

“Girls are like Glass”: Situated Knowledges of Syrian Refugee Women on Datafication and Transparency

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Girls are like glass. They are easy to break or scratch, distorting their glazy nature. This metaphor about women in our society is something you hear everywhere in Syria: Girls are like glass! Behind and before this metaphor stand many carefully and purposefully untold stories, because telling them would mean “breaking the glass.” [Mrs. B in Araa Al Jaramani]

The quote emerged during a three-day workshop, in which Mrs. B participated, on the importance of writing as a tool to tell human stories that Araa Al Jaramani, the first author of this chapter, organized for a women's group. While at first Mrs. B seemed to have no interest in the ongoing discussion, she suddenly came up with this remarkable statement. We used it as an epigraph because it encapsulates many of the discussions we tackle in this chapter on women's voice and position, issues of datafication and transparency, and the role of narrative in creating space for alternative subjectivities and identities in the condition of migration and integration.

In 2013, Araa Al Jaramani, the first author of this chapter, fled the war in Syria and accidentally ended up in the Netherlands after the human traffickers she paid to bring her to Sweden did not keep their promises. After arrival, Araa officially requested asylum and started her process with the Dutch Immigration and Naturalization Service (Immigratie- en Naturalisatiedienst, IND). Throughout the process, Araa was struck by its bureaucratic nature, the sometimes-amateurish conduct of the interviewers and interpreters, and the gender-insensitive approach to the very particular experiences of refugee women. After she was granted her refugee status, she started and led an organization to support Syrian women throughout their asylum-seeking and integration processes; she heard similar stories from these women being frustrated with their treatment by the IND. When given the opportunity during a postdoc project on Syrian refugee women as data subjects that she carried out at Utrecht University, Araa started to document her own experiences and the stories other women told her. In addition, together with Sandra Ponzanesi

and Gerwin van Schie, co-authors of this chapter, she took another critical look at the data in the file that the IND collected about her, by studying the copy which was given to her during the asylum procedure. The copy of this file is given to each asylum seeker to provide a sense of transparency in the otherwise daunting and stressful time of awaiting the decision on whether or not they will be granted permission to stay. While this procedure does give any asylum seeker the opportunity to read this file and suggest corrections, in this chapter we will critically question which of the parties involved actually benefits from this “transparency,” since, for a refugee fleeing from war, nothing is more opaque than the bureaucratic procedures of a foreign (from their perspective) country’s agency whose mission it is to “limit and control refugee flows to Europe” (Ministry of General Affairs 2016, translation by authors).

Yet transparency is an often-heard mantra in a society that increasingly relies on data and algorithmic processes in its bureaucratic organizations (Lathrop and Ruma 2010; Hansen and Flyverbom 2015; Douglas and Meijer 2016). Organizations are increasingly becoming aware that they need to open up to consumers and citizens about their often-hidden digital processes, since many aspects of business and governance are becoming subject to some form of datafication (van Es and Schäfer 2017). Datafication is understood here as the principle that underpins the transformation of all available information, often about the conduct and behavior of people, into quantifiable units, making them available for access, monitoring, analysis, and prediction (Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier 2013; van Dijck 2014). In line with this larger societal trend, the IND too has implemented several systems that rely on processes of datafication in their bureaucratic practice. However, as we will show, operational transparency with regard to forced migrants in a situation of limbo, as neither not-yet-citizens nor never-citizens, seems to be rather one-directional as it mainly aids the bureaucratic and legal needs of the IND rather than the emotional and humanitarian needs of asylum seekers.

Recent research on data processes employed in forced migration policies has mainly focused on data practices by the European Union in order to protect “Fortress Europe” (Dijstelbloem and Meijer 2011; Leurs and Smets 2018), or use by Syrian refugees themselves of social media and the telephone (Sánchez-Querubín and Rogers 2018; Gillespie, Osseiran, and Cheesman 2018). Media and social research on immigration practices has largely concentrated on inequality and the representation of refugees in society (Schinkel 2013; Castles, Haas, and Miller 2013; Ticktin 2006), in policy-making (Rath 2001; van der Haar and Yanow 2011; Bakker, Cheung, and Phillimore 2016), and in the process of integration (De Leeuw, and van Wichelen 2014; Boersma and Schinkel 2015). Furthermore, recent research on transparency in the context of the IND has focused on the discretionary powers of civil servants making decisions about asylum requests (Severijns 2019), and on the “transparency” of the IND organization with regard to Dutch society

and lawmakers (De Leeuw, Geerdink, and Smits 2019). Even the perspectives of volunteers working in Dutch asylum-seeker centers are heard in debates about the bureaucracy involved in processes of forced migration (Larruina and Ghorashi 2016). Yet the voice of the forced migrant seems to be largely missing in discourses on data practices in government bureaucracy.

