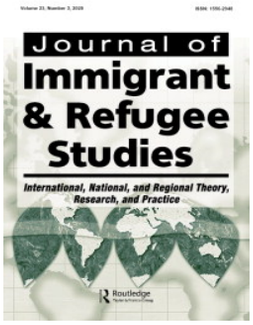

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# From Aspiration to Participation? Understanding Why Syrian Women Who Want to Work, Do Not

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**ABSTRACT**

This study explores the employment challenges faced by Syrian women refugees in the Netherlands, despite their eagerness to work. Using in-depth life history interviews, the research highlights how the interplay between Syrian women's aspirations and capabilities is key in navigating challenges such as labor market dynamics, caregiving responsibilities and social exclusion. Personal capabilities such as relevant work experience, networking, proactiveness, and digital literacy emerge as crucial enablers to securing employment. This study underscores the importance of understanding Syrian women's personal experiences and the socio-cultural barriers faced, advocating for a more nuanced approach to support their employment journey.

**KEYWORDS**

Syrians; refugee women; aspirations and capabilities framework; employment; participation; The Netherlands

## Introduction

Between 2014 and 2016, Syrian refugees constituted the largest group among those seeking asylum in the Netherlands. Initially, the majority of arrivals were men; however, in 2016 and 2017, there was a significant influx of family members, primarily wives and children. During these years, the proportion of female asylum seekers from Syria exceeded 50% (CBS, 2021). Existing studies highlight the challenges faced by Syrians in the Netherlands and other European countries where they sought asylum (Damen et al., 2024; Salikutluk et al., 2016; Salikutluk & Menke, 2021; Van Heelsum, 2017). After the initial years, typically focused on learning the language, securing housing and completing civic integration programs, one of the most pressing challenges is obtaining employment. For Syrian women, this appears to be particularly difficult. As with previous cohorts of refugees, there is a gender gap in employment, with refugee men being significantly more likely to be employed than refugee women (Maliepaard et al., 2017). Figure 1 illustrates that, after 4.5 years of residence in the Netherlands, the gender employment gap among Syrians was 38 percentage points. This pattern is similar across other European countries (Brücker et al., 2020; Salikutluk & Menke, 2021; Worbs & Baraulina, 2017).

Previous research showed that among Syrian women without paid employment, about 40% express a desire to work (van der Zwan & Van Tubergen, 2024). Nevertheless, little is known about why so few refugee women are able to secure employment, despite explicitly expressing this aspiration. Earlier studies have concluded that marital status and having children are significant factors contributing to migrant women's lower employment rates (Dale et al., 2006;

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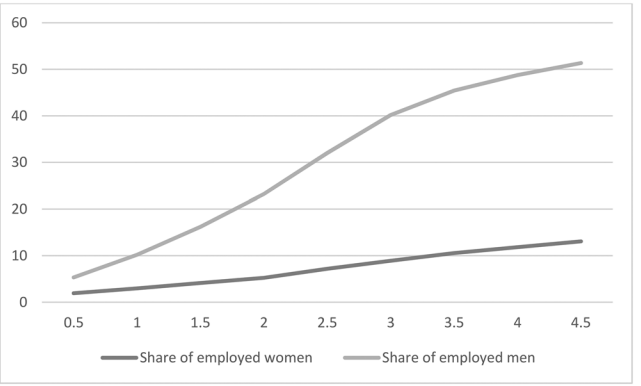


**Figure 1.** Paid employment among Syrian women and men, by years since receiving their residence permit (in %).
*Note:* This figure focuses on Syrians who received their residence permits between 2014 and 2018, from the moment they began living independently in a municipality. Results based on own calculations using non-public microdata from Statistics Netherlands (CBS, 2023).

Khoudja & Fleischmann, 2017; Khoudja & Platt, 2018; Kil et al., 2018). Similar to other (migrant) women, refugee women's low labor market participation may be attributed to traditional gender role attitudes as well as household and caregiving responsibilities (Salikutluk & Menke, 2021). These factors can shape the labor market trajectories of women who wish to work but are unable to do so. Care responsibilities may significantly influence women's pathways to employment, often depending on the broader household context. Indeed, marital status and its intersection with parenthood shape employment preferences and needs among both minority and majority populations (Khoudja & Platt, 2018; Van der Lippe & Van Dijk, 2002). Among refugees, the migration experience and the process of settling in the host country can further impact household dynamics (Al-Sharmani, 2017; Awoonor-Williams & Overå, 2022). However, questions remain about how such intra-household dynamics affect women's journeys to employment. This paper aims to contribute by examining both partnered and unpartnered women, as well as those with and without children, to uncover how these intersections influence the challenges faced on the path to employment.

Through in-depth interviews with 25 Syrian women who arrived in the Netherlands after 2013, we investigated how their aspirations to work align, or failed to align, with the Dutch labor market. We examine what these women themselves identify as key capabilities and obstacles in their pursuit of employment. Our focus is on the 17 women who aspire to work, whether they are still on the journey towards employment or have already succeeded in securing a job in the Dutch labor market. By doing so, we provide a nuanced understanding of this group, contributing both to theoretical insights into the barriers faced by women as well as provide stepping stones to enable a match between the Dutch labor market and these women.

