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Employment and work intentions of refugee women. Evidence on Syrians in the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the employment and work intentions of Syrian refugee women in the Netherlands. While earlier studies showed that refugee women have dramatically low labor force participation rates, it remains poorly understood why this is the case. In this study, we provide new insights, using large-scale, nationally representative data on Syrian refugee women in the Netherlands. Our analyses provide evidence to suggest that beyond human capital characteristics, three gender-specific factors contribute to lower participation rates: discrimination of Muslim women who wear a veil, family constraints and traditional gender role attitudes. Among Syrian unemployed women, we find that wearing a veil or having young children is associated with an inability to work, whereas traditional gender role attitudes are significantly associated with unwillingness to work.

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KEYWORDS Labor force participation; refugee women; work intentions; employment; The Netherlands; Syrians

Introduction

Since the 1990s, European countries have witnessed a significant increase in the movement of refugees. In 2015, 1.3 million people sought asylum in Europe (UNHCR 2016). The largest group of refugees had fled Syria. A key concern is whether these refugees will be able to settle into host societies (Van Heelsum 2017). Research findings indicate a high level of unemployment and inactivity in the labor market among refugees. Two years after their arrival in EU countries, refugees' employment rates remain below 20-25 per cent (Dumont et al. 2016). Over time, refugees have improved their position but remain at a significant disadvantage in the labor market

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compared to other citizens in the country (Bakker, Dagevos, and Engbersen 2017; Brell, Dustmann, and Preston 2020). Studies suggest that this "refugee gap" is due, among other things, to lengthy asylum procedures (De Vroome and Van Tubergen 2010; Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Lawrence 2016), health problems (Gerritsen et al. 2006), and deficits in human capital (Bakker, Dagevos, and Engbersen 2017).

Previous studies have also found that refugee women are doubly disadvantaged, as their employment rate is significantly lower than that of refugee men (Brücker et al. 2019; Buber-Ennser et al. 2020; Liebig and Tronstad 2018; Maliepaard, Witkamp, and Jennissen 2017; Perales et al. 2021; Salikutluk and Menke 2021; Spörlein et al. 2020; Worbs and Baraulina 2017). For example, five years after their arriving in Germany, 29 per cent of Syrian female refugees were employed, compared to 57 per cent of Syrian male refugees (Brücker, Kosyakova, and Schuß 2020). In the Netherlands, the contrast was even more pronounced, with 16 per cent of all refugee women being employed approximately 6 years after receiving their residence permits, compared to 54 per cent of all refugee men (Huijnk et al. 2021).

The aim of this paper is to understand the puzzling low labor force participation (LFP) of Syrian refugee women, about which little is known (Salikutluk and Menke 2021). Our strategy is to look more closely at the differences in LFP within the identified group. We contribute to previous work on refugee women's LFP rates in several ways. First, we provide new evidence on the role of wearing a veil in understanding variations in LFP among refugee women. The vast majority of Syrian refugees are Muslim, and several studies have found particularly low LFP rates among Muslim women in Western countries (Abdelhadi and England 2019; Khattab, Johnston, and Manley 2018, 2019), but why this is the case remains an open question.

One explanation could be that Muslim women and especially those who wear the veil have more traditional gender roles, prioritize household and caregiving tasks, and therefore are less active in the labor market (Khoudja and Fleischmann 2015; Khoudja and Platt 2018). Another hypothesis is that the lower LFP of Muslim women is due to discrimination (Blommaert, Coenders, and Van Tubergen 2014; Di Stasio et al. 2021; Thijssen et al. 2021). In the Netherlands, applicants with an Arabic name are less likely to receive a positive response to their resumes than candidates with Dutch names (Blommaert, Coenders, and Van Tubergen 2014). Additionally, visible markers of being Muslim, such as wearing a veil, appear to trigger discrimination among members of the majority population. Women wearing a veil were less likely to receive a callback compared to both women without a veil and women with Dutch names (Fernández-Reino, Di Stasio, and Veit 2023; Ramos, Thijssen, and Coenders 2021). However, the extent to which such discriminatory processes affect the LFP of Syrian Muslim women has not yet been sufficiently investigated. In this study, we take a closer look at these two underlying explanations.

Second, we examine the impact of the family situation on the LFP of Syrian refugee women. Research on female refugees' LFP has often neglected the role of the partner and the presence of children in the woman's life, while studies on the ethnic majority population (Jeon 2008; Kil et al. 2018; Van der Lippe and Van Dijk 2002) and immigrant groups (Dale, Lindley, and Dex 2006; Khoudja and Fleischmann 2017; Khoudja and Platt 2018; Kil et al. 2018) suggest that this may be an important explanation for refugee women's LFP (see Salikutluk and Menke 2021 for an exception).