Recent research that does include the perspective of the forced migrant usually deals with the period after permission to stay has either been granted or denied. It often details the difficulties of starting a new life in a foreign country (van Heelsum 2017; Huizinga and van Hoven 2018) or the precariousness of being denied citizenship (Kalir 2017; Boomgaard 2017). Instead, in this chapter, we intend to shed light on the mundane and often taken-for-granted nature of bureaucracy. While this part of the migration process might, from the perspective of the policy-maker, be understood as a moment in which people merely go through the necessary motions in order to collect "objective" information on the basis of which a decision can be made, for forced migrants these moments are very personal and stressful, and feel very uncertain, regardless of the intended transparency. Here, we aim to "let the subaltern speak" (Spivak 1988) and engage with the experiences of Syrian refugee women through metaphors such as "glass," "transparency," and "opacity." By highlighting not so much the intentions of the IND, but rather how various policies are turned into practice, we subscribe to social research interested in so-called "street level bureaucracies" (Lipsky 2010). More specifically, rather than investigating the experiences of various street-level bureaucrats, such as police officers (see for example Çankaya 2012), judges (Prescott 2009), or asylum officers (Darrow 2015; Dahlvik 2018), our research is aligned with studies that take the experiences of various marginalized identities, such as welfare recipients (Hansen, Lundberg, and Syltevik 2018), LGBT people (Nisar 2020), or refugees (Bhatia 2020), as the starting point for an investigation of a particular bureaucratic infrastructure. By letting the subjects speak rather than the data itself, we adhere to a feminist and postcolonial ethics of care, and aim to relate data practices of the IND to "human meaning-making, context-specificity, dependencies and temptations, as well as benefits and harm" (Leurs 2017, 150). In doing so, we will highlight how the collection of information by IND is anything but mundane, and instead a scary, and opaque process that offers very little opportunity for asylum seekers to express themselves in ways they desire.

The basis of this mixed-methods study of the information and transparency practices of the IND will be Araa's own IND file, her autoethnographic work, and her ethnographic work with four other Syrian refugee women. This means that this chapter will account for multiple voices and be narrated at times in the first person, namely with Araa speaking directly to account for her autoethnography, the voices of the four other Syrian women interviewed, as well as the scholarly contribution of Sandra Ponzanese and Gerwin van Schie, co-authors of this piece. To remain nar-

ratively close to Araa's actual experiences and conversations, we will consistently write these parts from the first-person perspective, similar to the vignette at the start of this introduction. The personal IND file of each of the individual women functioned as the starting point for the interviews. These files consist of the following types of data: 1) a print-out of several database checks that the IND routinely does to find out if people are registered as criminals in the Netherlands or the EU, or have previously requested asylum in another EU state; 2) the transcripts of the interviews with the IND; and 3) the documentary evidence submitted by the asylum seeker, such as passports, birth certificates, newspaper clippings, and other documents that prove they have been Syrian citizens and were in danger of persecution.

Situated Knowledges and Autoethnography

This chapter combines the expertise of scholars working on critical data studies, gender, and migration studies in order to position the research done on Syrian refugee women in their interaction with the IND system within a postcolonial ethics of care, through which we allow the voices of the respondents to emerge in their own right. Yet the positions of mediator, interpreter, and facilitator that Araa fulfilled with, for, and among the respondents exemplify the important function of what Spivak has defined as the "native informant." In ethnography, Spivak points out, the native informant "is a blank" deprived of autobiography, but who enables the inscription of the Other by the West. The major problem with the history of post-Enlightenment theory lies in its own autobiography: it has used the figure of the native informant to mask "subjective structures" as "objective truth." Second, in doing so, it has uncritically assumed as unproblematic the subjectivity of the Other who consolidates the knowing Western subject and provides him or her with indigenous information. Spivak's observations also show that behind the figure of the native informant lie the questions of knowledge, power, and representation, the questions that still dominate current discussions on how to theorize and empower the Other without falling into the pitfalls of essentialism and binary opposition (Spivak 1999). For that reason, we will refer to feminist standpoint theory through which we take women's lived experiences, particularly experiences of caring and work, as the starting point for scientific inquiry. Feminist standpoint theorists, drawing on the work of scholars such as Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding, and Patricia Hill Collins, make three principal claims: (1) knowledge is socially situated; (2) marginalized groups are socially situated in ways that make it more possible for them to be aware of things and ask questions than it is for the non-marginalized; (3) research, particularly that focused on power relations, should begin with

the lives of the marginalized (Harding 2008, 2009; Haraway 1991; Hill Collins 1997; Bracke and Bellacasa 2007).

Central to all these standpoint theories are feminist analyses and critiques of relations between material experience, power, and epistemology, and of the effects of power relations on the production of knowledge. Haraway's notion of situated knowledge is related, but also slightly different from, that of standpoint theory. It problematizes both subject and object, but instead of granting a privileged position to those at the margins, the subjugated knowers, it prefers to attribute privilege to partiality. This epistemological shift underscores the fact that "situated knowledge" is more dynamic and hybrid than other epistemologies that gives full knowability to the position of the subject. These situated knowledges involve "mobile positioning" (Haraway 1991, 192). Subjectivity is instead performed in and through the materiality of knowledge and practice of many kinds (Butler 1990, 1–34). Haraway says that situated knowledges require thinking of the world in terms of the "apparatus of bodily production." The world cannot be reduced to a mere resource if subject and object are deeply interconnected. Bodies as objects of knowledge in the world should be thought of as "material-semiotic generative nodes," whose "boundaries materialize in social interaction" (Haraway 1991, 201). The move to grant agency to material objects places the epistemology of situated knowledges at the center of scholarship in science and technology studies (Callon 1986; Latour 1987).

