pressing social issue, casting cultural "Others" as outsiders (Slootman, 2018). Consequently, a discourse of 'culturalism' gained prominence in the Dutch integration debate over the past two decades (Slootman, 2018). Uitermark (2012) describes Dutch culturalism as 'a discourse organized around the idea that the world is divided into cultures and that our enlightened, liberal culture should be defended against the claims of minorities committed to illiberal religions and ideologies' (Uitermark, 2012, p. 15).

As Slegers (2007) illustrates through an analysis of election programs, since 2000, the majority of political parties have adopted the narrative of 'multicultural

drama' (Scheffer, 2000), and have increasingly framed immigration and refugees as a series of challenges attributed to cultural differences. These parties suggest that these challenges can be addressed by promoting clarity around the Dutch identity and encouraging the widespread adoption of 'our' presumed, undisputed norms and values (Slootman, 2018). Thus, the discourse of culturalism centers on the assimilation of immigrants and refugees, expecting them to assimilate into Dutch society by learning the Dutch language and embracing assumed fundamental Dutch norms and values, such as gender equality, freedom of speech, and individual autonomy as integral aspects of the national identity (Duyvendak & Scholten, 2011; Ghorashi, 2018; Spijkerboer, 2007; Slegers, 2007; Slootman, 2018). Finally, in the recent decade, especially since 2015, the refugee crisis and growing public concern have fueled anti-refugee sentiments (Sutkute, 2024). Policymakers have responded by advocating for additional limitations and stricter border control measures to safeguard Dutch culture and identity from the perceived threats of immigration.

The evolving discourses on multiculturalism and culturalism, along with the increasing politicization of immigration and refugee issues in the Dutch context, are reflected in the shifting integration policies over these years. Following, I will delve deeper into integration policies over time.

Integration Policies

The asylum legislation in the Netherlands has undergone several revisions over the years. Prior to 1987, there was no organized state-run asylum accommodation. Asylum seekers often arranged their own housing with the assistance of volunteers. However, with the increasing numbers of refugees, the Regulation Asylum Accommodation (ROA) was introduced in 1987. This marked the beginning of temporary housing for asylum seekers in centralized asylum accommodation, followed by permanent housing arrangements. However, due to the surge in asylum seekers in the 1990s, the duration spent in temporary housing increased significantly, from several months to several years (Bakker, 2016; Ghorashi 2005). The 1994 Aliens Act centralized asylum accommodation to manage the influx of asylum seekers. The Central Agency for Asylum Accommodation (COA) became responsible for all asylum accommodation in the Netherlands, while linking asylum accommodation to the asylum procedure to monitor asylum seekers. This shift reflected a move away from refugee protection-focused policies of the 1980s towards a more control-oriented approach in the 1990s (Bakker, 2016; Geuijen, 2004).

Until 1994, the Netherlands' refugee policy primarily recognized individuals with refugee status, referred to as 'A-status', in accordance with the Geneva Convention (Bakker, 2016). Nonetheless, between 1994 and 2001, amendments to the asylum legislation introduced two additional statuses: individuals granted temporary residence permits on humanitarian grounds ('VTV-humanitair'), and those with conditional residence permits ('Voorwaardelijke Vergunning tot Verblijf, VVTV') under the 1994 Aliens Act (Bakker, 2016; Nicolaas & Sprangers 2001). These new statuses were designated for individuals who, due to specific circumstances in their countries of origin, could not be granted asylum but also could not return (Bakker, 2016). Each of these legal statuses carried different rights: individuals with A-status and humanitarian status had the right to work and education, whereas those with the VVTV did not (Geuijen, 2004). However, this multi-tiered system complicated the asylum process, often leading to prolonged procedures as people sought to secure a status granting more rights (Bakker, 2016). Notably, all Iranian refugee participants in this study entered the Netherlands while this integration system was in effect, leading them to experience different integration processes during their initial years in the country. I will illustrate these differences in Chapters 3 and 5.

In 2000, significant changes were made to the asylum procedure in the Netherlands with the implementation of the revised Aliens Act (*Vreemdelingenwet*). Under this legislation, there would be only one (temporary) refugee status granted. After a period of three years, this temporary status would transition into a permanent status (Nicolaas & Sprangers 2001). The Aliens Act of 2000 was a pivotal legislation that managed the immigration and legal status of all foreigners in the Netherlands. Its primary objective was to streamline the asylum procedure and enhance the quality of initial decisions made by immigration authorities regarding asylum seekers. This law applied to non-EU-country nationals seeking long-term residence in the Netherlands, which was only possible through obtaining a residence permit. To qualify for such a permit, individuals were required to undergo the integration process (Netherlands Aliens Act, 2000). Subsequent legislation, including the Aliens Act 2013-2021 and the Integration Agenda 2013, expanded on the framework established by the Aliens Act of 2000, providing more specific and comprehensive guidelines.

Upon arrival in the Netherlands, asylum seekers are required to report to the central reception center in Ter Apel to initiate the asylum procedure. Here, they receive legal and medical advice during the resting and preparation period. The Immigration and Naturalization Office (IND) decides within eight days whether further investigation is needed. Those requiring further assessment are transferred

to one of the asylum centers (AZC) while awaiting a decision, a process that can often extend beyond the formal six-month period (Scholten et al., 2019; Reneman & Stronks, 2021).

Asylum seekers in the Netherlands receive basic provisions from the government, including accommodation, food, and a small weekly stipend. However, they face significant limitations in accessing education, social security, and the formal labor market (Bakker, 2016). Until 2008, asylum seekers were only permitted to work for 12 weeks per year. This restriction was later extended to 24 weeks a year but still posed significant barriers to employment. While this limitation was lifted in 2023, asylum seekers are required to wait six months from the start of their asylum application process before being eligible to work (De Lange et al., 2021; Nijhoff, 2021). Both Iranian and Syrian participants in this study remained subject to the employment restrictions.

Under the 2000 Aliens Act, asylum seekers granted permission to stay in the Netherlands initially receive a temporary residence status valid for five years. Upon obtaining this status, they become eligible for social security benefits and gain the right to work. To fully integrate into society, refugees are required to complete a mandatory integration program. This program focuses on learning the Dutch language, civic education, orientation of the labor market, and familiarization with Dutch society regarding social rights, institutional knowledge, and Dutch history. Refugees have been responsible for arranging and completing their own integration program until 2021, including passing the integration exams, while municipalities may offer assistance such as personal guidance (Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid, 2024).

According to the Civic Integration Act 2013-2021, refugees have the option to receive a government loan to cover the costs of integration courses. If they achieved at least an A2-level proficiency in both oral and written skills, this loan does not need to be repaid. The logic behind the integration program is that individuals who attain sufficient language proficiency and cultural knowledge, are more likely to successfully integrate into society (Entzinger, 2014). Studies indicate that these integration courses directly contribute to the language proficiency of migrants and refugees (Dourleijn & Dagevos, 2011). Interviews with course participants suggest that improved language skills enable them to become more involved in their children's education and better navigate institutions (Bakker, 2016; Witvliet et al., 2013). After five years and meeting all integration requirements, refugees can apply for a permanent residence permit.

Therefore, the integration system in the Netherlands from 2013 to 2021 required refugees to adhere to a standardized pathway to achieve Dutch naturalization (Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid, 2024). All the Syrian refugee entrepreneurs included in this study fall under the Civic Integration Act 2013-2021. In contrast, the Iranian refugee group experienced a more fragmented and less cohesive integration system during the 1980s and 1990s. This differs from the Syrian group who arrived after 2015 and encountered a more homogenized system, as will be further discussed in Chapter 5. The opportunity structures for refugee entrepreneurship have been influenced by these distinct integration systems, a theme that will be elaborated in the subsequent Chapters and throughout this dissertation.

Considering these developments within the Dutch context and the differences among various groups of refugee entrepreneurs, a comparative analysis of the Iranian and Syrian refugee groups offers valuable insights into the dynamics of inclusion and entrepreneurship. The Iranian group, as a well-established and highly integrated refugee community¹ (Khademi et al., 2023; Hilhorst, 2010; Ghorashi, 2021; van der Heijden & De Valk 2018) shares some similarities with the Syrian refugee group, which represents the largest and most recent wave of refugees to the Netherlands, yet their experiences are shaped by distinct historical and policy contexts in the Netherlands². This comparison is particularly significant for several reasons:

Firstly, it reveals the changes in debates surrounding refugees and Dutch entrepreneurship policies over time. The Iranian group's trajectory reflects an era of multiculturalist policies and fragmented integration systems, while the Syrian group's experience is shaped by a more politicized discourse on migration. These shifts in policy and public perception have profoundly influenced the opportunities available to refugee entrepreneurs. Secondly, the comparison between the two groups sheds light on how these policy changes have shaped opportunity structures, playing a role in refugees' abilities to set up businesses. These differences underscore how institutional frameworks and societal attitudes create varying pathways for inclusion and economic participation. Lastly, the comparative study explores the diverse ways in which refugee entrepreneurs exert their agency

^{1.} At the start of this study in 2019, Iranians were a well-established and well-integrated group of refugees in the Netherlands based on factors such as education, labor market participation, level of income, and inter-ethnic partnership with Dutch natives (Khademi et al., 2023; Hilhorst, 2010; Ghorashi, 2021; van der Heijden & De Valk, 2018).

^{2.} At the start of this study in 2019, Syrian refugees represented the largest group of newcomers in the Netherlands (Allecijfers, 2024b).

in navigating their new environment. By examining intersectional aspects of their backgrounds—such as age, gender, class, religion, and generational status—the research reveals how these factors shape entrepreneurial motivations, strategies, and outcomes. By comparing the interplay between policy frameworks, societal discourses, and individual agency, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of refugee entrepreneurship as a pathway to inclusion in the Netherlands (see Chapter 5).

Methodology

In this dissertation, I employ an interpretative research strategy, utilizing thematic life-story interviews to examine the role of intersectional translocational positionality in refugees' experiences of inclusion and agency through entrepreneurship in the Netherlands. As McAdam asserts, 'individual life stories reflect cultural values and norms, including assumptions about gender, race, and class' (2001, p.101). This study centers on the intersection of five socially constructed positionalities: gender, age, religion, ethnicity, and class. By delving into participants' past and present experiences, the thematic life-story method yields comprehensive insights into how the translocational positionalities of refugee entrepreneurs have been constructed and changed over time and space, and how they shape refugee entrepreneurship, inclusion, and agency.

Thematic life-story interviews were conducted with two groups of refugee entrepreneurs, totaling 29 in-depth interviews: 14 with Iranian individuals (conducted between 2019 and 2020) and 15 with Syrian individuals (conducted between 2021 and 2022) residing in the Netherlands. The participants were selected through purposive sampling, considering criteria such as nationality (being Iranian or Syrian), gender (both female and male), refugee status (having a refugee background), and duration of residency in the Netherlands (Iranian participants who immigrated before 2000, as discussed in Chapter 3, and Syrian participants who immigrated after 2015, as discussed in Chapters 4).

I employed a variety of data collection methods for both groups, including leveraging social media platforms such as Telegram, Facebook, and LinkedIn, my personal immigrant network, and utilizing snowball sampling techniques. Prior to the interviews, I informed participants about the research objectives, the interview process, and their right to withdraw within three months following the interview. Participants were assured that their data would be securely stored in compliance

with Radboud University's protocols. Despite the initial plan for in-person interviews, I had to conduct half of the interviews with the Syrian group virtually via Zoom due to COVID-19 restrictions. The interviews with the Iranian participants were conducted in Farsi, while the interviews with the Syrian participants were conducted in English. Detailed information on data collection can be found in Table 1 and in the Research Data Management section, as attached to the dissertation.

Table 1: Dissertation Data Collection Summary

Target group	Type of interviews	Number of interviews	Sampling method	Language of interviews	Time of data collection	Interview formats
Iranian refugee entrepreneurs who have lived more than 20 years in The Netherlands	Semi-Structured	14	Social media	Farsi	2019-2020	In-person interviews
			Iranian Networks			
			Snowball method			
Syrian refugee entrepreneurs who have come to The Netherlands after 2015	Semi-Structured	15	LinkedIn	English	2021-2022	Mixed of on-line and In-person interviews
			Snowball method			

Employing thematic life-story interviews, I asked the participants to share their lives through the lens of their entrepreneurial experiences. Applying a semi-structured questionnaire, the various identity components such as gender, ethnicity, class, religion, and age were addressed during the interviews. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. I treated interview transcripts as the units of analysis (McAdams, 2012). ATLAS.ti software facilitated open, axial, and selective coding. To preserve individuals' privacy, pseudonyms were used throughout the dissertation. I will provide more details about methodology in Chapters 3 and 4, and the Research Data Management section.

Outline of the Dissertation

To address the main research questions, I conducted four studies with the contributions of Dr. Caroline Essers as the second author and Prof. Dr. Karin van Nieuwkerk as the third author. Each study will be presented in a distinct chapter in this dissertation.

Chapter 2, “Refugee Entrepreneurship from an Intersectional Approach”³, introduces an innovative multidimensional conceptual model for refugee entrepreneurship. This framework integrates the theory of mixed embeddedness with the concepts of intersectionality and agency. Specifically, it delves into how entrepreneurship is shaped by the diverse intersectional positions of refugees and examines how refugees exert their agency based on these intersecting identities. The conceptual framework elucidates how the intersectional positions of refugees influence their entrepreneurial motivations, resources, and strategies. The findings reveal that refugee entrepreneurship not only fosters economic autonomy within new societies but also provides avenues for refugees to assert their agency. This model holds practical applicability in empirical research and can contribute significantly to refugee entrepreneurship studies and intersectionality theory.

Chapter 3, “Iranian Refugee Entrepreneurship and Inclusion in the Netherlands”⁴, explores how entrepreneurship is informed by identity components such as ethnicity, age, class, gender, and religion and how intersecting identity factors influence the sense of belonging and inclusion among entrepreneurs with Iranian refugee background. This chapter identifies three distinct modes of belonging experienced by Iranian refugee entrepreneurs: hybrid, cosmopolitan, and transnational belonging. The study concludes that entrepreneurship serves as a catalyst for acceptance and inclusion within the host society. Furthermore, it emphasizes the necessity of transcending the integration paradigm by embracing the concept of inclusion. By adopting an inclusion-based approach, this chapter provides profound insights into refugees’ positioning within the labor market and the broader receiving society.

Chapter 4, “Navigating Translocational Positionality: Syrian Refugee Entrepreneurship in the Netherlands”⁵, delineates how Syrian refugee entrepreneurs exercise agency through their entrepreneurial endeavors. This investigation delves into the role of their translocational positionalities shaped by experiences in both country of origin and the receiving country. Syrian refugee entrepreneurs demonstrate their agency through the establishment of entrepreneurship, professional adaptability, utilization

³. This chapter has been published as an article: Khademi, S., Essers, C., & van Nieuwkerk, K. (2024). Refugee entrepreneurship from an intersectional approach. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research*, 30(11), 45-63.

⁴. This Chapter has been published as: Khademi, S., Essers, C., & van Nieuwkerk, K. (2023). Iranian Refugee Entrepreneurship and Inclusion in the Netherlands. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 36(1), 105-127.

⁵. An adapted version of this chapter has been prepared as an article for submission to the *Journal of Small Business Management*.

of available resources, acquisition of new resources, exploration of niche markets, and redefinition of identity. By merging the fields of refugee entrepreneurship, intersectionality, translocational positionality, and agency, this chapter provides a novel lens and contributes to the existing literature. Moreover, this chapter offers relevant insights for policymakers and practitioners based on the approach of intersectional translocational positionality, aiming to foster a more inclusive society.

Chapter 5, "A Comparative Study of Iranian and Syrian Refugee Entrepreneurs in the Netherlands" compares the experiences of Iranian and Syrian refugee entrepreneurs within the Dutch context. It traces the transformation of Dutch entrepreneurial policies and opportunity structures over the four decades, examining their impact on Syrian and Iranian refugee entrepreneurs. The chapter elucidates the institutional and individual challenges and opportunities encountered over time by Iranian and Syrian refugee entrepreneurs in the Netherlands. The chapter compares structural challenges such as inadequate economic support and societal biases to opportunities like equitable access to Dutch society and assistance from incubator organizations. Similarly, it contrasts individual hurdles like language barriers with prospects such as volunteer work and entrepreneurial drive. By comparing inclusion, sense of belonging, and agency, this chapter provides valuable insights into the distinct experiences of Syrian and Iranian refugee entrepreneurs.

In Chapter 6, the conclusion, the scientific and social contributions of this dissertation are elucidated. This final chapter summarizes the key findings and offers insights from the study and reflections on my own intersectional and translocational positionality, exploring how this might have played a role in the whole research process and knowledge production.

Chapter 2

Refugee Entrepreneurship from an Intersectional Approach

A previous version of this chapter has been published as an article:

Khademi, S., Essers, C., & van Nieuwkerk, K. (2024). Refugee entrepreneurship from an intersectional approach. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research*, 30(11), 45–63.

Introduction

Fariba and her family fled Iran for political reasons in 1985. She and her husband were both political activists, well-educated and from a middle-class background. After five years of living in several countries as asylum-seekers, they finally arrived in the Netherlands. After graduating from a Dutch university in 2000, Fariba entered the labor market as a medical laboratory scientist, ten years after seeking asylum in the Netherlands. As a result of the economic crisis, she lost her job in 2008. Fariba, who had some experience with beauty therapy, began to consider how to transform this skill into a reliable source of income.

To establish and develop her own business, Fariba capitalized on the resources available to her. While Fariba's gender, ethnic and religious background equipped her with these particular resources, the same (intersecting) identity categories also created challenges for her entrepreneurship. Providing beauty services to male clients, for example, posed obstacles for her as a female Muslim. Nevertheless, Fariba established her business and she believes that being an entrepreneur has increased her self-confidence. She feels that she now has acquired an autonomous place in society. She strongly feels she belongs to the Netherlands and identifies herself as a Dutch citizen, with a mixed Dutch-Iranian identity.

Fariba's life story is one of the millions of stories of refugees who have been forced to flee their homes to unknown destinations. While conducting a study on refugee entrepreneurs in the Netherlands, I met with powerful and accomplished refugee entrepreneurs. Amongst them was Fariba. The study on refugee entrepreneurship was conducted based on interviews with 14 Iranian and 15 Syrian refugee entrepreneurs in the Netherlands. I have chosen Fariba's life story because it is a clear example that illustrates the main concepts of this study. The interview, which lasted three hours, was conducted at the premises of Fariba's business in 2019. Fariba's life story and her professional experiences, including her entrepreneurship, over the course of 34 years, provide useful exemplary information about the lives of refugee entrepreneurs and the processes through which they can exert their agency. Fariba's life story is quoted throughout the chapter to illustrate how specific theoretical concepts can be used to understand the lived experiences of refugee entrepreneurs.

Existing literature on refugee entrepreneurs has merely concentrated on one single identity category of refugee entrepreneurs, namely ethnicity. It has largely neglected the multidimensional lived experiences and other identities

of refugee entrepreneurs, such as gender, class, age and religion. Yet in reality, refugee entrepreneurship is influenced by diverse identity categories of inclusion and exclusion and their intersections (Chreim et al., 2018; Essers and Benschop, 2007, 2009; Essers et al., 2010; Ozasir Kacar & Essers, 2019). For instance, Fariba set up and developed her entrepreneurship based on her position as a married Iranian woman, with a Muslim background. The role these positions play in informing her entrepreneurship and participation in the labor market of the host society should be considered. To understand how entrepreneurship contributes to the participation and economic self-dependence of refugees in the labor market, a more comprehensive, multifaceted conceptual model is needed, which can be used in empirical analyses concerning the lived experiences of refugee entrepreneurs.

Intersectionality is a helpful theory to provide this much-needed multidimensional approach. Introduced by Crenshaw in 1990, intersectionality theory addresses how various identity categories such as gender, race, class, etc. interact to determine an individual's position in a specific context (Crenshaw, 1990). This chapter, therefore, considers two questions: how is entrepreneurship informed by the various intersectional positions of refugees? And how do refugees exert their agency based on these intersecting identities? The purpose of this chapter is to develop a conceptual framework that can be used to analyze how refugee entrepreneurship is shaped by intersectional positions in an agentic way. This approach yields innovative insights into how refugees perform entrepreneurship, while actively drawing on the resources derived from these intersectional positions.

This chapter will examine, first, how the agency of refugees is addressed in the existing literature on refugee entrepreneurship. Second, I will critically discuss mixed embeddedness theory as a multilayered tool and argue that this should be combined with an intersectional approach. Third, this chapter will demonstrate how applying an intersectional approach can contribute to the refugee entrepreneurship literature. Fourth, the study will suggest a conceptual model which demonstrates the relationship between translocational intersectional positions and the acquisition of specific resources. These intersectional social categories shape opportunities for refugee entrepreneurs, which can be both enabling and constraining. The conceptual model will also discuss the concept of agency and how it is exerted, according to the intersectional positions of refugee entrepreneurs.

In this way, the study provides a conceptual framework for future empirical research in the field of refugee entrepreneurship.

Refugee entrepreneurship and agency

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 89.3 million people were displaced globally by the end of 2021, with 83% residing in low-and middle-income countries. The number of refugees globally reached 27.1 million between 2000 and 2021 (UNHCR, 2021). The increasing number of newcomers has sparked contentious debates around their inclusion in society and the labor market in host countries. Entrepreneurship has been identified as one of the agentic modes of inclusion through which refugees can carve out their socioeconomic positions in receiving societies (Embiricos, 2020, Heilbrunn & Iannone, 2020, Obschonka et al., 2018; Ram et al., 2022, Shepherd et al., 2020).

Refugee entrepreneurs are forcibly displaced self-employers (Abebe, 2022; Ram et al., 2022), who create or expand economic activity by locating and taking advantage of new goods, services or markets (OECD, 2017). Accordingly, despite limitations such as discrimination in the labor market, bureaucratic restrictions and limited resources, refugee entrepreneurs provide new opportunities for themselves and exert their agency. Agency refers to “a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable” (Mahmood, 2001). Reflecting on this definition, this chapter also considers the structural factors which limit people’s capacity to exert agency.

Although studies have implicitly addressed the agency of refugees, existing literature has so far failed to provide an adequate explanation of how agency is realized in the context of refugee entrepreneurship (Abebe, 2022). The studies adopting a culturalist approach assume that cultural attributes of ethnic groups encourage them to take part in certain economic activities. Such perspectives focus on the role of ethnic identity in facilitating access to cultural institutions for boosting capital, running family businesses and securing economic cooperation (Abebe, 2022; Gold, 1992). The structural approach also neglects the autonomy of refugee entrepreneurs, focusing instead on structural disadvantages (Abebe, 2022); minority group members are pushed to start their own small businesses due to the lack of language proficiency, low education, lack of required credentials and licenses and discrimination (Refai et al., 2018; Wauters and Lambrecht, 2008).

Two recent studies have taken a novel approach to understand refugee entrepreneurship, focusing on the agency of individuals, instead of cultural or structural factors (Abebe, 2022, Obschonka et al., 2018; Shepherd et al., 2020). Obschonka et al. (2018) considered career adaptability and entrepreneurial

intentions as agency factors in the integration process of refugees. They investigated the link between personality traits (such as self-efficacy and resilience), entrepreneurial intentions and adaptability in the careers of newly arrived refugees in Germany. They found that self-efficacy and resilience were crucial background factors that predicted entrepreneurial cognitions or entrepreneurial alertness which can be described as “a cognitive style that facilitates positive career development and adaptive vocational behavior in the modern world of work” (P. 175). By examining refugee entrepreneurship at the individual level and emphasizing the role of entrepreneurial cognitions and underlying personality traits during the early integration process, Obschonka et al. (2018) illustrated how refugees’ personal agency is actively involved in managing their entrepreneurial career.

In another study, Shepherd et al. (2020) examined how Palestine refugee entrepreneurs who grew up in refugee camps exercise agency through entrepreneurial actions in challenging environments. They focused on “resilience in the face of substantial and persistent adversity” issue. Their findings indicated notable differences between refugee entrepreneurs living inside and outside of refugee camps. Entrepreneurs living outside of the camps were able to leverage multiple identities (e.g. being Palestinian and Lebanese), multilingualism and social capital development, which were not available to those living inside the camps. These differences impact their ability to cope with difficult situations. The study argues that the ability to be resilient in a social context is not innate, but rather can be developed through actions that establish a foundation for resilience outcomes, particularly in the context of persistent adversity. The research highlights that proactive problem solving, self-reliance, broader purpose in life (for Palestine), realistic optimism and multiple sources of belonging are essential components of resilience outcomes which can also contribute to the entrepreneurial process (Shepherd et al., 2020).

Fariba’s life story sheds light on important aspects of refugee entrepreneurs’ experiences that are occluded by the dominant culturalist and structuralist approaches. They fail to capture a balanced view of refugees’ agency and to take into account the importance of both structure and agency. The elements of resilience, identified by Shepherd *et al.* (2020), including a broader purpose in life, realistic optimism and multiple sources of belonging, are evident in Fariba’s mindset and activities. Shortly after Fariba and her husband arrived in the Netherlands, while living in a refugee camp, Fariba eagerly participated in Dutch language classes with her new baby. She was convinced that the Netherlands would become her new home and enable her to provide a safe and prosperous future for her family. As she did not have any documentation of her educational credentials, Fariba could not

prove that she had graduated in medical laboratory sciences. In 1995, she returned to university and studied in the same academic field. In 2000, she was able to enter the Dutch labor market as a medical laboratory scientist.

Fariba explicitly mentions that she was fired in the economic crisis of 2008 because she was a foreigner. Moreover, she struggled to find another job, although she had sufficient professional experience, spoke Dutch fluently and had a certification from a Dutch university. She attributes her exclusion from the labor market to anti-refugee and xenophobic discrimination. Although she was pushed to self-employment, her entrepreneurship should not be purely reduced to a reaction to the exclusion she experienced in the labor market. She became self-employed whilst responding to the power relations related to the structural experiences of exclusion in the host society. Yet, her entrepreneurship was also resulting from a wish to exercise her agency. Her experience as an entrepreneur marked a new phase in her life and considerably impacted her position within the new society.

I felt so good when I started my business. I felt that this is a job that matches my emotions and it makes me who I am. I was the same person, whether I was at home or at work. There is no ambiguity within me. In other work experiences, I worked more and received less attention. (Fariba, Female Iranian refugee entrepreneurs, 2019)

Embiricos (2020) argues although self-employment is not a “fast track” to economic self-reliance, it is beneficial for social inclusion. Fariba’s exposure to Dutch culture increased through her direct interactions with clients. Her entrepreneurship contributed to her sense of belonging to the Netherlands and led her to identify herself as a Dutch-Iranian citizen.

Existing literature is unable to capture the interactive dynamics between individuals and contexts. Although the mixed embeddedness approach has attempted to develop an interplay model which consists of both agency and structure, it associates refugee entrepreneurship largely with the opportunities structure of the host society (Abebe, 2022; Jack & Anderson, 2002). In the following section, the mixed embeddedness theory is discussed to evaluate its potential to merge both structure and agency levels (Abebe, 2022; Barberis & Solano, 2018; Kloosterman, 2010; Kloosterman & Rath, 2018) and identify its inadequacies.

The mixed embeddedness theory

In the 1970 and 1980s, migrant entrepreneurship studies used mono-causal explanations, which mostly focused on entrepreneurs and their resources by highlighting the role of human, social or cultural capital (Bates and Bates, 1997; Portes, 1995). Hence, although these studies contributed to a deeper understanding of migrant entrepreneurship, the structural aspect were largely absent in their analyses (Kloosterman et al., 2018).

In the 1990s, a more interactive model of the immigrant enterprise was developed by Waldinger et al. (1990), which attempted to explain the interaction between the opportunity structure of the receiving society, the social structures of the immigrant community and the group characteristics. Inspired by Waldinger et al. (1990) and Kloosterman et al. (2019) coined the “mixed embeddedness” model, one of the most influential theories on ethnic self-employment that has been developed in the last 20 years (Kloosterman, 2010; Kloosterman et al., 2019; Solano, 2020).

Mixed embeddedness theory adopts a more comprehensive perspective that seeks to embrace both structure and agency levels (Barberis & Solano, 2018; Kloosterman, 2010; Kloosterman & Rath, 2018). Thereby, it serves as a conceptual framework that can address the relationship between the resources of self-employed immigrants and the “opportunity structures” that they utilize to create jobs in a new society. Hence, the basic conceptual elements of mixed embeddedness theory consist of “institutional contexts”, “opportunity structures” and “resources”, respectively. They developed the interaction between these three elements at three different levels: macro, meso and micro levels, which can be applied to both refugee and immigrant entrepreneurs (Kloosterman et al., 2019; Kloosterman & Rath, 2018).

“Opportunity structures” are built by “market conditions” and market accessibility. The market conditions can be seen in the demand for ethnic products and services, or non-ethnic markets. Market accessibility can pertain to “business vacancies”, “competition for vacancies” and “government policies”. Hence, “opportunity structures” are not merely determined by the market economy, they are influenced by both socio-cultural contexts and immigrant/refugee entrepreneurs’ resources. “Opportunity structures” are embedded in the larger institutional/regulatory and socio-cultural contexts of the host country. Meanwhile, the extent to which immigrant/refugee entrepreneurs have access to various resources determines their access to the market. These resources include human, financial, social capital, as well as, possible ethnic capital (Kloosterman, 2010; Kloosterman et al., 1999;

Kloosterman & Rath, 2018). Figure 4 displays the relationships between these concepts in mixed embeddedness theory.

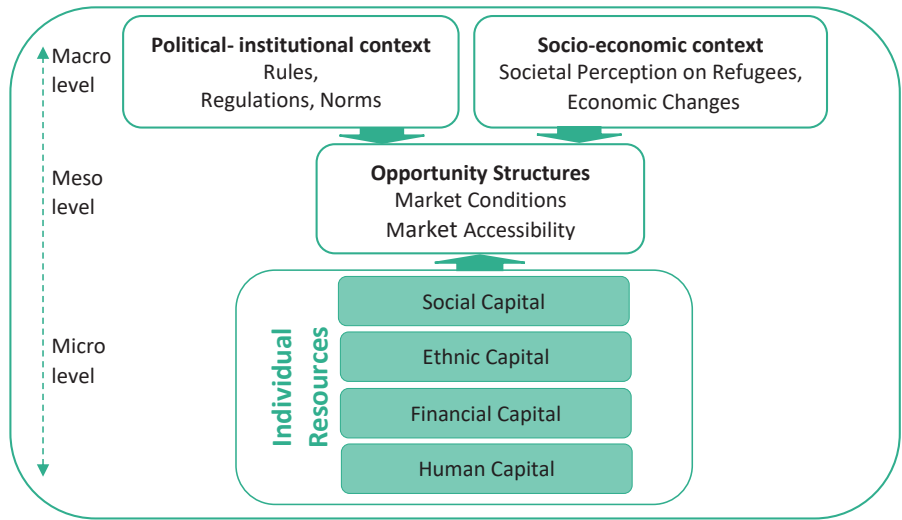


Figure 4: Mixed Embeddedness Theory
 Source: Inspired by Kloosterman et al., (1999)

To illustrate how the factors mentioned by Kloosterman et al. (2019) function, they examine the market of Islamic butchery in the Netherlands. When there is a demand for ethnic consumers’ products (e.g. halal meat), the self-employed utilize different resources. These resources can consist of the employment of family members, their networks, their credit, co-ethnic clients, etc. However, institutional and structural factors impact the migrants’ businesses, such as the saturated halal meat market, the position of the ‘Trading Association of Butchers’, governmental codes, etc. Hence, these entrepreneurial ventures survive in the cut-throat market by enjoying social capital and introducing some informal economic activities. For instance, they hire assistants only during peak hours, or they use and sell more parts of animals’ bodies compared with the non-ethnic market.

These features are observed in Fariba’s life story as well. The economic crisis in 2008 had a demonstrable impact on the market conditions and the “opportunity structures” in the Netherlands. Fariba not only lost her job but was also unable to find a new one. However, capitalizing on her different resources, Fariba was able to regain access to the market and to create her enterprise. She had a small initial financial capital. Her human capital was grounded in her personal experience with

beauty treatments in a refugee camp in Iraq. Moreover, her connections with other immigrants and refugees and the support of her family and friends contributed to her social and ethnic capital. After a two-month internship in a beauty salon, the Dutch Commerce and Tax Department gave her a work permit. This, in turn, allowed her to carve out her place in the labor market during the economic crisis and to establish her company.

The mixed embeddedness theory provides a valuable framework for comprehending how the interplay of individual, socioeconomic and politico-regulatory factors determines the scope of refugees' opportunity structures and their availability, appeal and accessibility (Abebe, 2022; Price & Chacko, 2009). However, this approach has faced various criticisms including its static nature (Anwar & Daniel, 2017; Jones et al., 2014), difficulties in operationalization (Anwar & Daniel, 2017; Ram & Smallbone, 2001), overlooking individual agency (Abebe, 2022; Anwar & Daniel, 2017), overemphasis on ethnic community factors, assumed homogeneity, gender-neutrality and lack of intersectional focus (Ram et al., 2017; Wang & Warn, 2018).