Third, we provide a more detailed examination of LFP. Unlike most studies (e.g. Abdelhadi 2019; Khattab, Johnston, and Manley 2018; Khoudja and Fleischmann 2015, 2017; Perales et al. 2021; Salikutluk and Menke 2021), we do not only consider actual employment, but also examine the work intentions of those who are not working. Since we already know that the employment rate among refugee women is low, paying more attention to the larger group of women who are not employed provides useful insights into the extent to which these women want to work and what might prevent them from doing so.

The insights from our study have societal and policy implications. On the one hand, we provide evidence of the kinds of barriers refugee women face in the labor market. Research shows that when Syrian refugees arrive in the Netherlands, they have high expectations and aspirations for their new lives (Van Heelsum 2017). They want to learn the language and find work. However, many are not able to achieve their goals, especially women. Understanding the underlying causes can inform policy makers. Employment is not only an essential step to financial independence and reducing benefit dependency, but also a way to increase contact with others in society. Furthermore, it can affect their children's opportunities, as previous studies have shown that mothers' employment status impacts their children's LFP (McGinn, Ruiz Castro, and Lingo 2019; Morrill and Morrill 2013; Olivetti, Patacchini, and Zenou 2020).

Syrian refugees and the Dutch context

Popular uprising and the response to that uprising by the regime in 2011 marked the beginning of a crisis in Syria in several respects. Syria faced an internal armed conflict, the development of ISIS, and later international involvement in the conflict (Williams and Carlson 2020). All of this led to a considerable number of people leaving the country, as well as a large number of Syrians who are internally displaced within the country. As of 2024, approximately 12 million Syrians were displaced within the region.[1] Between 2014 and 2016, 44,000 asylum seekers from Syria received a residence permit in the Netherlands. Syrians were the largest group among the 70,000 asylum seekers who received a permit during those years (Dagevos et al. 2018).

Asylum seekers spend their first period in asylum centers in the Netherlands, where they can start an application for asylum. Asylum seekers become permit holders once they receive a (often temporary) residence permit. Originally, the majority of the asylum seekers were male and young in age. For example, between 2014-2017, 75 per cent of asylum seekers were under the age of 35 (CBS 2018). In 2014, only 20 per cent of Syrian asylum seekers were family members who joined the asylum applicant (subsequent family members). This number increased in the following years to more than 60 per cent in 2016 (CBS 2018). Most of these following family members were women and children, meaning that the proportion of female refugees increased in 2015 and 2016. The first cohorts of Syrians who arrived in the Netherlands, obtained residence permits relatively quickly. Of the Syrians that arrived in an asylum center in 2014, about 80 per cent had a permit after 6 months and 94 per cent after 1,5 years (CBS 2018). This is much faster than for other groups (with the exception of Eritreans who arrived in the same period); for other nationalities, 40–60 per cent received a permit after 1.5 years. Due to the large influx of asylum seekers in 2015, the waiting time for a permit was longer for the Syrians who arrived in 2016, but this was still just over 100 days on average (compared to 50 days for those who arrived in 2014 and 2015; CBS 2019). In later years, the waiting time for a permit increased for all asylum seekers, including Syrians.

Once refugees are granted a residence permit, they are entitled to housing and are allowed to work in the Netherlands (Huijnk et al. 2021).[2] Nevertheless, most permit holders also spend a lot of time during the first years after arrival on the civic integration program, which they must complete within three years. The civic integration program mainly focuses on learning the language at the A2 level and learning about the Dutch educational system and labor market.

In addition to the situation of Syrians in the Netherlands and integration policies, the context of the Dutch labor market is relevant for understanding the participation of Syrian women. In the Netherlands, the participation of women in the labor market is high compared to other Western countries. In 2021, 77 per cent of working-age women at were employed (87 per cent of the men). However, compared to other countries, part-time work is very common among women, mothers in particular (CBS 2022). The Netherlands is known for its "one-and-a-half-earner" model, which means that in couples, the man works full time while the woman works part time (Van Lancker and Pavolini 2023; Yerkes 2009). A reduction in working hours is particularly likely when women become mothers. Families with young children combine different forms of childcare, and grandparents are an important resource. Formal childcare is available; families in which both partners work (or who are single parents) are entitled to an income-related childcare

benefit. This benefit is also available to permit holders who are taking the civic integration course. Formal full-time childcare (5 days per week) is very rare; on average, children go to daycare for about 2 days a week (Portegijs et al. 2006; Rijksoverheid 2023). In recent years, formal childcare has faced staff shortages, and parents face long waiting lists and high costs (I&O Research 2022).