In light of this approach, it was not necessary for the researchers to have access to the personal information of the research subjects involved with this study as they themselves were in control of what they wanted to share. The only file that we, the co-authors of this chapter, looked into was Araa's file. In what follows we will critically examine the data practices of the IND's asylum procedure and juxtapose these practices with the stories of Araa and four other Syrian refugee women who have been through this process in order to problematize the concept of transparency and highlight its gendered implications. Therefore, we foreground an ethnographic approach through which the experiences of the Syrian women emerge, in alliance and conflict with their memories, "everyday geographies of belonging" (Huizinga and van Hoven 2018; van Liempt and Starling 2020), "politics of location" (Kirby 2015) and "media strategies" (Udwan, Leurs, and Alencar 2020). As Araa said herself, she felt very alienated by the IND process and this has motivated her need to analyze and put into context her experience along with that of many other women like her in order to make sense of the process. We therefore propose to analyze below the ethnographic method we used, along with the critical approach to data studies, which jointly reveal the opacity and shortcomings of the immigration system.

Analyzing the women's files and paying attention to their experiences during their investigation gives us an insight into how the algorithmic system has been used to process their asylum files. At the time the women were not well or sufficiently informed about the procedure and the implications of their responses. This

put them in a subaltern position, based on misunderstanding and weaker communication skills, often mediated by an imperfect interpreter.

I didn't know that I had the right to request an interpreter or officer of a specific gender, and I did not suffer from the gender of the interpreter, but I suffered from the interpreter's lack of knowledge of politics and the Syrian dialect, so I asked them to change the interpreter more than once because I was aware that the interpreter does not know the difference between the Syrian Communist Party and the Communist Party and the Communist Labor Party, so I was hearing the officer's questions that were different from what I expected or they were confusing, so I had to explain the differences between the parties and go through some detail to explain to the interpreter, and that was a new task I had to take on, which is to explain things to the interpreter because his information and translation are not sufficient, as he is not an expert on Syrian political issues. [Samira]

By analyzing the data that is shared and combining it with the stories of Syrian women who are in or have been through the IND's decision-making process, we produce situated knowledges (Haraway 1988; Harding 1991) centered on the experiences of the women as data subjects. The project has focused on Syrian *women* because research has shown significant differences in the experiences of women and men in the process of awaiting a decision (Nolin 2017). This is partly due to the continuation of power inequalities between genders in the countries of origin, which means that women often take care of the children and/or are expected to follow the commands of the men. Another issue is the vulnerable position of women staying in refugee centers (Spijkerboer 2017). By focusing on the experiences and stories of the women themselves, this chapter aims to emphasize the agency of individual research subjects in deciding what to share and what not to share, both with the IND and with the researcher.

The stories included in this chapter show the complicated process of asylum applications, marked by many circumstances that these women take with themselves from their home, during their journey, and upon their arrival in the Netherlands. The five women include Araa, already introduced above and the co-author of this chapter. She is 45 years old, married and has three children. She holds a PhD from the University of Damascus, Syria, obtained in 2012. In 2013, because of the war in Syria, she fled to the Netherlands and got her status permit. She was the founder and director for many years of the Syrian Women Foundation SVNL, which has allowed her to be of support to many Syrian women newly arriving in the Netherlands or struggling to find their balance in the new society. This also allowed her to gain access to the other women interviewed and win their trust.

The other women are: Laila Abdel, Lana Mustafa, Samira Sayed, and Salma Ezz El-Din.¹ Laila Abdel is a 48-year-old Syrian refugee. She is a graduate of the Faculty of Physical Education at the University of Damascus. She is a divorced woman who has been living with her daughter in the Netherlands for five years. She has two other children in Syria who live with their father. Lana Mustafa, 27 years of age, is a Syrian refugee who has been living in The Netherlands for five years. She has studied at the economics institute in Syria and came to the Netherlands to study computer sciences. She is married and has one child. She came to the Netherlands with her two-year-old daughter, and then used the right (family reunification), which allows her to bring her husband to the country of asylum. Samira Sayed is a 63-year-old Syrian refugee, who has lived in the Netherlands for six years. She is married with one son, who is now 38 years old. She has a BA in Arabic from the University of Aleppo in Syria. Salma Ezz El-Din is a 35-year-old Syrian/Palestinian refugee. She is a graduate of the Institute of Cooking and Nutrition, married with four children. She has been living in the Netherlands for four and a half years. All the women respondents have a good level of education, are highly literate and were competent in navigating bureaucratic and administrative hurdles back in their home country. Nonetheless, their class and educational background did not equip them for the intricacy and opacity of the Dutch immigration system and datafication process. We can expect, therefore, that this disadvantage and power imbalance would only be heightened and magnified for women with a lower educational background.