The complexity of mixed embeddedness makes it difficult to operationalize the theory into measurable variables, posing challenges for empirical research, particularly in guiding data collection and analysis (Anwar & Daniel, 2017; Bisignano and El-Anis, 2018; Ram & Smallbone, 2001). Also, the theory has been criticized for its static character, leading to inadequately representing the dynamic and fluid experiences of immigrant entrepreneurs over time. Mixed embeddedness theory, along with the related opportunity structure model, primarily focus on the venture start-up phase, offering limited insights into how embeddedness changes over time and subsequently impacts aspects like venture growth and maturity (Anwar & Daniel, 2017; Jones et al., 2014). This shortcoming leads to a cross-sectional analysis of entrepreneurship rather than a processual one (Anwar & Daniel, 2017; Kloosterman & Rath, 2001).

Moreover, this approach may not fully acknowledge the significance of individual agency in shaping personal outcomes and the impact of structural constraints on marginalized entrepreneurs (Barberis & Solano, 2018; Högberg & Mitchell, 2023). According to the theory, entrepreneurs must be embedded in their social networks and the institutional environment to thrive (Kloosterman et al., 1999). The mixed embeddedness theory contends that social, economic and institutional contexts significantly influence ethnic entrepreneurs. This premise implies a unidirectional force, casting entrepreneurs as passive recipients with limited individual or collective agency (Anwar & Daniel, 2017; Bisignano & El-Anis, 2018).

This perspective may overlook the fact that some entrepreneurs can succeed despite limited social and institutional embeddedness because of their individual agency, innovative behavior and resourcefulness (Obschonka et al., 2018; Shepherd et al., 2020). Bisignano and El-Anis (2018) delve into the role of mixed embeddedness in reconciling agency and structure among asylum-seeking entrepreneurs with diverse legal statuses. They present how these asylum-seekers use understandings of community and notions of capital to make sense of their mixed embeddedness uniquely, affecting entrepreneurial decisions. By doing so, Bisignano and El-Anis (2018) aim to re-center the discourse of mixed embeddedness on the migrant entrepreneur, shifting away from the meso- and macro-level perspectives that have recently dominated the literature.

Furthermore, the mixed embeddedness theory may overemphasize the role of the ethnic community, potentially neglecting other forms of social capital that immigrant entrepreneurs might draw upon (Ram et al., 2017; Wang & Warn, 2018). Being gender-neutral, this theory often overlooks how experiences differ between male and female immigrant entrepreneurs (Ram et al., 2017). The theory also sometimes assumes a degree of homogeneity within ethnic communities, disregarding intra-community variances such as class, gender, or race differences (Wang & Warn, 2018).

However, the various intersectional identities and positions of ethnic minorities impact their entrepreneurial motivations, resources and strategies. For example, for Fariba's life story, relying solely on the mixed embeddedness approach fails to explain the role that her intersectional positions play in shaping her entrepreneurial resources and her entrepreneurship. As an educated, middle-aged, Iranian female refugee, with an Islamic background who is married and a mother of two children, her identity and social positioning are crucial factors which influence her entrepreneurial pursuits.

The different aspects of identities such as gender, religion, ethnicity, class, race, etc., may play a role in defining the situations of refugee entrepreneurs in the labor market. Consequently, it can affect business opportunities, the entrepreneurs' resources and entrepreneurial adventures. For example, the intersection of gender, religion and ethnicity has influenced the business of Muslim female Moroccan hairdressers in Dutch society. On the one hand, they sometimes need to avoid serving male clients, either to maintain their reputation in the Muslim ethnicity community, or for their own Islamic beliefs (Essers & Benschop, 2009). On the other hand, they have private Muslim female clients who cannot go to a public

beauty salon for haircutting and beauty treatments. However, Fariba experienced a different situation as a married Iranian woman with an Islamic background.

At first, I avoided [beauty treatment for] male clients. In our culture, men and women were always separated and we had no physical contact except with our husbands. That's why I didn't like to have a male client. But it became more acceptable to me later, because this was part of my job and I am impacted by Dutch culture a lot. Unlike me, my husband believed that it is unacceptable for a women to do beauty treatment for other men based on Islamic teachings. I attempted to reason with him, but he was not convinced. I eventually began accepting male clients, starting with the husbands of my clients. At the end of the day, my husband gradually came to terms with it.

As seen in Fariba's life story, when she faces pressure from her husband to refrain from serving male clients, she adopts her entrepreneurial strategy individually, without considering the norms of her ethnic community. This can be attributed, at least in part, to several features of the Iranian community in the Netherlands. For example, despite their Islamic background, the majority of Iranian immigrants/refugees in the Netherlands are secular (Bakker, 2016; Entzinger & Biezeveld, 2003; Hilhorst, 2010; Honari et al., 2017). Moreover, this ethnic community does not enjoy a strong sense of solidarity comparable to that of the Moroccan community in the Netherlands (Hilhorst, 2010). Hence, Fariba was not considered to be jeopardizing her reputation within the Iranian community.

This comparison demonstrates how different intersectional ethnic gender religious backgrounds impact the entrepreneurial resources and strategies of immigrant/refugee entrepreneurs in the same context. Hence, a multifaceted analysis, which includes the various aspects of identity and positionality of refugee entrepreneurs, including the dynamic nature of entrepreneurship over time is required. In order to better understand the experiences of refugee entrepreneurs, this chapter proposed to combine the mixed embeddedness model with an intersectional-translocational positionality approach while accounting for the various dimensions of their agency and resourcefulness.

Intersectionality theory

Intersectionality theory, as coined by (Crenshaw, 1990), views social categories such as gender, ethnicity, race, class and sexuality as inseparable and dynamically interconnected in the production of social practices of exclusion. That is, intersectionality as an analytic tool considers the multifaceted relations of power and oppression that individuals experience based on these intersections (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 1990).

Crenshaw (1990) illustrates the complications of multiple situated identities and the social contexts in which these identities are experienced. Structural intersectionality focuses on the marginalization process of people who suffer multidimensional discrimination because of their intersectional positions. Mentioning an example of domestic violence shelters for women located in minority communities in Los Angeles, she demonstrates how domestic violence experienced by black women differs from that of white women. Their intersectional positions as poor black women (race, gender, class) lead to limited access to social resources (such as housing, jobs) that reproduces apparent class poverty.

Applying an intersectional approach can enrich immigrant/refugee entrepreneurship study in different ways (Romero & Valdez, 2016). This approach can explain how the crossroads of gender, class, ethnicity, age, race, religion, etc. can impact entrepreneurship. The intersectional positions of refugee entrepreneurs place them in complex relations of power and oppression, which affect their access to resources for entrepreneurship. As a result of these positionalities they may experience different barriers to entrepreneurship in a specific context at a specific time (Martinez Dy, 2020). Some studies address how both intersections of ethnicity and gender can block female immigrant entrepreneurs from business development and limit them to small businesses (Chreim et al., 2018, De Vita et al., 2014).

Self-employed women mostly cope with limited access to financial capital. Even their loan applications appear to be more often rejected by banks, because of the skepticism about female immigrant entrepreneurs (Gonzalez-Gonzalez et al., 2011; Verduijn et al., 2014). Also, they may face inadequate human resource capacities, such as lower formal education, less management experience, inability to react to market competition, as well the added challenge of combining their businesses with many family responsibilities.

Intersectional positions may play a role in the economic contribution that refugee entrepreneurs make to the host society as well as to their community. These multiple positions provide more opportunities for networking among both the co-ethnic and host communities by which immigrant entrepreneurs increasingly integrate into the new society (Chreim et al., 2018; Gonzalez-Gonzalez et al., 2011; Khademi et al., 2023; Lidola, 2014; Villares-Varela & Essers, 2019).

The intersectional perspective can reveal how intersectional positions influence the processes of inclusion and exclusion in society for the self-employed. Various studies show female immigrant entrepreneurs are perceived and treated with respect by both members of the host society and the co-ethnic community because entrepreneurship improves social status for them (Chreim et al., 2018; Essers & Benschop, 2007; Gonzalez-Gonzalez et al., 2011; Lidola, 2014; Villares-Varela & Essers, 2019). This point is reflected in Fariba's life story. She states she feels more respect from society and her entrepreneurship has increased herself-confidence. Immigrant entrepreneurs not only attempt to create their place in society but also try to improve the situation of immigrants in the general labor market. They often do their best to hire workers from their ethnic background, either established immigrants, or newcomers (Bizri, 2017; Chreim et al., 2018; Kloosterman, 2010).

Intersectional positions often lead to particular entrepreneurial identities. Essers et al. (Essers & Benschop, 2007, 2009; Essers et al., 2010) develop the concept of "female ethnicity" for Turkish and Moroccan female entrepreneurs. Female ethnicity reflects the complex influence of gender and ethnicity in the construction of entrepreneurial identities to cope with structural inequalities. It creates space for agency and negotiating aspects of their identity. Self-employed Muslim women play an active role in the reconstruction of their professional identities by constantly resisting, reinterpreting and modifying the norms of patriarchy. As seen, Fariba has reinterpreted some current perceptions of Islamic teachings to improve her entrepreneurship, by which she has developed her entrepreneurial identity.

According to Essers and Benschop (2009), intersectional identities are reflected in some entrepreneurial strategies in the form of "boundary work". Boundary work means the strategies to draw differences between social groups based on various intersections of religion, gender, ethnicity, etc. – that is, processes of inclusion and exclusion. Muslim immigrant women entrepreneurs adopt four types of boundary work. The strategies consist of (1) resisting the strict sex segregation as advocated by certain sections in Islam; (2) emphasizing the individuality of faith; (3) embracing a progressive feminist interpretation of the Qur'an, such as referring

to Qur'anic female role models and stressing the morality of work; (4) historicizing and contextualizing the Qur'an. For instance, they believe that the strict gender relations as described in several Qur'anic verses, only pertain to the formational period of Islam and the societal conceptions of gender at the time.

As articulated above, the aforementioned studies (Essers & Benschop, 2007, 2009; Essers et al., 2010) have shown how intersectional identities inform entrepreneurial identity, strategies and agency. However, two gaps can be identified here: first, these studies have focused on immigrant entrepreneurship rather than refugee entrepreneurship. Second, they have not studied the effect of the intersectional positions of entrepreneurs on different resources and "opportunity structures" in refugee entrepreneurship. Ozasir Kacar and Essers (2019) study the relationship between identity construction and "opportunity structures", based on the narratives of Turkish migrant women entrepreneurs in the Netherlands. Adopting an intersectional approach, they consider how the wider socio-cultural and political-institutional environments impact the opportunity structure. Ozasir Kacar and Essers (2019) demonstrate how various interpretations and framings of "opportunity structures" among Turkish immigrant women entrepreneurs with the same background lead to different intersections of entrepreneurship, religion, gender, politics, class and ethnicity. For example, some of them criticize their Turkish identities and create cosmopolitan identities by separating themselves from their ethnic group, while the others construct a highly political identity by emphasizing their identity as Turks within the Dutch society. These women construct their entrepreneurial identities strategically and consciously. They exert their agency to construct an entrepreneurial identity that works for them within these "opportunity structures" (Ozasir Kacar & Essers, 2019).

Chreim et al. (2018) conducted a literature review on 54 articles on immigrant female entrepreneurs. They argue that the intersection of gender and ethnicity impacts self-employment. In particular, they concentrate on entrepreneurial resources, strategies, outcomes and contexts. According to them, the resources are the foundation of entrepreneurial strategies. These strategies have various shapes, which are influenced by the intersection of gender and ethnicity.

First, immigrant women entrepreneurs are active in low-tech/low-growth or low tech/ high-growth sectors where the gender-based traditional service and retail industries are available, in such areas as fashion, beauty, food services and housekeeping (e.g. sewing, cleaning, child-caring and cooking). Second, female immigrant entrepreneurs align with male partners, typically family members who

may play a big role in providing business advice, making business decisions and helping to secure funds from financial institutions. Third, sometimes, immigrant female entrepreneurs are involved in informal activities, such as running home-based businesses in which the owners have not registered and only accept cash and do not pay taxes. These strategies reflect the limited access to resources of immigrant female entrepreneurs (Chreim et al. (2018).

Although Chreim et al. (2018) combine the mixed embeddedness theory and intersectionality, they do not distinguish between refugee entrepreneurs and self-employed immigrants, even though one of the main distinct intersectional aspects of identity can impact self-employment is one's status as an immigrant or a refugee. Moreover, the role of the agency of female immigrant entrepreneurs has not been highlighted in their study.

Anthias (2008, 2013, 2020) developed the concept of "translocational positionality" in the framework of intersectionality, as to incorporate a more dynamic approach to different positionings (Villares-Varela and Essers, 2019). This notion conveys the idea that the importance of positioned social categorizations can change over time and space. That is, some identities become more manifest in a certain time and context (such as certain locations), while they were not so important before in previous contexts (Anthias, 2008, 2013, 2020). This shifting of individuals' positionality leads to experiencing different kinds and levels of power and subordination in different times and contexts. Accordingly, various patterns of agency emerge, based on these intersecting positions. Hence, Anthias suggests an intersectional study should 'be historically sensitive as there are complex new emerging constellations of disadvantage' (2013, p. 131). Translocational intersectionality explains why and how refugee entrepreneurs mobilize their resources in varied ways regarding certain structural constraints (Martinez Dy, 2020; Villares-Varela & Essers, 2019). That is, intersections of gender and class and age and so on, can produce different kinds of inequalities in the context of a refugee's country of origin compared to that of the host country.

For example, studies show that although many refugee entrepreneurs have high levels of human capital, sometimes, they are not able to directly enter into labor market opportunities in the host society (Villares-Varela, 2018). The accreditation processes for refugees' certificates take up a lot of time. Often their diplomas cannot be certified at all, and they need to re-educate and be trained again (Ager & Strang, 2008; Bevelander, 2016, Desai et al., 2021; Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018). In some cases, these obstacles force refugees to switch to a different field of work.

Using the translocational intersectionality lens, the different temporary and situational positions that Fariba inhabited in Iran while living in refugee camps in Iraq and Turkey and in the Netherlands can be understood. This approach also helps to show how these different positions were imbued with different degrees of power and subordination. Her position as a married, educated, employed and politically active woman in Iran placed her in a complex position of power and oppression. Despite being educated, she was placed in a relatively subordinated position due to her gender and age and felt that she was underestimated in her workplace. However, having a good job because of her education and being married to a man with a high-paying job elevated her socioeconomic status. These intersectional positions led her to exert her agency through political activism. Nonetheless, after the revolution and the coming to power of the opposition⁶ (Jalaeipour, 2006), her family was forced to leave the country.

Fariba's position as a young mother, a stateless asylum-seeker, displaced from country to country, from one refugee camp to another, placed her in a very subordinated and vulnerable position. The lack of identity documents made Fariba's position precarious and precluded her from having a normal life and finding employment. She and her family lived in limbo for several years. But in this situation, relying on her previous skills and the resource that her gender identity provided her, she started to earn money through beauty therapy, which became the basis of her entrepreneurship in the years to come. In this context, she found a means of exercising her agency.

In the Netherlands, power and subordination relations continued in a different way: contrary to the situation in Iran, in Dutch society, Fariba's gender created new opportunities for her. She tried her best to realize her agency through socio-class mobility and to gain success. Despite having relevant education and knowledge (which is expected to give her a powerful position), her qualifications were not recognized in the Netherlands. Therefore, she could not work in her own field, and this put her in a disadvantageous position. She attempted to increase her human resources by learning the Dutch language and studying again in the same field at a Dutch university in order to find a suitable job, but her status as an immigrant put her at a disadvantage and she could hardly compete in the market. Entrepreneurship provided her with various resources based on the same

⁶ The revolution in Iran in 1979 was carried out by different forces of left-wing, nationalist, intellectual and Islamist. Following coming to power Islamic republic, the conservative Islamist force quickly excluded other revolutionary forces from any positions of power in the new regime, although these forces were their former allies.

intersectional positions. Fariba's story shows the shifting intersectional positions of gender, class, age, nationality and immigration status according to the different contexts. At the crossroad of these shifting intersections, informed by the various power relations, Fariba exerted her agency in diverse translocational forms.

Hence, a conceptual framework is needed that can capture the connection between refugees, entrepreneurship, translocational intersectionality and their agency. In the following discussion, a conceptual model will be developed to visualize how entrepreneurship enables refugees to exert agency according to the different intersecting aspects of their identities.

Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to develop a dynamic multilayered and multifaceted conceptual framework to explain how refugee entrepreneurship is shaped by intersectional positions and how refugee entrepreneurs exert their agency through these intersections in their entrepreneurial contexts. The paper argues that refugees' experiences (including their capacity and opportunity to act) with entrepreneurship are shaped and impacted by the intersectional backgrounds of refugee entrepreneurs, as well as the 'opportunity structures' which are present in their context.

Considering the dynamic interactions between the micro (the entrepreneur), meso (the opportunity structure) and macro levels (both host and origin contexts), the mixed embeddedness approach offers a powerful tool for analyzing refugee entrepreneurship. However, as elaborated above, this theory has been criticized for various shortcomings, including its static conceptualization (Anwar & Daniel, 2017; Jones et al., 2014), challenges in operationalization (Anwar & Daniel, 2017; Ram & Smallbone, 2001) and an overemphasis on ethnic community factors. It has also come under scrutiny for its assumed homogeneity, gender-neutrality and a lack of intersectional perspective (Ram et al., 2017; Wang & Warn, 2018). Additionally, the theory is inadequate in studying the agentic role of self-employed refugees within specific structural conditions. While some studies (Bizri, 2017; Meister & Mauer, 2018; Wauters & Lambrecht, 2008) have utilized mixed embeddedness theory to achieve a more comprehensive analysis, the approach could benefit from further refinement through intersectional and translocational positionality perspectives. These adaptations could address the aforementioned limitations and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon.

The extent to which refugees can exert agency differs according to the different intersecting aspects of their identities and positionality (Ozasir Kacar & Essers, 2019), which is reflected in their entrepreneurial motivations, resources and strategies. Entrepreneurial resources are not accumulated apart of social contexts which refugee entrepreneurs experience, but they are informed through socially embedded processes (Bisignano & El-Anis, 2018; Martinez Dy, 2020). The interdependence of structure and agency influences the potentiality of the self-employed refugee to mobilize resources and support (Romero & Valdez, 2016). Therefore, an intersectional approach is needed to enable us to analyze the intersecting aspects of entrepreneurship without presuming homogeneity among refugees. This approach extends beyond ethnicity to simultaneously consider other social factors such as gender, age, religion and race in refugee entrepreneurs' positionality in the market. While the mixed embeddedness theory is beneficial for exploring the multi-layer relationships, the additional notion of translocational positionality, helps to show and understand dynamics of different positions according to time, location and specific structures. It thereby overcomes the limitation of an overly static conceptualization of mixed embeddedness. Accordingly, a dynamic intersectional mixed-embedded conceptual framework is developed by this study to fill the existing lacuna in the literature on the interplay of agency and structure.

The conceptual model presented below, illustrates the primary analytical categories that can be used in a refugee entrepreneurship study, focusing on the structure and agency domains at both macro and micro levels. At the macro level, this model examines the relations in the structural area, emphasizing the role of political-institutional and socioeconomic contexts in shaping refugee entrepreneurship, as well as the role that so-called "opportunity structures" play in this process. The contexts/structure impact refugee entrepreneurship either according to rules, regulations and norms relevant to refugee entrepreneurship or due to societal perceptions of refugees and economic changes. The model demonstrates the need to consider bi-directional relationships between these categories. These factors are reflected in these "opportunity structures" which determine market conditions and market accessibility for refugee entrepreneurs. In the context of the Netherlands, Fariba experienced feelings of non-appreciation and exclusion in her workplace as a foreigner. She attributes the loss of her job in the economic crisis in 2008 to anti-immigration sentiments in Dutch society. The economic crisis and Fariba's experience of unemployment compelled her to start her own business. However, she was able to commence her entrepreneurship quickly when she completed a short-term internship, because of Dutch regulations which incentivize

entrepreneurship. This shows that the existing structures do not always limit the agency of individuals, but can sometimes act as an empowering force.

Although the market conditions, as one aspect of the “opportunity structures”, are influenced by contexts at the macro level, market accessibility depends on how refugee entrepreneurs capitalize on their resources and what strategies they adopt at the micro level. Therefore, the relationship between opportunity structure and refugee entrepreneurship is bilateral. Indeed, it seems that refugee entrepreneurs adopt particular agentic strategies to find their place in the labor market. The agentic strategies are those strategies that refugee entrepreneurs apply to introduce new resources or capitalize on existing resources to access the labor market. Hence, the implementation of these strategies is crucial for the establishment and sustainability of refugee entrepreneurship.

Applying agentic strategies not only enables the refugee entrepreneurs to find their place in the labor market, it also helps them to navigate their path in the new society. Some refugee entrepreneurs may utilize agentic strategies to integrate in society (Wauters & Lambrecht, 2006, 2008). Fariba thinks entrepreneurship has contributed to her integration in different ways. At the social dimension, entrepreneurship has expanded her social contacts and friendships with Dutch people. At the cultural dimension, she has learned a lot about Dutch culture and adopted the Dutch norm-value system through her self-employment.

Moreover, the model highlights the impact of agentic strategies by refugee entrepreneurs at micro level on structures at macro level, although this impact may not be as big as the influence of structures on refugee entrepreneurs. Studies indicate that refugee entrepreneurs can change societal perceptions of refugees in the host society. These entrepreneurs receive more respect from both host society (Chreim et al., 2018; Khademi et al., 2023) and their own ethnic community through their entrepreneurship (Lidola, 2014; Villares-Varela & Essers, 2019). Accordingly, they experience greater social inclusion (Embiricos, 2020; Khademi et al., 2023), whilst their entrepreneurship contributes to the economy of the host society (Harb et al., 2019; Kadkoy, 2020).

In order to clarify the ways in which refugee entrepreneurs can exercise agency, the model suggests that I examine their entrepreneurial motivations, resources and strategies, which are shaped by their intersectional-translocational positionality. Highlighting Fariba’s intersectional background as a well-educated, middle-class, married, non-practicing Muslim and Iranian, female, refugee entrepreneur,

the model shows how these intersectional positions impact her entrepreneurial motivations, resources and strategies. The challenges Fariba experiences as an asylum-seeker in a refugee camp encouraged her to develop her skills in the beauty profession, enabling her to increase her independence amidst difficult circumstances (Alkhaled & Sasaki, 2021, Shepherd et al., 2020). Her position as a mother urged her to become fluent in the Dutch language and to continue her education in the Netherlands. Although she had no cosmetology qualifications, her gendered socialization in Iran acted as a trigger for the development of her skills. Her intersectional position as a female refugee is clearly linked to her human capital and exemplifies how agentic strategies can be shaped deploying intersectional positions. Her life story illustrates the importance of translocational positionality, as she accumulated different kinds of capital based on her intersectional positioning across different times and contexts.

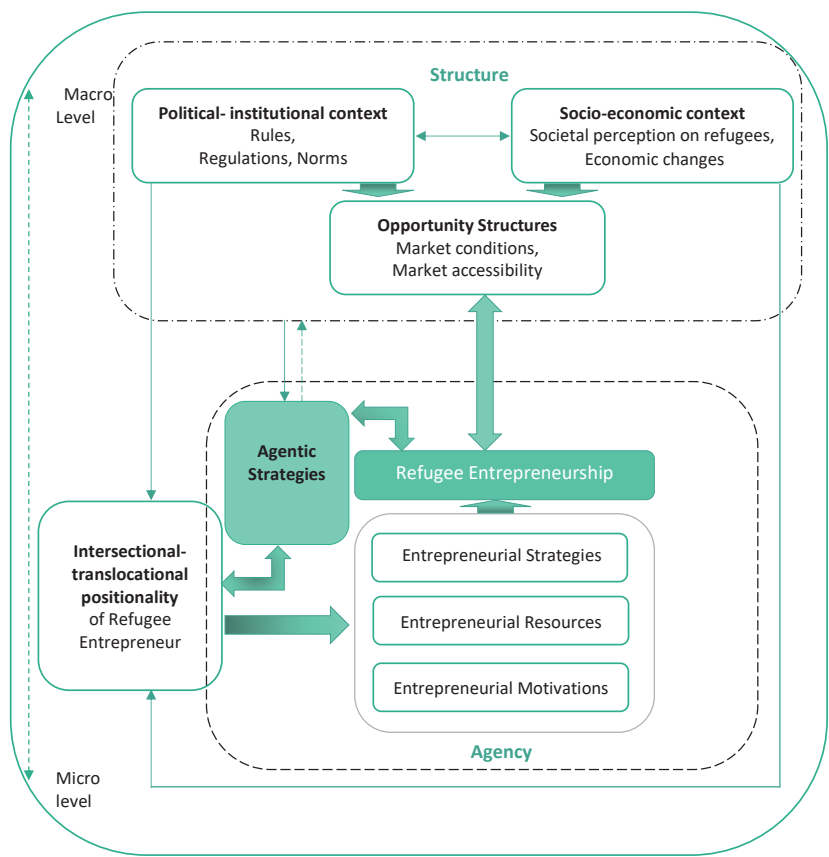


Figure 5: A conceptual model for studying refugee entrepreneurship
Source: Author's own creation

The conceptual model shows that structures contribute to the (re)production of the intersectional positions of refugee entrepreneurs; although these structures constrain the agency of individuals, they may also empower refugee entrepreneurs in some cases. Refugee entrepreneurs employ agentic strategies to reconstruct their intersectional identities in the light of both origin and present contexts through entrepreneurship. For instance, when Fariba faced a challenge due to her cultural background which threatened her entrepreneurship, she adopted an intersectional agentic strategy. While her husband asked her not to treat male clients, she did not obey him, as is often expected in the traditional Islamic Iranian culture. Fariba adopted an agentic strategy based on the culture of the host society, where gender equality is considered one of the basic values (Plantenga & Remery, 2015), rather than one based on the religious culture (gender segregation) of her homeland. This strategy not only added to developing her business but also reconstructed some aspects of her identity. Fariba describes herself as a Dutch-Iranian woman in Dutch society, where she feels she belongs.

The proposed intersectional mixed embeddedness framework for refugee entrepreneurship, accordingly, addresses how refugee entrepreneurs exert their agency in the labor market and the new society based on their intersectional backgrounds. This framework can be visualized as follows (see Figure 5).

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to develop a conceptual framework to analyze how refugee entrepreneurship is informed by refugees' intersectional identities and how refugees exert their agency through this intersectional process. This conceptual model, based on multiple theories and approaches in sociology, management and entrepreneurship studies, sheds new light on the theoretical fields of intersectionality and refugee entrepreneurship.

By combining translocational intersectionality and mixed embeddedness theory, the conceptual framework provides a multi-dimensional and multi-layered analytic tool for studying refugee agency in the new society through entrepreneurship. Within this model, mixed embeddedness theory demonstrates the interactive relationships between entrepreneurs' resources, 'opportunity structures' and contexts of refugee entrepreneurship. From this theoretical perspective, political-institutional and socioeconomic contexts in both the country of origin and the host society are important. Taking into account both contexts provides an overview of

the rules, regulations and societal perceptions of refugees and economic changes in which refugee entrepreneurship is shaped. Mixed embeddedness theory links micro, meso and macro levels together in constructing refugees' entrepreneurship. Although it is worth applying this mixed embeddedness approach, it does not pay enough attention to the contextualized agency of diverse refugee entrepreneurs. To account for such contextualized agencies, this conceptual framework incorporates a multifaceted intersectional approach. It addresses how intersectional positions, such as ethnicity, class, religion, age and gender provide different resources for refugee entrepreneurs. Additionally, intersectional- translocational positions produce knowledge and experiences that impact the ways in which refugees capitalize on these resources and adopt certain entrepreneurial strategies.

The conceptual framework brings new insights into refugee entrepreneurship studies by employing the concept of agency in light of refugee entrepreneurs' intersectional backgrounds. This conceptual model views entrepreneurship as a dynamic process -stressed by the concept of translocational positionality-through which refugee entrepreneurs exert their agency and reconstruct their intersectional identities. This model shows that, while institutional restrictions and 'opportunity structures' impact the labor market, refugee entrepreneurs attempt to carve space for themselves in the new society. Therefore, this analysis simultaneously addresses the factors that constrain and enable refugee entrepreneurs' efforts to exert agency.

Agency exerted by self-employed refugees is informed by their intersectional-translocational backgrounds and may be manifested in agentic strategies. These strategies are the conflux of structure and agency where refugee entrepreneurs struggle, negotiate and stand up for themselves, to become socially and economically independent.

Beyond its scientific contribution, the conceptual framework has implications for policy and practice. This model offers a comprehensive view to policymakers and practitioners working with refugees to understand refugee entrepreneurs' participation in the labor market and the way in which the structures of a new society enable or constrain their agency. According to this model, action plans for refugee entrepreneurship should take the intersectional backgrounds and agency of these people as their starting point. This chapter developed a conceptual model to analyze refugee entrepreneurship based on intersectional positions. The scope of this study is limited to the context of refugee entrepreneurs, in order to address an important gap in the literature (Abebe, 2022; Heilbrunn and Iannone, 2020). However, it also has broader relevance. In order to gain a deeper understanding of

entrepreneurship within other minority groups it is suggested that future studies address this intersectional-translocational mixed embeddedness conceptual framework and adjust or tailor it accordingly. Finally, this conceptual model has been developed based on other studies, but it has not yet been applied in empirical research. Thus, empirical studies will be needed to determine the limitations and the significance of this conceptual framework.

Chapter 3

Iranian Refugee Entrepreneurship and Inclusion in the Netherlands

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Introduction

After the economic crisis in 2012, I was fired. Since I had always worked, I didn't like to return home and become a housewife. I was 52, I didn't know the language [Dutch] very well, and I didn't take any professional training. I thought I should be realistic. What could I do? I told myself I've been assisting my husband in sewing for years and I've learned a few things along the way. Besides, young girls of my generation were trained in basic sewing techniques in Iran. Six years ago, I started up my alterations shop⁷ [...] Now, because of my job, I have gained more Dutch friends and acquaintances. Actually, my best friends are Dutch! I learn a lot from them and can speak Dutch more fluently now. [...] I don't think I am either an Iranian or a Dutch person, I am a citizen of the world. I am a person who lives here and feels at ease. Here is my home! (Mona, 58 years old, female Iranian entrepreneur, 2019)

The above quote is an extract from the life story of Mona, an Iranian refugee entrepreneur. She explains the different aspects of her identity that led her to set up her own business and how entrepreneurship impacted her integration and inclusion in Dutch society. To understand Mona's experience, we need to address how her position as a middle-aged, Iranian, unemployed woman shaped her entrepreneurship. We should also consider how she utilized her gender-based socialization in her country of origin to find a place in the labor market in the host society. Not only do we need to consider how Mona's diverse identities interact, but we must also attempt to understand how her proactive role in the labor market as an entrepreneur contributed to her integration and inclusion.

In Mona's case, the socio-economic context of an economic crisis in the Netherlands in 2012 led her to capitalize on her resources. Being an entrepreneur has increased her connection with Dutch society and expanded her social network and social capital. Improving her language proficiency through entrepreneurship has enriched her knowledge of Dutch society and cultural capital as well. She does not identify herself as Iranian or Dutch, but as 'a citizen in the world', reflecting her sense of belonging (Geurts, 2022). Mona's case demonstrates the need for a multifaceted analysis that includes various aspects of refugees' multiple identities and accounts for the way these identities might also play a role in refugees' inclusion in society.

⁷ Repairing and changing clothes.

I illustrate how refugee entrepreneurship plays a role in refugee entrepreneurs' sense of belonging and perception of acceptance, as two dimensions of inclusion.

The integration and inclusion of refugees represent significant issues for host societies. Despite various definitions of integration, the concept is typically deployed to measure how refugees adapt to the receiving society, based on indicators such as language proficiency, interactions with the host society, participation in the labor market, and education (Eijberts & Ghorashi, 2017; Ghorashi, 2021). Recently, studies have suggested that entrepreneurship is a suitable pathway to integration for refugees (Wauters & Lambrecht, 2006, 2008; Alrawadieh et al., 2019; Meister & Mauer, 2019; Lavison & Halabisky, 2019; Shneikat & Alrawadieh, 2019). Other studies have contested this claim, arguing that entrepreneurship can, in fact, prevent integration (Raijman & Tienda, 2000, 2004; Masurel et al., 2002; Toussaint-Comeau, 2005). Beyond the question of whether entrepreneurship facilitates or hinders integration, the impact of entrepreneurship on refugee inclusion remains largely under-studied, although the concept of inclusion has recently received more attention (Eijberts & Ghorashi, 2017; Ghorashi, 2021). Inclusion refers to refugees' perceptions of belonging to society and being accepted by the host society. Studying refugee inclusion contributes to a better understanding of how different beliefs, ideologies, classes, and sexual orientations are acknowledged and appreciated in a society from the perspectives of refugees themselves. The Netherlands has increasingly addressed the inclusion of refugees over the past two decades by considering their felt sense of belonging (Eijberts & Ghorashi, 2017; Ghorashi, 2021). In a country where entrepreneurship is recognized as an important pathway for participation in the labor market (Berns, 2017), the role of entrepreneurship in refugee inclusion must not be overlooked.

