

# HIGHLY SKILLED REFUGEES AND THE RIGHT TO DECENT WORK: THE CASE OF THE NETHERLANDS

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## List of Acronyms

CV	Curriculum Vitae
EU	European Union
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights)
ILO	International Labour Organization
ISS	International Institute of Social Studies
NGO's	Non-Governmental Organizations
NUFFIC	The Dutch Organization for Internalization in Education
SDG's	Sustainable Development Goals
UAF	Foundation for Refugee Students
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UNHCR	United Nations Refugee Agency

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## **Abstract**

This research analyses the right of highly skilled refugees to decent work in The Netherlands. Considering human capital and knowledge economy theories, it explains labour market segmentation, the precarity of refugees and the labour market integration of refugees. It investigates whether refugees find work in their areas and levels of expertise. It also explores how they find work, factors that influence this process and their definition of decent work. The aim is to contribute to existing knowledge on the employment situation of highly qualified refugees in relation to ideas of 'decent work'. This study focuses specifically on the views of ten highly skilled refugees on their employment in The Netherlands. I was interested in their efforts to find decent work that fit their fields of expertise and at the levels of income that reflect their ideas about where in the employment ladder they ought to be. To supplement interviews with refugees, five additional interviews were conducted with representatives of organisations involved in issues of employment for refugees. These included Non-Government Organizations (NGO's) and public sector organisations. The main findings were that highly skilled refugees generally did not find work that matched their highly skilled background. Respondents felt this was in part because of both structural and social discrimination. Revealingly, one Dutch informant referred to the existence of a 'Dutch working culture' to explain this exclusion. Surprisingly, validation procedures were not a significant part of these refugees' experience. Another finding was that 'volunteering' as a concept seemed to be offered to these highly skilled refugees, and was one they did not feel attracted by, given their costs and family obligations. This study advocates for the recognition and implementation of decent work for highly skilled refugees as a human right.

## **Relevance to Development Studies**

Refugees are a special category of people. Some often have high level of skills and expertise. They experience forced migration. Having moved to a new country, refugees struggle to find decent work in their own professional field. This is broadly detrimental to economic development of the refugees themselves, their host and home countries, since it deprives them of income, sustainable livelihoods and job satisfaction. In The Netherlands, there have been efforts to help the labour market integration of refugees, however, more needs to be done. Studying this topic is especially relevant to Sustainable Development Goal 8, which promotes inclusive, sustainable and decent employment for all. This study is concerned with decent work as a human right which promotes human dignity, economic development as well as self-sufficiency and resilience of refugees in the longer-term, as well as the development of their countries of origin and host communities.

## **Keywords**

Refugees; labour market, decent work; The Netherlands; human capital, deskilling, migrant precarity.

# Chapter 1 Highly Skilled Refugees and Decent Work?

“I don’t mean this as a boast, I think I can work something better than this, with my skills and qualifications, I speak 5 languages, Turkish, Armenian, Dutch, English, Arabic and I have begun to learn Spanish. I have studied very hard, did a lot of courses, I think I should work in a better position”<sup>1</sup>.

## 1.1 Introduction

This thesis focuses on decent work and highly skilled refugees in The Netherlands. Drawing from their right to work, this research uses theories such as human capital, knowledge economy, labour market segmentation, migrant precarity and explores how factors such as racism, discrimination and language determine the access of highly skilled refugees to decent work in the Dutch labour market. This thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter one consists of the introduction, contextual background, research problem statement, review of relevant literature, justification of study, research questions and objectives of the study. Chapter two explains the methodology and all choices surrounding data collection and this research. Chapter three consists of the theoretical framework. Chapter four presents the findings, analysis and chapter five wraps up with a conclusion.

## 1.2 Contextual Background

The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) defines a refugee as “someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so”(UNHCR. 2018b). During the last decade, global insecurity challenges have forced a lot of people to migrate from violence-infested societies to safer societies. This has resulted in the outpouring of refugees into Europe, which has led to a global refugee crisis (Ghorashi 2005). In June 2018 the UNHCR stated that there are 68.5 million people displaced because of force globally, 25.4 million of which are refugees (UNHCR. 2018b).

Having abandoned everything (or almost everything) to flee to other countries, refugees must start their lives afresh. They begin by integrating into their new societies. Part of this integration includes finding work (Delaporte and Piracha 2018), so they can earn a living, increase their resilience and reduce their defencelessness (ILO. 2018, UNHCR. 2018a, Zetter and Ruaudel 2016). However, they face special challenges in integrating into the host country’s labour market. Some refugees have high level of expertise and qualifications which could be used to contribute positively to the development of host countries’ economies. These skills may go to waste if they are not updated and used in the labour market. For example, in August 2018, it was reported that 15

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<sup>1</sup> WhatsApp Interview with Miss K, master’s degree holder, Syrian, 31 years old.



refugees with professional teaching experience were drafted in to work as teachers in Amsterdam to cover for the shortage of teachers (Boffey 2018).