Entering the System: Becoming an Asylum Seeker

When I went through the smuggling experience and got to know smugglers working between Turkey and Europe, I was offered several options for being smuggled. I chose the most expensive price, because I was afraid of sexual blackmail and other forms of extortion. I travelled to the Netherlands hidden in a truck, experiencing all the stages any refugee has to pass through to reach Europe. The moment you stand up in front of the asylum reception center to define yourself as a refugee coming from a country at war is still a vivid memory. Here, I experienced the moment that I turned from a citizen belonging to a country to a refugee in a new country. The moment I registered in the Dutch asylum system as a refugee, I experienced the Cartesian dualism of the ontological division between the "I" as a body, and the "I" as data subject. I felt strange in the Dutch system that understood me as a criminal or dangerous newcomer. The feeling that you are totally disregarded as a human being generated a reaction in me that motivated me to

1 These names are all pseudonyms at the request of the women concerned.

do this research, and share my experiences and those of other women refugees who underwent the same procedure. [Araa Al Jaramani]

The moment the refugee women knocked on the door at the central asylum seekers' shelter (*Centraal Orgaan opvang Asielzoekers*, from now on COA) in Ter Apel, the Netherlands, and filed their request for asylum, many processes, both human and computational, were started. The first page of Araa's IND file lists several of the computational checks under the abbreviations OPS, HKS, N/SIS, BVV, Eurodac and Havank (see figures 1 and 2, summary in Table 1). These abbreviations do not mean anything to the uninformed, let alone newly arrived forced migrants fleeing from a war. They did not get any explanation or interpretation that would help them understand these acronyms and coding. These acronyms are not even explained in the margin of their investigation documents. While Samira and Salma did not notice the abbreviations on their file, Lana did not dare to ask the officer about it:

Maybe if I were now under investigation I would have asked, but at that time I would not have dared to ask about its meaning. Knowing the meanings of these abbreviations will be better for me in that I will get to know the results or small details of what the investigators have discovered, as knowing that the abbreviations say that I am not involved in crimes in the European Union or in Syria during the war – I know that I am not guilty because I know myself, but it would have been good to know that the abbreviations on my papers mean that I am innocent. That they know who I am, instead of continuing investigations and me not being sure of what is happening around me, and always striving to absolve myself and prove that I am only a woman fleeing from war, who wants to protect her child from war. [Lana]

There was much apprehension about daring to ask questions, accompanied by the uncomfortable environment. Uninformed women feel embarrassed about their ignorance of these abbreviations and prefer not to ask. Samira described herself as a fool:

I read the codes now and I see that I was a fool, and I see that there was no transparency, which is really annoying. I did not notice these symbols at the time so I did not ask about them. [Samira]

The framework of the IND data system relies on the Accountability Guidelines, which depend on the algorithmic system and which are applicable when asylum seekers start the process of applying for asylum status. The key questions are: first, whether the IND data system classifies Syrian refugee women according to the same cultural standards, irrespective of their gender or background, social, cultural and personal; secondly, whether the data system recognizes that refugees do not fully comprehend Dutch bureaucratic processes and that there is a gap in knowl-

edge and understanding between Syrians and the Dutch system. This gap leads us to question not only the authority and correctness of the IND system that governs the interviews with these women, but also to wonder whether Syrian refugee women are entirely aware of their rights and power to object during the IND interviews.

Figure 1: First page of Araa's asylum request file



Politie
Groningen

Postadres Postbus 107
 9400AC ASSEN

Regio Groningen
Korpsonderdeel 1 Unit Vreemdelingenpolitie
Behandeld door ██████████
Telefoon 085 - 167 16 55
Fax 085 - 167 16 29
V-nummer / Zaak ██████████ - 01/08/2013
Datum 01/08/2013
Onderwerp HV23 Controle personalia in systemen en registers
 Controle personalia in systemen en registers

De personalia van hieronder genoemde vreemdelinge

Achternaam : al Jaramani
Voorna(a)m(en) : Ara
Geboortedatum : 07/07/1975
Geboorteplaats : Al-Mardj
Geboorteland : Libië
Nationaliteit(en) : Syrische
Geslacht : vrouwelijk

werden door de korpschef van het regionaal politiekorps Groningen gecontroleerd in de volgende systemen/registers.

| Stelsel/register | Datum/tijdstip controle |
|------------------|-------------------------|
| N-SIS | 01/08/2013 te 16:03 uur |
| OPS | 01/08/2013 te 16:03 uur |
| HKS | 01/08/2013 te 16:03 uur |

Uitslag controle:

De personalia van betrokkene komen niet voor in N-SIS.

De personalia van betrokkene komen niet voor in OPS.

De personalia van betrokkene komen niet voor in HKS.