The case of Iranian refugees in the Netherlands represents an excellent example to examine the relationship between entrepreneurship and inclusion. The Iranian refugee community is recognized as one of the most well-integrated groups of refugees in Dutch society, based on markers such as education, labor market participation, level of income, and inter-ethnic partnership with Dutch natives (Hilhorst, 2010; Ghorashi, 2021; van der Heijden & De Valk, 2018). Throughout the 1980s, a considerable number of Iranian refugees immigrated to the Netherlands, shortly after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. This group formed the first wave of Iranian refugees (Ghorashi, 2018). The Iranian refugees in the Netherlands are mostly highly skilled, well-educated political refugees from an urban middle-class background (Dourleijn & Dagevos, 2011; Bakker, 2016; Honari et al., 2017; van der Heijden & De Valk, 2018).

As almost 40 years have passed since the first wave of Iranian refugees settled in the Netherlands, this community can be understood as an established group of former refugees. Despite their successful integration, some studies illustrate that Iranian refugees experience less belonging to the Netherlands compared to other immigrant groups (Werkuyten & Nekuee, 1999; Ghorashi, 2018). This is partly because although Iranian refugees have mostly learned the Dutch language and some have also studied at Dutch universities, they struggle to enter the job market or advance in their careers in a manner proportional to their education levels. They often hear from employers that their Dutch 'is not good enough' (Ghorashi, 2018). Some studies have shown that entrepreneurship is sometimes a reaction to the experience of exclusion from the labor market (Khosravi, 1999; Fong et al., 2007; Wauters & Lambrecht, 2008). Khosravi (1999) portrays how the increase in unemployment and the negative attitude towards immigrants in Swedish society have caused Iranian refugees to find entrepreneurship as the only way to survive in the job market. Using the opportunity structures in Swedish society and relying on their ethnic resources, they established small businesses for themselves. The question now is whether entrepreneurship has provided a greater sense of inclusion to this established group of refugees in Dutch society. Therefore, to better understand the process of inclusion of Iranian entrepreneurs, this chapter poses the following question: *How does entrepreneurship play a role in the inclusion of Iranian refugee entrepreneurs in Dutch society?*

To answer these questions, first, I discuss the concepts of integration and inclusion in relation to refugee entrepreneurship studies, and the importance of different aspects of refugees' identity, such as gender, religion, age, class, and ethnicity, for refugee entrepreneurship. Second, I analyze the life stories of Iranian refugee entrepreneurs. Finally, I clarify the impact of identity components on refugees' entrepreneurship and inclusion.

Refugee Entrepreneurship and Integration

The concept of integration in scholarship on refugees generally refers to a multi-dimensional two-way process requiring, on the one hand, the will of immigrants to adapt to the lifestyle of the receiving society and, on the other hand, the will of the host society to facilitate access to employment and services and accept immigrants in society (Bakker et al., 2014). Within the debate on refugee and immigrant entrepreneurship⁸ and integration, we witness two streams.

⁸ In this chapter, sometimes I will extend the literature deal with migrants to refugees. Whenever I do this, I mention 'immigrants' or 'immigration', otherwise I apply 'refugee' for refugee studies. However, this chapter is mostly based on refugee studies.

The first and most dominant stream emphasizes the positive effect of entrepreneurship on integration (Alrawadieh et al., 2019; Meister & Mauer, 2019; Shneikat & Alrawadieh, 2019). This literature highlights how entrepreneurship can lead refugees to play a more active role in the labor market. Entrepreneurship increases their interactions with the new country, develops their social networks, contributes to their language proficiency, exposes them to the host culture, deepens their knowledge of society, and consequently, enriches their social and cultural capital. The second stream emphasizes the ‘enclave effect’ of entrepreneurship, which refers to a process in which a specific ethnic group creates its own labor market, hindering the integration of the immigrant group (Masurel et al., 2002; Toussaint-Comeau, 2005). Within this paradigm, members of the ethnic community are understood to live and work together in the same geographical location. The immigrant workers are employed by co-ethnic entrepreneurs and upward mobility only occurs within the confines of their ethnic group. In many cases, most clients are people from the same ethnic background, since these self-employers supply specific ethnic products or services (Raijman & Tienda, 2000; Masurel et al., 2002).

Both integration strands, including those describing the positive and the enclave impact of refugee entrepreneurship, take for granted the values and norms of the host society as standards that refugees should respect in order to integrate. Hence, refugees who have the highest interactions with society, cultural knowledge of the receiving society, norm conformity, and language proficiency are considered the most integrated (Duyvendak & Scholten, 2011; Eijberts & Ghorashi, 2017). The limitation of this concept is that it assumes integration is the most essential element in the creation of a secure, vibrant, and cohesive community (Lavison & Halabisky, 2019). The Netherlands is an example of a country that has such a perception of integration; nonetheless, studies on well-educated immigrants and refugees in the Netherlands reveal an integration paradox (Geurts et al., 2021; Ghorashi, 2018). The more immigrants and refugees integrate in terms of mastering the language, employment, and education; the less likely they are to feel a sense of belonging to the Netherlands. This is largely due to the negative discourse on refugees in Dutch society, which has increased at the turn of the millennium (Duyvendak & Scholten, 2011; Eijberts & Ghorashi, 2017; Geurts et al., 2021; Ghorashi, 2018).

At the level of policy, the approach towards immigrants and refugees in the Netherlands has changed several times in recent decades. In the 1980s, Dutch policy was dominated by so-called multi-culturalism discourse and focused heavily on immigrant support for minority groups (Duyvendak & Scholten, 2011; Ghorashi, 2021). In the last decade, even entrepreneurship laws were reformed to

better support immigrant and refugee entrepreneurship and small- and medium-sized businesses were encouraged (Kloosterman, 2003). In the 1990s, the so-called multi-culturalism discourse was replaced by integration discourse. The focus then shifted to the social and economic participation of refugees as citizens who were expected to independently carve out a position within the labor market. In recent years, the dominant discourse has moved to assimilation: that is, refugees have been expected to become like other Dutch citizens by learning the Dutch language and acquiring Dutch fundamental norms and values (Duyvendak & Scholten, 2011; Ghorashi, 2021).

Furthermore, refugee policy in the Netherlands has amplified the image of refugees as dependent on government support. Refugees are placed in asylum seeker centers, separated from Dutch society, while their asylum applications are processed; resulting in long waiting periods and greater dependence on Dutch governmental support (Ghorashi, 2003, 2021). It seems that integration, at least in the Dutch context, refers to the process of enabling refugees to reduce their dependence on social security and welfare systems, while they are expected to adapt to Dutch standards and expectations. The concept of inclusion, which attempts to encapsulate refugees' emotional attachments to society and their sense of being welcome in the host society, better reflects a more nuanced understanding of refugees' position in society (Slee, 2019; Dobson et al., 2021).

Refugee Entrepreneurship and Inclusion

The inclusion of refugees entails a process of improving social incorporation, through increasing 'opportunities, access to resources, authentic experiences of belonging and wellbeing and voicing respect for human rights' (Dobson et al., 2021, p. 4). Inclusion contains two aspects; namely, the felt sense of acceptance in the host society (Essers et al., 2021) and the 'sense of belonging' to a group or society (Slee 2019; Dobson et al. 2021). Belonging is a multi-layered notion that can be understood by identifications and emotional attachments to three different main analytical aspects: 'social locations' such as homeland, 'collectivities and groupings', and 'ethical and political value systems' (Yuval-Davis, 2016). Being separated from their homeland and exposed to socio-cultural differences with inhabitants from the host country, refugees experience different forms of belonging, which this study focuses on.

At least four distinct modes of belonging are recognizable in the literature. The first form, 'ethnic belonging' refers to refugees who prefer to avoid cultural dissimilarities and insist on their own ethnic collectives and the culture of their country of origin (Abreu et al., 2000). Khosravi (2018), in his research on Iranian entrepreneurs and refugees in Sweden, provides an example of ethnic belonging regarding the way cultural festivities are celebrated. They strongly adhered to their tradition of celebrating an ancient Iranian feast and refused to change on account of living in Sweden. The largest group of Iranian immigrants, though, adapted this ancient Iranian feast in order to celebrate it together with Swedish people, transforming it into a hybrid festivity. This second group can be understood to have a 'hybrid belonging'. This refers to refugees who position themselves inside the cultural dissimilarities and construct their sense of belonging based on a combination of emotional ties to cultural values and norms of both original and host societies (Ghorashi, 2003).

The third form, 'transnational belonging', describes refugees who feel a sense of belonging to their co-ethnic group abroad, but feel a distance between themselves and their compatriots in their homeland (Snel et al., 2006). Studies on Iranian immigrants and refugees show that they cannot be seen as a single diaspora, but are rather fragmented communities that have been shaped over the years based on different ethnic, political, religious, and class affiliations (Sreberny & Gholami, 2016; Cohen & Yefet, 2021; Etemadifard & Khazaei, 2021). Each community tends to interact within their networks and draw a boundary between themselves and other Iranians who do not have similar ties, whether in or outside of Iran. Such a feeling of belonging to one's community does not necessarily fit within the geographical boundaries of a host country.

The fourth form of belonging, 'cosmopolitan belonging', relates to refugees who do not affiliate themselves with any specific culture (Jones & Jackson, 2014). Cosmopolitan, which literally means 'citizen of the world', can be explained as a fluid identification grounded on feelings of belongingness to humanity as a whole, and not merely on a specific ethnicity (Waldron, 2000; Hill, 2011; Geurts, 2022).

I adopt the concept of inclusion, addressing refugee entrepreneurs' emotional attachments to the receiving society, their perception of acceptance, and different kinds of belonging constructed around entrepreneurial as informed by various dimensions of their identity. Such a concept enables us to perceive the experiences of inclusion as well as exclusion from the standpoints of refugee entrepreneurs. I thus focus primarily on how entrepreneurship shapes their experience of inclusion

and sense of belonging rather than how entrepreneurship impacts integration (whether with positive or enclave effects).

Refugees Entrepreneurship and Identity Categories

Following the OECD, I consider entrepreneurship as an 'enterprising human action in pursuit of the generation of value, through the creation or expansion of economic activity, by identifying and exploiting new products, processes or markets' (2017, p. 16). Accordingly, entrepreneurs are individuals who establish new opportunities in the market for themselves. But which factors enable refugee entrepreneurs to grasp these opportunities and set up an enterprise? Different factors determine refugees' access to opportunities to set up enterprises. Such access is impacted by identity categories that have been historically, economically, and culturally constructed (Chreim et al., 2018).

Some studies illuminate how aspects of identity such as gender, class, ethnicity, age, race, and religion shape refugees' resources and entrepreneurial strategies (Gonzalez-Gonzalez et al., 2011; Verduijn et al., 2014). For instance, female immigrant entrepreneurs encounter more barriers in accessing financial capital than male immigrant entrepreneurs. Moreover, some of these women have a lower level of formal education, and less management experience, and can be excluded from the male-dominated social networks, which could extend their social capital. These challenges, combined with family responsibilities, often lead them to start up rather modest businesses (De Vita et al., 2014; Chreim et al., 2018).

The entrepreneurial strategies reflect the constraints regarding access to resources, which are influenced by identity components (Romero & Valdez, 2016; Chreim et al., 2018). Female immigrant entrepreneurs often occupy low tech/ low growth or low tech/high growth sectors including gender-based traditional service and retail industries, such as fashion, beauty, food services, and house-keeping. Moreover, female immigrant entrepreneurs mostly utilize the company of male partners, typically family members, to enhance their entrepreneurial resources (Chreim et al., 2018). In some cases, immigrant female entrepreneurs relying on their social capital start informal activities, such as running non-registered home-based businesses in which the owners only accept cash and do not pay taxes (Dallalfar, 1994; Chreim et al., 2018).

The way in which the female refugees apply entrepreneurial strategies to survive in the labor market may therefore be uniquely shaped by various dimensions of

their identity (Essers & Benschop, 2007; Essers, 2009; Essers et al., 2010; Ozasir Kacar & Essers, 2019). I examine how identity categories play a role in Iranian refugees' entrepreneurial motivations, resources, and strategies and their experience of inclusion.

Methodology

3

I apply an interpretative research strategy based on thematic life-story interviews, to investigate the entrepreneurship of Iranian refugees and to examine how these entrepreneurial experiences affect their inclusion in Dutch society. As McAdams states, 'individual life stories reflect cultural values and norms, including assumptions about gender, race, and class' (2001, p.101). Focusing on interviewees' past and present, as well as their perspectives on their futures, a thematic life-story method enables us to understand how the different social backgrounds of refugee entrepreneurs have been constructed in the past, and how they affect their inclusion.

I conducted 14 in-depth thematic life-story interviews with Iranian refugee entrepreneurs in the Netherlands. These individuals were selected based on purposive sampling, taking into account criteria such as nationality (being Iranian), gender (both female and male), the first legal status (former refugee), and extent of living in the Netherlands (at least 20 years). Although Iranian refugees are reputed to be a well-integrated group regarding education, participation in the labor market, and income levels, they do not report feeling included in the Netherlands as much as they expected (Ghorashi, 2018, 2021). However, it is not yet clear how entrepreneurship impacts their experience of inclusion in Dutch society. For that reason, established Iranian refugee entrepreneurs represent an interesting group for research. They are all entrepreneurs, although they differ in terms of their career duration and their field of entrepreneurship.

To gather the life-story narratives, I as a female Iranian researcher, conducted the interviews drawing upon my connections with Iranian refugee/ immigrant networks. I applied two methods: summoning in the Telegram app and snowball sampling. I posted a call for Iranian refugee entrepreneurs to join the research project; however, this method resulted in only two interviews. The second method, snowballing, is typically employed when there are difficulties in accessing the group under investigation (Patton, 2002; Browne, 2005). Lack of trust has been extensively observed as a defining feature of the Iranian diaspora in Europe

(Sreberny & Gholami, 2016; Honari et al., 2017). Some Iranians are former political activists and they continue to fear the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, even after as many as 30–40 years of settling in a new country. I asked people in my network to connect me to the Iranian refugee entrepreneurs to gain their trust.

All interviews were conducted in Farsi, recorded digitally and transcribed literally. Applying thematic life-story interviews, the interviewees were asked to examine their lives based on their entrepreneurial experiences. The various identity components of gender, ethnicity, class, religion, and age of interviewees were also addressed during the interviews. To analyze the life stories, I considered the interview transcripts as the units of analysis (McAdams, 2012). ATLAS.ti software was used for open, axial, and selective coding. I obtained the informed consent of each participant and informed them about the research and their rights in the context of the project. To respect the privacy of interviewees, I applied pseudonyms and reduced the level of detail of the indirect identifier in this paper.

Refugee Entrepreneurship a Pathway to Inclusion?

This section explains how various elements of identity such as gender, age, ethnicity, religion, and class affect Iranian refugees' entrepreneurship and inclusion by exploring the following three themes: entrepreneurial motivations and inclusion, entrepreneurial resources and inclusion, and entrepreneurial strategies and inclusion.

Entrepreneurial Motivations and Inclusion

Mehrban, a married 52-year-old woman, is a foot reflexology therapist. She and her family lived in the Netherlands for nearly 10 years, waiting for the result of their asylum application. Mehrban and her husband were not allowed to work during this period. The family lived under financial pressure, relying on the government benefits paid to asylum seekers. During this 10-year period as asylum seekers, Mehrban and her husband conducted volunteer jobs to improve their Dutch and to connect with the community, so that they could increase their knowledge of society. After receiving Dutch nationality, Mehrban, highly motivated, enrolled in university to continue her previous expertise as a technician in an operating room. Although she studied diligently, she felt excluded as an intern and experienced discrimination by her co-workers. She discontinued her internship at the university. When she became unemployed Mehrban returned to volunteering in a nursing home, where she was introduced to foot reflexology. She was encouraged to study the field to

be able to help her child who had physical problems. Simultaneously, Mehrban needed to find a job to earn a living as soon as possible, especially because her family's dependence on government support put added pressure on her. In this situation, she decided to pursue foot reflexology as an enterprise. According to her, foot reflexology is a middle-aged job, and more popular among people who have not yet been able to earn enough money:

I was 43 years old when I started my entrepreneurship. Most of those who start foot reflexology aren't very young. Most are people who have either lost their jobs or are looking for work. I went at this age and got my qualification. This was important to my children. I wanted to be a good role model of perseverance and resilience to instill in them a strong work ethic. (Mehrban, Foot Reflexologist, 2020)

Mehrban's story illustrates how her gender, class, and age impact her motivation to start her own business. Having spent a decade as an asylum seeker, Mehrban was excluded from the labor market until the age of 40. The experience of exclusion as a foreigner in her previous work environment discouraged her to find a job in the Dutch labor market as well. As other studies show, refugee entrepreneurship can be a reaction to discrimination in the labor market (Khosravi, 1999; Fong et al., 2007; Wauters & Lambrecht, 2008). Regarding her class position, as a refugee without valid educational qualifications for Dutch society and experiencing pressure from the government to cut off government benefits, she needed to find a job to earn a living. Moreover, Mehrban's role as a mother influenced her in the creation, continuation, and development of her entrepreneurship. All these identity components together pushed her to set up her entrepreneurship.

Mehrban's story shows how the Netherlands has restricted the participation of asylum seekers in the labor market to voluntary activities. However, Mehrban made profound use of this only available opportunity to integrate into society. Later, her voluntary job helped her to start her entrepreneurship. According to Mehrban, she started her integration with her voluntary job, but it was entrepreneurship, which has increased her feeling of inclusion:

All my customers are Dutch. When I work on their feet, they start sharing their stories. It makes you familiar with their culture, for example, you learn a lot about their celebrations, funerals, weddings or birthday parties. I have a very friendly and warm relationship

with them. They have repeatedly invited me to their homes and celebrations. (Mehrban, Foot Reflexologist, 2020)

Mehrban's quote reflects how her entrepreneurship enhances inclusion through communication with her clients. Entrepreneurship has increased her connection to Dutch society. These interactions, which often take place with clients, have led to more friendships with Dutch people.

This relationship, based on mutual trust, has given her a sense of acceptance among her Dutch acquaintances and clients and strengthened her sense of belonging within Dutch society. Though she feels that she is still perceived as a foreigner in Dutch society more broadly, she now feels a stronger sense of belonging to Dutch society than to the Iranian community (Ghorashi, 2003; Yuval-Davis, 2016). Nevertheless, she does not identify herself as totally Dutch: "I feel the Netherlands is my home, I miss here when I go to Iran. [...] Sometimes I can say I am Dutch, but I'm not Dutch and will never become Dutch. Because I wasn't raised here" (Mehrban, Foot Reflexologist 2020).

Entrepreneurship has provided a context in which Mehrban experiences a hybrid sense of belonging which contributes to feeling more included in Dutch society (Ghorashi, 2003; Yuval-Davis, 2016; Essers et al., 2021). The hybrid sense of belonging has been developed based on identification with both Iranian culture and Dutch culture. Despite having closer connections to Dutch people than to the Iranian community, Mehrban acknowledges a barrier between herself and Dutch society that keeps her from feeling fully accepted. Kian is a 72-year-old carpet merchant who worked as a mathematics teacher in Iran. He was forced to leave Iran because of his political activities:

By the time we got here, I was actually in my 40s. [...] I was committed to my family and felt responsible to improve the financial situation quickly. [...] From the first day, it was a definite issue for me that we should manage on our own and not be dependent on the government's unemployed benefit. "If you want to work and start trading carpets, I can give you the carpet as consignment," a friend said. I didn't have any experience in trading carpets at that time, but anyway, I'm from Tabriz. I had been exposed to carpets, merchants and sellers since I was a child. (Kian, Carpet merchant, 2019)

Kian's position as a middle-aged, married, political refugee with a middle-class background, shaped his entrepreneurial motivations. Kian has been a political activist all his life due to his desire to play a proactive role in his life. This conviction also led him to entrepreneurship. Like many other refugees who experience downward social mobility (Campion, 2018), Kian as a newly arrived refugee was in need of an income. Nonetheless, he was not able to rely on his expertise as a mathematics teacher to earn a living due to language barriers and a lack of official educational documents. Furthermore, his gender as an Iranian man made him feel under pressure to play the role of breadwinner. His sense of responsibility to provide for his family is informed by the cultural and gender norms of Iranian culture. His age also motivated him to become an entrepreneur. Kian was over 40 and thought he was too old to learn a new specialization to find a job. His ethnicity as an Iranian from, Tabriz, a region known for its carpets, also empowered him. Kian's story exemplifies how different identity dimensions shape individual entrepreneurial motivations. Through entrepreneurship, Kian could find his own place in the labor market. Nonetheless, Kian's interaction with Dutch people is largely limited to his clients, who mainly have different class backgrounds, and religious and political beliefs to him, which acts as a barrier. They are often middle-aged, upper-middle-class, religious and conservative Dutch people. However, in the workplace, their relationship is characterized by trust and respect. Most of Kian and his wife's social connections and friendships are with Iranians, most of whom are long-term friends. They live outside the Netherlands and share commonalities based on lifestyle and ideological beliefs. His identity as a political activist in Iran makes Kian emotionally more connected to Iran than to the Netherlands: "After a 35-year absence from Iran, I can no longer identify myself as a complete Iranian in terms of identity, although I think I'm certainly not a Dutch person either" (Kian, Carpet merchant, 2019).

Although Kian's entrepreneurship contributed to his inclusion in the labor market and he feels accepted by his clients, this has not deepened his sense of belonging to Dutch society. Instead, Kian's position reflects a form of 'transnational belonging': he has a strong affinity with an Iranian refugee community that has formed along ethnic, religious, political and class lines.

Entrepreneurial Resources and Inclusion

Minoo was a beauty therapist in Iran, but only after passing several beauty-therapy courses in the Netherlands over a 20-year period, she was able to open her own beauty salon. From the first days of asylum seeking, she aspired to obtain a job. However, her status as an asylum seeker excluded her from gaining permission to work, which is another example of how the Dutch context deprives refugees of

entering the labor market. She also lacked a formal certification of her hairdressing and beauty-therapy skills and struggled as a result of the language barrier. These represented significant obstacles to her entrepreneurship (Bevelander, 2016; Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018). After 3 years of learning Dutch, at 30 years old, she attempted to enter the job market. But since she had left all her qualifications in Iran, she could not prove her skills and was required to take courses. Paradoxically, she first needed to earn money to pay for her courses. It was here that her gender, religious, and ethnic backgrounds provided her with a unique opportunity to develop her resources and access the labor market:

Finally, I was able to find work in Turkish and Arabic beauty salons and did beauty treatments for Muslim women. I knew Turkish and Arabic male barbers did beauty therapies for male and female clients, but Muslim women with hijab wouldn't like to have male barbers cut their hair or do their beauty therapies. Besides, their own female Muslim beauty therapists didn't work for male-run salons. It wasn't good for their reputation. I went to these beauty salons, where I knew they had Muslim clients. I asked them if I could do beauty treatments for female Muslim clients. They trusted me and gave me a room, divided the salon up with a curtain. In this way, I could earn money for my courses. (Minoo, Beauty therapist, 2020)

Minoo discovered a religion-based demand in a niche market (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000; Essers & Benschop, 2007, 2009). Because of her Islamic background, she had intimate knowledge that public beauty salons were considered inappropriate or incompatible with the religious and cultural values of many Muslim women with headscarves (hijab), who required a private space with female hairdressers. She was aware that Turkish and Moroccan Muslim women hairdressers did not want to work in male-run barbershops because it was potentially damaging to their reputation within their ethnic Islamic communities. Although Minoo came from an Islamic country and was familiar with Islamic values and norms, she was no longer a believer. Generally, Iranian immigrants are known for having more secular worldviews and are less inclined to practice Islam than other immigrant groups from the Middle East (Entzinger, 2003; Hilhorst, 2010; Bakker, 2016; Honari et al., 2017). Social and cultural pressures did not interfere with Minoo working in men-dominated workplaces. Her gender, ethnicity, and religious background enabled her to create special spaces in Turkish and Arab men's hairdressing salons, where she could provide services to women with hijab, in order to finance her training courses. The impact of diverse identity categories on entrepreneurial capitals is evident in Minoo's life story.

While working in beauty salons and barber shops, Minoo volunteered, organizing exhibitions where entrepreneurs presented their services and jobs. In this way, Minoo maintained a strong network in the labor market and established a greater sense of belonging to Dutch society and increased her human, cultural, social, and financial capital. The effort to raise capital, which was largely based on her voluntary work, built up trust between herself and Dutch society. Later, it provided fertile ground for her entrepreneurship after 20 years of living in the Netherlands and contributed to her inclusion in Dutch society. In her own words, she first ‘integrated in society’ and then started entrepreneurship: “Before and without the entrepreneurship, I had already integrated. Otherwise, no one would have trusted and lent me money. I had already passed my exam. [...] I owed it all to my volunteer work” (Minoo, Beauty therapist, 2020).

Minoo’s boyfriend is Dutch and she often socializes with Dutch people. She only has a few close Iranian contacts. She speaks Dutch well and states that she knows Dutch society better than Iranian society. She says she has incorporated Dutch culture and values—namely respect for individual privacy and organization—into her own value system. Nevertheless, she values aspects of Iranian culture, including respect for elders and the importance of the family. Minoo feels so akin to the Netherlands that she believes she was re-born there:

I have come into a new world. I feel I was re-born in the Netherlands. When I went to Iran for the first time after 24 years, I felt alienated and found myself a stranger in my Iranian family. I couldn’t recognize them. Neither did they! (Minoo, Beauty therapist, 2020).

Minoo displays a hybrid sense of belonging and considers herself an Iranian-Dutch woman. Although Minoo considers herself a completely integrated refugee regarding language proficiency, social participation, and belonging, she feels that she is only 50 per cent accepted by Dutch society. She attributes this to the mainstream and pervasive anti-immigrant sentiment in society that has dominated since 2000. In general, it can be said that Minoo has immersed herself in all aspects of Dutch life, and this has played an important role in her entrepreneurship.

Entrepreneurial Strategies and Inclusion

Mahsa was an ambitious 20-year-old mother when she entered the Netherlands in 2000. From the very beginning, ‘being in society as a Dutch citizen’ stimulated her to learn the Dutch language. She and her husband, who did not like being a burden on society as refugees and living on government benefits, decided to start

their own business as soon as possible. She created her own entrepreneurship in the food industry in 2002: Mahsa and her husband targeted their business to a niche market, preparing Iranian and Afghan food for Iranian and Afghan customers. Having worked for years as caterers, they opened their Iranian-Afghan restaurant in 2013. Mahsa believes that combining the values and norms of both the receiving society and homeland through entrepreneurship is a significant contributing factor to inclusion:

You should consider the Dutch mindset. You cannot live in a new society and remain in the same traditional and ethnic forms of your original society. However, the Iranian and Afghan cultures have been introduced very negatively. We should re-introduce them to Dutch society. We should criticize and remove the negative aspects, and emphasize their positive facets. (Mahsa, Restaurant manager, 2020)

This attitude is reflected in her entrepreneurship. Mahsa combines her background as an Iranian, practicing Muslim woman with hijab, with the norms and values of Dutch society to create entrepreneurial strategies. For example, she and her husband used to refuse to sell wine to customers because of the Islam prohibition on alcohol. Gradually, they realized that this had deterred customers and decided to add wine to the menu:

Wine is haram for me as a Muslim, but I see it differently. Drinking wine is in their [Dutch] culture. I shouldn't follow my own manner in their country. So why did I come here!? I shouldn't impose my Islamic rules on other people. I keep my Islamic beliefs to myself. Yes, wine is haram for me, but not for my clients. (Mahsa, Restaurant manager, 2020)

Although she draws a clear line between her identity and the norms of Dutch society, she does not define them in opposition. Mahsa conducts her business by maintaining her Islamic beliefs in her personal life and being flexible in the labor market of a non-Muslim society with non-Islamic values and norms. This entrepreneurial strategy bolsters Mahsa's inclusion and entrepreneurship.

Mahsa's extensive network, which includes Dutch, Iranian, and Afghan people, has impacted her sense of belonging and thus, her inclusion:

I've always been involved in both Iranian and Afghan cultures. I never could say I'm Iranian or Afghan. After immigration, I have also been

exposed to a third culture, the Dutch culture, for many years. I feel I'm more comfortable with Dutch culture. Now, I see myself outside of these cultural boundaries. I feel I'm a human being who lives in the world. (Mahsa, Restaurant manager, 2020)

She has developed a cosmopolitan sense of belonging (Jones & Jackson, 2014; Yuval-Davis, 2016). Although most of Mahsa's clients are likely to be Iranians or Afghans, an enclave effect has not materialized. Nonetheless, her entrepreneurship is a niche market, and she consciously and actively has aimed her business at enabling her to have more contact with Dutch society and contribute to her inclusion. She has applied various strategies to attract Dutch customers, from adding wine to the menu to innovations in traditional food decorations. Her extensive network has made her feel accepted by Dutch society. Now, she feels that she has become fully included in Dutch society.

Reza is a 58-year-old Iranian entrepreneur and political activist who owns an online Iranian supermarket. He was a 34-year-old with a successful history in entrepreneurship in Iran at the time of his asylum in the Netherlands in 1995. He was sure he could start another entrepreneurship after receiving refugee status. As some studies claim, previous experiences of self-employment positively impact entrepreneurial ambitions (Alexei & Lars, 1999; Khosravi, 1999; Ensign & Robinson, 2011).

Reza started his current business with a smaller entrepreneurship, an Iranian bakery and confectionery in an immigrant neighborhood. Although that was a novel initiative at that time, he now considers this strategy to be one of his biggest entrepreneurial mistakes. He attributes this decision to the fact that his knowledge of the Dutch labor market was initially informed by an Iranian perspective. Reza's entrepreneurial strategies were focused on the demands of Iranian and other foreign communities in the Netherlands. Therefore, most of his clients were immigrants. He could not develop his Dutch network, Dutch language, and consequently entrepreneurship as he expected:

I think my entrepreneurship not only didn't help my integration, but it was also a hindrance. Because you're dealing with a [immigrant] society that doesn't transmit the culture of the [host] society to you. In some cases, you even have to deliberately show that you are culturally distinct to keep your clients. Look..., for example, by selling halal products. I think it's much less now, but in the early years of the

21st century, well, I remember in many foreign families, not Iranians, Iranians are exceptions⁹, that during Christmas time, it wasn't desirable to hang up lights. We always heard the words 'Muslim', and 'Alhamdulillah' (thanks be to God). (Reza, Iranian Supermarket owner, 2020)

Reza's life story illustrates the significance of distinguishing between the concepts of integration and inclusion. In fact, Reza's entrepreneurial strategies have been impacted by the Islamic cultural values of ethnic minority groups. He believes that because he had a shop in an area with a high percentage of immigrant residents, he had to cater to his customers' specific cultural values; for example, by providing halal food products, or avoiding Christmas decorations in the store. Reza himself is a nonbeliever, but he comes from an Islamic background, which equipped him with the knowledge of Islamic norms and values. Like Minoo, Reza could utilize this niche market at first for his entrepreneurship and inclusion in the labor market. However, unlike Minoo, who used this niche market temporarily to develop her resources, Reza applied it as a long-term entrepreneurial strategy, which led him to be trapped in the enclave effect and prevented his integration. Reflecting on his sense of belonging to the Netherlands and its values system, he describes the differences between integration and inclusion in the following way:

Who defines integration? Who can say I haven't integrated? Perhaps I integrated! I can't speak Dutch well or I don't have contact with Dutch society that much, but I love the Netherlands very much. If integration means the acceptance of society [by the refugee], yes I am integrated. Maybe the society doesn't accept me. I am very happy with the life here. This society has given me the opportunity to live again. (Reza, Iranian Supermarket owner, 2020)

This quote illustrates that a refugee's experience concerning the receiving society is too complex to understand through an integration theory. An integration concept, which defines a good citizen based on criteria such as a high level of language proficiency or a certain level of social interactions with the host society, cannot grasp the experience of citizens such as Reza who feel a strong sense of belonging to Dutch society. This highlights the necessity of the concept of inclusion, which

⁹ Reza distinguishes Iranian immigrant group demands from other Muslim immigrant groups. According to him, although the Iranian immigrants have Islamic background, it does not impact their life style compared to other Muslim groups in the Netherlands. His point is reflected in studies on Iranian as I mentioned in Minoo's life-story (Bakker, 2016; Honari et al., 2017).

focuses on the acceptance and sense of belonging of the refugees themselves (Slee, 2019; Dobson et al., 2021):

Look, I am a human being in the world. I don't define myself based on my nationalities. Naturally, I like Iran very much. I think about it a lot. But I also like the Netherlands. For example, [...] I become upset for several hours if the Dutch football team loses a game. (Reza, Iranian Supermarket owner, 2020)

3

Despite the deep feeling of belonging to the Netherlands, Reza defines himself as a human with a non-certain nationality, beyond the national borders of Iran or the Netherlands. Hence, his sense of belonging can be characterized as cosmopolitan. Comparing Reza and Mahsa's stories shows how different aspects of identity play an important role in refugees' entrepreneurial strategies. While these strategies sometimes contribute to inclusion, they sometimes prevent this due to an 'enclave effect'.