To address our research question, we adopt the aspirations and capabilities framework, building on Van Heelsum's (2017), which highlights the applicability of this framework to migrants' lives and experiences in their countries of residence. This framework enables an evaluation of the aspirations people hold and the capabilities—or effective opportunities—they possess to lead the lives they wish to lead (Robeyns, 2005). It also sheds light on the structural constraints shaping opportunities, choices, and chances. By applying this framework, we aim to disentangle the relationship between aspirations—individual preferences for work and how they are formed—and capabilities, which encompass the possibilities and agency women have to translate their work preferences into employment.

This study is structured as follows: First, we provide an overview of the context surrounding Syrian refugees in the Netherlands, with a focus on civic integration requirements and relevant policies. Next, we review the existing literature on female labor market participation, refugee women, and the aspirations and capabilities framework. We then outline our methodology,

describing the data collection process and the key findings. This is followed by a discussion of the results, highlighting major barriers to labor market participation, including challenges related to language acquisition, caregiving responsibilities, the undervaluation of diplomas and skills, and labor market exclusion. Finally, we conclude with a discussion and summary of our findings. Our results reveal that women who have secured paid employment and those who have not share similar aspirations. Their capabilities also overlap significantly. Women who have successfully found employment often possess a university degree and prior work experience outside the Netherlands. Additionally, having a robust network and strong digital skills were critical capabilities that facilitated their success in entering the labor market.

## Context

The internal conflict in Syria, followed by international involvement over the past decade, has led to a significant displacement of people. Many Syrians have been forced to leave the country, while a substantial number remain internally displaced within Syria (Carlson & Williams, 2020; Van Heelsum, 2017). Between 2014 and 2016, 44,000 asylum seekers from Syria were granted residence permits in the Netherlands (Dagevos et al., 2018). Most refugees receive a Type III temporary asylum residence permit, which typically allows them to stay in the Netherlands for five years. After five years, they may apply for Dutch citizenship. Once a permit is granted, refugees are entitled to housing, should start the civic integration process, and are allowed to work in the Netherlands. For the group under study, we could say that integration policy reflects a "settle first" approach, as part of the Wet Inburgering 2013. The initial step is to follow the civic integration program, focused on acquiring Dutch language skills (at A2 level) and gaining knowledge about Dutch culture and the labor market. Following the successful completion of the required exams, the next stage is typically to enter employment. However, during the initial years after receiving their residence permits, the majority of refugees rely on social assistance benefits (CBS, 2020; Dagevos et al., 2018; Maliepaard et al., 2017).

It is crucial to consider gender differences in this context, both in pre-conflict Syria and in the Netherlands. Once refugees pass their civic integration exams, the primary goal of municipalities is to guide them towards employment and financial independence. Research indicates that this is a gendered process. For instance, men generally arrived in the Netherlands earlier than women (CBS, 2021), giving them a head start in the integration process and increasing the likelihood of securing employment sooner. A significant issue arises when families are no longer reliant on social assistance—often because the male partner has secured employment. In such cases, municipalities typically cease offering support to the household, including to women who may have aspirations to work. Married Syrian women whose partners are employed therefore often fall outside the scope of municipal guidance, potentially limiting their opportunities to participate in the labor market. Additionally, stereotypes among municipal staff about Syrian women may hinder support. For instance, assumptions that women prefer or are expected to stay at home and handle household and caregiving duties can influence the level of assistance they receive (De Gruijter & Razenberg, 2019).

Traditional gender roles, or assumptions about such gender roles are however not unique to Syrians in the Netherlands. Although labor market participation among Dutch women is relatively high (77%), it remains lower than that of Dutch men (87%). Part-time work is prevalent, particularly among mothers (CBS, 2022). The Netherlands is known for its "one-and-a-half-earner" model, wherein men typically work full-time while women work part-time (Van Lancker & Pavolini, 2023; Yerkes, 2009). This model is shaped by a strong cultural emphasis on motherhood, which frames part-time work as a personal choice. This is further reflected in the limited use of full-time childcare, as it is uncommon for young children to attend childcare full-time (I&O Research, 2022; Portegijs et al., 2006). Understanding this societal context is vital when analyzing the labor market participation of refugee women in the Netherlands.

In Syria, gender roles are also deeply ingrained in societal and institutional frameworks. Syrian society is predominantly family-oriented rather than individualistic, and norms and values strongly influence the roles of men and women (Ajlan, 2022; Van Eijk, 2016). Men are expected to provide for the family and women are assigned to caregiving responsibilities. These expectations are reinforced by the Syrian Personal Status Law, which is highly family-focused and restricts women's rights, particularly concerning marital property. For example, Syrian women are denied a share of marital assets acquired during the marriage (Van Eijk, 2016). This applies when two Syrian spouses marry in Syria, regardless of whether the divorce occurs in Syria or the Netherlands, provided that both partners have the Syrian nationality and do not hold Dutch nationality (Berger, 2010). This legal and social framework may shape the aspirations and labor market behavior of Syrian refugee women, even in their new environment.

## Theory

### *Labor market participation among women*

Women's employment has been widely studied in Western countries. At the individual level, research highlights the significant influence of life stages on women's participation in the labor market, with life course transitions playing a critical role (Dale et al., 2006; Van der Lippe & Van Dijk, 2002). For instance, marriage and partnership influence the labor market participation of women (Khoudja & Fleischmann, 2017; Van der Lippe & Van Dijk, 2002). Similarly, the presence of children—particularly the birth of the first child—often prompts significant changes in women's lives. These changes may include exiting the labor market or reducing working hours (Corrigall & Konrad, 2007; Dex et al., 1998; Khoudja & Platt, 2018; Macran et al., 1996; Van der Lippe & Van Dijk, 2002). Country differences also play a part in these processes, as countries differ in institutional frameworks, legal regulations such as family policies, and cultural norms regarding women's employment.