Bijzonderheden externe systemen:

Plaats: Ter Apel Datum: 01/08/2013

De korpschef van regionaal politiekorps Groningen, namens deze, de buitengewoon opsporingsambtenaar, **Politie** **Nord Nederland** **Unit Vreemdelingenpolitie**

V.nr. ██████████ Pagina 1 van 2

Source: image from private documentation

Figure 2: Second page of Araa's asylum request file

V-nummer: [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Onderwerp: Totaal overzicht
 Ter zake: Aanvraag langdurig verblijf

Onderstaande gegevens zijn in het kader van de vaststelling van de identiteit vastgelegd:

| | |
|---|--|
| Achternaam: Jaramani | Incidentnummer: [REDACTED] |
| Voorvoegsel: AI | Gebruiker: GRN07176 |
| Voornamen: Ara | PL-code: PL0100 |
| | Reden opname: aanvraag langdurig verblijf |
| Geslacht: Vrouwelijk | BVW: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| Geboortedatum: 19750707 Datum volledig: Geen bijzonderheden | Havank: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| Geboorteplaats: Damascus | Eurodac: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| Geboorteland: Syrie | Dacty check |
| Nationaliteit: Syrische | Bron: Eigen verklaring |
| Woonplaatsbuitenland: Land: | Document Nummer |
| Extra informatie: | |

In het BVV - register zijn de volgende gegevens aangetroffen :

| | |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Achternaam: | |
| Voorvoegsel: | |
| Voornamen: | |
| Geslacht: | |
| Geboortedatum: | |
| Geboorteplaats: | |
| Geboorteland: | |
| Nationaliteit: | |
| Woonplaatsbuitenland: | Laatste mutatie datum |
| Land: | Bron |
| Restgroep HAVANK: Niet getroffen | |

In Havank zijn de volgende gegevens aangetroffen:

| | |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Achternaam | Havank biometrie nr. |
| Voornamen | Havank incident nr. [REDACTED] |
| Geslacht | Reden opname |
| Geboortedatum | Datum opname |
| Geboorteplaats | Plaats opname |
| Geboorteland | Naam opniemer |
| Nationaliteit | Datum aanvr./strdh. |
| Fotonummer | Plaats aanvr./strdh. |
| Referentie | Eigen verklaring |
| Extra informatie: [REDACTED] | Document |
| UNKNOWN | Meerdere incidenten |

| | |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Eurodac | Eurodacnummer: [REDACTED] |
| Status: Niet geïdentificeerd | |

Source: image from private documentation

Table 1: List of different database checks performed as first step of an asylum request

| System Abbrev. | Full name | Function |
|----------------|---|---|
| N-SIS | Schengen Information System | European system circulating "alerts about wanted or missing people and objects such as stolen vehicles and documents." ² |
| OPS | Opsporingssysteem (Detection/Tracking System) | National Database of missing persons, missing vehicles, and crime suspects |
| HKS | Herkenningsdienststelsysteem (Recognition Service system) | Outdated and controversial National Database of crime suspects and unsolved crimes ³ |
| BVV | Basisvoorziening Vreemdelingen (Basic Provision for Migrants) | Database of personal information of people who are involved in any process of migration to the Netherlands ⁴ |
| Havank | Het Automatisch Vinger Afdrukkensysteem Nederlandse Kollektie (Automatic Fingerprint System – Dutch Collection) | Dactyloscopic database of Dutch delinquents and former delinquents |
| Eurodac | European Dactyloscopy | European anonymous dactyloscopic database of people who have requested asylum in the European Union |

As it turns out, refusing to cooperate in proving information can result in an immediate denial of the asylum request. One horrifying detail of the Dutch asylum law states that both “refusing to provide fingerprints” and “making the process of finger printing impossible by mutilating one’s finger tips on purpose” may be considered grounds for the verdict of “insufficient cooperation” (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties 2021, translation by authors). Laws such as these show the large power imbalance playing out in day-to-day asylum procedures. While forced migrants routinely have to prove that they are in need of care and are, in fact, not criminals, the “right to remain silent” or any other right pertaining to the refusal to provide information does not apply. Even when the IND’s need for information is in conflict with the personal beliefs or culture of a person requesting asylum, there is little room to deviate from protocol:

I remember that while taking fingerprints, especially the photo of the face, there were difficulties for women because the woman had to reveal her ears and raise part of her hijab to make her forehead visible, and therefore pictures of the women

were taken that did not respect their beliefs, and the women were terrified that they had to lift their veil, even partially. The women in the photos place were worried that their husbands and families might not believe they had to show their ears and part of their head in the pictures. [Lana]

Many of the IND regulations and criteria are not transparent and accessible to the refugees, who are at a disadvantage in understanding the implications of their choices, or consenting to the various steps in the procedure. Confusion about technicalities, coding, and acronyms used go together with the hazard of what gets lost in translation and the sensitive nature of intercultural communication that often leads to these women feeling intimidated, subalternized, and agreeing to choices and ticking boxes that they barely understand. But their desire and need to obtain asylum make them comply with any requests, even answering personal, invasive questions and showing compliance with a criminalizing line of questioning:

The employee was scary, even if he was not wearing military clothing; he was looking clearly and intentionally into my eyes and observing the extent of my sincerity in the statements. And him opening my Facebook page and finding out that I was lying drove me to feel nervous so I was always saying that I am a refugee and not a suspect and that when I lied about the fact that I arrived in the Netherlands through Schiphol Airport, it was only to avoid separating me from my child who arrived 21 days before me and that according to Dublin law she is entitled to remain in Netherlands but I must stay in Belgium. I did not lie to hide a crime, but to ensure that I remain with my daughter. The employee's style of interrogating me and confirming the story of my escape from Syria made me feel that I was under investigation, not in an interview. [Laila]

There is, in addition, another crucial factor: the women often do not have knowledge or understanding of the new ways of automated computation that make people/refugees part of algorithmic systems that sort, classify, and process refugees – through biometrics and other systems of datafication. This makes them particularly vulnerable not only to the manipulation and breaching of their data (Madianou 2019) but also to having to consent to these procedures, for fear of rejection, without being fully informed, accountable, and responsible for the forms of datafication undertaken. In this sense there is not only a total lack of transparency dictated by the asymmetric relationship of power, but also a lack of technological expertise and awareness.