Theory and hypotheses

In this section, we formulate hypotheses that may explain the variation in LFP rates among Syrian refugee women. We focus on factors that may affect women in particular. Unlike previous studies that compared the active population (employed and actively seeking work) with the inactive population in the labor market, we compare (a) those who have a job (at least one hour per week; *employed*), (b) those who want to work and are available (*job seeker*), (c) those who not want to work (*unwilling to work*), and (d) those who want to work but cannot work (*unable to work*). Given the relatively short duration of stay, we consider employment to be an indicator of active participation and integration rather than an indication of economic independence. Even those who work may still be partially dependent on social assistance. We formulate hypotheses about the four possible outcomes, keeping in mind that increasing the likelihood of one outcome (e.g. b) may sometimes (by definition) decrease the likelihood of the alternative outcome (e.g. c).

Family situation

The family investment model argues that among immigrant and refugee couples, men and women specialize in either paid work or unpaid household tasks (Cobb-Clark and Crossley 2004; Khoudja and Platt 2018; Long 1980). Who does what depends on the expected returns in the labor market, but in general, men specialize in paid work while women specialize in unpaid household and care tasks (Gowayed 2019; Kosyakova and Kulic 2022). Potential productivity in the labor market depends on the human capital of the spouse. In the literature on partner effects, studies typically use education as a key component of human capital and earnings potential (Bernardi 1999; Bernasco, De Graaf, and Ultee 1998; Blossfeld and Drobnic 2001).

We follow this tradition, but take into account that refugees and migrants can acquire education both in a foreign country and in the host society (Brücker, Kosyakova, and Vallizadeh 2020; Van Tubergen 2022). We also take into account that women can be single. Based on the investment model, we expect that women without a partner are more likely to work, because they do not have a working partner to rely on. In summary, we

infer from the family investment model that *the higher the educational level of the partner, the less likely that refugee women are employed (a) or job seekers (b), while single refugee women are more likely to be employed (a) or job seekers (b) than cohabiting or married refugee women* (H_1).

Another factor that may explain the variation in LFP among refugee women is family formation. Previous studies have demonstrated that women's employment is strongly influenced by the presence of (young) children in the household. Traditionally, women are expected to take care of young children, and studies indeed show that having children at home reduces women's LFP and working hours (Corrigall and Konrad 2007; Khattab, Johnston, and Manley 2018; Khoudja and Platt 2018; Salikutluk, Giesecke, and Kroh 2020; Van der Lippe and Van Dijk 2002). In Germany, research has indicated that for refugee women not using public childcare is associated with lower participation rates in language courses and job-training programs (Brücker, Kosyakova, and Vallizadeh 2020). It is not known whether this is the case for Syrian refugee women in the Netherlands.

However, studies show that in the Netherlands, parents with a migration background are less likely to use childcare for young children than parents without a migration background, particularly those who are more religious and have more traditional views on marriage and family (Kalmijn 2023; Van Lancker and Pavolini 2023). Both the lack of nearby families who could care for young children and the problems with formal childcare make it expectedly difficult for refugees to arrange childcare in the Netherlands. We expect this to affect not only employment but also the intention to work, especially for those with young children in the household. We therefore hypothesize *that refugee women with young children at home are less likely to be employed (a), less likely to be job seekers (b), and more likely to be unable to work* (d; H_2).

The veil effect

Disadvantages stemming from a visible Muslim appearance may also affect labor market outcomes among refugee women (Abdelhadi 2019; Khattab, Johnston, and Manley 2018, 2019). The majority (approximately 75 per cent) of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands are (self-identified) Muslims; 8 per cent are Christian; and 15 per cent identify as non-religious (Dagevos et al. 2018). Islamophobia is a pervasive problem in European countries, including the Netherlands (Savelkoul et al. 2011; Thijssen et al. 2021). Experimental field studies have shown that Muslim minority groups are subject to hiring discrimination in Western labor markets (Blommaert, Coenders, and Van Tubergen 2014; Thijssen et al. 2021). Discriminatory practices may be caused by the names revealed in resumes, which can trigger prejudiced views of Muslim minority groups, but discrimination may also be based on other cues, such as wearing a veil (Di Stasio et al. 2021). The visibility of a

Muslim identity through names, dress, and other practices can therefore trigger discriminatory behavior. In Canada, for instance, it has been shown that belonging to a Muslim minority group is associated with a disadvantaged position for women in the labor market (Khattab et al. 2019).