Refugee women, however, encounter additional barriers. They appear to benefit less from integration support and labor market programs compared to refugee men (Huijnk et al., 2021; Razenberg et al., 2021; Salikutluk & Menke, 2021). Furthermore, participation in language courses is, for instance, markedly lower among women with children, especially if they are not in childcare (Brücker et al., 2020; Fendel, 2019; Liebig & Tronstad, 2018). This results in lower language proficiency and reduced accumulation of host country-specific human capital compared to refugee men, which in turn negatively impacts their prospects for paid employment (Worbs & Baraulina, 2017).

Discrimination within the labor market is another significant barrier to employment. Multiple studies show that Muslim minority groups are subject to hiring discrimination in Western labor markets (Blommaert et al., 2014; Di Stasio et al., 2021; Khattab et al., 2019; Thijssen et al., 2022). Women who visibly express their Muslim identity, such as by wearing a veil are further disadvantaged, in particular if this intersects with other forms of marginalization, such as age and motherhood (Blommaert et al., 2024). Among Muslim women wearing a veil, chances of being hired were 40% lower compared to otherwise similar Muslim women not wearing the veil (Ahmed & Gorey, 2023). Building upon this body of research, our study seeks to understand the persistently low employment rates among refugee women who explicitly express a desire to work. Existing studies often group all women together, irrespective of their employment aspirations, which risks overlooking the specific barriers faced by those actively seeking employment. We argue that a deeper understanding of this issue requires centering the voices of refugee women themselves, focusing on the hurdles they experience. While comparative approaches—contrasting refugees with other migrant groups or the receiving population—are valuable, such methods often implicitly attribute observed gaps to refugees' own investments or willingness. In contrast, our study emphasizes refugee women's agency and aspirations. By exploring their lived experiences, we aim to uncover why their aspirations to work often do not translate into actual

employment. In doing so, we seek to provide a nuanced understanding of the interplay between structural barriers and individual agency, ultimately contributing to more effective and equitable policies to support refugee women in achieving their employment goals.

### Aspirations and capability framework

Originally, the aspirations and capability framework was developed and extended in order to understand dynamics of migration (Carling, 2002; de Haas, 2011). It examines, for instance, how immigration policies and other (restrictive) opportunity structures influence these dynamics in which migrants exert agency (Borselli & Van Meijl, 2021). More recently, there has been growing interest in this framework, which has been increasingly employed as a broad and interdisciplinary tool for evaluating phenomena such as inequality and individual well-being (Robeyns, 2005). In this light, Van Heelsum (2017) has suggested that this framework can also be applied to study refugees' lives *after* migration, including aspirations in domains regarding health, food, work, and education.

We use the aspirations and capability framework to center the perspectives of Syrian refugee women. Existing studies on refugee women often use the starting point that their integration into the host country lags behind that of refugee men, other migrants, and the majority population. While this perspective may hold from the viewpoint of the host society, it often overlooks refugees' own perspectives. Refugees compare their current situation with their pre-migration experiences, a comparison that, as Van Heelsum (2017) shows, frequently leads to frustration and disappointment. Including these perspectives as such provides a more nuanced understanding of these women's experiences, considerations and behaviors in the residence country.

In this framework, aspirations refer to future goals which one would like to realize to have a "satisfactory life," comprising both rational and emotional components that drives intentions to act to achieve such goals (Ghorashi et al., 2018; Robeyns, 2005). In this study, we focus on the domain of paid work, interpreting migrants' preference and intentions to work as aspirations. Through life history interviews, we examine these aspirations and their evolution over time, exploring why they lead to employment for some women but not for others.

Capabilities within this framework refer to the effective opportunities people have to live their life they value (Robeyns, 2005). To understand the interplay between aspirations and the opportunities to act on them, we distinguish between structural factors—such as policies and employer preferences—and personal circumstances, including caregiving responsibilities, education, and pre-migration work experience. This approach enables us to analyze how aspirations and circumstances interact, shaping the capability or inability to act on these aspirations. For Syrian refugee women, this interplay not only contributes to low employment rates but also fosters feelings of disappointment and frustration, which, in turn, can alter their initial aspirations (Van Heelsum, 2017).

## Methods

### Data collection and sampling

We conducted 25 in-depth life history interviews with Syrian women who received their residence permits in the Netherlands in 2013 or later. Most participants had been granted a temporary asylum for five years in the Netherlands, while some were still in the asylum procedure. The study received ethical approval from the ethics committee from the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen (application no. 2022-24).