I didn't know I had the right to reject it; perhaps I was ignorant of its importance, too. But now that I know the concept of privacy, and that I have the right to refuse having my information shared and that research parties may take some of my information and share it in a way that offends me, for example, now I know that if I am subject to such investigations, I will ask the investigator to explain to me

who are these authorities and then I would search for the identity, credibility, and conformity of these transparency requirements and the reason why they want my personal information. [Samira]

The striking point is that during the investigation not one of our interviewees, including Araa, objected to their information being shared with other stakeholders, and no one asked about the nature of those stakeholders. On the contrary, when we read and discussed the IND investigation documents together, they emphasized many times how they assumed that they had no choice or say in the way the procedure was conducted. They assumed that they could not choose to refuse or object to the IND officer's request because this could lead to their status being rejected.

If I look back to the period of my investigations by the IND, I am fully aware that I couldn't choose to refuse the IND's request to have my fingerprints or information, because at that time I thought that would affect my asylum application results. What people do not know is that the person who applies for an asylum application feels weak and that he/she cannot refuse any request from the authorities to which he/she has applied for asylum, for fear that his/her application would be rejected. [Lana]

However, the women managed also to find a form of agency and development during the procedure which allowed them to evaluate more carefully the options and opportunities ahead. We will discuss these in more detail in the next section.

Being Processed: The Interviews

Violation is one of the characteristic features of many asylum seekers' stories. That includes Laila and Lana, who both suffered violence and sexual abuse on their trip to Europe, and had to live in camps with strangers, while their restricted financial condition allowed smugglers to sexually blackmail them. They also have something else in common, which is their need to protect and defend their daughters as well as themselves. Though they are both asylum seekers now, Laila comes from a background as an activist, as she was a political prisoner under Assad's regime. Therefore, their memories about the violation they faced are different and this impacted their response to the IND investigator, who was not fully informed of the abuses they suffered before coming to the Netherlands. Laila told the investigators everything she felt when the Syrian intelligence agents forced her to be naked in front of them:

They laughed and said that they want to examine my body. [Laila]

But she could not tell them the name of her smuggler, or even that he raped her and blackmailed her:

The smuggler told me that the day had come, and he asked me to take with me only a simple bag, I met him in Omonoia Square. There he told me that he would take me to a small house while the plane was arriving, so I entered the house and he closed the door with the key, he took off my clothes, and raped me and I can still smell his dirty smell. He was strong and he was an Arab. I was afraid that if I told the investigator his name, I might be chased by the gang he belonged to and that they would harm me and my daughter, so I told the investigator that I do not remember his name. He is scary so I had no solution but to give him an extra sum to let me get out of the place. [Laila]

The decision of Laila to hide the identity of the smuggler during the IND investigation is an example of her mistrust of the IND. Moreover, she was intimidated by the IND officer, who accused her of lying about how she arrived in the Netherlands, not via Schiphol but through Brussels airport. Laila explained Araa her reason for lying: she was trying to rescue her daughter from the smugglers' harassment so she sent her to the Netherlands with a friend who had been residing there for the past two years, and she found her through a mutual friend as she was looking for a destination to flee to. After her daughter had arrived in the Netherlands, Laila did not find a way to get to the Netherlands but only to Brussels, where she later crossed the border into the Netherlands. According to the Dublin Conventions, the country of entry is the country where you must apply for asylum, which meant she would be separated from her daughter.

While the IND officer was complying with the Conventions of the European Union, with the implicit bias of protecting "Fortress Europe" and the Dublin Regulation from bogus migrants (Dijstelbloem and Meijer 2011; Leurs and Smets 2018), Laila struggled with understanding the mistrust and suspicions concerning her statements. It was difficult for her to be open-hearted, and convey her emotions, fears, and traumas. It was hard to explain that her situation was not only generated by her becoming a refugee all of a sudden, but also by the unfair gender system of her society, which considers her to be property and therefore not free in her choices and always to be judged by her behavior.

She could not explain why she did not wear a veil in the Netherlands when the IND officer doubted her identity because of a veiled photo on her passport. She was confused by this accusation, as if she had to explain that she was not an extremist coming to the Netherlands with the wrong intentions. She could not readily describe how her rejection of the veil was motivated by the rejection of her society that mistreated her as a woman. After the Syrian intelligence agents forced her to be naked, she took off the veil and refused to wear it again. But these

are explanations that are difficult to bring forward during an IND hearing whose intimidating and accusatory tone does not help traumatized women to open up.