Based on the idea of discriminatory practices targeting Muslim minorities, scholars have investigated the impact of wearing a veil on the LFP of Muslim women in Western countries. Abdelhadi (2019) used data on Muslims in the United States to show that Muslim women who wear the veil are less likely to be employed than Muslim women who do not wear the veil. Part of this association was found to be due to differences in human capital, demographics, and household composition. However, most of the differences remain unexplained (Abdelhadi 2019), which could be an indication that Muslim women who wear a veil face discrimination in the labor market.

A meta-analysis of seven experimental studies found that Muslim women who wear a veil were 40 per cent less likely to be hired than Muslim women who do not wear the veil (Ahmed and Gorey 2021). Researchers found similar results for callback rates for women who wear a veil and women who do not in the Netherlands (Fernández-Reino, Di Stasio, and Veit 2023; Ramos, Thijssen, and Coenders 2021).

However, Salikutluk and Menke (2021) found no difference in LFP between refugee women who wear a veil and refugee women who do not wear a veil based on the IAB-BAMF-SOEP survey of refugees in Germany. Therefore, further research is needed to determine whether wearing a veil is associated with lower LFP rates among Muslim refugee women. We hypothesize that *refugee women who wear a veil are less likely to be employed (a) or more likely to be unable to work (d) than refugee women who do not wear a veil* (H_3).

Gender role attitudes

Third, we examine the effect of gender role attitudes, that is norms and values regarding the division of paid and unpaid work between men and women (Fortin 2005). It is important to consider gender role attitudes when examining the influence of the family situation on LFP. Khoudja and Fleischmann (2015), for example, found that women with more traditional gender role attitudes were less likely to participate in the labor market, even after controlling for human capital and household conditions. In the United Kingdom, women with more traditional gender role attitudes were found to be both less likely to enter the labor market and more likely to leave it (Khoudja and Platt 2018). Similarly, having a partner with more traditional attitudes was found to be associated with lower LFP among immigrant women in the Netherlands (Khoudja and Fleischmann 2017). Among Syrian refugees in the Netherlands, 47 per cent disagree that women should stop working after having a child**,** 17

per cent are neutral and more than a third (36 per cent) agree that women should stop working after having a child (Dagevos et al. 2018).

We do not know how this differs between Syrian men and women, but we hypothesize that traditional views correlate with employment and work intentions and that *refugee women with more traditional gender role attitudes are less likely to be employed (a) or looking for work (b) and more likely to be unwilling to work (c*; H4).

Table 1 summarizes our expectations for each outcome.

Table 1. Summary of hypotheses regarding LFP among Syrian refugees women.

	Employed	Job seeker	Unwilling to work	Unable to work
H_1: Family investment				
– *Partner's education level*	–	–	+	n.a.
– *Single women*	+	+	–	n.a.
H_2: Presence of children	–	–	n.a.	+
H_3: Wearing a veil	–	n.a.	n.a.	+
H_4: Traditional gender role attitudes	–	–	+	n.a.

Note: "+" *indicates a positive effect; " – " indicates a negative effect; and "n.a." means not applicable.*

Data and methods

Data

To analyze the variation in the LFP among Syrian refugee women, we used data from the New Permit Holders in the Netherlands survey (NSN-2017-2019; SCP 2019). This probability survey is representative of Syrian refugees aged 15 years and older who received a residence permit in the Netherlands between January 2014 and July 2016. A total of 3,209 respondents participated in the first wave of data collection, which took place in 2017 (response rate 81 per cent). Of these 3,209 respondents, 2,544 also participated in the second wave of data collection in 2019 (response rate: 86 per cent). We used the data collected in the second wave, because in the first wave most Syrian women had just arrived in the Netherlands, and very few were active in the labor market. We selected only female respondents aged 18–65 ($N = 830$).

Data were collected using either online questionnaires or face-to-face interviews (in the case of non-response). The questionnaires were available in both Dutch and modern standard Arabic and the interviewers spoke both Dutch and Arabic as well.

Operationalization

Dependent variable

We measured paid employment and work intentions using four categories, combining the question on paid employment (i.e. those currently employed

at least one hour per week) with the question on work intentions for those who were unemployed. All refugees without a job were asked the following question: "Would you currently want to have paid employment?" The response categories were "already employed," "yes," "no," and "would like to but can't." We created an "employed" (a) category that included all women who reported that they were currently employed. A few women indicated in the first question that they were unemployed, but in the work intentions question, they indicated that they were already employed. We counted these women as employed. The other three categories were (b) want to work (job seeker), (c) do not want to work (unwilling), and (d) want to work but cannot (unable). As an additional check, we ran the same analyses using "being active" (employed or available for work; 1) or not (0) as the dependent variable. Table S4 shows broadly similar results in the online supplement.