Discussion

This chapter has analyzed how Iranian refugee entrepreneurs conduct and deploy their entrepreneurship based on different identity categories, and the role of entrepreneurship in their inclusion in Dutch society. I examined the significant role of different elements of identity in the life stories of Iranian refugee entrepreneurs who immigrated to the Netherlands at least 20 years ago.

As illustrated, gender, ethnicity, class, religion, and age motivated the interviewed refugee entrepreneurs to set up their enterprises. All interviewees had different class positions in Iran; however, they found themselves in similar circumstances after arriving in the Netherlands. They lost their property and possessions, lacked qualifications and personal documentation, and had no knowledge of the Dutch language (Bevelander, 2016; Campion, 2018; Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018). Accordingly, they spent periods living under economic pressure, dependent on welfare support from the government. However, the interviewed Iranian refugee entrepreneurs resisted being 'a burden on society' and instead aspired to play a proactive role, as exemplified in the life stories of Kian, Mahsa, and Minoo. This can be explained by their characteristics as well as their reaction to the negative attention towards refugees in the Netherlands (Duyvendak & Scholten, 2011; Ghorashi, 2021).

Experiences of exclusion as non-Dutch individuals in the work environment motivated these refugees to become entrepreneurs and to work more independently (Fong et al., 2007; Wauters & Lambrecht, 2008). Mehrban, for instance, felt that she was being excluded by her co-workers, so she decided to start her own business. Moreover, we observe that identity components seem to have provided specific entrepreneurial opportunities for refugee entrepreneurs and link them to niche markets. This is exemplified by Mahsa's experience of an Iranian-Afghan catering business and Reza's experience of creating an Iranian bakery.

Gendered family roles, such as that of the breadwinner in the case of men, and women's roles as caretakers and mothers also impact these interviewees' entrepreneurial motivations (Ashe & Leung, 2011; Chreim et al., 2018). Kian felt financially responsible for his family, spurring him to become self-employed, while Mehrban's child's mobility problems moved her towards entrepreneurship in the field of reflexology, inspiring her to be a good role model for her children. The initial gender socialization of men and women in the country of origin can inform entrepreneurship through gender-based cultural and human capital as well, such as Mona's training in sewing techniques at school as a girl.

The impact of religion on Iranian refugee entrepreneurs can be seen in two different ways, in the form of 'knowledge of Islam' and '(non) believing in Islam'. The possession of an Islamic background, regardless of personal belief or practice, equipped refugee entrepreneurs with a source of knowledge that enabled access to niche markets and shaped entrepreneurial strategies (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000; Essers & Benschop, 2009). Minoo's Islamic background enabled her to discover a niche market for beauty treatments for Muslim female immigrants and capitalize on this opportunity. For Reza, having a business in a Muslim neighborhood encouraged him to sell halal products and avoid Christmas decorations, although he did not believe in Islam.

Religion in the form of '(non) believing in Islam' has shaped these refugees' entrepreneurial strategies as well (Essers & Benschop, 2007, 2009; Essers et al., 2010). Lack of belief in Islam created a job opportunity for Minoo in a barber shop that Turkish and Moroccan Muslim women were reluctant to pursue since it would harm their reputation among their Islamic communities. Mahsa adopted her entrepreneurial strategy to sell alcohol in her restaurant by individualizing her faith.

That is, without referring to the opinions of Islamic scholars (Mujtahids¹⁰), she re-interpreted the Islamic teachings about the prohibition of alcohol trading in light of her own perceptions of inclusion in the labor market. This echoes the work of Essers and Benschop (2009), who also demonstrated how individual interpretations of the Qur'an were applied by female entrepreneurs of Moroccan and Turkish origin to legitimize their entrepreneurship.

This study also demonstrated that entrepreneurship is not necessarily conducive to integration but sometimes produces an enclave effect. In this case, refugee entrepreneurs concentrate on their co-ethnic suppliers and customers, which precludes interactions with the host society. For example, Reza's entrepreneurship prevented him from communicating with Dutch society or learning Dutch, instead, his business kept him more in touch with his non-Dutch customers' cultures.

Although entrepreneurship sometimes boosts integration by enhancing the social interactions of refugees with the host society and improving language proficiency, it does not always bolster inclusion. In comparing Kian's and Mehrban's life stories, although both have mostly Dutch clients, their sense of belonging diverges. The reason lies in their different initial aspirations and motivations (Borselli & van Meijl, 2021; van Heelsum, 2017). Mehrban strived to become part of Dutch society from the first days of immigration, while Kian wanted a job to live and continue his political activities for Iran. In both cases, Mehrban and Kian guided their energy towards the society to which they felt they belong. For Kian, this meant Iranian society, but for Mehrban, this implied Dutch society. Thus, Mehrban developed a sense of belonging to the Netherlands through her entrepreneurship, but Kian did not experience a strong belonging to the Netherlands.

The different identity dimensions, finally, have shaped various modes of belonging of refugee entrepreneurs. Some Iranian refugee entrepreneurs experienced a more hybrid positioning in their entrepreneurship, which led to the formation of a sense of 'hybrid belonging'. They identify themselves as entrepreneurs with both Iranian and Dutch identities. This group experienced inclusion in the Netherlands (such as Mehran and Minoo). Another form is 'cosmopolitan belonging', applicable to those Iranian refugee entrepreneurs who did not define themselves with a specific nationality. Although they feel they are included in Dutch society through entrepreneurship, they have a broader understanding of the concept of inclusion.

¹⁰. In Islam, only a mujtahid who is a specialist of religious law is qualified to interpret Quran and give an opinion on Islamic law. Although this traditional approach is challenged by modernist Islamic scholars nowadays.

They see themselves as part of a global society (such as Mahsa and Reza). In this research, both groups, those with either hybrid or cosmopolitan senses of belonging, feel a sense of belonging to the Netherlands, whether they were integrated, in terms of social contacts and language proficiency or not.

‘Transnational belonging’ pertains to the Iranian refugees who feel a sense of belonging to their co-ethnic group abroad but feel a distance between themselves and their compatriots in their homeland, Iran or other Iranian communities who do not have a shared political, religious and class background (such as Kian). This group feels less included in Dutch society. ‘Ethnic belonging’, which refers to refugee entrepreneurs who feel strong emotional attachments with their own ethnic community, was not observed in this study. Perhaps this can be attributed to the fact that these refugees have spent at least 20 years of their lives in the Netherlands¹¹.

Conclusion

This study has provided new insights into refugee entrepreneurship and inclusion. First, I have introduced the concept of inclusion into the field of refugee entrepreneurship, shifting my focus away from integration. An integration perspective that focuses on refugees’ language proficiency and social interactions with the host society (Bakker et al., 2014) is insufficient to fully analyze and understand the sense of attachment of refugees. Inclusion, addressing their experience of belonging and perception of being accepted, provides a more profound understanding of refugees’ emotional bonds with their host society (Slee, 2019; Dobson et al., 2021). I studied inclusion as a process of enhancing the social incorporation of refugees from a refugee lens, by considering how refugee entrepreneurs experience belonging to society and how they perceive acceptance by the host society (Essers et al., 2021). This study showed that in some cases, Iranian refugee entrepreneurs were integrated economically, socially, and culturally; yet, they did not feel they belonged to Dutch society, or they did not perceive themselves to be entirely accepted by the host society. However, other Iranian refugee entrepreneurs who were not integrated in the sense of knowing the language and interacting with Dutch people have a deep sense of belonging

¹¹. The total population of Iranians (both immigrants and refugees) in the Netherlands is about 40,000 people. It seems that the small size of this community, the high diversity and contradiction in political perspectives, and lack of trust among Iranian refugees prevent them from building a strong community, which could bind the Iranian diaspora under the umbrella of a single ethnic identity.

to the Netherlands. This study thus has illustrated the importance of distinguishing between integration and inclusion and the value of adopting the concept of inclusion in refugee entrepreneurship studies.

Second, the study provided a more nuanced insight into the refugee entrepreneurship literature by addressing the role of various identity categories in the refugee entrepreneurship process. I showed how class, gender, religion, ethnicity, and age play a role in the formation and continuity of refugee entrepreneurship (Essers & Benschop 2007, 2009; Chreim et al., 2018). I then examined the link between entrepreneurship and inclusion. The inclusion of refugee entrepreneurs largely depends on how the aforementioned identity dimensions shape the motivations and resources of refugee entrepreneurs and direct their entrepreneurial strategies towards either the host society, immigrant communities, or a combination of both. The refugees' positioning excluded some refugees from the labor market, and yet, it became a strong motivation for setting up their own businesses to be a part of society, or just for a living. Sometimes these identity components created a niche market accessible for refugee entrepreneurs, which functioned as a double-edged sword for their inclusion. On the one hand, a niche market included them in the labor market; on the other hand, it may result in enclaving them in ethnic entrepreneurship. Although these niche markets worked perfectly for capitalizing on resources for the short-term, they play a preventative role in long-term inclusion. By demonstrating the different ways in which refugees' backgrounds inform inclusion and entrepreneurial experiences, I highlighted the significance of the crossroads of different aspects of an identity (e.g., gender, ethnicity, and class, religion); an issue that needs more systematic study within the context of refugee entrepreneurship.

Third, I strengthened the existing literature on refugee entrepreneurship and inclusion, by studying inclusion in terms of both refugee entrepreneurs' sense of belonging and perception of being accepted by the host society. I introduced refined analytical categories allowing us to specify senses of belonging in light of entrepreneurial experiences, including cosmopolitan, hybrid, and transnational forms of belonging. I demonstrated that entrepreneurship did not always result in feelings of inclusion among refugee entrepreneurs. The greater the sense of belonging to the Netherlands, the more refugees experience inclusion in Dutch society. Furthermore, Iranian refugee entrepreneurs feel that they receive more respect and acceptance from society since they have become the owners of a business. Refugee entrepreneurs who were marginalized by the labor market because of identity elements of gender, class, age, religion, and ethnicity

developed trust in Dutch society through entrepreneurship. Self-employment built an environment in which the feeling of otherness was suspended. In most cases, refugee entrepreneurs cultivated friendships with Dutch and other ethnic groups through entrepreneurship. Nonetheless, outside of the entrepreneurship context and in general society, some of the refugee entrepreneurs did not feel completely accepted as a part of society. They feel they are still 'others' or 'foreigners', etc., in Dutch society.

In addition to the theoretical insights outlined above, this study has societal relevance. By focusing on the concept of inclusion, the limitations of the current paradigm of integration are rendered visible: this study shows that although refugees might be considered to be integrated, they do not necessarily feel they belong. At the same time, it is clear that a sense of belonging in one's host society is not strictly contingent on integration as it is typically understood. In addition, entrepreneurs' sense of belonging and integration depends on identity categories. To construct an inclusive society that includes refugees, it is important to develop mutual trust and respect between the host society, immigrant communities, and refugee entrepreneurs. To do so, we need to consider the identity components that shape refugee entrepreneurs' sense of belonging.

Future studies might address how policymaking can be developed based on inclusion. Moreover, they might include other identity dimensions such as generation, race, and disability to reflect other aspects of refugees' identities that might impact their entrepreneurship and various modes of belonging. The insights gained from this study contribute to understanding the inclusion of established refugees who set up their entrepreneurship within different opportunity structures, which have changed during the last 30 years. To further advance this field, I suggest that more studies address the experiences of recent refugee entrepreneurs, such as Syrians, Afghans, and Ukrainians, and their inclusion.

Chapter 4

Navigating Translocational Positionality: Syrian Refugee Entrepreneurship in the Netherlands

An adapted version of this chapter has been prepared as an article for submission to the Journal of Small Business Management.

Different versions of this chapter were presented at the Migrant Entrepreneurship Conference 2023 in Paris, France; the MSC Conference 2023 in Utrecht, The Netherlands; and MIG.EN.CUBE Conference 2023 in Bologna, Italy.

Introduction

Neighbors sometimes asked, "Still on social allowance?" It was a shame for me. When I lived in Syria, I always offered help to people, but we had to leave everything behind. The Netherlands gave us a new life, and I started my own enterprise to give back for all I received. (Khadijah, a 48 year old woman, 2021)

Khadijah, a 48-year-old electrical engineer, originated from an upper-class, well-educated family in Syria. Despite her two decades of managerial experience in a Syrian company, her positionality as a middle-aged refugee woman posed obstacles to finding employment in the Netherlands. In 2021, four years after settling in the Netherlands, Khadijah established an Arabic teaching institute for children in the Netherlands. Khadijah came to the Netherlands in 2017 through a family reunion visa, joining her husband who moved to the Netherlands in 2015. In that year, 1.3 million asylum seekers, predominantly Syrians fleeing conflict, sought refuge in Western Europe (Dingott Alkopher, 2018; van Heelsum, 2017). This marked the highest single-year influx since World War II (Barlai et al., 2017), sparking the 'European refugee crisis'. The socio-economic integration of Syrian refugees subsequently became a key European issue (Betts et al., 2017).

Since 2015, the Netherlands has housed Syrian refugees (van Heelsum, 2017), their numbers soaring from 10,300 in 2010 to 126,260 in 2022 (Allecijfers, 2024b). Within this group, women represent 43.8%, while men 56.15% (Allecijfers, 2024b). Religious affiliations are primarily Muslim (78%), while the proportion of non-believers, Christians, and other faith groups are respectively 13%, 8%, and 1% (Damen, Huijnk, & Dagevos, 2022). The Syrian refugees, as a relatively young and educated immigrant group, present a considerable socio-economic potential for the Netherlands. In 2022, 83.5% of the Syrian population with a refugee background were younger than 45 years old (Allecijfers, 2024b). By 2018, 22% of the 18-30-year-olds were enrolled in Dutch higher education (Dieleman, 2020). Despite slow initial labor market integration in the first years of being granted a residence permit (Lubbers & de Valk, 2020), unemployment amongst Syrian refugees dropped from 52% in 2017 to 28% in 2019 (Dagevos et al., 2020).

The scientific relevance of understanding refugee integration has been recognized by scholars (Freiling, et al., 2019; Heilbrunn & Iannone, 2020). This emerging literature focuses mainly on their labor market integration (Miltenburg & Dagevos, 2021), especially through entrepreneurship in the Middle East and in North Africa

(Almohammad, et al., 2021; Atasü-Topcuoğlu, 2019; Bizri, 2017; Refai, et al., 2018; Shneikat & Alrawadieh, 2019). This regional emphasis stems from the large number of Syrian refugees hosted by the neighboring countries: about 3,1 million in Turkey, 788,000 in Lebanon and 639,000 in Jordan (UNHCR, 2024). Given the growing Syrian refugee population in the Netherlands, more research on their entrepreneurship in Dutch society is needed.

Existing sparse research on Syrian refugee entrepreneurship in the Netherlands (de Lange, 2021; Nijhoff, 2019; 2021), often overlooks the dynamic interactions between refugee entrepreneurs and structural contexts (Khademi et al., 2024). It primarily emphasizes entrepreneurial opportunities as structures, neglecting the role of refugee entrepreneurs as independent agents (Harima, 2022). Such studies highlight that refugees are often pushed towards entrepreneurship by factors, such as unemployment, rather than pulled by self-realization, entrepreneurial aspiration and human capital (Barberis & Solano, 2018). However, a more nuanced understanding of refugee entrepreneurship requires acknowledging refugee entrepreneurs' agency and examination of the intricate interplay between them and institutional structures- both enabling and inhibiting- in their new context (Bakewell, 2010; Khademi et al., 2024). Moreover, the intersectional backgrounds of refugee entrepreneurs, which significantly shape their entrepreneurial agency and are often overlooked, need to be addressed to avoid homogenizing refugees (Alrawadieh, et al., 2019; Embiricos, 2020; Lavison, & Halabisky, 2019; Wauters & Lambrecht, 2006, 2008).

Refugee entrepreneurs' intersectional identities shift over time and place and context, shaping their agency translocationally. Comprehensive understanding requires considering the impact of structural contexts over different times and locations (Anthias, 2008; Martinez Dy, 2020; Villares-Varela & Essers, 2019). The concept of translocational positionality sheds light on how identities transform with changing locations, including intersectional aspects that evolve with time and context (Anthias, 2008). For instance, becoming a refugee involves shifts in class and social status. Identity categories such as religion and gender, may take on new meanings depending on context. The experience of being a Muslim women in an Islamic country differs from being a Muslim woman in a secular country.

Examining Khadijah's experience, a well-educated, middle-aged, middle-class Syrian woman, reveals a change in her positionality due to her displacement. As a middle-aged woman refugee, she encounters a downward class shift despite her education. Age, once an asset as an experienced manager in Syrian, now acts as

a barrier in the job market. Identity elements such as ethnicity, class, education, age, and refugee status define her new positionality in the Dutch labor market. Leveraging her Arabic proficiency as a resource, and utilizing opportunity structures, Khadijah sets up a company in a niche - teaching Arabic to children from Arabic countries struggling with language loss due to residing in non-Arabic environments. This example clarifies how shifts in meaning and identity over time, place and structural context influence opportunities and limitations for individuals, consequently shaping their agency. The concept of translocational positionality provides insights into the agency experienced by Syrian refugee entrepreneurs across varying periods, location and social context.

The research question is: *How do Syrian refugee entrepreneurs in the Netherlands exert agency through entrepreneurship given the possibilities and constraints of their translocational positionality and structural context?* In this chapter, first, I contextualize the opportunity structures of refugee entrepreneurship within the Netherlands. Second, I discuss the concepts of intersectionality, translocational positionality, and agency in the refugee entrepreneurship. Third, I analyze the life-stories of 15 Syrian refugee entrepreneurs to examine how they exercise agency given their translocational positionality, while interacting with structural opportunities and limitations.

Contextualizing Refugee Entrepreneurship

To deeper understand the agency of refugee entrepreneurs, one must examine macro-level opportunity structures and micro-level translocational positionalities of refugees (Khademi et al., 2024). Refugee entrepreneurship refers to identifying and exploiting new economic activity despite constraints such as bureaucratic restrictions, discrimination, and limited resources (OECD, 2017) by forcibly displaced individuals (Abebe, 2022; Ram et al., 2022). This definition highlights the dynamic interplay between the refugee entrepreneurs as proactive agents and their legal, social, and economic environment, the so-called “opportunity structure” (Atasü-Topcuoğlu, 2019). Opportunity structures pertain to the market conditions and accessibility within a specific socio-economic and legal context that impact refugee entrepreneurs’ opportunities (Kloosterman, 2010; Ozasir Kacar & Essers, 2019). These structures, such as legal frameworks and local consumer markets (Kloosterman, 2010), access to particular markets due to knowledge or financial support limitations (Volery, 2007), availability of financial assistance, social networks, recognition of qualifications, and the presence of supportive programs

or initiatives (Rashid, 2018) can facilitate or impede entrepreneurial opportunities for refugees.

In the Netherlands, opportunity structures related to refugee and refugee entrepreneurship are ambivalent. Positively, refugees can acquire citizenship after five years and benefit from social assistance, including allowances, healthcare, and education for children (Immigratie- en Naturalisatiedienst, 2024). These factors increase their sense of societal inclusion and encourage entrepreneurship, as seen in Khadijah's case (Khademi et al., 2023). However, the Dutch political institutional context still presents many challenges for refugees that complicate their entrepreneurial journey (de Lange et al., 2021; Nijhoff, 2019; van Riemsdijk & Axelsson, 2021).

The Dutch integration system, from 2013 to 2021, mandated refugees to follow a unified path, hindering business startups due to a prolonged asylum process (Marchand & Dijkhuizen, 2018) and lack of work permission (Chliova et al., 2018; Nijhoff, 2021). Until late 2023, Dutch law permitted asylum seekers to work only 24 weeks per year (de Lange et al., 2021; Nijhoff, 2021). Although this limitation has recently been lifted (Rijksoverheid, 2024), it was still in effect for the study participants.

Moreover, refugees often face the devaluation of their education due to different educational systems, complicating job acquisition in the Netherlands, especially for those without European work experience, as exemplified in Khadijah's experience (de Lange et al., 2021; Khademi et al., 2024). Furthermore, the Dutch system's complexity, characterized by bureaucracy, ambiguous regulations, intricate social security, taxation, and diverse labor and environmental legislation, serves as a significant barrier to refugee entrepreneurship (Nijhoff, 2021). At the municipal level, refugees encounter additional challenges, as municipalities, responsible for labor market participation, enforce varied legal standards on entrepreneurs (Nijhoff, 2021). This requires adherence to complex, locality-specific regulations (de Lange et al., 2021; van Riemsdijk & Axelsson, 2021).

While the welfare system provides unemployed refugees with social allowance, some municipalities hesitate to grant special assistance to the self-employed (*bijzondere bijstand zelfstandigen*-BBZ). The BBZ scheme supports new entrepreneurs for up to 12 months, offering crucial financial aid to help their businesses become viable (de Lange et al., 2021). Lacking a standardized program for refugee entrepreneurship, incubator organizations act as intermediaries, providing training, coaching, and

funding to mitigate barriers from municipalities or banks (Marchand & Dijkhuizen, 2018). Nonetheless, their availability varies by region, and project scale remains small (de Lange et al., 2021). Moreover, the Dutch system often treats refugees as a homogeneous group, ignoring the diverse intersectional identities. These identities, however, significantly influence refugees' access to resources and their ability to navigate opportunity structures (Khademi et al., 2024; Nijhoff, 2019).

Refugee Entrepreneurship and Translocational Positionality

Intersectionality, a framework examining the interconnection of social identities and power systems, recognizes individuals' multiple identities, such as race, gender, and class, intersecting to shape experiences (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 1990). Some researchers emphasize how these intersecting identities interact with social structures to inform entrepreneurial experiences, particularly in immigrant entrepreneurship (Chreim et al., 2018; Essers & Benschop, 2009; Essers, et al., 2010; Ozasir Kacar & Essers, 2019). However, this approach remains relatively new in refugee entrepreneurship studies (Abebe, 2022). Thus, this section draws mainly on immigrant entrepreneurship.

Despite intersectionality's merits in identifying individuals' positions within social categories of inclusion and exclusion, it is criticized for its alleged static nature to intersectional components. In response, Anthias (2008, 2013, 2020) introduced 'translocational positionality' into the framework of intersectionality, offering a more dynamic approach to comprehending varying positionalities (Villares-Varela & Essers, 2019). Positionality refers to the juncture where structure- social position/ social effects- and agency- social positioning/ meaning and practice- intersect (Anthias, 2008). Translocational positionality refers to the complex interplay between individuals' identity, social location, and their ability to navigate various cultural, economic, and geographic contexts (Anthias, 2008, 2013, 2020).

Translocational positionality recognizes the fluidity of social categorizations across varying contexts and over time and space (Martinez Dy, 2020; Villares-Varela & Essers, 2019). Accordingly, entrepreneurs' social identities assume different significance depending on their operative context. Refugee entrepreneurs may encounter unique challenges (Martinez Dy, 2020) or discover new opportunities in a host country due to their intersecting identities of ethnicity, gender, religion, class, age, and immigration status (Villares-Varela & Essers, 2019). This approach enables us to reconceptualize the

relationship between entrepreneurial resources and agency (Cederberg & Villares-Varela, 2019; Martinez Dy, 2020). For instance, cultural capital brought by refugee entrepreneurs from their home countries provides distinct advantages. Their cultural knowledge, language skills, and ethnic networks can enable them to identify niche markets, access specific customer segments, and establish connections within their own communities or transnational networks (Atasü-Topcuoğlu, 2019; Nijhoff, 2019).

The concept of translocational positionality in refugee entrepreneurship studies remains underutilized, with limited research primarily concentrating on the intersection of gender and displacement (Adeeko & Treanor, 2022). However, I aim to expand this focus beyond gender issues and delve into other dimensions, such as ethnicity, religion, class, age, and education. By doing so, this chapter can gain insights into how power dynamics and social structures shape entrepreneurial opportunities and outcomes, and how refugees can leverage their diverse backgrounds and experiences to foster innovation and create social agency.

Refugee Entrepreneurship and Agency

Agency refers to the capacity for action that is created and enabled by specific relations of subordination (Mahmood, 2001). The expression of agency varies across different contexts influenced by a multitude of factors including existing structures and diverse refugee entrepreneurs' translocational identities- such as gender, class, religion, age, and ethnicity. Accordingly, a comprehensive understanding of agency requires analyzing the dynamic interaction between the translocational identities of refugee entrepreneurs and the structural frameworks in which they operate (Bakewell, 2010; Khademi et al., 2024). Although several recent studies have examined the agency of refugee entrepreneurs (Adeeko & Treanor, 2022; Obschonka et al., 2018; Shepherd, et al., 2020), they failed to analyze it considering the role of structure.

Shepherd et al. (2020), illustrate how Palestinian refugee entrepreneurs outside camps can leverage resources not readily available to those within camps. These resources include their multiple identities, such as being Palestinian and Lebanese, as well as their multilingualism and the development of social capital. The certain attributes and factors contribute to resilience and also play a role in the entrepreneurial process for refugee entrepreneurs, including proactive problem-solving, self-reliance, a broader sense of purpose in life (particularly for Palestinians), realistic optimism, and the presence of multiple sources of belonging (Shepherd et

al., 2020). Shepherd et al.'s study (2020) primarily focuses on the micro level and does not adequately explore how these individual characteristics interact with the prevailing structure to contribute to the resilience of refugee entrepreneurs.

The intersecting identities of refugee entrepreneurs can provide both privileges and disadvantages, impacting their access to resources, networks, and opportunity structures necessary for exercising entrepreneurial agency (Harima, 2022; Martinez Dy, 2020). These intersecting identities can also impact how others perceive entrepreneurs, ultimately affecting their capacity to leverage their agency (Adeeko & Treanor, 2022; Nguyen, 2019). Since identities are socially constructed and labeled by the host society, societal perceptions of refugees manifest structurally through norms, values, and discourses, consequently influencing the agency of refugee entrepreneurs (Khademi et al., 2024). Adeeko and Treanor (2022) demonstrate that while entrepreneurial identity enables women refugee entrepreneurs to challenge the label of "refugee", persistent structural obstacles compounded by gendered limitations and refugee background, continue to impede their access to entrepreneurial resources. In this study, I examine how Syrian refugee entrepreneurs navigate the interplay between their translocational positionalities and opportunity structures to exercise their agency.

Methodology

This research explores the impact of translocational positionality on Syrian refugee entrepreneurship and agency within Dutch society. Adopting an interpretative strategy, it employs thematic life-story interviews to highlight societal constructs of gender, age, religion, ethnicity, and class (McAdams, 2001). By focusing on interviewees' past and present experiences, this method provides in-depth knowledge on how the translocational positionalities of refugee entrepreneurs affect their current lives, entrepreneurship, and agency.

This study applied interviews with Syrian refugee entrepreneurs in the Netherlands. Purposive sampling was used, selecting participants based on their ethnic background (Syrian or raised in Syria), gender (both male and female), legal status (refugee), and having migrated post-2015. Although all the participants were refugee entrepreneurs, their businesses varied in stages. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, some had not yet registered their entrepreneurship. The business operation ranged from 6 months to 3 years. I included this diversity

to be able to illuminate the influence of contextual challenges on initiating refugee entrepreneurship.

I collected data by inviting Syrian refugee entrepreneurs via LinkedIn to participate in the study. Eventually, 15 individuals, seven women and eight men, agreed to be interviewed, the details of which can be found in the Appendix. To maintain the privacy of the individuals, pseudonyms have been used. COVID-19 restrictions necessitated conducting half the interviews virtually using Zoom from April 2021 to April 2022. Participants were informed about the research's objectives, the interview process, and their right to withdraw within three months post-interview. They were assured of secure data storage as per Radboud University's protocols. Notably, during the invitation process, one individual declined participation, while another responded solely to entrepreneurship-related questions, avoiding those tied to his refugee status. Hereby, they objected to the 'refugee entrepreneurship' term as a label, instead advocating for 'Syrian entrepreneurs'. This reaction prompted queries about how refugee entrepreneurs perceive their identity: do they see the term 'refugee entrepreneurship' as a negative label, or do some refugee entrepreneurs prefer to underline their refugee positionality? I will explore these questions in the results section.

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide, recorded digitally, and transcribed verbatim via Otter.ai, a transcription software. Durations varied from 55 minutes to 2 hours and 50 minutes, since some participants experienced several migrations. I verified each transcript against the audio, making necessary edits. The interview transcripts, considered as units of analysis, were analyzed (McAdams, 2001) and the ATLAS.ti software was used for open, axial, and selective coding. Utilizing, thematic life-story interviews, participants were asked to share their entrepreneurial journeys in the light of their translocational positionalities. I probed intersecting social identities including gender, religion, age, ethnicity, and class. Class as a translocational positionality was defined according to the participants' self-attributions in terms of their economic circumstances, education, income level, and type of job (Wright, 2005).

My positionality as the researcher significantly influenced the research in different ways. As I am not of Syrian origin, gaining access to the study population posed challenges. Being an Iranian female with limited Dutch and Arabic proficiency, I conducted interviews in English. Consequently, the sample predominantly consisted of educated, middle or upper-middle class participants. Accordingly, the results show the translocational positionality of a more privileged group of Syrian

refugees but do not capture the experience of all Syrians with refugee backgrounds, particularly those who are less educated and from lower social classes. Additionally, all interviewees shared their life stories in a language other than their mother tongue. Moreover, at times, my positionality played a role in the interviews by the interlocutors. For instance, I had to clarify my political stance on the Syrian war to establish trust with some of the interviewees. During another interview with a young woman, I shared my experience as a woman from an Islamic country from the same generation, which helped to establish a rapport between us. Moreover, the dynamic between me as the interviewer and the participants often extended beyond the research context. Aware of my academic positionality, participants sometimes sought advice on entrepreneurial resources, such as information, links, and skills necessary for improving their entrepreneurship. They also inquired about my immigration experience in the Netherlands.

Navigating agency through entrepreneurship?

In the subsequent section, I seek to demonstrate the role of translocational positionality and structural context in the agency of Syrian refugee entrepreneurs, taking into account factors such as age, gender, religion, ethnicity, and class. Through an examination of the life stories of four of the 15 interviewed Syrian refugee entrepreneurs, I will show that agency takes on multifaceted forms among the participants, and it cannot be simplified or generalized into a single expression.

Same Context But Different Entrepreneurial Experiences

Born and raised in Syria to an educated upper-middle-class Palestinian-Lebanese family, Amal moved first to Iran and later to Lebanon. After studying communication and English translation, she worked as a translator, interpreter, and journalist in Lebanon. However, her Palestinian refugee status limited her opportunities. In 2015, inspired by asylum seekers news that she covered, she decided to venture beyond the Middle East, forging a new life in the Netherlands. Amal, as a refugee in the Netherlands, received permission to work in 2018. While working as an Arabic teacher, she discovered her passion and talent for teaching. After joining a refugee-focused incubator, in 2020 and over the pandemic, Amal successfully launched her entrepreneurship to teach Arabic to refugee organizations.

Amal's translocational positionality - encompassing class, gender, ethnicity, age, and religion - informed her entrepreneurial agency. Originally from an upper-middle-class family, her refugee status and gender position presented persistent barriers

to the job market despite her significant human capital - diverse training programs, multilingualism, creativity, and varied work experiences. She attributes this difficulty to unequal structures and gender-based constraints in the countries she used to live in, contrasting this with her experience in the Netherlands: "I had never thought that I could be an entrepreneur as a woman. It was in the Netherlands that I encountered the idea for the first time that a woman could be an entrepreneur" (Amal, a 33-year-old woman, 2021).

During her asylum years, Amal faced financial struggles. Even now, while identifying with the middle class, she grapples with securing sufficient funds for her entrepreneurial venture and faces substantial debt. Despite these challenges and her downward class mobility, she is very satisfied with her entrepreneurship, as it allows her to exert her agency: "Financially, we were good because my dad was in a good job. But what is finance if you don't have freedom? Now, I have debt, but I don't really care. Because I'm waking every day to do something I love" (Amal, a 33-year-old woman, 2021).