We used purposive sampling to find participants, aiming for diversity in age (ranging from 27 to 60 years old), education, labor market position and marital status (see Table 1). To find participants, we created a flyer in Dutch, English, and Arabic. Interested participants were provided with an information sheet containing further details about the study, also available in

**Table 1.** Overview of interviewed women and their characteristics.

| Name | Year of arrival | Age | Educational level | Work experience abroad | Main activity in the Netherlands | Partner | Children |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rana | 2015 | 36 | University Syria; Master in the Netherlands (NL) | Yes | Paid employment | Yes, Dutch partner | Yes, 1 child of pre-school age |
| Amina | 2016 | 59 | University Syria | Yes | Self-employed & volunteer | Yes, Syrian partner | Yes, youngest is 18 years old |
| Layla | 2016 | 41 | University Syria | Yes | Paid employment & volunteer | Yes, Syrian partner | Yes, in primary and high school |
| Jamila | 2015 | 46 | University Syria; Bachelor (HBO) in NL | Yes | Paid employment | Yes, Syrian partner | Yes, in high school |
| Dania | 2016 | 34 | University in Syria; Secondary vocational education (MBO 4) in NL | Yes | Paid employment & volunteer | Yes, Syrian partner | Yes, in primary school |
| Mona | 2014 | 45 | University Syria | Yes | Self-employed & volunteer | Second marriage, Dutch partner | Yes, 1 child of pre-school age |
| Nuha | 2016 | 48 | University Syria | Yes | Paid employment & volunteer | Yes, partner abroad | Yes, in high school |
| Sana | 2021 | 38 | General secondary education Syria (similar to 2 years of Havo in NL) | Yes | Paid employment, used to be self-employed | Divorced, new partner abroad | Yes, 1 in primary school, 1 in high school |
| Razan | 2017 | 39 | University Syria; Master in NL | Yes | Self-employed | Divorced | No |
| Sabah | 2014 | 40 | University Syria; Master in NL | No | Paid employment & volunteer | No | No |
| Samira | 2015 | 28 | University Syria; Master in NL | Yes | Paid employment & volunteer | No | No |
| Salwa | 2015 | 31 | General secondary education Syria (similar to 2 years of Havo in NL) | No | Volunteer | Yes, Syrian partner | Yes, in primary school |
| Ruba | 2015 | 38 | University Syria | Yes | No, but paid employment in NL before | Yes, Syrian partner | Yes, 1 child of pre-school age |
| Noura | 2022 | 32 | University Syria | Yes | Volunteer | Yes, partner abroad | No |
| Aisha | 2021 | 27 | University Syria | No | Volunteer | In divorce | No |
| Khadija | 2016 | 60 | University Syria | Yes | Volunteer | Divorced | Yes, adult children |
| Yasmin | 2022 | 34 | General secondary education Syria (similar to 2 years of Havo in NL) | Yes | No | No, multiple divorces | Yes, in primary and in high school |

these three languages. The flyer was distributed *via* social media platforms (LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter) and through the researchers' networks.

Based on the interviews, we identified three groups of women: those who had already found paid employment; those with clear aspirations to find paid employment, but who had not yet done so; and those whose aspirations were primarily in other domains and who expressed less explicit aspirations to work. Our focus is on the 17 women who either had paid employment or expressed aspirations to work. We aim to understand the interplay between their aspirations and both personal and structural circumstances, exploring how these factors influence the realization of their goals. An overview of these women is provided in Table 1.

The interviews were conducted by a research team of three female researchers. Of the 17 interviews analyzed in this study, the first author conducted the majority of the interviews (14), while the remaining interviews were conducted by the other two team members. One of these researchers, who has a Syrian background, conducted one interview in Arabic for the participant who preferred this language. The remaining interviews were conducted in Dutch ($N=10$) or English ($N=6$). All interviews were recorded and transcribed after obtaining the interviewees' consent.

The interviews were held face-to-face at a location chosen by the interviewee, between February and April 2023, and continued until data saturation was reached, with no new themes emerging. Comparisons between interviews conducted in different languages and those conducted with or

without a partner or child present did not reveal major differences in results or interpretations; the general processes discussed were consistent across these variations. The interviews lasted an average of one hour, with the shortest interview lasting 38 min and the longest lasting 1 h and 33 min. Interviewees received a gift card of their choice worth 25 euros.

### *Interviews and analysis*

In the interviews, we adopted a biographical and narrative, exploring various life phases such as life before migration, the initial years after migration, the present, and aspirations for the future. Topics included labor market experiences and preferences, education, family dynamics, and perceptions of social inclusion in the Netherlands. This biographical approach allowed us to understand the meanings interviewees attach to these concepts while highlighting the dynamic and multi-layered nature of their perspectives, experiences, and capabilities (Rouvoet et al., 2017).

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using the software program MAXQDA, mentioned names are pseudonyms. Narrative and textual analyses were applied to identify patterns in how work aspirations translated into employment among those seeking work and those already employed. This process also included comparing the experiences of women with and without a partner and/or children. By doing so, we identified the conditions under which aspirations translated into finding paid work, the specific stumbling blocks faced by the women, and how marital status and caregiving responsibilities intersected with these processes.

The first author conducted the initial analysis of interviews with women who were not employed, while the second author focused on those who were employed. To ensure inter-coder reliability, the authors compared their analyses and discussed the findings with the third author, who reviewed a subset of transcripts from both groups.

## Results

### *The hurdle track to paid employment*

Examining the aspirations and capabilities of our interviewees, we identify several common challenges. Women articulate their aspirations through concrete activities aimed at finding work and share specific examples of efforts to navigate the labor market. Some women also describe a newfound sense of freedom and a desire to seize every opportunity available in the Netherlands. However, the extent to which these aspirations translate into paid employment depends on the interplay between personal capabilities and structural barriers.