Independent variables

To test H_1, we considered whether someone had a partner and, if so, their partner's *educational level* as reported by the respondent. We distinguished between (1) primary education at most, (2) lower secondary education, (3) upper secondary education, and (4) tertiary education. We also included a dummy variable for those who were (5) single. Missing values in Wave 2 were replaced by values from Wave 1 where possible ($N = 58$), and other missing values (0.4 per cent) were deleted.

To test H_2, we examined *the number of young children living at home*. Since children in the Netherlands start primary school at the age of 4, only children aged 4 or younger were counted. This variable ranges from no children (0) to four or more children (4).

To test H_3, we used self-reported data on the practice of *wearing a veil*. Muslim women were asked whether they wore a veil outside the home, and we compared those who answered in the affirmative (1) with those who did not. We also distinguished between Muslim women and non-Muslim women. The resulting three categories were: non-Muslim (0), Muslim, does not wear a veil (1), and Muslim, wears a veil (2).

We included the measure of *traditional gender role attitudes* to test H_4. We used four statements to create a Likert scale measuring gender role attitudes. The statements were: (a) "men should be responsible for money"; (b) "it is more important for boys to earn their own money than for girls"; (c) "men should decide about major purchases"; and (d) "women should stop working after having children." The scale was reversed, meaning that it ranged from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5). The mean score of the responses was used, so that a higher score implied more traditional gender role attitudes (Cronbach's alpha = 0.67).

Control variables

According to human capital theory, the greater the individual's human capital, the better their labor market outcomes (Becker 1964). Refugees can acquire human capital in their country of origin (or in another country abroad) and in the receiving society. Therefore, we included several measures to control for human capital, starting with *foreign educational levels*. Respondents were asked about the highest level of education attained in their country of origin or elsewhere and whether they obtained a diploma. If information on a diploma was missing (6 per cent), we used information from Wave 1 (the highest diploma obtained or, if missing, the highest level of education attained). Four categories were distinguished: (1) primary education at most, (2) lower secondary education, (3) upper secondary education, and (4) tertiary education. We also included *work experience in the country of origin*, measured by asking about what their main activity was. We coded this as not employed (0) and employed (including self-employment; 1). We also took Dutch *language proficiency* into account, which was measured by asking respondents how well they spoke Dutch on a scale from 1 ("I do not speak Dutch") to 10 ("I speak Dutch very well"). To measure *health*, we used the question, "How is your health in general?" Response categories ranged from 1 ("very poor") to 5 ("very good").

To capture past and current enrollment in programs that promote the acquisition of host-country human capital, we included participation in a (a) *Dutch language course*, (b) *integration course,* and (c) *full-time education in the Netherlands*.

For Dutch language courses and full-time education in the Netherlands, we distinguished between (1) those who were not enrolled, (2) those who were currently enrolled, and (3) those who had completed the program. With regard to integration courses, we differentiated between those who had passed their integration exam (1) and those who had not (yet) passed it (0).

We also controlled for *age* and *year of receipt of the residence permit* (between 2014 and 2018). Once refugees have received their residence permit, they are allowed to work in the Netherlands. Our final analytical sample consisted of 821 women (9 missing values were deleted; 1 per cent). Descriptive statistics of the variables are presented in the online supplementary material (Table S1).

Methods

To test the hypotheses, we estimated multinomial logit models of employment and work intentions (Table 2). We present the average marginal effects (AME) of the four outcomes: employed, job seeker, unwilling, and

unable to work. Model 1 includes whether someone had a partner and, if so, their partner's educational level and whether the woman had young children at home. Wearing a veil is included in Table 2, Model 2. Model 3 adds a variable capturing gender role attitudes.

Table 2. Multinomial logistic regression model of employment and work intentions: human capital and family situation. Average marginal effects are presented (N = 821).