The right of refugees to work is derived from a plethora of legal instruments; internationally, regionally and domestically. A good starting point is the Refugee Convention of which The Netherlands are signatory. Article 17 states that refugees shall be employed in jobs where they can earn wages, Article 19 states that refugees who have diplomas or are specialized in their profession should be allowed to work using their diplomas and have these qualifications recognized by the state which hosts them and employers (United Nations 1951). As refugees are legally allowed to work, this puts refugees under the mandate of the International Labour organization (ILO) (ILO. 2018). The Netherlands is also bound by the European Convention on Human Rights (Council of Europe 1950), other laws and policies including its internal immigration laws and policies including The Alien Act 2000 (Government of the Netherlands 2000). As part of its obligations, The Netherlands has welcomed many refugees from different parts of the world.

Notwithstanding these layers of protection for refugees, the ILO has expressed concerns about the fact that refugees can hardly find formal employment, the ILO states that

“... often only a very small minority of refugees gain access to labour markets in the formal economy. Access to work may be prohibited or restricted by law and refugees who do manage to find work do so mostly in the informal economy” (ILO. 2018: 3).

The ILO also states that there are over 17 million recognized refugees and asylum seekers, out of this great number, only very few are able to gain access to the formal economy, formal economy and decent work opportunities (ILO 2015, ILO 2015). “Globally, the refugee and asylum-seeker population of almost 25 million is a significant but grossly underutilized labour force” (Zetter and Ruaudel 2016: viii). This means that refugees are exposed to precarious work or no work at all and a substantial labour force is left to waste.

A good example are doctors who are qualified to practice outside the European Economic Area. Before coming to The Netherlands, some of them were well established and practiced in their countries. Sadly, when they arrive in The Netherlands, they are not allowed to practise until they are certified by the Department of Health. Mostly they are not certified by the Department of Health, they must study and qualify as Medical Doctors institution in The Netherlands. Some of these doctors have families and combining studies with a job to support their families is almost impossible to do. They give up, accept lower jobs such as caregiving or cleaning to enable them to cater for their families (RNW Media , Herfs 2011).

### **1.3 Research Problem Statement**

Refugees need to work because “work is important. Not only as a provider of income, but as a source of personal development, psychological stability, social participation and recognition” (Monteith and Giesbert 2017: 816). However, most refugees have difficulty in securing formal employment due to multiple factors such as; the type of jobs available, acceptance of their educational qualifications, labour market governance, and sometimes language barrier.

Where the jobs are available, the jobs do not fit the expertise of the refugees leading to underemployment, de-skilling, mismatch, etc. Working in lower positions or not working at all can lead to losing their dignity (ILO. 2018). The lack of sources of livelihood makes them dependent and defenceless. As described by Halleh Ghorashi, “what is striking in the case of The Netherlands is that the Dutch welfare system makes refugees dependents of the state and then blames them for their dependency on the state” (Ghorashi 2005: 186).

Legally, refugees in The Netherlands can work after being granted refugee status (Dutch Council for Refugees. 2018) However, some of the refugees are highly skilled and educated but they only find manual work. If refugees are employed in their areas of expertise, they will be more productive to themselves and their host countries. This is in line with the SDG 8 which aims to “promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all” (United Nations. 2018).

This research focuses on highly skilled refugees because they have high investments of human capital by their qualifications and skills. According to human capital theory, accessing the labour market should be easy for them. This research is conducted in The Netherlands because The Netherlands is a knowledge economy with a developed labour market. As a knowledge economy, in theory, people with high investment of human capital should easily get decent employment in the labour market. This does not seem to be the case. The ILO states that in Europe, refugees are mismatched, and about 25-45 percent of migrants are either under or overqualified for their job and this promotes lower wages, deskilling and brain waste (ILO 2015). Studies also show that “refugees have problems finding employment, have more difficulties in organizing self-employment and hence also suffer from lower earnings” (Bauböck and Tripkovic 2017: 93). These and the precarious positions in which migrants (refugees) inclusive find themselves is the push factor behind the ILO framework for decent work for migrants.

The ILO framework for decent work launched in 1999;

“involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men” (Monteith and Giesbert 2017).

This framework according to the ILO in principle seeks to encourage better working conditions globally. However, in practice, decent work and its theories or investigation into the quality of work for workers is often carried out in developing countries. An example is a study carried out into debates of what quality or good work mean to people who work in Burkina Faso, Uganda and Sri Lanka (Monteith and Giesbert 2017).

Apart from the fact that these kinds of study are rarely conducted in the Global North, these workers are rarely given a voice in these studies (Abkhezr et al. 2018). This is quite puzzling as there are issues as to the quality of work and the decency of work for the workforce in the Global North. Studies find that even “in Europe and North America, refugees with mid- or high-level qualifications may find it difficult to find appropriate work.” (Desiderio 2016: 4). Studies such as the afore mentioned prove that research surrounding decent

work is also necessary in developed countries. Addressing these shortfalls in 'developed' labour markets like The Netherlands contributes to a richer understanding of the causal factors of indecent work, how it can be addressed and contributes to greater epistemic justice between the Global North and South. This research seeks to address this gap using The Netherlands as an example. It seeks to emphasize refugee workers own definition of decent work thereby reverting the class-based silencing of racialised workers own voices and desires (Abkhezr et al. 2018).