Capitalizing on her resources, including economic, social, cultural, and human capitals, Amal navigated challenges and exercised her agency in the new context. She quickly mastered Dutch, supplementing her multilingual skills which include various Arabic accents, Persian, English, and French. Her proficiency became a valuable resource for her entrepreneurship. Starting her business at the age of 30, she combined extensive life experiences with youthful energy to hone her skills and human capital. Amal continually enhances her human capital through workshops and business courses. She leverages her cultural capital acquired from her previous life experiences and her positionality as a female Palestinian refugee with multiple cultural backgrounds. This translocational positionality has provided valuable cultural capital and knowledge, underpinning her entrepreneurial venture. Although she continues to grapple with the religious and gendered cultural expectations within her community, her agency is manifested by resourcefully using these challenges in her entrepreneurship:

I was named a Muslim, even though I wish I could change anything that labels me as a Muslim because I'm not (...). For me, being a Muslim woman has always been a challenge. When I was 20 I should be married, have kids, and know how to cook. But I am different from many other Arab women. So I use my ethnicity, religion, gender, and anything about culture in my entrepreneurship. If there are things you suffer from, you can actually use them to your benefit to make something good out of them. (Amal, a 33-year-old woman, 2021)

Amal's translocational positionality allowed her to identify a niche market within the Dutch integration system. During her asylum process, her multicultural background and language skills enabled her to identify a significant lack of understanding between refugees and supporting organizations, leading to misunderstandings. Therefore, she aimed to break down these barriers by offering Arabic language and culture training to organizations working with refugees. Her experience as an asylum seeker granted her insight into a gap in understanding refugees, particularly those originating from the Middle East and Arabic Islamic culture. This realization initially motivated her entrepreneurship and subsequently became an essential resource of her business.

Amal's story exemplifies how her translocational positionality has shaped her entrepreneurship and empowered her agency through entrepreneurship within the Dutch context. Her agency is evident in identifying a niche market based on a gap in the Dutch integration system, adopting a social entrepreneurship model, and effectively capitalizing on her resources. Amal values the freedom and equality she finds in the Netherlands, including gender fairness and recognition of Palestinian refugees. She appreciates the support system for refugee entrepreneurship, including the Chamber of Commerce, municipalities, and other related organizations. While she feels fully included in the Dutch system, her entrepreneurial experience does not reflect the entrepreneurial journeys of all Syrian refugee entrepreneurs.

Refugee entrepreneurs, despite appearing to engage in entrepreneurship under similar circumstances within a particular context, do not all have equal access to these opportunities, as we will see in Jamila's life story. Jamila, a married Syrian woman and mother of two boys, hails from an upper-middle-class background and pursued her education in English literature and law in Syria. She formerly worked as an executive secretary and later as a public relations officer in a Swiss company based in Syria. Following the Syrian civil war in 2011, she and her family moved to Qatar for four years. In 2015, they immigrated to the Netherlands. Although Jamila quickly learned Dutch, was fluent in English, and had international work experiences, she faced challenges. The complexity of the Dutch system hindered her to understand how to find a job or access a university education. Her expectations for support to integrate into the labor market were not met by the municipality, and her age added to the difficulty of finding a job, leaving her feeling depressed and excluded. This demonstrates how her class and educational positionalities have changed over time and location:

My contact person, at the municipality told me, “You can clean the toilets!” I was an executive manager, and you're telling me to go and clean the toilets!? I'm not saying that those who clean toilets aren't good people. But I am educated; I have skills and experience since I was 18. I had everything in my life, and my family beside me. Now I have to restart from under zero. (Jamila, a 41-year-old woman, 2021)

Jamila's agency is evident in her entrepreneurial journey. Motivated by increasing age and diminished class positionality, compared to life in Syria and Qatar, she became economically independent through entrepreneurship. Joining an incubator that supported refugee entrepreneurs, Jamila's and her husband's culinary skills were recognized by their coach, who suggested they establish a Syrian catering family business. They capitalized on existing resources, despite never having been utilized professionally before. Jamila's domestic cooking experience, based on gendered role expectations, and managerial skills formed a solid foundation for the business. Previously, Jamila had never considered Syrian catering in Syria or Qatar, but in the Netherlands, this ethnic resource enabled her to showcase her Syrian ethnic identity while earning a living. Incorporating Halal food in their catering reflected her religious background.

Jamila's story demonstrates how she exerts her agency through entrepreneurship by capitalizing on her existing resources, acknowledging new resources, discovering a niche market (Syrian catering was a new concept for Dutch society), and persisting in her entrepreneurial project despite facing structural barriers. While valuing the support from an incubator organization and benefiting from free entrepreneurial training for refugee entrepreneurs, Jamila mentioned significant challenges in launching her business. The registration process took over two years, during which she was unable to generate income, remaining reliant on government financial assistance. The municipality's lack of trust in her entrepreneurial success as a refugee, complicated matters further. Even after a meticulous business plan, employing marketing strategies, and gaining clients, her efforts were stymied, and the situation was exacerbated by the onset of the pandemic.

Jamila's experience underscores the Dutch system's dual nature: both facilitating and obstructing, reflecting the accessibility of opportunity structures for refugees. Comparing the experiences of Jamila and Amal demonstrates that refugee entrepreneurs do not have equal access to opportunity structures, even under seemingly similar circumstances in a given context. Local municipalities vary in support for refugee entrepreneurship. Therefore, how refugee entrepreneurs

overcome the structural barriers shows their agency. Despite initial resistance from her municipality, Jamila proved herself by persistently pursuing and organizing multiple meetings, ultimately earning the municipality's trust and support needed for her entrepreneurial endeavors.

Refugee Entrepreneur or Entrepreneur?

Translocational positionality not only influences the experience of the Dutch context by refugee entrepreneurs but also molds their perceptions of identity within the new society through their entrepreneurial endeavors. Saeed's story illustrates how translocational positionality redefines the identity of refugee and entrepreneur, fostering entrepreneurial agency in host societies. From a middle-class entrepreneurial background and with a Master's in Food Safety & Quality, plus 10 years of work experience, Saeed immigrated to the Netherlands in 2015, aged 32. Eager to start a food business but seeking more experience, Saeed volunteered and networked, aspiring to study for his second Master's in Food Technology at Wageningen University in the Netherlands. Concurrently, Saeed pursued incubation courses to kickstart his venture.

Saeed's entrepreneurial journey in the Netherlands is shaped by his translocational positionalities of gender, class, ethnicity, and age. Originally from Aleppo, Syria, where he enjoyed a good education and income, Saeed, at only 32 years old, encountered limited job opportunities in the Netherlands due to his age and lack of experience in Europe. Working in a factory for low wages, he struggled to support his family, while his Dutch peers earned more, fueling his determination to establish his own business. The entrepreneurial culture of Aleppo – the economic capital of Syria– ingrained in him a drive for entrepreneurship in the Netherlands. Meanwhile, his displacement also challenged traditional gender roles, as he grappled with the cultural embarrassment of asking his wife to contribute financially, balanced against the practical need for a dual income.

Despite Saeed's professional background in the food industry and efforts to carve a similar position in the Netherlands, his translocational positionality as a Syrian male refugee brought distinct challenges, influencing his entrepreneurial trajectory. He confronted negative perceptions in Dutch society, where Syrian refugees are sometimes labeled as 'gelukszoekers' (fortune seekers), implying they were not fleeing war, but rather seeking a better life. This stereotype persists even as Syrian refugees strive to contribute as entrepreneurs, casting a shadow over their efforts:

One of my Dutch friends asked: “Why do most Syrians feel the need to establish their own business? In the Netherlands, we also need workers; we already have entrepreneurs”. People say this because they don't know that in Syria, only one or two million individuals work for the government, but the rest aspire to or are already entrepreneurs. Syrians in the Netherlands have the same mindset. This isn't because the Netherlands is seen as a lucky land. (Saeed, a 39-year-old man, 2022)

Over time, Saeed's concern for young refugees' inclusion in Dutch society grew, especially due to their vulnerability without proper skills. His translocational positionality motivated him to establish a social enterprise in 2021 aimed at empowering youths, and introducing newcomers to the host society. Leveraging his new positionality as a refugee, he transformed challenges into resources by engaging in refugee-specific incubators and utilizing specialized assistance to advance his university education. Saeed's proficiency in Arabic, as a human capital, and understanding of cultural expectations and background of these young refugees as a cultural capital, stemming from his translocational positionality, enabled him to communicate with young refugees. His experience working with young individuals in Syria during his university teaching years, further enhanced this ability. Despite financial challenges, Saeed perseveres patiently and his agency is manifested through capitalizing various resources. Saeed redefined his identity as a refugee entrepreneur, used education in a Dutch university to increase his human resources, engaged in volunteer works, and participated in entrepreneurship courses. His social entrepreneurship to assist other refugee's inclusion in the host society, along with identifying niche markets related to refugees inclusion, demonstrate a proactive approach and agency through entrepreneurial action.

Defining and redefining the identities of refugee and entrepreneur in the light of translocational positionality varies among Syrian refugee entrepreneurs. While Saeed views his refugee identity as a resource for his entrepreneurship, Bashir takes a different approach, completely redefining this attributed identity and considering himself an immigrant. This different perspective forms the foundation of Bashir's entrepreneurship. Bashir, a Syrian energy engineer and business owner for 15 years, arrived in the Netherlands at age 50 in 2014. His translocational positionality including his class, gender, age, and ethnicity led to a redefinition of his new positionality as a refugee, enabling a fresh start in his new country through his enterprise:

One of my worst moments was waiting in line for food in a refugee camp. In Syria, I had my company and a good life. Being a refugee weighed heavily on me, so I decided to see myself an immigrant instead. Because being a refugee ties you to your past; thinking like an immigrant ties you to the future. To have a future, I need a job to support my family, as a man. (Bashir, a 57-year-old man, 2021)

Bashir's downward class mobility, contrasted with his gender-cultural expectations as a breadwinner, and conscious of age-related hindrances in finding a job, drove him to seek employment. Unwilling to rely on government support as a refugee, Bashir volunteered with various organizations, aware that in Dutch perception, paying tax symbolizes integration. Drawing on his experience in Syria, trading with European companies, and familiarity with their business models, he aimed to establish his entrepreneurship in the Netherlands immediately, to underscore his identity as an entrepreneur and a tax-payer with an agentic role in society. To enhance his human capital and networking, Bashir participated in entrepreneurial courses, conducted extensive research, and engaged with Dutch society as much as possible. He used his integration as a key resource for his entrepreneurship. Unable to utilize his educational background in the Netherlands, Bashir leveraged his management skills to launch a construction company. Nevertheless, the Dutch bureaucracy postponed his entry into the labor market until a year after receiving his refugee status, leading him to commence his entrepreneurship in 2018.

Bashir's translocational positionality as a Syrian, educated, middle-aged male refugee provided him with insight to identify a gap in the Dutch labor market. Observing many refugee expert craftsmen failing to enter the Dutch labor market due to language barriers, he focused on these individuals, creating a company tailored to their culture and lifestyle. Unlike Dutch companies starting at seven o'clock, his company began at nine, accommodating refugees' familial responsibilities, such as school drop-offs. The company's language was Arabic, positioning Bashir as a connector between Dutch customers and staff. Although Bashir was not as fluent in Dutch as he was in English, he managed the company's affairs using three languages: English, Dutch, and Arabic. His daughter helped in writing Dutch letters/emails for him as well. Hereby, he exerted his agency by converting his cultural background into a cultural capital as a recourse for his enterprise. Moreover, he played an agentic role in Dutch society by incorporating more Syrian refugees into the labor market: "Through my business, I earn enough money to build my own life and to help many refugees in starting theirs. I

understand their mindset and problem very well, because of my background and experience" (Bashir, a 57-year-old man, 2021).

Therefore, Bashir's agency is epitomized in identifying niche market, empowering other refugees, integrating them into Dutch society, creating new resources, capitalizing on existing ones, demonstrating professional adaptability, and converting his integration and voluntary works into entrepreneurial resources. Furthermore, by redefining his identity as an immigrant rather than a refugee, Bashir imbues his identity with an empowering meaning, enabling him to surmount feelings of frustration stemming from perceived social-class decline through his translocational positionality. This entire process can be viewed as an expression of agency.

As mentioned in the methodology section, some Syrian entrepreneurs declined participation in this research due to their objection to the term "refugee entrepreneurship". They preferred the designation "Syrian entrepreneurs" instead:

Why does the word "Syrian" come with "refugee"? Why the labeling? It can be "Syrian Entrepreneurship in the Netherlands". I am running a network of +600 Syrian Entrepreneurs and market players, and its main mission is to erase any labels or stereotypes. (Majid, a male Syrian entrepreneur, 2022)

Accordingly, two distinct tendencies emerge among Syrian entrepreneurs with a refugee background. Sayeed and others highlight both their refugee and entrepreneurial identities to challenge negative societal perceptions. They assert their autonomy as entrepreneurs, despite facing structural challenges associated with their translocational positionality. The second group, represented by individuals such as Bashir and Majid, rejects the refugee identity altogether, emphasizing their entrepreneurial identity to project a strong image of Syrians as newcomers. Despite employing different strategies, both groups navigate the downward socio-economic class to establish a powerful identity, relying on their translocational positionality such as their Syrian ethnic identity and (redefined) gender expectations through entrepreneurship. Both groups actively engage in agentic roles, by challenging refugee labeling while empowering themselves.

Discussion

The objective of this chapter is to examine the agency of Syrian refugees within the realm of entrepreneurship. I explore the intersections of their translocational positionality, emphasizing class and education, with other facets of their positionality including religion, ethnicity, gender, and age. Interacting with opportunity structures, the translocational positionality may either enable or hinder the agency of Syrian refugee entrepreneurs. I demonstrated that pre-existing social class positionality, manifested by factors such as education, income level, economic conditions, and occupation can act as a resource for entrepreneurial motivation and agency in the host country, while concurrently, the individual may face disadvantages associated with a lower social class status (Adeeko & Treanor, 2022).

The Syrian refugee entrepreneurs interviewed in this study generally had higher-class backgrounds, good education, and proficiency in English. Their English skills not only highlight their educational and middle or upper-middle-class positionality status in Syria but also play a significant role in their entrepreneurial journey in the Netherlands. This socio-class background has positively impacted their ability to leverage resources (Adeeko & Treanor, 2022; Cederberg & Villares-Varela, 2019), facilitated quicker Dutch language acquisition, enabling them to participate in English-taught entrepreneurship courses and expediting business preparations. Their ability to utilize these resources underscores how refugees with higher-class backgrounds and greater human capital can integrate more rapidly into new society (Simk, 2018). Such observations suggest that inequalities originating in refugees' home countries are somehow reproduced in destination countries. Despite Dutch policymakers' claims of providing an equal integration system, the persistent inequalities among refugee entrepreneurs indicate the lack of an intersectional approach in policy formulation (Scott & Hussin, 2019).

From a gender perspective, the interlocutors' translocational positionality significantly influenced entrepreneurship. The cultural belief that men should be the family breadwinners was evident in Bashir and Saeed's narratives, reflecting a Syrian upbringing where boys often worked during school vacations. Conversely, women, as Saeed noted, might earn money but are not culturally expected to bear household expenses. In the Netherlands, where gender roles differ, some Syrian male entrepreneurs, including Saeed, found these roles challenging. For Syrian female entrepreneurs, certain gender-based skills, such as domestic cooking in Syria, may serve as entrepreneurial resources in the Netherlands, as exemplified by Jamila. While entrepreneurship is traditionally male-dominated in both Syria and

the Netherlands (Hattab, 2012; Verheul et al., 2006), the equal gender opportunity structures in the Netherlands have rendered it a viable option for Syrian refugee women, like Amal, enabling them to realize their agency and potential as female entrepreneurs.

The significance of translocational positionality is evident in the age aspect as well. The majority of Syrian refugee entrepreneurs interviewed, predominantly in their late 40s or early 50s, possessed prior work experience as entrepreneurs or employees in Syria. While their age was advantageous in securing employment in Syria due to their previous experiences, in the Netherlands their age was an obstacle when seeking work and launching new ventures. This could be attributed to the fact that either their work experiences were not relevant in the Netherlands, or employers were hesitant to invest in middle-aged refugees without European work experiences (as observed in the cases of Jamila and Khadijah), or due to skill-specific requirements. For instance, managing a company requires a high level of Dutch language proficiency illustrated by 57-year-old Bashir's life story. Acquiring such skills proves challenging for middle-aged refugees, thereby complicating their efforts to establish businesses.

In this study, participants' relationship to religion varies, which influences their entrepreneurship. For instance, Amal, not identifying as a Muslim but having an Islamic background, used her Islamic knowledge as cultural capital. Similarly, Jamila who may not strictly adhere to religious practices, offers Halal food in her catering business. Notably, at least three interviewed Syrian entrepreneurs stressed the significant role of religion in their ventures. They pointed out that in Islam, working is considered a form of Jihad and God does not favor those who are idle. Jihad in Islamic theology is often divided into the 'Lesser Jihad', the external efforts beyond military struggle such as social justice advocacy, and the 'Greater Jihad' an internal, spiritual struggle against the ego ('nafs'), emphasizing continuous self-examination, ethical conduct, and spiritual growth (Heck, 2004). Consequently, these entrepreneurs viewed receiving governmental social assistance as incongruent with their religious values. Their religious beliefs guided their self-concept, positioning them as proactive societal contributors.

In this study, I identified the importance of intersections between entrepreneurship and the diversity of regional cultures, highlighting the heterogeneity among Syrian refugees. Upbringing and societal expectations within a specific region may shape the entrepreneurial mindset of individuals (Korte, 2018) motivating them to entrepreneurship even in translocational contexts. A considerable number of

respondents from Aleppo exhibited a strong inclination towards entrepreneurship. They had also been encouraged to view it as a viable professional path from a young age (such as Saeed). In contrast, this cultural expectation was not prevalent in other Syrian cities like Damascus. Notably, the Syrian men from Aleppo I interviewed viewed entrepreneurship as a fundamental aspect of their identity and had been raised with the belief that it was a path worth pursuing.

Our investigation has extended beyond the examination of the translocational positionality's role in shaping refugee enterprise discussed thus far. Entrepreneurship can be a powerful form of agency for Syrian refugees in the Dutch context. Yet, despite some institutional encouragement, setting up a business remains challenging due to the fragmented regulatory system of entrepreneurship (de Lange et al., 2021). Municipalities are the primary institutions responsible for refugees in the Dutch context, providing social benefits and promoting welfare recipients to work (de Lange et al., 2021). Some Syrian refugees have reported difficulties with municipalities. These challenges include delays or rejections in granting BBZ (such as Jamila), absence of entrepreneurial advisors, and in certain instances, municipalities even demotivate refugees from starting entrepreneurial activities due to age or unfamiliarity with the Dutch system (de Lange et al., 2021; Nijhoff, 2021), as experienced by Khadijah. This may stem from ineffective communications between different municipal sections overseeing refugees' affairs. Moreover, as highlighted by de Lange et al (2021), municipalities adopt varied approaches toward refugee entrepreneurship, potentially hindering business sustainability. Jamila stated how her municipality contact person lacked confidence in the success of her enterprise, leading to prolonged BBZ application processes. As Nijhoff (2021) illustrates, the municipality was hesitant to take risks, preferring to avoid refugees accumulating debts during the early stages of their residency. In these situations, establishing a business can signify refugees' agency in navigating structural barriers, leveraging limited available opportunities within Dutch society such as incubation organizations supporting refugee entrepreneurship.

This research delves further into the impact of translocational positionality on the constraints or facilitators of entrepreneurial endeavors among Syrian refugees, scrutinizing the varied forms of agency exercised by them. The subsequent paragraphs emphasize the diverse aspects of agency: the first aspect of agency is represented as pull factors; the second aspect of agency lies in the types of entrepreneurship they pursue; the third aspect of agency is their ability to leverage available resources or create new resources (Harima, 2022; Martinez Dy, 2020); the fourth aspect is adaptability in their professional trajectories (Obschonka et al.,

2018); the fifth aspect of agency involves discovering niche market (Khademi et al., 2023); and the final aspect of agency I would like to highlight is redefining identity (Adeeko & Treanor, 2022; Rashid, 2018).

First, agency as pull factors: While some studies suggest that push factors, such as discrimination in the labor market or lack of job opportunities, are the main drivers of refugee entrepreneurship (Mawson & Kasem, 2019; Shneikat & Alrawadieh, 2019), this study provides a more nuanced understanding. The findings reveal that some Syrian refugee entrepreneurs in the study started their own businesses while still employed in the labor market, or kept their job while setting up their entrepreneurship. This suggests that they seek more autonomy and the ability to pursue their dreams and develop their skills through entrepreneurship. As Amal's story reveals, when she felt that her current job constrained her creativity, she started considering the establishment of her own business (Obschonka, et al., 2018). Additionally, some entrepreneurs have humanitarian goals that are not aligned with their current job, motivating them to create social entrepreneurship ventures such as Saeed when he set up his organization to empower other refugee groups. These results highlight the agentic aims behind refugee entrepreneurship and suggest that refugee entrepreneurship cannot be solely explained by push factors.

Second, agency in the types of entrepreneurship: Syrian refugee entrepreneurs have exhibited agency through the establishment of social entrepreneurship ventures that prioritize the empowerment of individuals, including both those working with refugees and refugees themselves, with a specific emphasis on the Syrian community. These ventures not only contribute to enhancing the self-confidence and inclusion of refugees but also seek to raise awareness within the host society regarding refugees as individuals with distinct narratives and independent identities, as we see in the experience of Saeed and Amal. Through the creation of social entrepreneurship ventures, Syrian refugees actively participate in shaping their integration into Dutch society, underscoring the significance of agency in refugee entrepreneurship.

Third, agency in leveraging resources: The agency of Syrian refugee entrepreneurs is also reflected by their ability to capitalize on available resources and discover new ones to set up their businesses based on their intersectional identities and translocational positionality (Harima, 2022; Jack & Anderson, 2002). Despite having lost some of their previous resources, they may convert skills, previously unremarkable in their home society, into valuable enterprise resources, for instance, Jamila's expertise in Syrian cuisine or Amal's fluency in Arabic. They also may focus

on developing their human capital to meet Dutch standards, such as pursuing education at Dutch universities since their education in Syria is not recognized in the Netherlands like Saeed. They may also participate in voluntary work to gain work experience that is valued in their new society such as Bashir and Saeed. Indeed they use integration as a resource for their future entrepreneurship (Khademi et al., 2023). Additionally, they may seek training and support from various incubator organizations to establish their own businesses and take advantage of the available resources such as Amal or Jamila.

Fourth, I distinguish agency as adaptability in professional trajectories: While the refugee entrepreneurs had pursued different professional trajectories in Syria, they faced various challenges that prevented them from continuing in the same professional path, such as age or limited resources. As a result, all interviewed entrepreneurs had to demonstrate flexibility in their professional trajectories (Obschonka et al., 2018) and explore new opportunities to carve out their place in the labor market. Fifth, agency in discovering niche market: Leveraging their translocational positionality, some entrepreneurs, like Bashir, have discovered niche markets by organizing a company to hire Arab refugee handymen, while others, like Jamila, have found success in showcasing their culinary skills by preparing Syrian food.

Finally, I envision agency as redefining identity: The agency of Syrian refugee entrepreneurs also is manifested in the way they perceive their reality and redefine their identities as independent agents capable of initiating change (Adeeko & Treanor, 2022; Rashid, 2018). In this study, some Syrian refugee entrepreneurs redefine their identities by emphasizing their role as entrepreneurs rather than solely identifying as refugees. This is observed in the case of those who were reluctant to participate in the interview or only responded to questions related to the entrepreneurship section, avoiding answers to questions about their personal lives. They recognize the negative societal connotations associated with the label "refugee" and choose to highlight their economic contributions and their status as tax-paying entrepreneurs. This redefinition of identity allows them to assert their agency and take control of their own narrative (Adeeko & Treanor, 2022; Rashid, 2018). However, it is important to note that some refugee entrepreneurs acknowledge and emphasize both their refugee and entrepreneurial identities. They aim to shed light on the additional barriers they face as refugee entrepreneurs compared to native or immigrant entrepreneurs as illustrated in Saeed's story. Accordingly, they use refugee positionality as a resource for their entrepreneurship.

Conclusion

In this chapter I examined the role of translocational positionality of Syrian refugee entrepreneurs in their entrepreneurship, focusing on its interplay with opportunity structures, and exertion of agency. Utilizing a translocational positionality approach, I emphasized the significance of contextual understanding in refugee entrepreneurship research and the recognition of entrepreneurship as a means for refugees to exercise autonomy.

Our theoretical contribution is fourfold. Firstly, by adopting a contextualizing approach to refugee entrepreneurship, I elucidate the facilities and barriers encountered by refugee entrepreneurs over institutional and temporal contexts. I have illustrated how the lived experiences of refugee entrepreneurs transcend national boundaries and encompass trajectories and aspirations in both their countries of origin and destination.

Secondly, this study contributes to the existing literature on refugee entrepreneurship by utilizing an intersectional approach, considering the intersections of gender, religion, ethnicity, age, and class. Previous structure-based perspectives, such as the mixed embeddedness approach, have often studied migrant/refugee entrepreneurship in a manner that is neutral to these intersectional positionalities. This research highlights how these intersecting social positions interact with the structural level.

Furthermore, I aimed to revise the theory of intersectionality in refugee entrepreneurship by applying the translocation positionality as a dynamic approach, demonstrating the shifting social positions over time and across spaces. While intersectionality provides valuable insights into how individuals are positioned in social categories of inclusion and exclusion, it has been criticized for its tendency to address these issues statically (Anthias, 2008; Essers & Benschop, 2009; Villares-Varela & Essers 2019). By employing a translocational positionality approach, I have examined how these intersections evolve as refugee entrepreneurs navigate a multitude of spaces and temporalities. The diverse translocational social positionalities including class, education, age, gender, religion, and ethnicity that refugee entrepreneurs encounter in different contexts, can at times be contradictory.

Finally, this study enriches our understanding of Syrian refugee entrepreneurship by examining the agency's interplay with opportunity structures. Accounting for

the diverse contexts and intersectional, translocational positionalities experienced by Syrian refugee entrepreneurs, we can better grasp the complexities and dynamics of their agency through entrepreneurship. I demonstrated that their agency manifests itself in aspects such as pull factors, the pursuit of various entrepreneurial types such as social entrepreneurship, resources leveraging or creation (Martinez Dy, 2020; Harima, 2022), professional adaptability (Obschonka et al., 2018), niche markets identification (Khademi et al., 2023) and the Syrian entrepreneurs' identity redefinition (Adeeko & Treanor, 2022; Rashid, 2018). This study provides a comprehensive understanding of how these entrepreneurs exert autonomy, underlining their resilience, resourcefulness, and capacity to overcome challenges while also shedding light on the role of social and structural factors in their entrepreneurial pursuits.

The study reveals that although the Netherlands' opportunity structures generally claim to encourage refugee entrepreneurship, existing policies lack a fully intersectional approach, potentially restricting access to resources and support systems for entrepreneurs from diverse backgrounds. Consequently, policymakers and institutions should consider to develop more inclusive, intersectional-informed policies and programs to address the unique challenges faced by refugee entrepreneurs. Implementing such policies would not only bolster the success of refugee entrepreneurship but also facilitate their broader economic and social integration within the Dutch context.

While this study offers insights into the experiences of refugee entrepreneurs, it also has limitations, notably its linguistic bias. The use of English as the language for interviews resulted in a bias towards middle-class, educated refugee entrepreneurs, which narrows the generalizability of the findings, limiting our understanding to a specific socio-economic group. Although the study deepens our grasp of how educated middle-class refugees adapt to downward mobility in the host society, it neglects the experiences of lower-class refugees. To address this limitation, future research should employ multilingual interviews and a more diverse sample of participants. Additionally, given the importance of intersectionality for understanding the experiences of marginalized groups, future studies should explore the different intersectional categories, such as disability. By acknowledging these limitations and heeding these suggestions, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of refugee entrepreneurs and work towards creating more inclusive policies and support systems for refugees.

Chapter 5

A Comparative Study of Iranian and Syrian Refugee Entrepreneurs in the Netherlands

A different version of this chapter was presented at the ICCI Conference 2024 in Frankfurt, Germany.

Introduction

Refugee entrepreneurship is a relatively young and underexplored research field, particularly in the context of the Netherlands. A significant gap exists in the literature regarding how refugee entrepreneurs navigate and respond to structural opportunities and limitations in their host country over time. This dissertation addresses this gap by focusing on two important groups of refugees: individuals of Syrian and Iranian origin. To conclude how opportunity structures are being experienced and deployed amongst these different groups, this chapter endeavors to provide a comparative analysis of these two groups of entrepreneurs with refugee backgrounds. Scrutinizing how different arrival periods and contexts play a role in these refugees' entrepreneurial experiences and activities is essential for deepening our understanding of the dynamic interplay between evolving opportunity structures and refugee entrepreneurial agency. This chapter adopts a contextualized approach to compare two groups: entrepreneurs with an Iranian refugee background, who immigrated to the Netherlands predominantly during the 1980s and 1990s (see Chapter 3), and their counterparts of Syrian origin, who arrived after 2015 (see Chapter 4). This comparison enables an exploration of how different contexts shape their entrepreneurial experiences, opportunities, and challenges.

This chapter first illuminates how evolving dynamics have molded the opportunity structures available to refugees, influencing their ability to establish enterprises, their sense of belonging, and their experiences of inclusion in society. Second, it explores the multifaceted aspects of agency among two distinct groups of refugee entrepreneurs. Through this comparative lens, I aim to uncover nuanced insights into refugee entrepreneurship and contribute to the ongoing debate on the inclusion and agency of refugees. Consequently, the research question addressed in this chapter is: *How are the inclusion and agency of entrepreneurs with Iranian and Syrian refugee backgrounds informed by the evolving Dutch context over time?*

The studied groups of entrepreneurs with Syrian and Iranian refugee backgrounds demonstrate both similarities and differences. As discussed in Chapter 1, while both groups relocated to the Netherlands as refugees, they were subject to distinct refugee regulations. Consequently, the timing of their arrivals led to different experiences of the regulatory environments: the majority of Iranian refugees arrived in the 1980s and 1990s (Bakker, 2016; Ghorashi, 2003), whereas Syrian refugees migrated to the Netherlands after 2015. The changing Dutch context over the past four decades has led each group to perceive inclusion and their agency differently.

In this chapter, I analyze the opportunities and barriers faced by both Iranian and Syrian groups at structural and individual levels, their diverse forms of agency, their sense of belonging, and inclusion as experienced through entrepreneurship.

Dutch Entrepreneurial Policies

In Chapter 1, I explored the evolving social discourse on refugees and immigrants, tracing the shift from the multiculturalism discourse prevalent in the 1980s to the more recent assimilation-focused approach. Additionally, I discussed the changing landscape of immigration policies over time. In this section, I will examine the evolution of opportunity structures for refugee entrepreneurship in Dutch society from 1980 to 2022.

Over the decades, reforms in entrepreneurship laws have aimed to reduce unemployment, address social exclusion, and promote upward mobility (Kloosterman, 2003). Policy changes during the late 1980s and 1990s sought to boost self-employment and the establishment of small businesses, particularly among immigrants. These regulatory adjustments resulted in a doubling of businesses and startups between 1987 and 2000 (Kloosterman, 2003), and a notable 158% increase in businesses owned by immigrants from less-developed countries (Kloosterman, 2003; van den Tillaart, 2001). Programs such as *Work through Entrepreneurship* (1995) and *The Entrepreneurial Society* (1999) aimed to streamline market entry barriers through deregulation and fiscal incentives, facilitating easier establishment of small businesses (Kloosterman, 2003). Prior to 1996, starting a small business, such as a hair salon, required multiple licenses, placing immigrants at a disadvantage.

In 1996, the Assistance Decree for the Self-Employed was revised into the Self-Employment Assistance Decree (*Besluit bijstandsverlening zelfstandigen*, BBZ), extending credit with guarantees, to enable self-employed individuals to obtain bank loans. In 2000, efforts were made to enhance the utilization of BBZ for benefit recipients, including a preparation period of up to 12 months with exemption from work obligations (de Lange et al., 2021; Klijnsma, 2014). (Klijnsma, 2014) With the introduction of the Work and Social Assistance Act (*Wet werk en bijstand*, WWB) in 2004, the BBZ underwent further revisions. Eligibility for BBZ 2004 has since depended on factors such as the viability of the company and the entrepreneur's motivation, knowledge, and skills (Klijnsma, 2014; Nijhoff, 2021). Due to insufficient security for repayment, banks typically have not extended credit to starter entrepreneurs, prompting municipalities to continue providing credit

under the BBZ scheme (de Lange et al., 2021; Klijnsma, 2014; Nijhoff, 2021). Starter entrepreneurs may also be required to participate in preparatory entrepreneurship programs, with BBZ facility recipients given three years to become financially independent (de Lange et al., 2021). The BBZ 2004 remains in effect to this day.