	M1			
	Employed dy/dx	Job seeker dy/dx	Unwilling to work dy/dx	Unable to work dy/dx
Partners' level of education (at most primary level = ref.)				
– Lower secondary	0.043	0.011	−0.017	−0.036
	(0.038)	(0.054)	(0.041)	(0.050)
– Upper secondary	0.054*	0.020	0.039	−0.113**
	(0.035)	(0.054)	(0.046)	(0.051)
– Tertiary	0.013	0.062	−0.062*	−0.013
	(0.035)	(0.058)	(0.044)	(0.057)
– No partner	0.052*	0.058	−0.065*	−0.045
	(0.035)	(0.059)	(0.043)	(0.057)
Number of children aged 4 or younger	−0.145***	−0.0150	0.0362**	0.123***
	(0.029)	(0.030)	(0.021)	(0.026)
Control variables				
Foreign education (at most primary level = ref.)				
– Lower secondary	0.006	−0.007	−0.013	0.015
	(0.034)	(0.056)	(0.042)	(0.050)
– Upper secondary	0.003	−0.020	−0.039	0.055
	(0.032)	(0.052)	(0.040)	(0.048)
– Tertiary	0.022	0.022	−0.008	−0.036
	(0.040)	(0.064)	(0.053)	(0.059)
Employed in Syria	0.071***	0.143***	−0.106***	−0.109***
	(0.027)	(0.040)	(0.036)	(0.040)
Dutch language proficiency	0.013**	0.026***	−0.016**	−0.023**
	(0.007)	(0.011)	(0.008)	(0.010)
Health	0.003	0.081***	−0.028*	−0.059***
	(0.013)	(0.020)	(0.015)	(0.019)
Dutch language course (never enrolled = ref.)				
– Currently enrolled	0.001	0.024	0.009	−0.034
	(0.070)	(0.146)	(0.095)	(0.140)
– Completed	0.076	−0.036	0.065	−0.105
	(0.070)	(0.147)	(0.097)	(0.141)
Passed integration course	0.004	0.022	0.027	−0.052*
	(0.023)	(0.037)	(0.031)	(0.036)
Education in NL (never enrolled = ref.)				
– Currently enrolled	−0.031	−0.086**	0.139**	−0.022
	(0.029)	(0.051)	(0.061)	(0.060)
– Completed	−0.039*	0.023	−0.0003	0.017
	(0.030)	(0.060)	(0.052)	(0.063)
Year of receipt of the residence permit	−0.032**	0.071***	−0.012	−0.027
	(0.016)	(0.025)	(0.021)	(0.024)
Age	−0.006***	−0.002	0.003*	0.005***
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)

Note: *Standard errors are in parentheses. One-tailed test. ***p < .01; **p < .05; *p < .1.*

Results

Hypotheses testing

The first hypothesis concerns the influence of a partner's level of education on the LFP of a Syrian refugee woman. We found that women whose partner had upper secondary education were more likely to be employed (5 percentage points) but more often unable to work (11 percentage points) than women whose partners had at most a primary level of education. Women whose partners had a tertiary education were less likely to be unwilling to work (−6 percentage points). We found no negative effects on employment or job search and no significant positive effects on unwillingness to work among women with partners with higher education. Our findings are therefore inconsistent with the family investment model, according to which we had expected that refugee women with a partner with a higher level of education would be less likely to be employed or looking for work and more likely to be unwilling to work. Among women without a partner, we found evidence to support our hypotheses. The results showed that they were more likely to be employed (5 percentage points) and less likely to be unwilling to work (−6 percentage points).

Having young children at home was clearly related to Syrian refugee women's employment and work intentions. In line with H_2, Model 1 shows that women with young children at home were 15 percentage points less likely to be employed than women without young children at home. Additionally, women with young children at home were more likely to be unwilling to work (4 percentage points) and more often unable to work (12 percentage points).

H_3 and H_4 focus on the effects of wearing a veil and gender role attitudes, respectively. First, we examined the employment and work intentions of the women in the study, distinguishing between those who were not Muslim, those who were Muslim but did not wear a veil, and those who were Muslim and wore a veil. Figure 1 shows that there was a substantial employment gap between Muslim women who wore a veil (8 per cent) and those who did not wear a veil (18 per cent). Non-Muslim women had the same employment rate as Muslim women who did not wear a veil. In addition, 40 per cent of Muslim women who wore a veil reported that they were unable to work. This is much higher than among Muslim women who did not wear a veil (18 per cent) and among women who were not Muslim (27 per cent).

To investigate whether these differences between wearing a veil or not were not driven by other characteristics, we estimated multinomial models that included family situation, gender role attitudes, and control variables

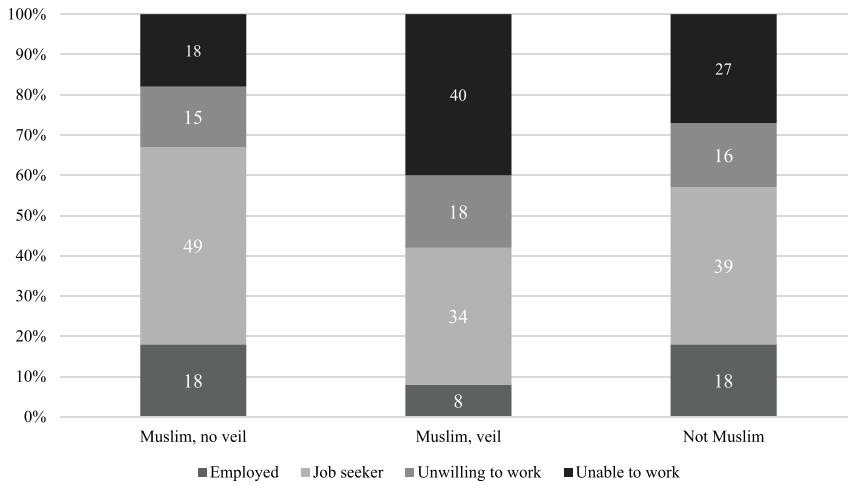

Figure 1. Employment and work intentions among Syrian refugee women who wear a veil and those who do not.