Interestingly, the capabilities identified show partial overlap between women with and without paid employment. From their arrival in the Netherlands to the time of the interviews, the women often follow a similar trajectory, revealing a timeline of recurring barriers. Initial hurdles emerge during the settling-in and civic integration phases, particularly in learning the language. Not all women had yet overcome this challenge by the time of the interviews. For those who had, subsequent barriers were often related to pursuing education and the recognition and valuation of diplomas, and, later, accessing the labor market.

Household and caregiving responsibilities, as well as experiences of social exclusion, emerged as persistent barriers affecting women throughout the entire timeline, making the hurdle track slippery throughout. These challenges will therefore be discussed first, followed by an analysis of the other significant hurdles encountered at different stages of the process, as mentioned above.

### *Household and caring tasks*

Household and caring tasks play a central role in the lives of Syrian women in the Netherlands. This aligns with existing research on women's employment (Khoudja & Fleischmann, 2017; Khoudja & Platt, 2018; Van der Lippe & Van Dijk, 2002). Regardless of their aspirations, the

majority of women stated that the primary responsibility for household and care tasks lies with them. This affects them in various ways, beginning from the moment they arrive in the Netherlands. Time spent on caregiving cannot be devoted to learning Dutch, pursuing education, or seeking employment opportunities. The extent of this impact depends on both women's personal social norms and those of their surrounding environment. For instance, women with children and a Syrian partner tend to adhere more strongly to traditional norms that designate women as responsible for these tasks. By contrast, single women or those with a Dutch partner express greater flexibility in how caregiving duties are divided and balanced with paid employment.

The burden of household and caregiving responsibilities is evident even in the initial period in the Netherlands and in the initial stages of learning the language. These duties often restrict women's ability to choose a suitable language school or to devote sufficient energy to language acquisition. These challenges persist into subsequent hurdles related to education and employment. For instance, a woman with young children explained the difficulty of maintaining her Dutch language skills:

> I don't do it every day, learning Dutch, that's a pity, but it depends on time and everything. Taking the children to school and picking them up, yes, cooking and eating; I do what every mother does. In the evening when my children play football, train, or have swimming lessons, I walk the dog and yes, then the day is over [laughter]. (Salwa)

For many with young children, the lack of formal daycare or a childcare or a network that can support in these caregiving tasks makes it difficult to study or find meaningful employment.

Many instead seek jobs that fit within school hours, though finding such flexible roles is challenging. Women often cite caregiving responsibilities as a reason for not working, noting that available jobs rarely align with school schedules. Childcare is perceived as too expensive and, at times, not in the best interests of the child.

> We have no family here, and if I send my children to daycare, it costs a lot of money. (Layla)

These examples illustrate how social context and norms regarding women's roles shape the opportunities available to them. While these women may possess the necessary capabilities, their personal circumstances often prevent them from fully utilizing available opportunities.

### *Social exclusion*

Another challenge we identified is social exclusion. All the women we interviewed reflected on their experiences in the early years of living in the Netherlands, describing difficulties in establishing contacts, friendships, and other social interactions with Dutch-speaking people. Language barriers were frequently cited as a key factor. Additionally, life in the Netherlands was described as being overwhelmingly busy. Women referred to the demands of work, social obligations, and the numerous appointments typical of Dutch life. This made forming a social network more challenging and was perceived as a significant change from social life in Syria. Over time, this busy lifestyle also became normalized for the women themselves, particularly those with young children at home, leading to feelings of social exclusion even in their private lives.

> It's difficult to make friends with Dutch people because they have their own system. In Syria it's easier. Like if I want to see my friend, I call them "Hi, how about to have a cup of coffee today at like 7:00 PM?" "Oh, okay, yeah, let's go. Let's meet." I'll call other friends. But here, if I want to see my friend, I have to take an appointment like a month or two months before. (Ruba)

Some women also reported negative experiences in public spaces, such as on the street or in public transport. These incidents, ranging from verbal abuse to physical violence, were most commonly directed at women wearing a veil. Such experiences not only impacted their sense of safety but also undermined their confidence in interacting with others in the Netherlands.

The lack of a support network in the Netherlands impacts their opportunities in several ways. First, as mentioned, women are seldom relieved of their caregiving duties, leaving little time for learning Dutch or personal development. Second, limited (positive) social contact with Dutch-speaking individuals further hampers their language proficiency. Several interviewees noted that their language skills deteriorated after completing the civic integration program:

> All the girls my age have their own studies or jobs. There's never enough time… They're always busy, busy. I don't have a job or education, but I still feel busy, too. (Salwa)

Third, the absence of a network leaves women with little guidance in navigating Dutch systems, such as healthcare, childcare, education, and the labor market. This social exclusion has a ripple effect on other areas of life. A lack of a social network—or even the absence of a single key supportive individual—can significantly hinder a woman's ability to practice speaking Dutch and to take the right steps towards finding a suitable educational program or job.