Despite years of efforts to promote entrepreneurship in the Netherlands, refugee entrepreneurship continues to face numerous challenges. These include barriers to entering the labor market, inadequate integration programs tailored to entrepreneurship, a lack of coherent support structures for refugee enterprises, diverse labor legislation, ambiguous regulations, limited understanding of the complexity of the Dutch system by refugees, and a failure to recognize the unique circumstances and diversity among refugees (de Lange et al., 2021; Nijhoff, 2019; van Riemsdijk & Axelsson, 2021). Furthermore, the lengthy asylum process (Marchand & Dijkhuizen, 2018), coupled with work restrictions, significantly hinders entrepreneurial opportunities for refugees (Chiova et al., 2018; Nijhoff, 2021). Additionally, the civic integration program also fails to adequately support refugee entrepreneurship, focusing primarily on language skills and Dutch labor market orientation while neglecting business-related language proficiency and entrepreneurial training (de Lange et al., 2021).

At the local level, municipalities are responsible for providing social benefits and facilitating the labor market participation of their residents (Nijhoff, 2021). Historically, the municipal focus has been on mainstream employment, with little preparation for supporting refugee entrepreneurship. Programs predominantly emphasize job application skills, such as resume writing and job training, with no standardized entrepreneurship courses available (Nijhoff, 2021). Refugees aspiring to start businesses face intensive collaboration with their municipalities and navigate complex rules that differ per municipality (de Lange et al., 2021; Nijhoff, 2021). These discrepancies exist not only between municipalities but also within them, as civil servants are often unaware of support opportunities in other departments (de Lange, et al., 2021, Nijhoff, 2021). In some cases, municipalities face a deficiency in expertise, with civil servants ill-equipped to assess business plans (Nijhoff, 2021). Furthermore, the BBZ structure places municipalities at the center of financial decision-making, fostering a cautious approach to risk. This reluctance stems from concerns about burdening newcomers with debt (Nijhoff, 2021). The lengthy procedures and administrative hurdles often drive refugees to seek loans from friends or family instead (de Lange, et al., 2021).

Another financial option could be a bank loan. However, securing financial capital through bank loans presents challenges for refugee entrepreneurs. Qredits, a Dutch non-profit venture, offers microfinancing and facilitates financing of vulnerable entrepreneurs, including refugees (de Lange et al., 2021, p.82), but historically excludes those with temporary residence status. Refugees typically have to wait five years to meet the eligibility criteria (de Lange et al., 2021). Nonetheless, Qredits co-finances incubator programs, aiding refugees with training, coaching, and funding opportunities, as well as navigating Dutch society and bureaucracy (de Lange et al., 2021; Marchand & Dijkhuizen, 2018; Nijhoff, 2021). Yet, without additional guidance from incubators, mentors, or municipal contact persons, it is difficult for refugee entrepreneurs to meet material criteria and navigate administrative procedures. However, these supports remain sporadic due to regional variations in availability and accessibility (de Lange et al., 2021, p. 82).

Entrepreneurial courses offered by entities such as the Chamber of Commerce or the Tax Office are valuable, but newcomers often lack sufficient Dutch proficiency to participate (Nijhoff, 2021). Furthermore, entrepreneurship programs often overlook refugees' unique circumstances and diversity, grouping them with other vulnerable groups or simply categorizing them as immigrants. However, as detailed in the introduction of this dissertation (Chapter 1), there are significant differences between immigrants and refugees that impact their entrepreneurial journey.

Entrepreneurial policies in the Netherlands have played a significant role in shaping the experiences of Iranian and Syrian refugees seeking to establish their businesses. Iranians who arrived in the 1980s and 1990s benefited from a period of streamlined entrepreneurship policies, including the introduction of supportive schemes such as BBZ. However, despite these reforms, challenges such as bureaucratic complexities and financial barriers continued to restrict their access. Similarly, more recent Syrian refugees, despite emerging opportunities such as incubator programs, face persistent obstacles including fragmentation in municipal-level support, which undermine their ability to fully benefit from these structures. In the subsequent section, I analyze the contextual impacts through examining the experiences of Iranian and Syrian refugee entrepreneurs.

Refugee Entrepreneurial Experiences (1980-2021)

In this section, I explore the structural and individual challenges and opportunities faced by Iranian and Syrian refugee entrepreneurs over the last four decades.

Structural Challenges and Opportunities

The entrepreneurs with Iranian and Syrian refugee backgrounds have encountered various challenges and opportunities at the institutional level when setting up their businesses. These include navigating integration policies, accessing entrepreneurial support, and addressing societal perceptions of refugees.

Integration Policies

Iranian refugee entrepreneurs, especially those who arrived in the 1980s and early 1990s, encountered challenges stemming from fragmented and ineffective integration policies. These hurdles encompassed issues such as obtaining housing, accessing Dutch language education, and enduring prolonged stays in refugee centers without labor market access:

Living in the refugee center felt confining, checking in three times a day like a prisoner. Unable to learn the language or integrate into society, feeling isolated and cut off. It was tough, especially between 1993 and 1994. The Netherlands can drain your energy. (Shahin, a female Iranian entrepreneur, 2019)

Mainoo, another female Iranian entrepreneur, criticizes the paralyzing integration policies that restricted asylum seekers' employment opportunities, suggesting: "At least they could use refugees' expertise and skills to help other refugees and asylum seekers in refugee centers". Mehrban, another Iranian refugee in 1998, shared her experience: "Our asylum process took ten years. It was tough. We could only do unpaid work. My husband sometimes did painting jobs for friends, earning black income. We managed on that and the small amount of government support" (Mehrban, a female Iranian entrepreneur, 2019). Reza, a male Iranian entrepreneur, highlights another aspect of this system's inefficiency, stating: "The problem I faced and still struggle with is that we didn't grasp the value of integrating into society from the start" (Reza, a male Iranian entrepreneur, 2019).

While Syrian refugee entrepreneurs have benefited from a more cohesive integration policy post-2015, compared to their Iranian counterparts, the system's homogenizing approach overlooks their diversity, hindering prompt entrepreneurship initiation. For example, individuals who rapidly acquired Dutch proficiency encountered a three-year waiting period before becoming eligible to obtain a work permit for establishing businesses:

The inflexible system treats everyone the same. Despite being an English teacher, I was put in a slow-paced integration course with basic lessons, wasting time. I could have learned Dutch at the B2 level in a year, but I wasn't allowed to progress faster. (Yousef, a male Syrian entrepreneur, 2021)

Despite the challenges within the Dutch integration system, many of the refugee entrepreneurs, particularly the Syrian group have acknowledged the opportunities provided by the Dutch welfare system. Some Syrian refugees, like Ibrahim, emphasized their deliberate choice to come to the Netherlands due to the perceived opportunities: "I didn't just want to flee; I wanted to secure my future. I researched extensively, including legal matters" (Ibrahim, a male Syrian entrepreneur, 2021). Reza, expressing gratitude, reflects: "Despite occasional discrimination, comparing my life here to where I was born, I see the opportunities this country has given us. Despite my language and cultural barriers, I've greatly benefited from the invaluable society's support and opportunities" (Reza, a male Iranian entrepreneur, 2019). Similarly, Khalil, a male Syrian entrepreneur expresses: "When I arrived in 2015, the Netherlands had the most comfortable refugee policies. The government took care of us, offering housing, furnishings, and social allowance. I felt equal to other citizens" (Khalil, a male Syrian entrepreneur, 2021).

The support received from these opportunity structures facilitated a sense of inclusion and belonging to Dutch society for both Iranian and Syrian groups, prompting refugees like Asma to become entrepreneurs:

During the refugee process, I was touched by the kindness of people and their willingness to help us. I felt that there was always a chance, but you had to seize it. I belong to this society, even though I'm a refugee. I started my own business because of this feeling, I am one of them. (Asma, a female Syrian entrepreneur, 2021)

Entrepreneurial Support

Despite the ease of enterprise registration in the Netherlands and the availability of financial support mechanisms at the institutional level, such as the BBZ scheme and bank loan, both Iranian and Syrian refugee entrepreneurs reported inadequate economic support for refugee entrepreneurship. Particularly when their projects require significant investment, it is almost impossible to initiate them:

I did my master's in sustainable energy in the Netherlands and came up with an idea for an e-bike system. I enhanced my plan with a refugee-focused incubator and even built a mobile app that got 10,000 downloads. But it's not enough to start. I need investors, and I can't find any because this plan is expensive and I'm not Dutch. Competing with Dutch people means you need a Dutch investor—someone who knows the local scene and how to network. When I registered my company, I felt proud. I had a business in the Netherlands! But as time went by and I couldn't find investors, that feeling faded. Now, I'm still living on welfare. (Khalil, a male Syrian entrepreneur, 2021).

Khalil's need for a Dutch investor who understands the local network underscores the challenges he faces in navigating the cultural and social landscape. This highlights a form of social exclusion, where being an outsider limits access to critical resources and networks. Living on welfare, despite having a viable business idea and a higher education degree, illustrates a persistent state of economic and social exclusion. It reflects the failure of the system to provide adequate support for refugees to transition from dependence to economic independence. Among the 29 participants interviewed in this research, only one succeeded in securing a bank loan in 1991, largely due to his network connections:

I pitched my business plan to the municipality for funding, but they said it was tough. Then I met a bank president at church and showed him my plan. He liked it and approved a loan of 30,000 guilders in 1991 to get started. (Kamran, an Iranian entrepreneur, 2019)

Both Iranian and Syrian refugee entrepreneurs expressed that frustrating and overly bureaucratic procedures often make it easier to apply for unemployment benefits (WW-uitkering), which do not require repayment than to receive approval for financial loans for self-employment (BBZ) that must be repaid if sufficient income is earned. Bashir noted:

Getting through the BBZ process takes at least six months, and it depends on your municipality. Our municipality seems focused on one goal: to quickly place people into any kind of job. This approach is a mistake. It's crucial, especially for newcomers to find work they enjoy. Otherwise, they feel isolated from society. Unfortunately, the system doesn't seem to recognize or build on the experience and

skills of these individuals, which is a missed opportunity. (Bashir, a male Syrian entrepreneur, 2021)

Another challenge in entrepreneurial support emerged during the pandemic. Most interviewed Syrian refugee entrepreneurs had started their businesses just before COVID-19, facing significant difficulties due to new regulations and restrictions. During the crisis, only those enterprises that paid taxes received governmental support, putting new ventures at greater risk:

I had clients, but once COVID-19 hit, everything fell apart. I applied for governmental support, but you had to show your previous income to receive monthly support. Unfortunately, since I was just starting and hadn't made any income yet, I didn't qualify for that support. (Ibrahim, a male Syrian entrepreneur, 2021)

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The emergence of various incubator organizations, targeting entrepreneurship among vulnerable groups such as refugees, in recent years in the Dutch context is promising. This presents an opportunity structure that Syrian refugee entrepreneurs could benefit from, unlike their Iranian counterparts, who did not experience such a context before 2000. However, access to these opportunities often depends on intersectional positionalities of gender, education, class, and refugee status: "Being a refugee and knowing English let me take free online business courses for several months. As a single mom with two sick kids, I couldn't travel to Amsterdam" (Asma, a female Syrian entrepreneur, 2021).

Societal Perception of Refugees

The participants in this research offer diverse perspectives on society's perception of refugees. Iranians observe that in the 1980s and 1990s, the limited number of refugees in Dutch society led to unfamiliarity and distrust towards newcomers, resulting in feelings of discrimination. Moreover, as Iranian refugees integrated more into society over time, experiences such as university education and employment intensified these feelings of exclusion. Consequently, for some Iranian refugees, this sense of exclusion acted as a catalyst for entrepreneurship: "I turned to entrepreneurship due to discrimination in academia. In the 1990s, foreigners like me faced skepticism and were seen as deceitful and culturally inferior in Dutch society" (Farzad, an Iranian entrepreneur, 2019).

The intersection of refugee status and gender intensifies feelings of exclusion for the Iranian group: "As a woman in Dutch society, you have to work twice as

hard to achieve your goals. As a foreign woman, it's four times as hard. And as a foreign woman not born here, it's six times as hard" (Fattaneh, a female Iranian entrepreneur, 2020).

Iranian entrepreneurs note that while encountering refugees has become more commonplace in the Netherlands, negative attitudes toward refugees have grown more prevalent as their numbers increase. As Reza puts it: "In the past, the belief that 'these refugees are disrupting our lives' was much less widespread than it is now". Some Syrian refugees have also encountered feelings of exclusion in the workplace: "Dutch people often prefer to work with fellow Dutch individuals. I've heard from several people working with Dutch companies that they sometimes feel excluded" (Leila, a female Syrian entrepreneur, 2021).

Nevertheless, entrepreneurship offered both Iranian and Syrian groups a path to greater social respect and acceptance. The inadequate understanding and negative perceptions of refugees in Dutch society have motivated some Iranian and Syrian refugees to establish social entrepreneurship. These ventures aim to bridge the gap between refugees and the host society by providing mutual understanding through various activities. To build up these enterprises, they draw on their unique intersectional and translocational positionalities, as Milad expresses:

I am not just an artist; I am an expert in the field we work in. I have experienced war, lived as a refugee, navigated life in Europe, and studied art for ten years, accumulating extensive knowledge across various domains. I aim to bridge the gap between refugees and Dutch society. I use art to introduce refugees to the Dutch and familiarize the Dutch with the culture and stories of refugees (Milad, an Iranian entrepreneur, 2019).

On the other hand, some refugees, particularly recent Syrian newcomers, exhibit a positive attitude towards Dutch society. They believe that discriminatory behaviors are limited to a small segment of the population and should not be generalized to the entire society. This outlook enhances their sense of belonging to Dutch society. As one Syrian entrepreneur, Tiam, explains: "Feeling like you belong comes with a sense of security. In my daily life, I do not experience overt racism. Perhaps once, from someone drunk. I don't think everyone is racist" (Tiam, a male Syrian entrepreneur, 2021).

Individual Challenges and Opportunities

At the individual level, both groups of refugee entrepreneurs encounter various challenges and opportunities stemming from their unique intersectional and translocational positionalities such as age, gender, class (regarding education and refugee status), religion, and ethnicity. These positionalities significantly impact their access to markets and ability to capitalize on various entrepreneurial resources such as human, social, financial, and cultural capitals.

Human Capital

Most educated refugee entrepreneurs from Iran or Syria have faced challenges due to skill and qualification mismatches. Diplomas from their home countries are often not recognized in the Netherlands, because of differences in the educational systems or lack of transcripts. Even when certificates are accredited, the Dutch labor market has tended to distrust their skills and expertise. The job prospects are further complicated by the intersection of translocational positionalities such as devalued education, age, gender, and their diminished socio-economic class position due to being refugees. This often forces them to pursue reeducation or change their careers to set up their entrepreneurship:

I studied business in the Netherlands in English, but finding a job was tough as an older, single mom with a high degree but little experience. My Dutch wasn't great, and subtle racism meant locals got priority. I once applied for a store job, but they wanted me to clean instead. That's when I decided I'd never work for anyone here. I didn't want my fate to depend on others. So, I turned my beauty hobby into a business and opened a beauty salon. Promoted it hard, and my business studies really paid off! (Shahin, a female Iranian entrepreneur, 2019)

Moreover, both Iranian and Syrian refugee entrepreneurs with proficiency in English have been able to leverage their resources more effectively. Particularly, Syrian refugees have had opportunities to participate in various training programs, and incubator organizations, and pursue university education. Their English proficiency has facilitated quicker learning of Dutch. Additionally, Syrian refugee entrepreneurs have utilized social media and the internet to enhance their marketing knowledge and promote their businesses. Conversely, Iranian entrepreneurs experienced more difficulties in developing their human capital, as the internet and digitalization era before 2000 were not as accessible as they became post-2015.

Social capital

Lack of proficiency in Dutch at a professional level presents a significant barrier for both Iranian and Syrian refugee entrepreneurs, particularly in their early years of immigration. This limitation affects their networking and marketing capabilities within the Dutch market. Both groups engaged in voluntary work, which proved beneficial for improving Dutch fluency, integrating into Dutch society, and familiarizing themselves with the host culture. This experience also provided valuable insights into the labor market. In some cases, this volunteering inspired Syrian refugees to establish their own enterprises, particularly social enterprises:

Through my time volunteering with different organizations, I've seen how much help refugee women need to rebuild their lives and find jobs here. That's what inspired me to start my own business and help others integrate and start their own lives in society. (Hadil, a female Syrian entrepreneur, 2021)

However, among the Iranian group, this insight came out of work experiences as Milad expressed:

Before starting my own institute, I worked at a Dutch art foundation for refugees. They meant well but didn't really get what being a refugee is like. They kept changing my ideas, even though I was speaking from personal experience. When I pointed this out, they just said, 'This is our country, we know best.' That's when I realized I should share my experiences and creativity with people I actually understand. (Milad, an Iranian entrepreneur, 2019)

As demonstrated by the experiences of both Iranian and Syrian refugee entrepreneurs, their social capital, shaped by interactions with social organizations working with refugees, intersects with their translocational positionalities, significantly influencing their entrepreneurial journeys. This social capital, particularly when combined with the entrepreneurs' unique translocational positionalities—such as their lower socio-economic status, refugee background, and gender-related needs—becomes a key driver of entrepreneurial motivation. For instance, Hadil's volunteer work highlighted the gap in support for refugee women, leading her to start a business focused on female refugee empowerment. Similarly, Milad's dissatisfaction with the misunderstanding of refugee experiences at a Dutch art foundation motivated him to establish an enterprise aimed at bridging this gap by leveraging his personal and cultural understanding.

Financial capital

Limited access to financial capital further exacerbates the challenges faced by the Iranian and Syrian refugee entrepreneurs, often compelling them to rely on government support for sustenance during the initial years of their entrepreneurial journey. Some Iranian entrepreneurs, as a well-established group of refugees, have managed to finance their entrepreneurship through their ethnic network, family support, and savings over years. In contrast, Syrian refugee entrepreneurs, who are newcomers with a weaker social network, continue to struggle with securing financial capital.

To sustain their enterprise, both Iranian and Syrian refugee entrepreneurs employ various strategies. Some maintain their paid job or actively seek employment, while simultaneously striving to finance their entrepreneurship. In the case of social entrepreneurship, they may collaborate with other organizations possessing budgets and networks. Social refugee entrepreneurs might also engage volunteers to reduce costs or even contribute their efforts for free.

I do more marketing and involve more volunteers. It's important to include more people who share the same passion for the project. Personally, money isn't my first focus; sometimes I work on projects for free simply because they're fun. For me, the drive for a social impact is more significant than purely commercial motives. I'm not running a commercial company, but sustainability is essential. (Salah, a male Syrian entrepreneur, 2021)

Cultural capital

Both Iranian and Syrian refugee entrepreneurs share the experience that their intersectional translocational positionalities – such as age, religion, gender, class, and ethnicity- have provided them with cultural knowledge, which they leveraged as cultural capital through their entrepreneurial journey. This cultural capital may shape their entrepreneurial motivations, enable refugee entrepreneurs to discover niche markets, and help them adopt strategies to sustain their enterprises. For example, Yousef, a male Syrian entrepreneur, explains how his intersecting translocational positionality as a Muslim, a married man, and a father in his 40s from Aleppo, raised in Syria have shaped specific cultural expectations and knowledge that serve as the foundation for his enterprise:

I come from Aleppo, where many people work in industry or commerce. Most of my family are entrepreneurs. In my childhood,

I worked in different jobs and workshops. In Syria, many boys start working in workshops at a young age to learn a profession and build connections. We, as men, are raised to be responsible for providing for our families.[...] From my understanding, Islam encourages people to be impactful in society, and as a Muslim, you need to seek a bigger impact. As a refugee, while there are some benefits, my age pushes me to go faster. I'm 42, and I don't want to delay starting any longer. (Yousef, a male Syrian entrepreneur, 2021)

Similarly, Asma, a female Syrian entrepreneur, benefited from her intersectional and translocational background to discover a niche market. Motivated by her children's health challenges, she explored the creation of a healthy pancake alternative, which later evolved into a business concept. She innovatively adapted the traditional Dutch pancake into a healthier version inspired by Syrian cuisine, tailored for vegetarians, diabetics, and those seeking gluten-free options:

As a mom of two diabetic kids, I know how hard it is to find healthy meals that taste good. Dutch people love pancakes, and my boys do too, but regular pancakes aren't healthy. So I decided to create a savory version without sugar. With help from my business coach, we made a mix using nutritious ingredients like flax seeds, quinoa, and rye instead of wheat flour. The toppings are delicious and healthy, blending Dutch and Syrian flavors. (Asma, a female Syrian entrepreneur, 2021).

The same utilization of cultural capital is seen among the Iranian group as well. Milad, a male Iranian entrepreneur, faced a fragile position as a newly arrived refugee, grappling with a culture shock. However, he leveraged his cultural capital and experiences to navigate his way into Dutch society. Reflecting on his experience, Milad explains:

I was 23 when I came to the Netherlands. As a refugee, I dealt with homesickness, culture shock, and an uncertain future, but my sports spirit kept me going. In wrestling, I lost 600 matches to win 400. Whenever I faced discrimination, I was inspired by wrestling—when you fall, you have to get back up. [...] I learned English and Dutch and went to Art schools because my Iranian culture taught me the value of education. As the Persian proverbs say 'Seek knowledge

from the cradle to the grave' and 'Whoever is wise is capable. (Milad, an Iranian entrepreneur, 2019)

As a former national wrestling champion in Iran, Milad drew on the values of masculinity, endurance, and willpower embedded in traditional Iranian wrestling teachings. His identity as a male, combined with his ethnicity, gave him specific cultural knowledge, which became a key asset in his entrepreneurial journey. The high value placed on education in Iranian culture further motivated him to simultaneously learn English and Dutch at an academic level, allowing him to pursue his education up to a Master's degree at a Dutch university. At 23, he was young enough to invest a decade in education, creating a strong foundation for his future career as an art coordinator.

5

Discussion

In this chapter, the experiences of entrepreneurs with Iranian and Syrian refugee backgrounds in the Dutch context over the last 40 years have been compared. This final section will synthesize how the intersection of translocational positionalities- such as gender, socio-economic class, ethnicity, religion, and age- has shaped their experiences of inclusion and exclusion. Additionally, I will reflect on how the interviewed refugee entrepreneurs navigate their agency through entrepreneurship, considering the limitations and opportunities provided by the Dutch system.

Both groups of refugee entrepreneurs have faced ambiguities within the Dutch integration system. On one hand, the long integration process, restrictions on working hours, and the homogenization of refugees under Dutch integration law have contributed to feelings of exclusion (de Lange et al., 2020, Nijhoff, 2021). For instance, Shahin described how she felt marginalized during her time in a refugee center in the early 1990s. Similarly, Mehrban and her family subsisted on limited social welfare and were compelled to earn illegal income due to the lack of work permits. Yousef a highly-skilled and educated Syrian refugee, was barred from education and employment for three years despite his quick learning ability.

On the other hand, the existing opportunity structures such as perceived gender equality, the welfare system, and the provision of Dutch citizenship, which grants the same rights as a native Dutch citizen, have facilitated a sense of inclusion and belonging to the Netherlands for some interlocutors t (Essers et al., 2021; Khademi

et al., 2023; Nijhoff, 2019, 2021). For example, Reza expressed gratitude toward the Dutch system for these opportunities. This sense of inclusion has motivated some refugees, like Asma, to pursue entrepreneurship as a way to contribute to the supportive system.

The Iranian participants have observed shifts in discourses in the Netherlands over time. Overall, the Iranians have benefited from a more supportive system, whereas Syrian refugees have experienced a more structured integration system, that provides access to additional resources. For instance, some Syrian refugees, such as Khalil and Ibrahim, have chosen the Netherlands specifically for its supportive system. Conversely, the Iranian group that arrived before 2000 often ended up in the Netherlands by chance, without a predetermined destination for their displacement journey.

Ambiguities have persisted in the entrepreneurial support provided by the Dutch system. Although there have been changes aimed at streamlining entrepreneurship in the Netherlands (Kloosterman, 2003), such as the simplified registration process for businesses through the Chamber of Commerce (KVK), or the availability of the BBZ scheme at the municipal level (de Lange et al., 2021; Klijnsma, 2014; Nijhoff, 2021), both groups of Iranian and Syrian refugee entrepreneurs have faced a lot of barriers. These barriers include complex bureaucratic regulations, taxation (Ozasir Kacar & Essers, 2019), a municipal focus on immediate labor market participation, the absence of a central program for refugee entrepreneurship (de Lange et al., 2021; Nijhoff, 2021), poor economic support for refugee entrepreneurship, and limited access to opportunity structures such as incubators (de Lange et al., 2021; Nijhoff, 2021).

These obstacles hinder the rapid initiation of entrepreneurial ventures, erode the energy and motivation of refugee entrepreneurs, and challenge the sustainability of their enterprises, which ultimately can lead to societal exclusion. Khalil's experience highlights the paradox of initial inclusion through educational and entrepreneurial support, followed by ultimate exclusion due to systemic, financial, and social barriers. The complex regulations of Dutch bureaucracy and the lengthy process of obtaining the BBZ scheme present significant challenges for refugee entrepreneurs. Furthermore, the intricacies of the Dutch taxation system are overly complicated for many refugees to navigate effectively (de Lange et al., 2021; Ozasir Kacar & Essers, 2019; Nijhoff, 2021). Moreover, as Bashir's experience demonstrates, municipalities predominantly emphasize rapid labor market participation. This narrow focus often results in economic integration without fostering a sense of belonging or inclusion within Dutch society. Addressing the previous experiences and skills of refugees,

mainly rooted in their intersectional backgrounds, entrepreneurship can pave the path for both integration and inclusion.

Furthermore, the absence of a centralized program for refugee entrepreneurship has contributed to significant disparities in the integration and inclusion of refugees into the labor market over the past 40 years. The decentralized approach, which grants substantial authority to municipalities, has created a fragmented system at the local level (de Lange et al., 2021; Nijhoff, 2021). This decentralization has led to varied experiences of inclusion and exclusion for refugee entrepreneurs. Some municipalities adopt more conservative attitudes toward refugee entrepreneurship, as noted by Bashir in this chapter and Jamila in Chapter 4, often resulting in limited support and increased barriers to obtaining BBZ loans. Also, the Iranian refugee entrepreneurs, such as Kamran in 1991 have highlighted the difficulties in receiving municipality support. Conversely, other municipalities provide more robust support, exemplified by the BBZ loans received by individuals like Asma (see this Chapter) and Amal (see Chapter 4). Additionally, the different layers of the system are not well-connected, leading to further inconsistencies (de Lange et al., 2021; Nijhoff, 2021). This uneven support underscores the lack of a cohesive national and local strategy, resulting in an inconsistent landscape where refugee entrepreneurs' experiences vary significantly based on their municipality. While some feel included and supported, others face exclusion and substantial challenges, depending on where they reside.

The absence of an intersectional approach to refugee entrepreneurship is a critical gap in existing support mechanisms. While facilities such as the BBZ scheme are designed to assist vulnerable groups, including refugees, they are not specifically tailored to address the unique circumstances faced by refugees. Refugees often encounter distinct legal, psychological, cultural, and social challenges that require targeted interventions. The generalized nature of these programs fails to acknowledge the intersectional backgrounds of refugees' experiences and specific needs, leading to inadequate support for their entrepreneurial endeavors. Programs must consider refugees' intersectional backgrounds to effectively foster their integration and inclusion (Khademi et al., 2024; Nijhoff, 2019, 2021).

Both groups of Iranian and Syrian refugee entrepreneurs experienced that the Dutch context does not sufficiently support the entrepreneurial activities of refugees or empower them to start their businesses effectively. The interviewed entrepreneurs often struggle to find investors as illustrated in Khalil's life story. Only one Iranian refugee entrepreneur, Kamran, managed to secure a bank loan through

his network, highlighting the significant challenges refugees face in accessing financial resources.

Access to opportunity structures, such as incubators, is limited for many refugee entrepreneurs. Incubator organizations play a crucial role in preparing refugees for entrepreneurship, yet not all refugees have equal access to their training programs (de Lange et al., 2021; Nijhoff, 2021). These organizations have only recently become more active, therefore none of the interviewed Iranian entrepreneurs had received support from any incubation organization, reflecting the limited access to such opportunities in the past. The emergence of these organizations has primarily benefited Syrian newcomers who are either fluent in English, indicating a higher level of education, or more proficiency in Dutch, which suggests they have already spent some years in the Netherlands and are relatively more established.

Thanks to digitalization, Syrian refugees have had more chances to promote their entrepreneurship and empower themselves. Compared to their Iranian counterparts, they can build better networks and improve their human capital, such as learning Dutch or participating in online vocational training. For instance, Asma was able to participate in online business courses while caring for her two children as a single mother. However, these advancements are a product of modern technological developments rather than a deliberate systematic improvement by the Dutch system. These facilities are decentralized remain sporadic and mineral, and are not available for all refugees (de Lange et al., 2021).

The different forms of agency observed among the Syrian refugee entrepreneurs, as discussed in Chapter 4, are also evident among the Iranian refugee entrepreneurs. These include firstly, professional adaptability; secondly, leveraging available resources; thirdly capitalizing on new resources; fourthly, discovering niche markets; fifthly, engaging in social enterprises; and finally redefining identity.

Agency in showing professional adaptability: Both Iranian and Syrian refugee entrepreneurs had pursued diverse professional trajectories in their countries of origin. However, upon arriving in the Netherlands, they encountered various challenges that hindered their ability to continue in the same professional fields. These challenges include skill and qualification mismatches, a lack of trust in their expertise by the Dutch labor market, and their intersectional positionalities, such as age, socio-economic class (including the devaluation of their education, and reliance on social allowance), and refugee status. Consequently, all the interviewed entrepreneurs demonstrate significant flexibility in their professional trajectories

and explore new opportunities to establish themselves in the labor market (Obschonka et al., 2018).

Agency in leveraging resources: The Iranian and Syrian refugee entrepreneurs demonstrate agency by leveraging available resources and capitalizing on new resources, shaped by their intersectional and translocational positionality (Harima, 2022; Jack & Anderson, 2002). They may convert skills, previously undervalued in their home society, into valuable business assets; for example, Shahin turned her beauty hobby into a business. To adapt to Dutch standards and enhance their professional prospects, individuals like Milad or Shahin from the Iranian group and Khalil and Younes from the Syrian group, pursued further education in the Netherlands. The Syrian refugee entrepreneurs have effectively used social media and the internet for marketing knowledge and business promotion. Conversely, the Iranian entrepreneurs faced difficulties in developing their human capital, due to limited digital access before 2000. Additionally, Syrian refugee entrepreneurs may seek training from incubators, a resource less available to Iranian entrepreneurs before 2000.

Both groups may also participate in voluntary work to gain work experience valued in their new society such as Hadil and Asma. Notably, the interviewed Syrians participated in more voluntary work than the Iranian group, possibly due to the recent emphasis on volunteerism and greater social engagement opportunities compared to those available to Iranians in the 1980s and 1990s. The refugee entrepreneurs have often struggled to secure financial capital, leading to reliance on government aid during the early stages of their businesses such as Khalil in this chapter or Kian in Chapter 3. Iranian entrepreneurs, being a more settled group, often finance their entrepreneurship through their community network, family support, and savings as shown in the case of Fariba (see Chapter 1). Syrian refugee entrepreneurs, still in the early years of their residency in the Netherlands, face greater challenges due to weaker networks. These experiences highlight the critical role of networks as a resource for refugee entrepreneurship in the Netherlands (Khademi et al., 2022).

Agency in discovering niche markets: By leveraging their translocational positionality, some refugee entrepreneurs have identified and capitalized on niche markets. Their intersectional and translocational positionalities - Such as age, religion, gender, class, and ethnicity- provided them with unique cultural knowledge, which they utilized as cultural capital. This cultural capital is instrumental in enabling refugee entrepreneurs to uncover and exploit niche market opportunities, thus fostering their agency and promoting their inclusion within the broader economic landscape.

Bashir's entrepreneurial venture in organizing a company to employ Arab refugee handymen, described in Chapter 4, exemplifies how translocational positioning can lead to the discovery of profitable market niches.