(Table 3). Model 2 in Table 3 shows that the Muslim women in our study who wore a veil were 4 percentage points less likely to be employed, 8 percentage points less likely to be looking for a job, and 14 percentage points more likely to report that they were unable to work than women who were Muslim but did not wear a veil. Controlling for women's gender role attitudes did not significantly affect our findings regarding wearing the veil. Model 3 in Table 3 shows that we still observe that Muslim women who wore a veil were less likely to be employed or looking for work and more likely to be unable to work. This suggests that traditional gender role attitudes cannot account for the "veil effect" and that other factors, possibly discrimination, play a role in the lower LFP of Muslim women who wear a veil. In other words, we did not find that the lower LFP of Muslim women who wear a veil was due to confounding variables.

Additional analysis comparing non-Muslim women with Muslim women who wear a veil shows that Muslim women who wear a veil were 4 percentage points less likely to be employed and 8 percentage points more likely to report being unable to work than non-Muslim women (see Table S3 in the online supplement). These results confirm $H_{3:}$ veiled refugee women were less likely to be employed. They indicated that they wanted to work but were unable to do so, suggesting labor market discrimination based on wearing a veil. Instead, our findings provide evidence of a veil effect, thus supporting H_3.

We also hypothesized about the role of gender role attitudes (H_4). Model 3 (Table 3) shows that women with more traditional gender role attitudes were less likely to be job seekers and more likely to report being unwilling to work

Table 3. Multinomial logistic regression model of employment and work intentions; wearing a veil and gender role attitudes. Average marginal effects are shown (N = 821).

	M2				M3			
	Employed	Job seeker	Unwilling to work	Unable to work	Employed	Job seeker	Unwilling to work	Unable to work
	dy/dx	dy/dx	dy/dx	dy/dx	dy/dx	dy/dx	dy/dx	dy/dx
Wearing a veil (Muslim, no veil = ref.)								
Not Muslim	−0.008	−0.073*	0.016	0.065	−0.008	−0.067	0.013	0.062
	(0.034)	(0.056)	(0.049)	(0.053)	(0.033)	(0.055)	(0.050)	(0.054)
Muslim, wearing a veil	−0.044*	−0.083**	−0.011	0.139***	−0.039*	−0.071*	−0.025	0.135***
	(0.029)	(0.047)	(0.040)	(0.0444)	(0.029)	(0.047)	(0.041)	(0.045)
Traditional gender role attitudes					−0.017	−0.045**	0.046***	0.016
					(0.014)	(0.021)	(0.016)	(0.020)

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses. One-tailed test: ***$p < .01$; **$p < .05$; *$p < .1$. The variables included in Model 1 of Table 2 are included as control variables. See Table S2 in the online supplement for a complete table.

than women with more progressive gender role attitudes. These findings are consistent with H_4. We do not find an effect of gender role attitudes on employment, however.

We also find that, in addition to the hypothesized relationships, other factors also shape the employment outcomes of refugee women. In line with human capital theory, the evidence in Table 2 demonstrates that work experience in Syria and a better command of the Dutch language were associated with higher LFP in the Netherlands. We found that better health was only associated with being a job seeker. As expected, Syrian refugee women enrolled in Dutch education programs are less likely to be job seekers and more likely to be unwilling to work. Overall, these findings largely support the idea that human capital plays a central role in the LFP of refugee women. Additionally, we found that Syrian refugee women who received their residence permit later, and therefore had a shorter period of work eligibility, were less likely to be employed and more likely to be job seekers.

Conclusions and discussion

Existing research indicates that refugee women in Europe are at significant disadvantage in the labor market. To shed more light on this issue, the aim of this paper was to understand the puzzling low labor force participation (LFP) of Syrian refugee women in the Netherlands. Syrian refugees have a difficult start in the Netherlands due to the mismatch between their expectations of their new country and reality, especially in terms of education and work (Van Heelsum 2017). We investigated the extent to which these women's family situation, wearing a veil, and gender role attitudes are associated with both employment and the intention to work among Syrian refugee women. Our main strategy was to examine the differences in LFP among Syrian women, identify gender-specific factors that hinder and promote LFP, and thereby gain more insight into their overall lower LFP. Based on our analyses of a large-scale, nationally representative survey on Syrian refugee women, three major conclusions can be drawn from our study.