### *The first hurdle: Civic integration program*

The majority of the women we interviewed participated in a civic integration program, which is mainly focused on language acquisition and providing essential skills for their future in the Netherlands. However, from the women's perspective, the program did not adequately prepare them to pursue further education or enter their preferred employment sectors. In particular, many women perceived their level of Dutch proficiency was insufficient to meaningfully participate in Dutch society. For some, this issue arose during the program itself, as they wished to attend classes at a higher level than those available in their village or city. Considering that the majority fell under the civic integration act of 2013, they were required to select their own language school. However, not all were aware that they could choose schools outside their immediate locality. Even when aware, logistical and financial challenges made it difficult to act on this option. Support for attending schools in other locations varied significantly across municipalities, particularly regarding much-needed reimbursement for travel expenses. One participant recounted her experience:

> I even asked the municipality to support me with the transportation. They said, "No, we have schools here, so you have to go here." And I told them, "No, I don't want to spend the money on a school that is very bad." So, I went to a school in (name city) and it was a really good school. Yeah, they were very tough, and they are really specialized in this. (Ruba)

These narratives highlight the interaction between individual capabilities and structural barriers. One notable capability we identified that contributed to overcoming this hurdle is proactiveness, exemplified by women actively seeking better language schools. Many of the interviewed women demonstrated this quality. Nevertheless, the low quality of some language schools and the lack of municipal support posed significant barriers, requiring substantial perseverance to overcome.

Among the women who had not yet secured paid employment, three were relatively new arrivals and had not yet begun their civic integration program. Nevertheless, they demonstrated similar indications of proactiveness:

> I found a master's in Amsterdam, but now it's really difficult because I don't have enough time and I found a Master of Accounting, also, in English. First, I have to do the IELTS test and score 6.5, and then I can apply for this master program. But also, it should be funded from UAF. (Noura)

Overall, the challenges and efforts associated with the Dutch civic integration program often demotivate women from realizing their employment aspirations. This is either because the skills taught are deemed insufficient or because structural support that aligns with their ambitions is lacking. However, women who exhibit consistent proactiveness are better positioned to overcome these obstacles, navigating one hurdle only to encounter the next.

### The second hurdle: Education

A second barrier relates to women's education in the past and present. A starting point is the recognition of diplomas obtained abroad, which were often valued lower than the women expected. Their diplomas were moreover deemed insufficient by employers for roles that fit women's educational level and experiences:

> Yes, it was very difficult, because in Syria, I worked as a laboratory physician. […] When I came to the Netherlands, I first had to have my diploma evaluated, and it was assessed as equivalent to a master's degree. But being assessed doesn't mean you're allowed to work at the same level, due to many factors. First of all, because of the language. (Jamila)

For highly educated women, the lower evaluation of their diplomas means they must take more steps and spend more time than anticipated to find suitable paid employment in the Netherlands. This delay not only postpones financial independence but also creates disappointment and frustration. Regardless of previous educational achievements, all women face significant challenges when attempting to start a study program. Often, they do not meet the required Dutch or English language proficiency levels. Additionally, women over the age of 30 are not eligible for a study loan. Without such financial support, studying becomes too expensive. Older age is not only a barrier to obtaining a study loan, but it also affects the support women receive from their municipalities. While some women benefit from municipal assistance, such as being allowed to study instead of taking low-paid jobs, others encounter less favorable experiences:

> Because of my age, the municipality won't pay for me to start learning again. And without a diploma, I can't do the job I want to do. (Khadija)

This participant had studied and worked in Syria for 27 years. She has high aspirations and explored various avenues, including volunteering, networking, building social contacts, and requesting municipal support to begin a new study program. However, the municipality believed her chances of employment were low and did not support her, even though her being divorced made employment pressing, to her own frustration. Despite her capabilities, her age is deemed a constraint.

Despite the high quality of the educational system in the Netherlands, which our interviewees explicitly valued, strict regulations and conditions for starting a study, as well as education-related barriers to entering the labor market, indicate significant structural barriers for refugee women. However, personal circumstances may help to overcome these barriers. Among the six women who completed a study program in the Netherlands, some had coincidentally arrived in the Netherlands for their studies around the time the conflicts in Syria began. Others did not have a partner or had a supportive partner. Participants explicitly mentioned that their partner taking on additional household and caregiving responsibilities during their study period was critical to their success.

A final, critical barrier to studying, is the lack of access to information about the educational system in the Netherlands. Many women struggle to identify suitable study programs or to find relevant information. Women who possess the capabilities to navigate this system are more likely to succeed in fulfilling their aspirations. Two key sources of such capabilities are having a network in the Netherlands and digital skills. A network—or key individual—might include a Dutch partner, family members, or Dutch-origin volunteers who have become friends. Such networks play a vital role in two ways: first, by helping women realize that studying is a necessary step; and second, by assisting them in identifying the right educational program, internship, or volunteer opportunities to support their career goals. Numerous interviewees described how a single individual played a pivotal role in overcoming this barrier:

> The most important step was that friend. She referred me to her brother-in-law. Through him, I joined this program for foreign doctors. And then I really had a clear picture of what I could do here. (Jamila)

Once again, we thus observe how structural barriers—such as diplomas being lower evaluated, language proficiency requirements, and municipal regulations—interact with women's personal capabilities. Those with the resources to access relevant information and sufficient language proficiency are better equipped to overcome these barriers.

Many women find themselves 'stuck' at this hurdle. They want to pursue a study but, for the reasons mentioned above, are unable to do so. Meanwhile, they often remain at home, taking care of children and household tasks—a situation considered logical, especially when a partner is employed. Nevertheless, some women indicated that they postponed studying until their children are older. It is challenging to determine whether this postponement is a cause or an effect of their circumstances.