Agency in setting up social enterprises: Some refugee entrepreneurs from both Iranian and Syrian groups exercise agency through social entrepreneurship (Aisenberg et al., 2019; Korstenbroek & Smets, 2019). These social enterprises enhance self-confidence and foster inclusion among refugees while promoting awareness within the host society about refugees as individuals with unique stories and identities. This dynamic is evident in the experiences of Milad, Saleh, and Hadil. Through these ventures, the refugee entrepreneurs actively shape their Sense of belonging to Dutch society, highlighting the pivotal role of agency in refugee entrepreneurship. In certain instances, Syrian refugees, inspired by volunteering efforts, started social enterprises, such as Hadil's organization, aimed at empowering women. However, among the Iranian group, entrepreneurial insights often stemmed from work experiences. For example, Milad, dissatisfied with the efficacy of Dutch social activities for refugees, established his social enterprise to better serve this group.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I compared how the inclusion and agency of entrepreneurs with Iranian and Syrian refugee backgrounds have been shaped in the evolving Dutch context over time. Despite the various challenges for refugee entrepreneurship, the interviewed entrepreneurs, both Iranian and Syrian, have found entrepreneurship to be a means of increasing their inclusion in Dutch society. They perceive greater acceptance through their entrepreneurship. However, this perceived acceptance does not necessarily translate to an increased sense of belonging to the Netherlands (Khademi et al., 2023).

The interviewed refugee entrepreneurs have experienced societal perceptions of refugees in diverse ways. This variance in experience can be attributed to factors such as the duration of residence in the Netherlands, the appreciation of the Dutch welfare state, and the degree of integration, given the intersectional positionalities of the participants. Both Iranian and Syrian refugee groups had distinct experiences of discrimination and exclusion. Generally, the refugee entrepreneurs who compared the lives of refugees in the Netherlands with those in their countries of origin, felt a greater sense of inclusion within Dutch society. This observation aligns with the study by Dagevos et al. (2022), who found that first-generation Iranian

and Syrian refugees exhibit remarkably positive views toward the Dutch political and institutional system. This perspective is profoundly influenced by the political environments of their country of origin, where they faced certain limitations in accessing social opportunities and engaging with the political landscape (Dagevos et al., 2022).

Moreover, despite the growing anti-immigration discourse in the Netherlands in recent years, the Syrian refugee entrepreneurs generally experience a higher level of inclusion compared to their Iranian counterparts (Sutkute, 2024). There are two reasons for this. First, these Syrian refugees tend to compare their situation not only with that of other Syrian refugees in Middle Eastern countries but also with the conditions of refugees within Syria, where they lack citizen rights and have no prospects of future citizenship. The second reason can be explained by the 'integration paradox,' discussed in Chapter 3 (Dagevos et al., 2022; Khademi et al., 2023; Geurts, 2021; Ghorashi, 2021). This concept deals with the experiences of refugee entrepreneurs who have strived for higher positions in education or careers but have encountered more exclusion and discrimination in workplaces and universities.

Initially, Dutch society appears highly welcoming to refugees, who can only compare their conditions with those in their home countries. However, as refugees become more integrated—achieving language proficiency, educational attainment, and higher-level employment—they realize the paradox. Despite their increased integration, they do not experience the promised inclusion, leading to feelings of disillusionment (Dagevos et al., 2022; Ghorashi, 2021). In this study, the integration paradox was more prevalent among the Iranian group than among the Syrians. This difference is probably due to the fact that Syrian refugees are still in the early stages of integration, whereas Iranian refugees are more established in the Netherlands.

Faced with numerous challenges and limited opportunities at the institutional level, Iranian and Syrian refugee entrepreneurs navigate their agency through entrepreneurship by utilizing their unique intersectional and translocational positionalities such as age, gender, class (in terms of education, income and refugee status), religion, and ethnicity. These positionalities play a significant role in their access to markets and their ability to capitalize on various entrepreneurial resources, including human, social, financial, and cultural capital. Through these means, refugee entrepreneurs often find pathways to inclusion within the host society by carving out spaces where their diverse backgrounds become assets rather than barriers.

By examining the experiences of these two groups across different decades, this analysis contributed to insights into how changing regulatory, social, and economic conditions impact entrepreneurial trajectories, inclusion, and agency of refugee entrepreneurs in Dutch society. The next chapter, the conclusion, synthesizes the insights gained from this comparative analysis.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Aim of the research

The primary aim of the present PhD dissertation was to explore how Iranian and Syrian refugee entrepreneurs in the Netherlands experience agency and inclusion through an intersectional lens. Accordingly, the main research question was: *How do entrepreneurs with Iranian and Syrian refugee backgrounds experience inclusion according to their intersectional positionalities, and how do they navigate structural challenges and opportunities through entrepreneurship in the Netherlands?*

To contribute to the emerging field of refugee entrepreneurship (Alrawadieh et al., 2019; Meister & Mauer, 2019; Obschonka et al., 2018; Shneikat & Alrawadieh, 2019), this dissertation combined the three theoretical areas of inclusion, agency-structure, and intersectionality. As a refinement and enrichment, the concept of translocational positionality was utilized to capture more accurately the fluid and dynamic identities of refugee entrepreneurs, which are shaped by their intersectional experiences across different social, cultural, and geographical contexts (Anthias, 2008, 2013, 2020). This is because the intersectional identities of refugee entrepreneurs such as gender, class, age, religion, and ethnicity, also, inform processes of inclusion and exclusion, and shape their entrepreneurial agency within structural constraints and opportunities (see Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5).

A critical entrepreneurship approach (Essers et al., 2017; Tedmanson et al., 2012) was adopted by going beyond the traditional concept of socioeconomic integration to examine inclusion more comprehensively. Inclusion was defined by two key dimensions: 'a sense of belonging' and 'feeling accepted' in the host society (Khademi, et al., 2023) (see Chapters 3 and 5). Furthermore, I addressed the intersectional positionalities of refugee entrepreneurs to gain a deeper understanding of how they exercise their agency and navigate structural challenges and opportunities within Dutch society through entrepreneurship (see Chapters 4 and 5).

In this concluding chapter, I first reflect on the process of knowledge production involved in writing this dissertation, drawing on my own intersectional and translocational positionality as a researcher. Second, I revisit the main research question and review how each chapter addressed the sub-questions, discussing the key findings on inclusion, agency, intersectionality, and translocational positionalities in the Dutch context. Third, I highlight the scientific and societal contributions of this dissertation. Finally, I address the research's limitations and offer recommendations for future studies.

From Research Process to Knowledge Production

This PhD dissertation sought to explore how entrepreneurs with Iranian and Syrian refugee backgrounds experience agency and inclusion in the Netherlands through entrepreneurship, applying an intersectional lens. This objective emerged not only from academic curiosity but also from personal experiences shaped by my own immigration journey. Concepts of agency and inclusion have consistently been a part of my personal and professional concerns, and living as an immigrant in the Netherlands deepened my awareness of these issues. Navigating my transition from Iran to a new country brought to light the challenges faced by others, particularly refugees, in achieving autonomy and acceptance. This awareness fundamentally influenced the design and focus of my research.

My translocational positionality—as an Iranian woman researcher in her late thirties who recently arrived in the Netherlands—greatly shaped the research process and the nature of the knowledge produced. My Iranian background provided certain advantages, such as conducting interviews in Farsi and drawing upon a cultural and historical familiarity that enriched the analysis (Essers, 2009). Iranian participants often sought to establish a mutual understanding based on a shared cultural background or common historical knowledge. They would make statements such as, "You are a woman yourself, and you understand the situation of Iranian women in our society!" or "I'm not talking about Iran, you know what the situation is like." In these moments, I consciously tried to avoid adopting a detached, "objective" role as an interviewer. Instead, I demonstrated empathy and solidarity, not only through words but also through my body language and, at times, by sharing my own opinions. While I was aware that this approach diverged from the traditional positivist stance of maintaining objectivity and neutrality in interviews (Riessman, 2001), I chose to align myself with a feminist methodological perspective (Essers, 2009). In this tradition, rejecting the hierarchical, objectifying view of the "neutral" interviewer is important. By engaging more personally and showing my understanding of the participants' experiences, I was able to foster a more authentic and collaborative interaction, acknowledging our shared experiences and intersecting positionalities (Atkinson, 2001; Essers, 2009; Riessman, 2001).

However, this translocational positionality also paradoxically positioned me as an "outsider" within the Iranian immigrant community. As a newly arrived Iranian with a limited network, no Dutch citizenship, and an academic rather than entrepreneurial identity, my positionality created barriers to trust, placing me in a perceived power deficit within the community. This dual positionality evoked complex reactions.

Many Iranian refugee entrepreneurs exhibited resistance and mistrust, particularly those with political activist backgrounds, fearing surveillance and questioning the research's purpose. For example, one Iranian woman entrepreneur accused me of espionage for unclear reasons, and questioned the academic relevance of studying Iranians who had immigrated to the Netherlands years ago. Despite my efforts to clarify the academic legitimacy of my research, the skepticism persisted. In one case, a female entrepreneur canceled an interview appointment as her husband forbade her participation. During another interview, the participant gave vague, non-personalized answers, seemingly to avoid potential complications.

This resistance highlights a pervasive sense of mistrust within the Iranian immigrant community (Honari et al., 2017; Sreberny & Gholami, 2016), raising questions about the applicability of the term "community" when individuals operate within fragmented networks. The hesitancy among some community members reflects lingering apprehensions toward the Iranian government, persisting even decades after relocation. My intersectional positionality helped foster connections with some Iranian refugees, particularly among those with academic backgrounds, who appreciated the significance of the study. Their assistance proved invaluable in overcoming initial resistance, revealing deep divisions within the Iranian community and varied levels of support and cohesion. These exchanges deepened my understanding of the fragmented networks within the Iranian diaspora and highlighted the complex dynamics of power within immigrant communities, where intersecting identities, histories, and collective memories can both facilitate and constrain research access. These experiences underscored how power relationships rooted in translocational positionality shape not only the research process but also the knowledge that emerges from it.

In conducting interviews with Iranian refugee entrepreneurs in the Netherlands, shared cultural heritage provided a foundation, but several key distinctions separated my experiences from those of my interlocutors: generational differences, divergent migration paths, and unequal familiarity with life in the Netherlands. These factors not only influenced the dynamics of our interactions but also shaped the insights into the agency and inclusion of my interviewees.

Generational Differences: I focused on established Iranian refugees to contrast them with the recent Syrian arrivals. My Iranian interviewees were primarily over 55, representing a generation marked by the Iranian revolution, the post-revolutionary period, and the Iran-Iraq war. In contrast, my age placed me in a different generational context; I had only vague childhood memories of these

events, which limited my direct understanding of their enduring impacts. Engaging with them was akin to encountering a living history of my homeland, exposing how distinct generational experiences had shaped their sense of agency, resilience, and strategies for inclusion in Dutch society.

Divergent Migration Paths: Our migration journeys highlighted stark contrasts in experiences and identities. My immigration as a highly skilled professional on a work visa differed greatly from their refugee experiences, which were defined by survival, uncertainty, and the pressure of forced migration. Many interviewees had fled Iran under life-threatening conditions, carrying with them a resilience forged in circumstances vastly different from my own experience. While I was familiarizing myself with Dutch society on a scholarship and work contract, they had confronted immense challenges to secure stability. This difference in migration experiences also affected the knowledge and perspectives shared during our interviews, with their stories unveiling layers of hardship and perseverance I had not personally encountered.

Unequal Knowledge of Dutch Society: Having lived in the Netherlands for only a short period, I was often unfamiliar with the cultural and linguistic subtleties that were routine for my interviewees. My limited knowledge created an implicit power imbalance in the interviews, as I found myself reliant on their guidance for basic cultural comprehension. Their patient explanations not only bridged this gap for the research but also helped me in navigating my journey in the Netherlands. This supportive stance from my interlocutors subtly shifted traditional interview power dynamics, facilitating a collaborative knowledge exchange that enriched both the research and my integration into Dutch society.

Despite these distinctions, my translocational positionality as an Iranian woman with recent immigration experience fostered a bond with the Iranian participants. This intersecting background allowed me to empathize with their efforts to exercise agency and seek inclusion in their host society. As Iranian refugees who had navigated and reshaped their positions within a foreign society, my interlocutors embodied complex narratives of resilience and adaptability. Their stories illuminated how they negotiated agency amidst structural barriers, offering valuable insights into how they navigated inclusion in the Dutch labor market and social structures.

These distinctions and shared experiences between the participants and me as a researcher highlighted the power relationships embedded within the research

process. My position as a researcher with limited familiarity with Dutch society, but with academic and immigrant credentials, simultaneously positioned me as both an insider and outsider, producing knowledge that was collaboratively shaped through our interactions. The translocational positionality framework (Anthias, 2008, 2013, 2020) provided a lens to reflect on how intersecting identities—marked by generational, immigrational, and social differences—impacted both the process of data collection and the interpretations we co-constructed. This reciprocal influence underscored that knowledge production in research is not static but rather a dynamic process shaped by the relational power dynamics between researcher and participants, especially when intersecting identities are involved translocationally (Essers, 2009).

Engaging in interviews with Syrian refugee entrepreneurs revealed complex dimensions of agency and inclusion within their entrepreneurial journeys, shaped by both their social locations and the dynamics of our interactions. My translocational positionality—as an Iranian immigrant researcher with limited Arabic proficiency—influenced not only my data collection but also the power dynamics and interpretive processes in my research with Syrians. My Iranian background and language limitations presented notable challenges in establishing rapport with Syrian refugees. Out of the 62 Syrians initially contacted on LinkedIn, the majority either did not respond or declined to participate, with some explicitly rejecting the study's focus on "refugee" entrepreneurs. This reaction stemmed from a perception that such labels could reinforce stereotypes, casting Syrians as subordinate, despite their entrepreneurial efforts. While I clarified that the term "refugee" was intended to foreground agency, it did not fully alleviate their concerns. This feedback underscored the importance of framing in research, where terminologies can profoundly affect the way participants view their roles and identities.

Eventually, of those contacted, 15 Syrian entrepreneurs agreed to be interviewed and shared their experiences openly. Among them, some saw the research as a platform to advocate for their aspirations, expressing appreciation for the project. A few even extended their involvement, attending university events focused on refugee entrepreneurship, where they contributed their perspectives on supporting refugee agency. These varied responses underscored that Syrian refugee entrepreneurs while navigating similar systemic barriers, experience inclusion and identity dynamics distinctly based on intersecting factors such as class, education, and individual history.

Conducting interviews in English added complexity and additional layers to the research. As English was a non-native language for most Syrians, participation required a certain level of fluency, which inadvertently led to a selection bias. Consequently, the research ended up including participants from educated, middle- or upper-class backgrounds. This lack of class diversity may have further limited the research's scope, as it primarily reflects the perspectives of Syrians with particular educational privileges. Furthermore, communicating in English made the interviews slower and often required additional clarifications, as participants narrated their journeys in a language that did not fully capture the nuances of their experiences. This linguistic factor highlights how language can shape the depth of data and potentially impact knowledge production, ultimately shaping a study that reflected the experiences of a more educated and privileged group of Syrian refugees.

Despite linguistic and cultural barriers, certain aspects of my intersectional positionality as a fellow Middle Eastern immigrant with an Islamic background fostered rapport, particularly with younger Syrian women who saw parallels in our experiences of relocating from the Middle East to the Netherlands. This common ground in age, gender, and religion added a layer of trust and mutual understanding (Alvesson, 2003; Essers, 2009), allowing them to discuss challenges with a sense of relatability they perceived. I could grasp it as a young immigrant woman. The shared identities softened the researcher-participant power differential, creating a collaborative space for knowledge production where personal experiences informed collective understanding.

As a recent immigrant and researcher, my positionality influenced the power dynamics in my interactions with Syrian and Iranian entrepreneurs. During interviews with Iranian entrepreneurs, I typically posed questions about life in the Netherlands, integration, and networking opportunities, as I was still familiarizing myself with Dutch society, particularly within the Iranian community. In contrast, Syrian entrepreneurs, who were in the early stages of establishing their businesses, frequently sought my assistance. They asked me to share resources that could enhance their entrepreneurship endeavors, such as relevant websites, articles, or network connections, reversing the typical roles of interviewer and interviewee. On the one hand, I felt a strong sense of responsibility to support the integration and inclusion of newcomers, as I had personally benefited from the guidance and support of both Dutch people and previous immigrants during my early years in the Netherlands. On the other hand, I felt a moral obligation to reciprocate the Syrian entrepreneurs' valuable contributions to my study (See Essers, 2009). By sharing information and resources to facilitate

their integration and professional development, I not only sought to assist them in navigating challenges but also found a deeper sense of purpose in contributing to their inclusion in Dutch society and the labor market. Over time, I found myself acting as a connector to networks, a role that reflects a distinctive, participant-driven knowledge exchange where they actively shaped the research direction by indicating what support they needed. This shift underscored how power relations in knowledge production are not static but fluid, shaped by participants' agency and the relational positioning of both interviewer and interviewee.

It is very common in qualitative interviewing for researchers to maintain contact with respondents beyond the initial interviews (Essers, 2009; Warren, 2001). I continued to engage with some Syrian entrepreneurs after the interviews, following their progress and inviting them to academic events for valorization or as guest lecturers in one of my supervisor Dr. Caroline Essers's courses. These ongoing interactions not only offered further insights into their evolving entrepreneurial paths but also reflected the research's role in fostering inclusion and bridging academic and refugee communities.

This research experience reinforced my understanding of translocational positionality as a tool for examining the lives of others in the process of producing knowledge while reflecting on my own immigrant journey. My intersectional position as an Iranian woman navigating academia in a new country allowed me to recognize the interplay of time, space, and intersectional translocational identities as sources of agency- an outlook that empowered me as both an immigrant and a researcher. This framework continues to guide my approach to knowledge production, encouraging me to use my intersecting identities not only to bridge connections with marginalized groups but also to exercise agency in academic and personal domains.

Ultimately, the varied responses, collaborative engagements, and intersecting positionalities in this research underscore that inclusion and agency among Iranian and Syrian refugees are shaped by a nuanced interplay of identities and structural opportunities and barriers. This project thus not only illuminates the multifaceted ways refugees negotiate their entrepreneurial journeys but also exemplifies how knowledge production is an ongoing, relational process shaped by mutual influences between researcher and participants, enriched by the shared and distinct identities brought into the research process.

In the following section, I address the main research question and the accompanying sub-questions that this dissertation aimed to explore and answer.

Answering the Research Questions

To address the main research question, I formulated several sub-questions, each explored in a separate chapter.

1. How is entrepreneurship informed by the various intersectional positions of refugees? And how do refugees exert their agency based on these intersecting identities?

To answer these sub-questions, in Chapter 2, I developed an innovative, multidimensional conceptual framework for studying refugee entrepreneurship, blending mixed embeddedness theory with intersectionality and agency. This framework employed mixed embeddedness theory to illustrate how refugees' resources, opportunity structures, and socio-economic contexts interact to shape entrepreneurial opportunities at micro, meso, and macro levels. However, traditional mixed embeddedness theory lacked a nuanced perspective on refugee agency (Abebe, 2022; Anwar & Daniel, 2017), which this framework enriches by incorporating an intersectional approach (Khademi et al., 2024).

Through a more dynamic form of intersectionality, known as 'translocational positionality', the framework captured the changing intersectional identities and positionalities of refugees over time, space, and context (Anthias, 2008, 2013, 2020). The conceptual model revealed how translocational positionalities—such as ethnicity, class, religion, age, and gender—generate unique knowledge and experiences at the micro level that, when interacting with institutional-political contexts and socio-economic factors at the macro level, shape refugees' entrepreneurial motivations, resources, and strategies. By viewing entrepreneurship as a dynamic process, this model's application of translocational positionality underscored how refugees negotiate agency within their specific contexts (Khademi et al., 2024).

This framework, thus, contributed to both refugee entrepreneurship studies and intersectionality theory. In subsequent chapters, I employed this conceptual framework to examine the entrepreneurial experiences of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands (Chapter 4) and to compare these experiences with those of Iranian refugees (Chapter 5).

2. How does entrepreneurship play a role in the inclusion of Iranian refugee entrepreneurs in Dutch society?

In Chapter 3, I addressed another aspect of the dissertation's main question: the inclusion of refugee entrepreneurs in Dutch society (Ghorashi, 2023, 2005, 2021), a dimension often overlooked in the field of refugee entrepreneurship. I studied how identity components such as ethnicity, age, class, gender, and religion intersect to shape Iranian refugee entrepreneurship and influence their sense of belonging and feelings of being accepted in Dutch society, two important dimensions of inclusion. This study illustrated three distinct modes of belonging experienced by Iranian refugee entrepreneurs: first, 'hybrid belonging', for those who identify with both Iranian and Dutch identities; second, 'cosmopolitan belonging', for those who view themselves as part of a global society rather than identifying with a specific nationality; and third, 'transnational belonging' for those who feel a connection to their co-ethnic group abroad yet perceive a gap between themselves and their compatriots in their homeland, Iran (Khademi et al., 2023).

It was concluded that while entrepreneurship can serve as an accelerator for societal acceptance, it does not necessarily deepen refugees' sense of belonging to Dutch society. Moreover, the chapter underscored the need to move beyond the traditional integration paradigm by incorporating the concept of inclusion (Khademi et al., 2023). By adopting an inclusion-based approach, this chapter shed light on refugees' positioning within the labor market and their broader engagement with the host society.

3. How do Syrian refugee entrepreneurs in the Netherlands exert agency through entrepreneurship given the possibilities and constraints of their translocational positionality and structural context?

In Chapter 4, I applied the conceptual framework of Chapter 2 to analyze the structural challenges and opportunities encountered by Syrian refugee entrepreneurs in the Netherlands, focusing on how they navigate these dynamics through their translocational positionalities. The interplay between these positionalities and available opportunity structures can either facilitate or hinder the agency of Syrian refugee entrepreneurs.

The results showed that Syrian refugee entrepreneurs exhibited their agency in different ways. They sought new opportunities through entrepreneurship in response to structural barriers that prevented them from pursuing their original professions

(Obschonka et al., 2018). However, refugee entrepreneurship was not merely driven by push factors such as labor market discrimination. It was also motivated by pull factors like the desire for autonomy, skill development, and humanitarian objectives. By creating social enterprises, Syrian refugee entrepreneurs empowered fellow refugees, enhanced self-confidence, and promoted inclusion, while raising awareness of refugees' unique identities within Dutch society.

Furthermore, Syrian refugee entrepreneurs, utilized their translocational positionalities to transform existing capital, such as cultural capital, into entrepreneurial resources through education, participation in local support programs, or voluntary work (Harima, 2022; Martinez Dy, 2020). Their translocational positionality also enabled them to identify niche markets (Khademi et al., 2023). Syrian refugee entrepreneurs sought to be recognized as independent entrepreneurs rather than solely as refugees, thereby taking control of their narratives and highlighting their economic contributions. However, some acknowledged their dual identity, emphasizing the specific challenges they faced as both refugees and entrepreneurs (Adeeko & Treanor, 2022; Rashid, 2018).

The study showed that Syrian refugee entrepreneurs from higher-class backgrounds were better able to leverage their resources, leading to a faster integration into Dutch society (Simk, 2018). These findings suggest that pre-existing inequalities in refugees' home countries are often reproduced in the host country, particularly during the initial years of resettlement. Despite claims from Dutch policymakers about providing an equitable integration system, the inequalities among refugee entrepreneurs highlight a lack of an intersectional approach to policy design (Scott & Hussin, 2019).

4. How are the inclusion and agency of entrepreneurs with Iranian and Syrian refugee backgrounds being informed by the evolving Dutch context over time?

In Chapter 5, I conducted an active comparison between the two groups of entrepreneurs, focusing on the structural challenges they faced, the opportunities available through entrepreneurship, and the differing entrepreneurial policies shaped by the distinct time periods in which they arrived.

Using a contextualized approach, I demonstrated that despite four decades of efforts to promote entrepreneurial inclusion, opportunities remain unevenly distributed. Both Iranian and Syrian refugee entrepreneurs found that the Dutch context does not adequately support their entrepreneurial endeavors or empower

them to start businesses. Many interviewees highlighted difficulties in securing investors and bank loans, alongside limited access to support structures such as incubators, which have only recently become more active. These resources have primarily benefited Syrian newcomers, who have more human capital (de Lange et al., 2021; Nijhoff, 2021).

Despite these challenges, both Iranian and Syrian refugee entrepreneurs exercised their agency in different ways within the Dutch labor market, relying on their translocational positionalities. They perceived entrepreneurship as a pathway to greater social inclusion within Dutch society. They felt that their entrepreneurial activities contributed to increased societal acceptance, though this did not necessarily translate into a stronger sense of belonging in the Netherlands (Khademi et al., 2023).

This comparative analysis provided the necessary background to address the main research question:

How do entrepreneurs with Iranian and Syrian refugee backgrounds experience inclusion according to their intersectional positionalities, and how do they navigate structural challenges and opportunities through entrepreneurship in the Netherlands?

At the individual level, both Iranian and Syrian refugee entrepreneur groups encountered various challenges and opportunities stemming from their unique intersectional and translocational positionalities such as age, gender, class (regarding education and refugee status), religion, and ethnicity. These positionalities significantly played roles in their access to markets and their ability to capitalize on various entrepreneurial resources such as human, social, financial, and cultural capital. At the structural level, including integration policies and regulations, entrepreneurial support, and societal perceptions, both Iranian and Syrian refugee entrepreneurs faced ambiguity in the Dutch context, which shaped their experiences of inclusion and exclusion, as well as their agency. Below, under the two sub-titles, *Perceived Inclusion* and *Navigating Structural Challenges and Opportunities*, I will elaborate further on these dynamics.

Perceived Inclusion

This analysis demonstrated that the Iranian participants observed a shift in discourses from culturalism to a more assimilation approach in the Netherlands over time (Vasta, 2007; Vertovec & Wessendorf, 2010). Iranians often arrived before

2000 without a clear destination, benefiting over time from a more supportive system, while many Syrians chose the Netherlands intentionally for its organized support systems.

Positive aspects of Dutch systems—such as welfare benefits, citizenship rights, and perceived gender equality—have contributed to a sense of belonging among refugees, encouraging them to participate in entrepreneurship as a form of giving something back to the supportive system (Essers et al., 2021; Khademi et al., 2023). However, integration policies have not consistently produced favorable outcomes. Both Iranian and Syrian refugees faced hurdles including lengthy integration procedures, restricted working hours, and a homogenizing approach that often limited them under the Dutch integration framework, fostering feelings of exclusion (de Lange et al., 2021; Nijhoff, 2021). The absence of an intersectional lens, coupled with decentralized support activities and a complex bureaucratic system, has marginalized many Iranian and Syrian refugees over the past 40 years. As a result, the process of starting and sustaining a business remains an overwhelming challenge for most refugee entrepreneurs.

Moreover, entrepreneurship among refugees can arise from both inclusion and exclusion. For Syrian refugees, starting a business is often driven by a desire to contribute to their host society, reflecting a sense of belonging and inclusion. Conversely, for Iranian refugees, entrepreneurship may emerge as a response to exclusion from the labor market. In both cases, entrepreneurship serves as a form of agency and contributes to the inclusion of refugee entrepreneurs within the host society.

This study revealed that refugees' perceptions of Dutch society vary based on factors such as residence duration, welfare appreciation, and levels of integration. Interestingly, Iranian entrepreneurs, despite having resided in the Netherlands longer, experience lower levels of inclusion compared to more recently arrived Syrian entrepreneurs—a phenomenon explained by the “integration paradox” (Dagevos et al., 2022; Khademi et al., 2023; Geurts, 2021; Ghorashi, 2021). Generally, the refugees' comparative view—against conditions in their countries of origin—facilitates a greater sense of inclusion (Dagevos et al., 2022). Syrians report feeling relatively included in the Netherlands due to comparing their situation with refugees in Middle Eastern countries, particularly in Syria (Dagevos et al., 2022). Iranians, in contrast, encounter the “integration paradox,” where deeper integration brings higher exclusion from professional and educational spaces, leading to disillusionment as discussed in Chapter 3 (Dagevos et al., 2022; Khademi et al.,

2023; Geurts, 2021; Ghorashi, 2021). This difference is likely because Syrian refugees are still in the early stages of integration, whereas Iranian refugees are more established in the Netherlands.

Navigating structural challenges and opportunities

Both Iranian and Syrian refugee entrepreneurs, facing institutional challenges and limited opportunities, leveraged their agency through entrepreneurship by drawing on intersectional and translocational positionalities—such as age, gender, education level, income, refugee status, religion, and ethnicity. These dimensions shape their market access and ability to mobilize diverse entrepreneurial resources, including human, social, financial, and cultural capital. Through this approach, refugee entrepreneurs turn their diverse backgrounds into assets, finding pathways to inclusion within Dutch society. Notable forms of agency among both Syrian and Iranian entrepreneurs include professional adaptability (Obschonka et al., 2018), resource leveraging (Harima, 2022; Jack & Anderson, 2002), niche market identification, social enterprise engagement (Aisenberg et al., 2019; Korstenbroek & Smets, 2019), and identity redefinition.

Two key differences emerged between Iranian and Syrian groups in navigating structural barriers. First, Syrian entrepreneurs frequently engaged with incubation programs and leveraged social media, while Iranian entrepreneurs mainly relied on community and family networks for financial support (Khademi et al., 2023). This difference is linked to recent policy shifts in the Dutch context aimed at fostering refugee entrepreneurship through incubator organizations. Second, social enterprises were notably more prevalent among Syrian refugee entrepreneurs compared to their Iranian counterparts. This trend is likely connected to the rise of volunteerism and the emphasis on social entrepreneurship in the Netherlands (Aisenberg et al., 2019; Korstenbroek & Smets, 2019).

Both Iranian and Syrian refugee entrepreneurs view entrepreneurship - despite challenges - as a vital channel for societal inclusion. These diverse experiences highlight the Dutch integration system's complexity and suggest a need for a more inclusive, intersectional approach to refugee entrepreneurship support. In the following section, I deal with the contributions of this dissertation to the existing literature.

Contributions to the Literature and Theory

This dissertation contributed to the emerging literature on the refugee entrepreneurship in three different ways.

1. Contribution to Refugee Entrepreneurship in the Structure-Agency Debate

This dissertation contributed to the structure-agency debate in refugee entrepreneurship by emphasizing a contextualized understanding of agency. Through this approach, I highlighted the diverse institutional and temporal barriers, as well as opportunities that shape refugee entrepreneurship across origin and host countries. This framework enabled a deeper understanding of how refugees' lived experiences, aspirations, and trajectories transcend national borders.

The dissertation investigated how entrepreneurial agency interplays with opportunity structures. By accounting for intersectional and translocational positionalities, this research captures the complex dynamics of agency within entrepreneurship. Findings demonstrated that agency manifests in various forms, including pull factors, pursuit of social entrepreneurship, resource creation and leveraging (Martinez Dy, 2020; Harima, 2022), professional adaptability (Obschonka et al., 2018), niche market identification (Khademi et al., 2023), and identity redefinition (Adeeko & Treanor, 2022; Rashid, 2018).

Ultimately, this study offered a comprehensive view of how refugee entrepreneurs navigate constraints and opportunities, underscoring their resilience, resourcefulness, and capacity to exert autonomy within varied structural contexts. It also revealed how social and structural factors influence entrepreneurial agency, informing a nuanced understanding of refugee entrepreneurship within the broader structure-agency framework.

2. Contributing to Refugee Entrepreneurship through the Lens of Inclusion

This dissertation advanced refugee entrepreneurship research by critically examining the integration approach that emphasized refugees' language proficiency and social interactions (Bakker et al., 2014) but overlooked their sense of belonging and attachment (Khademi et al., 2023). I addressed inclusion as a process of enhancing the social incorporation of refugees, by studying how

refugee entrepreneurs themselves experience belonging and perceive their acceptance by the host society (Essers et al., 2021; Khademi et al., 2023). This study revealed that although refugee entrepreneurs may achieve economic, social, and cultural integration, they do not necessarily feel they belong or are fully accepted, highlighting the importance of adopting an inclusion perspective distinct from integration in refugee entrepreneurship studies (Khademi et al., 2023).

Moreover, this study enriched the literature on inclusion in refugee entrepreneurship by examining both the entrepreneurs' sense of belonging and perceptions of societal acceptance. I introduce nuanced analytical categories—cosmopolitan, hybrid, and transnational belonging—that capture varied experiences of attachment formed through entrepreneurship. The findings indicated that refugee entrepreneurs with a stronger attachment to the Netherlands reported a greater sense of inclusion, which sometimes motivated them to pursue entrepreneurship as a way of expressing gratitude to the host society. Furthermore, many refugee entrepreneurs noted that owning a business increased their perceived respect and acceptance, particularly among those previously marginalized in the labor market due to intersectional identities. Entrepreneurship created a context in which the experience of "otherness" was often suspended, fostering new social connections with Dutch and other ethnic communities. Yet, outside entrepreneurial spaces, some refugee entrepreneurs continued to feel excluded, experiencing an enduring sense of being perceived as "others" in the host society.