First, we have found evidence of a veil effect: Even when we accounted for gender role attitudes, human capital, family situation, and other confounding variables, we found that Syrian refugee women who wear a veil have lower labor market participation rates. Importantly, the lower LFP rate of Muslim women who wear a veil is not explained by traditional gender role attitudes. Previous studies have argued that higher religiosity among Muslim women may lower their LFP (Dildar 2015; Khoudja and Fleischmann 2015) and that this association is largely or entirely due to traditional gender role attitudes (Grunow and Lietzmann 2021; Guveli and Spierings 2021; Kanas and Müller 2021; Khoudja and Fleischmann 2015). Although we do not capture religiosity

in our study, wearing a veil is often used as an indicator of religious affiliation. However, our results do not show that the relationship between wearing a veil and employment disappears when we control for traditional gender role attitudes. Our findings are consistent with research on Muslim women in the US (Abdelhadi 2019) and possibly provide evidence of the role of discrimination faced by Muslim women who wear a veil (Ahmed and Gorey 2021). However, using data from Germany, Salikutluk and Menke (2021) found no difference in LFP between Syrian women who wear a veil and those who do not. This discrepancy may be related to a slightly different measurement, as we distinguish between Muslim women who wear a veil, Muslim women who do not wear a veil, and Syrian women who are not Muslim. Overall, our study suggests that refugee women who wear a veil face barriers to labor market participation.

Second, we also found that traditional attitudes about gender roles matter. Such conservative attitudes were associated with a lower willingness to work. This shows that different mechanisms do indeed seem to be at play here. Clearly, women with more traditional views on the division of paid and unpaid work between men and women indicate that they do not want to work. In this sense, the results for Syrian refugee women confirm the findings for women from other ethnic majority and minority groups (Khoudja and Fleischmann 2018; Khoudja and Platt 2018).

Third, Syrian women's LFP may be constrained by family conditions. Specifically, we found that having young children at home reduces the likelihood of participation in the labor market. These results are in line with findings on earlier refugee cohorts and with findings on Syrian refugees in Germany (Bakker, Dagevos, and Engbersen 2014; Brell, Dustmann, and Preston 2020; Salikutluk and Menke 2021). It is also interesting to note that women with young children at home are not only less likely to be employed but are also more likely to be unable to work. This shows that at least some of the refugee women, who are often considered inactive, are not inactive by choice. Future research should investigate the extent to which both attitudes toward and knowledge of the childcare system in the Netherlands play a role for refugees with young children at home.

This study had several limitations. First, it is important to keep in mind that some biases may be at play when distinguishing between unwillingness and inability to work. For instance, some women may have given socially desirable responses about wanting to work, or women who are unable to work but report this as their own choice. It would be interesting to address this in more detail in future research. In addition, the data used were collected relatively soon after arrival, so it is likely that even women who are employed are not yet financially independent. Furthermore, an alternative explanation that we were unable to investigate is the influence of the norms and values of these women's social networks. Having a partner and/or family with

traditional ideas about the division of work and care in the household may hinder the LFP of Syrian refugee women in the Netherlands. Information on the partner's gender role attitudes was not included in the survey but should be explored in future research.

Our study provides much needed insight into the LFP of Syrian refugee women in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe that can be used to promote their participation in the future. We have shown that there are similar explanations for their low LFP compared to other migrant women, in addition to human capital, which is key to labor market participation. In particular, wearing a veil and having young children at home seem to hamper access to the labor market for Syrian refugee women in the Netherlands.

Notes

1. https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/syria-situation. Retrieved March 2024.
2. At the time of data collection, asylum seekers were only allowed to work under certain conditions, the most important of which was that they could only work for a maximum of 24 weeks per year (Van den Braak et al. 2023). This rule was abolished by the court in November 2023.

Disclosure statement

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Statements of ethics

This study used a secondary data source, the New Permit Holders in the Netherlands survey (NSN-2017-2019; SCP 2019). Ethical approval was not obliged according to national law at the moment of data collection. Nevertheless, respondents received all the relevant information – including about informed consent – prior to the data collection and the data collection took place in accordance with the Dutch privacy laws. The information letter and all other relevant documents, including the questionnaire, were available in both Dutch and Modern Arabic.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from Statistics Netherlands. Restrictions apply to the availability of these data. Under certain conditions, these microdata are accessible for statistical and scientific research. For further information: microdata@cbs.nl. The code can be found on SOCARXIV: https://osf.io/s9yhr/.

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