### *The third hurdle: Entering and navigating the labor market*

Although our interviewees were dissatisfied with their Dutch language proficiency and were not always able to pursue their desired studies, this did not stop them from trying to find paid employment. Again, we observed a strong proactiveness in their efforts to secure employment, including researching how to find appropriate study programs or jobs, for which digital skills are also essential. Additionally, their proactiveness and perseverance were evident in activities such as volunteering, seeking support at the municipality, the Dutch Council for Refugees, and finding a language buddy to practice Dutch. Despite these women's capabilities in creating opportunities for employment, they all experienced difficulties in the process of finding work. One significant barrier was their desire to continue improving their Dutch but lacking the time or financial means to do so. Improving their level of Dutch was seen as essential to finding a suitable job. An example of proactiveness is illustrated by a woman who had previously worked as an English teacher. Her story reflects what we heard from other women: she studied hard to learn Dutch, tried to build a network, and began searching for work. She had several jobs, but they were all temporary. Her first paid job in the Netherlands was as a substitute English teacher:

> I know that for people with a university education, you need B2-level [Dutch], not A2, necessary for the civic integration program. So, I continued studying with the B2 book, with help from neighbors, the language café, volunteers, a friend… everything, you name it. That was in April, and in August, I passed my state exam and my civic integration exams. Immediately, I started looking for work. I contacted the Randstad employment agency. I went there for an introductory meeting, and immediately… after a few weeks, in November, I had my first contract with [name of school]. (Nuha)

Of the eleven women with paid employment, most had children and the majority did not have a partner in the Netherlands at the time of the interview or had a Dutch partner. Here, we see that having children and no partner in the Netherlands may require women to be more proactive in the need for paid employment, whereas those with a Dutch partner benefit from access to relevant resources in their labor market journey. Among those without paid employment, only two were married (with a Syrian partner), and half had children still in school. In many ways, those without employment are thus similar to those with employment, suggesting that other structural barriers or personal circumstances played a role in determining the participants' success in securing paid employment.

We identified several additional capabilities that contributed to women finding employment. The majority of the women who secured employment, for instance, held university degrees from Syria. Of the eleven women employed, most had studied in Syria and/or worked in Syria or another country. Their prior work experience often gave them a clearer sense of the sector or type of job they wanted. Especially during the initial years after migration, this awareness often led to finding volunteer opportunities, internships, or temporary jobs that served as a bridge to paid employment. Their educational level, diplomas and often strong command of the English language, were personal capabilities that helped them navigate the Dutch system in general, and the Dutch labor market in particular. Nevertheless, when asked what advice they would give to

other women, many concluded that obtaining a Dutch diploma is ultimately the best option for finding work in their former field of expertise. Some women pursued studies in the Netherlands, which helped them secure suitable employment.

During the job application process, women who successfully found jobs mentioned several challenges, including prejudice and discrimination. Another common issue was the lack of work experience in the Netherlands, which made it more difficult to get hired:

> So, for me, it was more of a vicious cycle: I didn't have experience because I didn't have a job, and I didn't have a job because I didn't have experience. (Sabah)

This lack of work experience in the Netherlands was often compounded by language proficiency. For highly educated women, limited knowledge of Dutch terminology in their professional field posed an additional barrier. For example, one English teacher shared her challenges:

> I'm not afraid to stand in front of a class. But honestly, I must admit, it's just difficult, in terms of pronunciation. I want to do my best as a teacher. I have my methods, where I can explain everything in English-English, but they don't understand anything. So, it's like I'm speaking Chinese, and they don't understand anything. So, mission failed. (Nuha)

Similarly, women faced difficulties at the workplace in understanding 'unwritten' rules. Some mentioned experiencing exclusion or bullying by colleagues. Although they had overcome the hurdle of finding employment, these new challenges made it difficult to enjoy their jobs and develop their skills further.

The difficulty in finding suitable employment caused some women to explore alternative options, such as becoming self-employed. As with education, we observe that a support network can make a substantial difference. Women who became self-employed received help from their networks, not only in pointing out that self-employment was a viable option, but also in navigating the practicalities involved. One participant, for example, learned about self-employment through a friend:

> I applied to one organization and had a job interview. They choose another candidate. A friend told me that I could become self-employed if I wanted to and that it is not a complicated process. And yes, why not? She went with me to the Chamber of Commerce and, yes, I registered. (Amina)

Although self-employment highlights women's perseverance as their embeddedness in relevant networks, it was never their preferred option from the outset. Instead, women turned to self-employment to navigate the challenges they encountered.

## Conclusion & discussion

This study set out to assess the aspirations and capabilities of Syrian women in the Netherlands regarding paid employment. Our aim was to take a closer look at how to understand that among women with aspirations to work, some succeed in finding paid employment and others do not.

Our findings show that various personal capabilities turned out to be advantageous. Women who succeeded in entering the labor market tend to have a higher level of education, prior work experience, experience with volunteering in the Netherlands, and a proactive attitude. Proficiency in English, digital skills, and support from a key person or network were also significant enablers. Women with clear aspirations to work but who have not yet found paid employment however exhibited similar capabilities. The primary difference between these groups lay in the specific personal and structural barriers they faced.