Likewise, Lana's testimony was shaded with insecurity and fear. She was shocked when, during the interview, the IND officer did not pay any attention to the abuse she encountered, either to the sexual violence she had experienced from the smuggler during her journey as a refugee, or even to the fact that she was raped by a refugee living in the same camp as her in Greece. But on the other hand, he was interested in knowing why she selected the Netherlands as a destination:

In fact, there were questions that I considered strange and without reason. What was the reason for wanting to know why I came to Netherlands while I was waiting to be asked about the rape incident that I went through and I was waiting for them to protect me from the man who chased me after I moved from the camp and assaulted and violated me for the second time, I was waiting for them to arrest him. I did not receive help with anything and I do not know how these questions were beneficial for them. [Lana]

Despite the fact that Lana has been living in the Netherlands for five years, trying to empower herself by learning Dutch, doing karate courses, and continuing her education in ICT, she is still looking for some security to guarantee the honor and the safety of her and her daughter. At the same time, she does not care anymore about the veil in order to be respected by her society. She explained to Araa that she had changed her perspectives on life in particular after she had been raped twice and had encountered a Dutch bureaucratic structure that treated her with no special consideration given to her gender exploitation; she compared this to the attitude of her husband, who rejected her decision to be unveiled! And he is threatening to kidnap her daughter and take the girl back to Syria, because a woman without a veil does not deserve to raise her daughter.

When Lana was asked whether she thought that things would have been different if it was her husband who has applied for asylum first, she commented on the community context:

For example, my husband and I study the Dutch language within the framework of the integration program in the Netherlands. We put our daughter in kindergarten during our school hours. Our families do not blame him for putting the child in kindergarten while he is out. Rather, they consider this a necessary matter that allows my husband to learn the language and to get a job, but they believe that I am not taking care of my child because I leave her upbringing to the kindergarten, and that I can learn the language online without having to leave the house and leave the girl in kindergarten. The same thing if he is the one who immigrated with the child, they will consider him a hero who migrated for the safety and future of his daughter, and whatever the results are, they will always grant him the honor of

trying. But I did not find that in their conversations with me: I did not hear a single word of flattery, but always blame, intimidation, and recommendations. [Lana]

Many women may not have the necessary financial resources to undertake the flight journey to Europe. And as “Fortress Europe” continues to raise its barriers, it is more and more likely that asylum seekers will need to enlist the aid of traffickers or smugglers to help them enter Europe, and the high cost of this may well be beyond many women’s reach. It can be argued that all these obstacles mean that women only leave their homes and families when circumstances become so hostile that they cannot possibly remain (Spijkerboer 2017).

Being “Integrated”: Becoming a Data Subject

In 2013 Araa’s asylum request was granted, and while this was a great relief, the transition from being under investigation to a position with agency and legal rights does not always directly translate into advantages in lived experience. When the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) was implemented by the European Commission in 2018, Araa and Gerwin decided that it would be interesting to test the implementation of this law at the IND. One of the provisions of the GDPR, aimed at increasing transparency and accountability, is that all people, as data subjects, have the right to request a copy of all information an organization or company keeps about that person.⁵ This has led many governmental organizations, including the IND, to 1) design a clear formal route for making these requests on their website, as well as 2) appoint a central person responsible for the handling of data and privacy-related matters, often referred to as a “Data Protection Officer” (DPO). In August 2018, out of sheer curiosity, Araa and Gerwin filed a GDPR request, following the procedure explained on the IND website, sending an information request and a picture of Araa’s passport to verify her identity.⁶ However, the IND GDPR procedure proved to be much less straightforward than promised on the website of the IND.

The first obvious hurdles are the two very specific routes IND offers to file an information request, namely an online form that is only accessible in Dutch and a regular letter via mail (not email). The former option might not be helpful for many asylum seekers as the majority of them only start to learn this language when they arrive in the Netherlands. In many cases similar to Araa’s, the Netherlands is not even the chosen destination, but rather a coincidental end point of their trip. While the latter option, an old-fashioned letter, does provide an opportunity to send a

5 See <https://gdpr.eu/what-is-gdpr/>.

6 See <https://ind.nl/en/Pages/privacy.aspx>.

request in a different language, it still presupposes people being able to navigate the Dutch mail system, something that, again, would be much easier for a Dutch-speaking person. Understandably, competency levels between asylum seekers vary greatly, since the opportunities to learn Dutch are heavily dependent on the personal situation in terms of financial means, level of education, and competency levels in other languages such as English. In addition, as shown by the story of Lana in the previous section, opportunities to learn Dutch can also heavily depend on gendered expectations concerning the necessity to learn a new language. By making competency in Dutch a requirement for filing an information request, the IND effectively also gendered the possibility for transparency and accountability.