Furthermore, this dissertation further refined the refugee entrepreneurship literature by analyzing the role of intersectional identities in experienced inclusion (Khademi et al., 2023). Refugee entrepreneurs' inclusion is significantly shaped by intersecting identities that influence their motivations, resources, and strategies—directing them toward belonging to either the host society, immigrant communities, or both. For some refugee entrepreneurs, intersectional positionality initially excludes them from the labor market, motivating self-employment as a means of social belonging or economic survival. Thus, this dissertation provided a comprehensive view of inclusion, bridging the gaps in the current understanding of refugee entrepreneurship in the Netherlands.

3. Contribution to Refugee Entrepreneurship through the Lens of Translocational Positionality

This study advanced refugee entrepreneurship literature by employing an intersectional approach that examines how gender, religion, ethnicity, age, and

class intersect in shaping entrepreneurial experiences. Previous structure-based perspectives, often overlook the influence of these intersecting social positions, treating migrant/refugee entrepreneurship as largely neutral to positional nuances. In contrast, this dissertation emphasized how these social categories dynamically interact with structural contexts, revealing the complex ways in which they shape refugee entrepreneurs' experiences and strategies.

Additionally, this work contributes to intersectionality theory in refugee entrepreneurship by integrating translocational positionality, offering a dynamic lens that tracks shifts in social positioning across time and space. While intersectionality provided critical insights into how people are positioned in social categories of inclusion and exclusion, it has been criticized for addressing these issues too statically (Anthias, 2008; Essers & Benschop, 2009; Villares-Varela & Essers 2019). The translocational positionality approach addresses this gap by focusing on how refugee entrepreneurs' intersecting identities evolve as they navigate varied social, economic, and geographic contexts (Anthias, 2008, 2013, 2020).

This approach captures the diversity of translocational social positions—encompassing factors such as class, education, age, gender, religion, and ethnicity—that refugee entrepreneurs encounter across different settings, which can sometimes be contradictory. For instance, while religious affiliation or ethnic identity may grant access to niche markets or community support in one context, it may also contribute to marginalization or barriers in others. Thus, by examining translocational positionality, this study underscores the fluidity of refugee entrepreneurs' social positions, advancing a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of how refugees leverage, negotiate, or are constrained by their complex identities in entrepreneurial endeavors.

Despite the contributions outlined above, this dissertation has certain limitations. In the next section, I will discuss these limitations and provide recommendations for future research.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

One limitation of this research pertains to the conceptual model, initially developed based on immigrant studies in 2019 and revised in 2022. Given that the field of refugee entrepreneurship research is rapidly evolving, the model will require

revision as further empirical studies emerge. As additional data become available, the limitations and relevance of this framework for understanding refugee entrepreneurship can be more accurately assessed. Future research should focus on empirically validating and adapting this model to the specific contexts of refugee entrepreneurs to ensure it reflects their unique challenges and strengths accurately.

Another area for refinement is the incorporation of additional identity dimensions, such as generation, race, disability, and other aspects that play a role in refugees' entrepreneurship experiences and modes of belonging. Including these dimensions would offer a more comprehensive perspective on how intersecting identities shape refugees' entrepreneurial motivations, agency, and inclusion. Further studies might also consider how policymaking can be designed to emphasize inclusion, exploring policies that explicitly recognize the unique intersectional barriers refugee entrepreneurs face and aim to facilitate more equitable access to entrepreneurial resources and opportunities.

The linguistic scope of this study also introduces certain limitations. The interviews with Syrian refugee entrepreneurs were conducted in English, creating a selection bias toward middle-class, educated participants. This bias limits the generalizability of the findings to a specific socioeconomic group and overlooks the experiences of refugees from other socioeconomic backgrounds, who may face distinct challenges and barriers to entrepreneurship. While the study offers valuable insights into how educated, middle-class refugees manage downward mobility within the host society, it does not capture the full range of entrepreneurial experiences within the Syrian refugee community.

To address this linguistic limitation, future studies should adopt a multilingual approach, conducting interviews in participants' native languages whenever possible to ensure a broader and more inclusive sample. Expanding the linguistic diversity of the sample would help capture the nuanced experiences of refugees across different socioeconomic strata, thus enhancing the representativeness and depth of findings. Additionally, integrating interpreters or community liaison officers could facilitate data collection across a more diverse participant pool and provide richer, more inclusive insights into the entrepreneurial journeys of refugee entrepreneurs.

Given these limitations, I would like to offer several recommendations for future research in the field of refugee entrepreneurship. This study illustrated that entrepreneurship is a significant pathway for refugee entrepreneurs in the

Netherlands to foster a sense of belonging, assert agency, and achieve social inclusion. Refugee entrepreneurs report that their ventures contribute to both personal fulfillment and increased social acceptance from the host community. Nevertheless, the study of refugee entrepreneurship must not imply that the responsibility for their social inclusion rests solely on the refugees rather than the host government. Governments must actively support refugees in their entrepreneurial pursuits, minimizing risks and emphasizing inclusion rather than only economic gain.

To support refugee entrepreneurship effectively, policymakers must address the unique intersectional identities and backgrounds of refugees. These intersecting identities—such as gender, religion, class, education, age, and professional experience—shape entrepreneurial potential, helping refugees to identify niche markets, leverage existing skills, and mobilize resources. However, intersectional identities can also impose constraints; for instance, limited professional networks, language barriers, or cultural unfamiliarity may impede access to necessary resources and opportunities. Thus, a nuanced understanding of intersectionality should guide entrepreneurship policies, enabling targeted support for diverse refugee groups.

Incubator organizations play a critical role in supporting refugee entrepreneurs, bridging gaps that government programs alone may not address. These organizations provide mentorship, training, and access to networks and resources, which enhance the agency of refugees and facilitate their inclusion into Dutch society. By supporting incubators, the government can simultaneously lighten its responsibilities while empowering refugees. To achieve meaningful agency and inclusion outcomes, incubators should be supported with adequate resources to expand and adapt their services, ensuring their programs address the unique needs of refugee entrepreneurs.

Furthermore, social entrepreneurship offers a promising avenue for refugee entrepreneurs, allowing them to create businesses that benefit both their communities and the wider society. However, despite growing recognition of social entrepreneurship's potential, Dutch policies still have room to improve in actively fostering this model. By prioritizing social entrepreneurship as a key pathway for inclusion, the Dutch government could further facilitate refugee inclusion, providing refugees with the tools to address social issues while building economic resilience. Encouraging social entrepreneurship would not only benefit the economy but also foster community-based solutions and networks that enhance social cohesion.

One barrier to refugee entrepreneurship is unfamiliarity with Dutch society, business norms, and regulations. To address this, the integration exams and process should include dedicated training on entrepreneurship. This training should inform refugees about the pathways to entrepreneurship and the resources and skills required. As indicated, in Chapter 5, a cohesive program for refugee entrepreneurship is essential, beginning with foundational skills and then integrated into the broader refugee integration process. Such a program would equip refugees with practical knowledge, fostering greater agency and reducing dependence on fragmented support services.

Moreover, effective communication between refugees and available resources, such as legal and financial advisory services, is essential. Municipalities, which play a primary role in refugee integration, should be trained to offer targeted entrepreneurial support, including advising refugees on business planning, financial management, and legal compliance. Additionally, municipalities could refer refugees to incubators and offer continuous guidance from business conception to operational stages. This holistic approach would ensure that refugee entrepreneurs receive comprehensive support tailored to their entrepreneurial journeys.

Language remains a fundamental barrier for refugee entrepreneurs, particularly for older refugees. While Dutch proficiency is vital, digital and assistive language tools could help ease these challenges. Training refugees to effectively use these digital tools would facilitate smoother interactions with customers, employees, and partners, ultimately increasing their entrepreneurial confidence. Literacy programs focused on labor-market-specific vocabulary should be a staple of refugee integration curricula, equipping refugees with practical language skills to navigate Dutch society and business environments.

In conclusion, promoting the agency and inclusion of refugee entrepreneurs requires a multifaceted approach. Governments, incubator organizations, and community-based programs must work together to support refugee entrepreneurs, addressing intersectional challenges while leveraging their unique skills and perspectives. A commitment to integrating entrepreneurial training and language literacy into refugee support systems would empower refugees, enabling them to contribute meaningfully to Dutch society while building sustainable livelihoods.

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Appendices

Interview Guidelines

This interview focuses on your life story, your business, and your experience of inclusion in the Netherlands. As a social scientist, I am interested in hearing your story, including reflections on the past as you remember it and your vision for the future. The story is selective; it does not include everything that has ever happened to you. Instead, I will ask you to focus on a few key aspects of your life, particularly those parts related to your job. There are no right or wrong answers to my questions. Your task is simply to share the most important events in your entrepreneurial journey and your aspirations for the future. I will guide you through the interview which should take around two hours or less.

A. Life Chapters

1. If you were to describe your life as a book, how many chapters would it have?
2. What would you name each chapter?

B. Background in Country of Origin

3. Could you tell me about your family and background in your home country?
4. What was your educational field, and what degree did you obtain?
5. What was your professional role in your home country?
6. How was your socio-economic status in your home country?
7. Were you involved in entrepreneurship in your home country, as well?
8. What were your political views or background in your home country?

C. Asylum-Seeking Period

9. Can you share why and how you fled your home country?
10. How and why did you come to the Netherlands?
11. What challenges did you face during this period?
12. What opportunities or positive experiences did you encounter during this time?
(For example, valuable connections, relationships, conditions, knowledge, skills, or courses that helped you in your journey, particularly in building your business in the Netherlands.)
13. How did you find a pathway into society?

D. Entrepreneurship Period

14. When and why did you decide to begin your own business?
15. How did you start your entrepreneurship?
16. What was required to start your business? [e.g., certification, language skills, experiences, capital, etc.]

17. What kind of courses or training did you take to start your entrepreneurship?
18. How did you acquire the financial capital needed for your entrepreneurship?
19. What kind of support did you receive from institutions or government in starting your business?
20. How has your **previous life** and experiences in your home country impacted your entrepreneurial journey? [e.g., your diploma, skill, experiences, capital, cultural expectations, etc.]
21. How has your status as a **refugee** impacted your entrepreneurial journey?
 - Has it played a constraining or contributing role to your entrepreneurship?
 - If it has been a constraint, how have you managed this challenge?
22. How has your **ethnicity** impacted your entrepreneurship?
 - Has it acted as a constraint or a benefit?
 - If it has been a constraint, how did you manage this challenge?
23. How has your **gender** impacted our entrepreneurship?
 - -Has it acted as a constraint or a benefit?
 - -If it has been a constraint, how did you manage this challenge?
24. How has your **age** when starting your business impacted your entrepreneurship?
 - Did it act as a constraint or a benefit?
 - If it was a constraint, how did you manage this challenge?
25. How has your **socio-economic class** impacted on your entrepreneurship?
 - Has it acted as a constraint or a contributing factor?
 - If it has been a constraint, how have you coped with this challenge?
26. How have your **religious beliefs** impacted your entrepreneurship?
 - Have they played a constraining role or contributing role for your entrepreneurship?
 - If they have been a constraint, how have you managed this challenge?
27. What has had the greatest impact on your entrepreneurship?
28. What challenges have you faced in your entrepreneurship generally?
29. How have you developed your entrepreneurship over time?
30. What strategies do you use to cope with the challenges in entrepreneurship?
31. Who are your clients, and how do you contact them?

E. Present Life in the Netherlands

32. How do you identify yourself in terms of religious belief, nationality, gender, and your socio-economic class?
33. What is your current socio- economic class?
34. Is it the same as your socio-economic class in your country of origin? Why or why not?
35. Do you enjoy your life here?

36. Where do you feel you belong?
37. To what extent do you feel you are accepted as an entrepreneur by society?
38. To what extent do you think you are part of society and you are included in the Dutch society?
39. What are your thoughts about Dutch people?
40. How would you describe the quality of your relationships with Dutch people?
41. How do you socialize with Dutch people?
42. Do you have any Dutch intimate friends?
43. Are you a member of a Dutch friendship group?
44. How is your relationship with people from your own ethnic background?
45. To what extent do you follow the news in Dutch society?
46. Which society do you know better, your country of origin, the Netherlands, or other countries?
47. How has entrepreneurship helped to your inclusion in society?
48. What aspects of Dutch culture do you like?
49. What aspects of Dutch culture do you dislike?
50. What is your level of proficiency in Dutch language?
51. To what extent do you identify yourself as Iranian/Syrian, Dutch or other national identity?

F. Personal Ideology

52. How do you perceive the inclusion policies have been changed in the Netherlands?
53. How has the social, economic climate for entrepreneurs in the Netherlands evolved?
54. To what extent do you feel these changes negatively impact refugees?
55. How do you perceive the changes in structural opportunities over time?

G. Life Theme

56. Reflecting on your life story—its chapters, key moments, challenges, and your vision for the future—do you identify a central theme or message that ties it all together? What would you describe as the major theme of your life story? Please explain.



Research Participants

Table 2: Entrepreneurs with Iranian refugee background

#	Nickname	Gender	Enterprise	Year of asylum seeking
1	Fariba	Female	Beauty therapist	1992
2	Mona	Female	Dressmaker	1992
3	Minoo	Female	Beauty therapist	1995
4	Fattaneh	Female	Financial advisor	1987
5	Mahsa	Female	Restaurant manager	2000
6	Mehrban	Female	Foot reflexologist	1995
7	Shahin	Female	Beauty cosmetic saleswoman	1993
8	Jahan	Male	Driving instructor	1990
9	Kian	Male	Carpet merchant	1990
10	Farzad	Male	Dentist	1990
11	Reza	Male	Manager of an online supermarket	1995
12	Kamran	Male	Director of a company	1985
13	Milad	Male	Director of a music organization	1991
14	Farhad	Male	International merchant	1992

Table 3: Entrepreneurs with Syrian refugee background

#	Nickname	Gender	Enterprise	Year of asylum seeking
1	Asma	Female	Pancake mixture company	2016
2	Amal	Female	Arabic teaching institute	2015
3	Khadijah	Female	Arabic teaching institute	2017
4	Hadil	Female	Empowering women organization	2015
5	Leila	Female	Architect	2017
6	Jamila	Female	Syrian Catering	2015
7	Najma	Female	Teaching art techniques	2016
8	Bashir	Male	Construction Company	2015
9	Taim	Male	Digital Marketing	2015
10	Yousef	Male	Food and Beverage Services	2015
11	Salah	Male	Social-cultural Organization	2015
12	Ibrahem	Male	Painter	2015
13	Khalil	Male	E-bike charger start up	2015
14	Saeed	Male	Empowering youth refugee organization	2015
15	Majid	Male	Empowering business organizations	2015



Research Data Management

The importance of data management in maintaining the integrity of scientific research has become increasingly recognized. Therefore, Radboud University has developed rigorous guidelines for researchers regarding the storage of scientific data and the facilitation of study replication. This section outlines the measures taken to ensure the quality of this dissertation.

Data Collection

The data used in this research includes interview recordings, transcriptions, observation notes, and reflection memos. Using a voice recorder, a total of 29 interviews were conducted and recorded, in either Farsi or English, depending on the shared language of the participants and interviewer. Before each interview, I explained the purpose of the study, the reason for the interview, and the intended use of the data in scientific publications and presentations. Data collection was carried out with the informed consent of participants. For in-person interviews, participants were asked to sign a consent form. In online interviews, consent was obtained verbally. When participants explicitly stated "yes" to indicate their approval for recording, I started the recording. To ensure privacy protection, all sensitive data have been pseudonymized. Participants were also given the option to withdraw their consent to participate in the project within three months after the interview, allowing them to request the removal of their data from the study.

Data Processing

During the research process, raw data (interview recordings) from in-person interviews were initially stored on a secure recording device. These recordings were subsequently transferred to the campus network through the university laptop. Online interviews conducted via Zoom were automatically recorded and saved directly onto the university network. All interviews with the Iranian group were conducted in Farsi, recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim. For the Syrian group, interviews were conducted in English, recorded digitally, and transcribed verbatim using Otter.ai, a transcription software. For data analysis, I utilized ATLAS.ti.

Data Storage

All research data have been securely stored on a protected RU server. Safe and secure storage is ensured through the IT security and data protection protocols of the university. Upon completion of this PhD project, the research data will be securely archived for ten years to uphold scientific integrity. Long-term closed archiving of data is mandatory in the internal Radboud Data Repository, in

accordance with institutional policies. Due to ethical considerations, the data collected in this research will not be made publicly available. This decision is based on concerns regarding participant privacy, as the data contain personal information that could lead to individual identification. Additionally, the data consist of personal life narratives, making confidentiality a key priority.



English summary

This PhD dissertation studied how entrepreneurship plays a role in the inclusion of refugee entrepreneurs and how they navigate structural challenges and opportunities within the Dutch context through an intersectional lens. It adopted a contextualized comparative approach, drawing on interviews and life stories of 29 refugee-background entrepreneurs from two distinct groups: Iranian entrepreneurs who predominantly arrived in the Netherlands during the 1980s and 1990s and Syrian entrepreneurs who immigrated after 2015.

In Chapter 2, I developed a multidimensional conceptual model for refugee entrepreneurship. This framework combined the theory of mixed embeddedness with the concepts of intersectionality and agency. The conceptual framework offered a comprehensive lens to examine how entrepreneurship is informed by the diverse intersectional positions of refugees and how refugees exert their agency through these intersecting identities. The conceptual framework highlighted the role of intersectionality in shaping refugees' entrepreneurial motivations, resources, and strategies. The findings demonstrated that refugee entrepreneurship not only promotes economic autonomy within new societies but also serves as a pathway for refugees' agency. This model was the basis for Chapters 4 and 5.

In Chapter 3, I argued for moving beyond the traditional integration paradigm by adopting an inclusion-based approach. Focusing on entrepreneurs with Iranian refugee backgrounds, I studied how identity components such as ethnicity, age, class, gender, and religion shape their entrepreneurial activities, and how these intersecting identities play a role in their inclusion in the host society. I conceptualized inclusion through two dimensions: the sense of belonging and the felt acceptance. This study identified three distinct modes of belonging among Iranian refugee entrepreneurs: hybrid, cosmopolitan, and transnational belonging. The findings indicated that while participants perceived their entrepreneurial activities as enhancing societal acceptance, this did not always translate into a stronger sense of belonging in the Netherlands. Entrepreneurship generally fosters felt acceptance and contributes to broader inclusion within the host society.

In Chapter 4, I focused on Syrian refugee entrepreneurs and examined how they exercise agency through their entrepreneurial activities. This study explored how their translocational positionalities —shaped by experiences in both the country of origin and the receiving country— play a role in their entrepreneurial journeys. Syrian refugee entrepreneurs demonstrated agency through establishing (social)

entrepreneurships, professional flexibility, leveraging available resources, acquiring new resources, exploring niche markets, and redefining their identities. By integrating the fields of refugee entrepreneurship, intersectionality, translocational positionality, and agency, this chapter introduced a novel analytical lens and contributed to the existing literature. Furthermore, it provided insights for policymakers and practitioners, emphasizing the importance of an intersectional translocational positionality to fostering a more inclusive society.

In Chapter 5, I compared the experiences of Iranian and Syrian refugee entrepreneurs within the Dutch context. I analyzed the transformation of Dutch entrepreneurial policies and opportunity structures over the past four decades, examining their impact on these two groups. The chapter highlighted the institutional and individual challenges and opportunities faced by Iranian and Syrian refugee entrepreneurs in the Netherlands. Structurally, challenges such as insufficient economic support and societal biases, are contrasted with opportunities like equitable access to Dutch society and support from incubator organizations. At the individual level, hurdles such as language barriers are weighed against prospects such as volunteer work and entrepreneurial ambition.

Despite facing institutional barriers and limited opportunities, both groups demonstrate agency through entrepreneurship. They leverage intersectional and translocational positionalities—including age, gender, class, religion, and ethnicity—which shape their market access and ability to mobilize entrepreneurial resources, including human, social, financial, and cultural capital. By transforming their diverse backgrounds into assets, refugee entrepreneurs create pathways for inclusion in Dutch society. Key forms of their entrepreneurial agency include professional adaptability, resource mobilization, niche market identification, engagement in social enterprises, and identity redefinition.

Two key differences emerged in how the groups navigate structural barriers. First, Syrian entrepreneurs frequently engaged with incubation programs and utilized social media, while Iranian entrepreneurs primarily relied on community and family networks for financial support. This distinction reflects recent Dutch policy initiatives aimed at promoting refugee entrepreneurship through incubators. Second, social enterprises were notably more prevalent among Syrian refugee entrepreneurs, aligning with broader trends in the Netherlands toward volunteerism and social entrepreneurship.



In Chapter 6, I presented the concluding insights of this dissertation. I demonstrated that despite four decades of efforts to promote entrepreneurial inclusion, opportunities for refugee entrepreneurs remain unevenly distributed. Both Iranian and Syrian refugee entrepreneurs faced significant structural and institutional barriers, revealing that the Dutch context often falls short of providing adequate support or empowering them to establish and grow their businesses. Despite these challenges, both groups perceived entrepreneurship as a crucial pathway for societal inclusion. Refugee entrepreneurs viewed their entrepreneurial activities not only as a means of economic survival but also as a way to assert their agency, redefine their identities, and foster connections within Dutch society. Their diverse experiences underscore the complexity of the Dutch integration system and reveal the limitations of existing policies in fostering truly equitable opportunities.

This study calls for a more inclusive and intersectional approach to support refugee entrepreneurship. By recognizing the unique intersectional and translocational positionalities of refugee entrepreneurs—shaped by factors such as gender, age, ethnicity, religion, and class—policymakers and practitioners can design more targeted and effective support mechanisms. Such an approach would not only address the structural barriers faced by refugee entrepreneurs but also leverage their potential as agents of economic and social change. Ultimately, this dissertation underscored the need for systemic reforms to create a more equitable and inclusive environment for refugee entrepreneurship in the Netherlands.



Nederlandse samenvatting

In dit proefschrift is onderzocht hoe ondernemerschap een rol speelt bij de inclusie van vluchteling-ondernemers en hoe zij structurele uitdagingen en kansen binnen de Nederlandse context navigeren, bekeken vanuit een intersectionele lens. Het onderzoek is gebaseerd op een gecontextualiseerde vergelijkende benadering, waarbij de levensverhalen van 29 ondernemers met een vluchtelingenachtergrond zijn geanalyseerd. Deze ondernemers behoren tot twee groepen: Iraanse ondernemers die voornamelijk in de jaren tachtig en negentig naar Nederland kwamen, en Syrische ondernemers die na 2015 naar Nederland immigreerden.

In **hoofdstuk 2** is een multidimensionaal conceptueel model voor vluchtelingen-ondernemerschap ontwikkeld. Dit raamwerk combineert de theorie van mixed-embeddedness met de concepten van intersectionaliteit en agency (handelingsmogelijkheid). Het model biedt een uitgebreide lens om te onderzoeken hoe ondernemerschap wordt beïnvloed door de diverse intersectionele posities van vluchtelingen en hoe zij hun agency uitoefenen via deze identiteiten. Het benadrukt de rol van intersectionaliteit in het ontwikkelen en vormgeven van de motivaties, middelen en strategieën van ondernemers met een vluchtelingenachtergrond. De bevindingen tonen aan dat vluchtelingenondernemerschap niet alleen economische autonomie bevordert, maar ook mogelijkheden biedt voor het uitoefenen van agency door vluchtelingen in bredere zin. Dit model vormt de basis voor de hoofdstukken 4 en 5.

In **hoofdstuk 3** pleit ik voor een verschuiving van het traditionele integratie-paradigma naar een op inclusie gebaseerde benadering. Ik richt me op Iraanse vluchteling-ondernemers en onderzoek hoe identiteitscomponenten zoals etniciteit, leeftijd, klasse, geslacht en religie hun ondernemersactiviteiten vormgeven. Inclusie wordt geconceptualiseerd aan de hand van twee dimensies: de eigen beleving van “erbij te horen” en de ervaren acceptatie door anderen. Het onderzoek identificeert drie manieren van “erbij horen”, oftewel “belonging” onder Iraanse ondernemers: een hybride, kosmopolitische en transnationale manier inzake “erbij horen”. Hoewel de geïnterviewden hun ondernemersactiviteiten als bevorderlijk voor maatschappelijke acceptatie zien, vertaalt dit zich niet altijd in een sterker gevoel er echt bij te horen in Nederland.

In **hoofdstuk 4** richt ik me op Syrische vluchteling-ondernemers en onderzoek ik hoe zij agency uitoefenen via hun ondernemersactiviteiten. Hierbij is gekeken naar hun translocale positionaliteit, gevormd door ervaringen in zowel het land van

herkomst als het ontvangende land. Syrische ondernemers tonen agency door het opzetten van (sociaal) ondernemerschap, professionele flexibiliteit, het benutten van beschikbare middelen, het verkennen van nichemarkten en het herdefiniëren van hun identiteit als vluchtelingenondernemer of alleen ondernemer. Dit hoofdstuk introduceert een nieuwe analytische lens en biedt inzichten voor beleidsmakers en praktijkmensen, waarbij het belang van intersectionele en translocale positionaliteit voor inclusie is benadrukt.

In **hoofdstuk 5** vergelijk ik de ervaringen van Iraanse en Syrische vluchteling-ondernemers binnen de Nederlandse context. Ik analyseer de transformatie van het Nederlandse ondernemersbeleid en de kansenstructuren in de afgelopen vier decennia. Structurele uitdagingen zoals onvoldoende economische steun en maatschappelijke vooroordelen worden afgezet tegen kansen zoals gelijke toegang tot de sociale rechten en de steun van incubatororganisaties. Op individueel niveau worden hindernissen zoals taalbarrières afgewogen tegen vooruitzichten zoals vrijwilligerswerk en ondernemersambities. Ondanks institutionele barrières tonen beide groepen agency middels ondernemerschap, waarbij zij gebruik maken van intersectionele en translocale positionaliteit.

Twee belangrijke verschillen zijn naar voren gekomen: Syrische ondernemers nemen vaker deel aan incubatieprogramma's en maken regelmatig gebruik van sociale media, terwijl Iraanse ondernemers vooral vertrouwen op gemeenschaps- en familienetwerken. Daarnaast komen sociale ondernemingen vaker voor onder Syrische ondernemers, wat aansluit bij bredere huidige trends in Nederland.

In **hoofdstuk 6** geef ik de concluderende inzichten van dit proefschrift. Ondanks vier decennia van inspanningen om ondernemerschap te bevorderen, blijven de kansen voor vluchteling-ondernemers ongelijk verdeeld. Zowel Iraanse als Syrische ondernemers worden geconfronteerd met aanzienlijke structurele en institutionele belemmeringen, wat aantoont dat de Nederlandse context vaak tekortschiet in het bieden van adequate ondersteuning voor deze groepen ondernemers. Toch zien beide groepen ondernemerschap als een belangrijke weg naar maatschappelijke integratie. Hun ervaringen onderstrepen de complexiteit van het Nederlandse integratiesysteem en de beperkingen van het bestaande beleid in het bevorderen van echt gelijke kansen.

Dit onderzoek roept tenslotte op tot een meer inclusieve en intersectionele aanpak om ondernemerschap van vluchtelingen te ondersteunen. Door de unieke intersectionele en translocale positioneringen van vluchteling-ondernemers te



erkennen, kunnen beleidsmakers en praktijkmensen gerichtere en effectievere ondersteuningsmechanismen ontwerpen. Een dergelijke aanpak zou niet alleen de structurele barrières aanpakken waar vluchtelingenondernemers mee te maken hebben, maar ook hun potentieel benutten als actoren van economische en sociale verandering. Uiteindelijk onderstreept dit proefschrift de noodzaak van systemische hervormingen om een rechtvaardigere en inclusievere omgeving te creëren voor vluchtelingenondernemerschap in Nederland.



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To my family, words cannot express how much your support has meant to me throughout my life. **Maman**, you have been my role model, a woman of resilience, compassion, and determination. From founding a non-profit school that welcomed immigrant children excluded from Iran's public education system when I was a teenager, to tirelessly caring for Baba and helping him walk again after his severe stroke, you have shown me how to face life's challenges with grace and strength. **Baba**, your unwavering love and countless sacrifices have profoundly shaped the person I am today. You taught me adaptability and respect for diversity. Your perseverance this past year, fighting to recover and regain your independence, has been truly inspiring.



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به خانواده‌ام، هیچ واژه‌ای نمی‌تواند عمق تأثیر حمایت شما را در طول زندگی‌ام بیان کند. **مامان**، تو الگوی من بوده‌ای؛ زنی سرشار از استقامت، مهربانی و اراده. از زمانی که در نوجوانی‌ام مدرسه‌ای غیرانتفاعی تأسیس کردی که پذیرای کودکان مهاجری بود که از تحصیل در مدارس دولتی ایران محروم بودند، تا روزهایی که بی‌وقفه از بابا مراقبت کردی و پس از سخته‌شدیدش دوباره او را به راه رفتن بازگرداندی، همیشه به من نشان دادی که چگونه باید با قدرت و متانت با چالش‌های زندگی روبه‌رو شد. **بابا**، عشق بی‌قید و شرط و فداکاری‌های بی‌شمارت شخصیت امروز مرا شکل داده است. تو به من سازگاری و احترام به تنوع را آموختی. پشتکار تو در سال گذشته، در مسیر بهبودی و بازیابی استقلال، برایم الهام‌بخش بوده است.

محمد، برادر بزرگ‌تر و نخستین راهنمایم، تو دریچه فلسفه، ادبیات و تفکر انتقادی را به رویم گشودی. جمله‌ات که می‌گفتی «هرگز اجازه نده دیگران به جای تو تصمیم بگیرند» همچنان چراغ راه من است. **رضوان**، که برای من مانند یک خواهری، من قدرت و پشتکار تو را تحسین می‌کنم. تعادل برقرار کردن بین مسئولیت مادری، مهاجرت و ادامه تحصیل در مقطع عالی کار کوچکی نیست، اما تو همه را با وقار و توانمندی مدیریت می‌کنی. **پارسا**، خواهرزاده عزیزم، لحظه‌ای که برای اولین بار در بیمارستان در آغوش گرفتم یکی از عمیق‌ترین لحظات زندگی‌ام بود. تو شادی قلب منی و می‌دانم آینده‌ای درخشان در انتظارت است. **محمد**، **رضوان** و **پارسا**، مهاجرت شما به هلند در سال گذشته برایم شادی و صفاپذیری به همراه داشت و نزدیک‌تر بودن شما به من، موهبتی بزرگ است.

ساغر، خواهر کوچک و صمیمی‌ترین دوستم، گفت‌وگوهای بی‌پایانمان مرا سرشار از انرژی و امید می‌کند. تو در سخت‌ترین روزها بزرگ‌ترین حامی من بوده‌ای و با راهنمایی‌های خردمندانه‌ات، اغلب حس کرده‌ام که تو خواهر بزرگ‌تر من هستی. پیوند عمیق ما با وجود سال‌ها فاصله فیزیکی همچنان استوار مانده است. **هادی**، همیشه قدردان حضورت در کنار خواهرم و خانواده‌مان هستم، به‌ویژه برای نجات جان بابا زمانی که من در ایران نبودم. تو واقعاً برایم همچون یک برادر هستی و حضورت مایه دلگرمی است.

About the Author

Samaneh Khademi is a sociologist and researcher specializing in refugee entrepreneurship, intersectionality, and social inclusion. Born in 1982 in Mashhad, Iran, she obtained her B.A. in Social Sciences from Ferdowsi University of Mashhad in 2005. She continued her studies at Allameh Tabataba'i University in Tehran, completing an M.A. in Sociology (2005–2009) with a thesis on the intersection of gender and religiosity in Iran. From 2009 to 2016, Samaneh served as a university lecturer at Payam Noor University and the Applied Scientific University in Mashhad, teaching a range of courses, including Introductory Sociology, Cultural Studies, Ethnology, Mass Media Sociology, and Women in Culture Studies. Her research during this period focused on the sociology of religion, women's studies, feminism, gender and corruption, and organizational dynamics.

In 2018, she joined Radboud University in the Netherlands as a guest scholar in the Department of Social Sciences, conducting research on religiosity among Iranian immigrants. She later began her PhD in Business Administration at Radboud (2019–2025), focusing on how Iranian and Syrian refugee entrepreneurs navigate structural barriers and inclusion in the Netherlands through an intersectional lens. Alongside her research, Samaneh is dedicated to academic teaching and mentorship. From 2020 to 2022, she supervised Master's theses in Innovation and Entrepreneurship, and Strategic Human Resource Leadership. Between 2021 and 2025, she served as a guest lecturer in the course *Entrepreneurship from a Socio-Cultural Perspective*, under the supervision of Dr. Caroline Essers, at the Nijmegen School of Management. Since February 2025, she has expanded her research to explore gender and leadership challenges in academia.

Her scholarly work has been published in leading academic journals such as the *Journal of Refugee Studies* and the *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research*, and she has presented her findings at international conferences. Her research contributes to critical debates on refugee entrepreneurship, gender equity, and inclusive societies.



Publications

Publications Related to Refugee Entrepreneurship

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