All in all, we identified five main challenges for Syrian refugee women in the Netherlands: the civic integration phase (including Dutch language acquisition); education; access to the labor market; household and caregiving responsibilities; and social exclusion. While the latter two referred to aspects that played a part throughout women's life in the Netherlands, the former

three are specific hurdles that are necessary to jump. While all women faced these challenges, the extent to which these barriers influenced their aspirations and decisions varied. Where previous, more quantitative, research also touches upon these identified challenges (e.g. Dale et al., 2006; Huijnk et al., 2021; Khoudja & Fleischmann, 2017; Khoudja & Platt, 2018; Kil et al., 2018; Salikutluk & Menke, 2021), this study shows in more detail *why* and *how* these factors (directly and indirectly) are challenging for labour market success. For example, we found that women experienced a general sense of social exclusion in Dutch society—signaling it is not just discrimination in the labour market that is a problem for accessing it (Blommaert et al., 2014; Di Stasio et al., 2021; Khattab et al., 2019; Thijssen et al., 2022). The difficulty to establish contacts—in part due to facing broader social exclusion in society—has negative consequences for feelings of belonging, language proficiency and finding employment.

We conclude that the aspirations and capabilities framework has additional value for a better understanding of and why some women who wish to work are unable to do so. At the same time, the interplay between aspirations and capabilities is complex and at times may develop subconsciously, making it difficult to determine how they influence one another based on interviews or survey data.

Our findings highlight the role of both social norms and social structures in shaping Syrian women's aspirations and capabilities in the Netherlands. By specifically focusing on Syrian women only, we unraveled how social norms within the Syrian community and Dutch society influence their capabilities and the choices they make. This influence can operate in two ways: some women adhere to more traditional gender roles, while others find that the Dutch context provides new opportunities and greater freedom. This was particularly evident among women who are single, divorced, or had a Dutch partner. The interviews revealed that being single or having a supportive partner can serve as an important capability in securing employment. However, having a partner and/or children was not a decisive factor among the women who either worked or expressed a strong willingness to do so. Notably, other women we interviewed for a larger project and who were not the primary focus of this study—because they did not express the aspiration to work—were all married to Syrian men and had children (or were pregnant). They were also significantly less educated than the women included in our analysis. As such, this illustrates that (the type of) partnership may be more vital in developing aspirations to work compared to how having a partner and children affects women's success in their aspiration to work. Identifying the importance of these social norms and social structures provides a valuable addition to the literature on the employment of migrant women (van der Zwan & Van Tubergen, 2024). We recommend future research to explore how partnership dynamics shape labour market participation, also acknowledging how loss of social status and perceptions of masculinities among Syrian refugee men affect this process (Huizinga & Van Hoven, 2021; Kleist, 2010), for which the aspirations and capabilities framework can also be applied (Van Heelsum, 2017).

Instead, social institutions and their shortcomings, particularly regarding access to information, language, education, and employment, play a crucial role in shaping whether refugee women are able to realize their aspirations; in other words, they shape their capabilities to challenge or work within given opportunity structures. This is particularly striking when compared to their life prior to migration. The women's background characteristics indicate that many did not start from zero: many had studied or worked before moving to the Netherlands. These experiences and related work aspirations are however not acknowledged nor taken into account in Dutch integration polices. Instead, integration policies focus mainly on language acquisition and rapid financial independence for refugees. Many municipalities therefore encourage refugees to enter the labor market as quickly as possible. Disregarding and not supporting women's aspirations, which may require more time and resources, result in many women not achieving suitable and fulfilling employment. This aligns with previous research showcasing how women are limited by policies not acknowledging previous qualifications (Cuban, 2018; Van Hees et al., 2024).

Based on the results of our study and the suggestions of the interviewed women themselves, we formulate several policy recommendations (also shared in this Dutch infographic; van der Zwan et al., 2024). First, women expressed the need for more time, money and support in learning the language. Moreover, accessible childcare is a basic requirement for mothers to be able to find employment. Accessible in terms of costs, but also by providing clear information about how the childcare system works. A third recommendation is to enable combining learning the language with work or study. Last, for municipalities guiding women to work, a recommendation is to listen to what women themselves want and what their aspirations are, supporting women to develop a new perspective and work towards it (Van Hees et al., 2024), as Syrian refugee women are diverse, and thus vary in the kind of support necessary.

Indeed, this study reveals crucial diversity within the group of Syrian refugee women regarding their aspirations and capabilities for paid work. Many Syrian women experience frustration and disappointment when being unable to realize their aspirations due to various hurdles faced. Conversely, we also identified women who had the capabilities to achieve their goals and expressed satisfaction with the opportunities available to lead the lives they desired, suggesting that access to relevant resources and support are crucial and possible.

This study focused on Syrian women in the Netherlands only. For future research, it would be relevant to examine whether similar mechanisms are at play for refugee women from other countries. In the Netherlands, for instance, refugees from Eritrea also form a substantial group which may have different experiences, and thus needs. We recommend future research to explore this accordingly while also systematically acknowledge the power dynamics between interviewer and interviewee. Although we tried our best to create an atmosphere of openness and trust during the interviews, we do not know to what extent the interviewers and the language of the interviews affected the women's responses and social desirability.

Notwithstanding these limitations, our findings underscore the importance of recognizing variation within refugee groups, even among those from the same country, to grasp underlying mechanisms behind often-presented gaps in labor market participation. It provides insights in why so few Syrian women are able to find employment, despite their desire to work (van der Zwan & Van Tubergen, 2024). Paying attention to refugees' aspirations, as well as their structural and personal circumstances, can help facilitate better alignment with the labor market and increase our understanding of migrants' labor market related preferences, such as self-employment.

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