The second issue is the lack of trust in government agencies that many refugees have due to experiences with corrupt and totalitarian systems. They know many stories of situations in which rights on paper did not mean anything in practice. This was no different when Gerwin first suggested to Araa that she should file a GDPR request with the IND:

In Syria, I had written a drama text about corruption in certain Syrian universities. The university that I was doing my Ph.D. at wanted to punish me and tried to prevent me from getting to discuss my thesis, while I had already gotten that permission in the past. This put me in a challenging position, where I had to convince my university that Work is Work, and Education is a Right, and that they aren't allowed to punish me like that just due to my work and that I had every right to discuss my thesis. At the time I didn't discuss all of that with Gerwin, because I felt like I had to make this transition from a Syrian citizen into a Dutch citizen and I decided to go forward with the GDPR request. However, when I was on my way home, on the train, I wondered if I was wrong, and had put myself and my family at risk again. [Araa]

In hindsight, this situation shows the large difference in government trust between Gerwin and Araa. Where Gerwin did not consider the information request and Araa's refugee status to be related matters, Araa was afraid her request would be seen by the IND as a nuisance at best and a reason for denial of Dutch citizenship at worst. Instances like these should therefore be carefully considered by both researchers and organizations in their interactions with forced migrants. Even if researchers are right in their assessment of an information request being an entirely separate matter from bureaucratic decision-making processes, the precarious situation of an asylum seeker might cause unnecessary anxiety and stress. Depending on the aim of an information request, such negative effects are often not worth the potential benefits.

A final issue concerning the information request of Araa was that her interaction with the IND concerning her information did not end after she had sent the request. At first, IND did not respond at all and it turned out that the GDPR

compliance promised by the IND website did not directly translate into action by the organization. After three months of waiting (more than a month past the legal waiting time for a response), Araa sent the IND a reminder via email. Instead of a response by email, Araa received a phone call from the IND Data Protection Officer. At first Araa was frightened by his direct approach, which was in sharp contrast to the distant bureaucratic process she had expected. However, she was quickly comforted when he immediately apologized and invited Araa to come over for coffee at his office in the building of the Department of Justice in The Hague:

It was comforting to hear the employee's apologies and see him trying to find a fair solution for both of us. His kindness was a striking thing for me, especially when he invited me to have coffee at his office, gave me a tour of the IND building and took time to discuss the research that I wanted to work on at Utrecht University.
[Araa]

After this meeting, Araa received a PDF file of about 150 pages which turned out to be an identical copy of all the combined documents Araa had already received during her asylum procedure. Until this day it is unclear to us in what ways Araa's invitation related to her work at Utrecht University at the time. In addition, we are aware of Araa's privileges in terms of her language proficiency in both English and Dutch, as well as her connections with the two other authors of this chapter, as we do not think that every forgotten GDPR request will end in an invitation for coffee and a tour of the IND building.

Conclusions

In this chapter we have analyzed the ways in which Syrian refugee women respond to the bureaucratic system of the IND, and how they tackle the increasingly datafied society and system of governance that impact them upon their arrival in the Netherlands. The aim was not only to analyze the structures, procedures, and decision-making process of the IND system but also to provide an account of the ways in which it is experienced and understood by Syrian refugee women themselves, with a particular focus on gender, ethnicity, class, and language issues. The IND is often referred to as an opaque, aggressive, and bureaucratic system that is far removed from the emotional and personal needs of the refugees.

There is a big discrepancy between the claim of transparency, objectivity, and fairness promoted by the IND as a governmental agency and the sense of opaqueness, and an impersonal and indifferent approach as experienced by the refugee women themselves. The Syrian women refugees feel like they have to defend themselves and prove their authenticity and trustworthiness, and show that they are deserving of help in order to gain access to Europe. This puts them in a constant

position of being subject to scrutiny and suspicion. Due to algorithmic and machine-learning registration systems, the migrants often become dehumanized and reduced to statistical data. By providing an insight into the lived experiences, trajectories, and immigration stories that accompany this small but representative group of Syrian refugee women, we have attempted to offer a sobering and multi-perspectival account of the limits and pitfalls of datafication systems.

We have done so by offering a theoretical framework of how datafication works in the case of the IND and the immigration system, and how a response can be formulated by drawing from standpoint theory that foregrounds the role of native informants and the ways in which partial knowledge can be produced that offers a more insightful and ethical response to the skewed relations imposed by the governmental system. Drawing on autoethnography and combining it with traditional ethnographic work, the chapter offers an exclusive insight into the procedures of the IND as experienced by the "data subject" through the different stages, from entering the system and asking for asylum, to being processed through the method of the interview, to finally becoming integrated and assimilated into the system when fulfilling all required criteria.

The chapter makes an important contribution to critical data studies, gender studies and in particular situated knowledges and ethnographic methods, legal and migration studies. It shows the relevance of the IND immigration procedure from the perspective of the data subjects. It sheds insights into possible ways of bridging cultural differences and increasing understanding and mutual trust under conditions of vulnerability and precariousness. We have tried to discuss how regulations and classifications around the garnering of refugee status from the point of view of the IND need to be counteracted by bringing forward and taking into account the perspective of the women who underwent the process themselves. The various accounts show the difficulties of aspiring citizens who struggle with linguistic, cultural, and legal barriers while dealing with emotional and traumatic experiences. We claim that it is important to consider the voices, opinions, and coping mechanisms of migrant refugees in order to envision new possible strategies for integration and assimilation based on mutual understanding of and respect for international agreements, but also intercultural practices.

To conclude, the chapter presents a moving as well as very informative collection of responses, experiences, and insights from five Syrian women refugee women who are in, or have been through the IND's decision-making process, and who speak back to the system, producing alternative knowledges and representations to the dominant and mainstream stories of migration and integration in the Netherlands.

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