## 1.4 A Review of Relevant Literature

Refugees are considered a problem. This influences the perception and reaction of host communities that they arrive in. This also plays a part in their integration in these communities (Simpson 1938: 607, Delaporte and Piracha 2018). On the part of the host countries, for refugees to be settled, substantial preparation, finance and some basic amenities have to be put in place (Simpson 1938: 608, Delaporte and Piracha 2018). Even with adequate preparation, when refugees arrive in host countries, unless they can start working soon, they might place a strain on the social welfare system. If they can access labour markets, they are likely to contribute in taxes and as consumers thereby adding to the economy, increasing economic growth and productivity of labour (Delaporte and Piracha 2018). If on the contrary, refugees are restricted from accessing the labour market, or driven into low-paying jobs, there may be less positive economic impact from their presence (ILO 2016: 7). Refugees should have a source of livelihood, they often need to find work, not just any kind of work but decent work.

Decent work is described in terms of "opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity" (Anker et al. 2003: 147, Nizami and Prasad 2017). Decent work entails poverty reduction, promotes growth, sustainable development, better lives and better jobs (Anker et al. 2003: 147, Nizami and Prasad 2017). Decent work is made up of six dimensions including: work opportunities; productive work; work chosen freely; workers must be treated in equity and in fairness; job security; lastly such workers must be treated with respect (Anker et al. 2003). Decent work also has eleven indicators including:

"Employment opportunities; Unacceptable work ;Adequate earnings and productive work; Decent hours; Stability and security of work; Balancing work and family life; Fair treatment in employment; Safe work environment; Social protection; Social dialogue and workplace relation; Economic and social context of decent work" (Anker et al. 2003: 153-154, Kubo 2018: 452, Nizami and Prasad 2017).

In simple terms, "the decency of a job also depends on the rights that are derived from that job, such as a good salary, social security, representation rights etc" (P. Auer 2006: 23). In all decent work is a means of raising the already "deteriorating labour rights and standards worldwide" (Vosko 2002: 20). Decent work is an attempt at global social justice for workers by globally encouraging transparency in organisations, strengthening alliances with trade unions, formal and informal groups, women groups, fighting against unpaid labour and child labour (Vosko 2002). Decent work and refugees are rarely put together. Though the framework of decent work and its methodologies have been explained, there

are rarely studies which investigate decent work and refugees in the global north. As Burchell et al explains, “we must therefore conclude that the extent to which decent work has penetrated the academic literature has been extremely limited...” (Burchell et al. 2013: 471).

## 1.5 Justification of Study

There is a substantial amount of literature on the labour market integration of immigrant. However, there is a gap regarding decent work for refugees in the global north as it is rarely written about (Bevelander 2016: 7). Current research will benefit from the contribution of this analysis which combines legal, scholarly literature, experiences of the refugees and the perspectives of the organizations involved in the labour market integration of refugees. Overall, this research paper aims to contribute to scholarly literature on labour market integration of refugees in The Netherlands. Further, this research seeks to provide evidence on whether the policies as regarding the labour market integration of refugees are viable or not which is important for policy makers and the government of The Netherlands and other countries.

## 1.6 Research Questions

The main question in this research is as follows:

**To what extent do highly skilled refugees in The Netherlands find work that meets their own definition of ‘decent’ work? If not, why might this be?**

There are a number of sub-questions that define the main question:

1. What laws and policies protect the right to work of refugees? Which organizations helps to integrate refugees into the labour market in The Netherlands?
2. What kinds of work do highly skilled refugees in The Netherlands find?
3. In cases where highly skilled refugees do not find suitable work, is this due to a ‘skills gap’ or other issues, including discrimination in the labour market?
4. How do highly skilled refugees in The Netherlands define decent work?

## 1.7 Objective

The objective of this study is to investigate whether highly skilled refugees are employed in work that they consider to be on a par with their level of skills, educational qualifications and whether they consider such work to be ‘decent work’. Beginning from the perspective of laws, policies and conventions, the aim is to investigate the right of refugees to work that fits their expertise and experience. The study also investigates factors that influences the kind of work refugees are offered and end up taking. This research argues that the right to work of refugees should be expanded to include decent work.

# Chapter 2 Methodological Strategies and Methods

## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter explains the methodological choices and techniques used to conduct this study. It explores the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, limitation of the study, ethical choices, position and reflections of the researcher. This study is conducted using the qualitative approach of data collection (O'Leary 2014: 121). The choice of methodology for this research is linked with its objectives. Resources and data are collected from refugees, government and non-government organizations, literature etc. More importantly, it amplifies the voices of refugees to avoid using a top-down approach (Korac 2003).

The use of the qualitative approach enables the researcher to examine the subject matter holistically. It is useful for contextualising the topic, thereby building a framework and critically studying the topic at hand (Castro et al. 2010). Collecting data for this research has enabled the researcher to tailor the theoretical framework, research design and strategies for collecting data to answer the research questions. This ensures coherence and ensures that the data collected is relevant.

## 2.2 Types of Data and Sources

This research uses both primary and secondary data. This combination of data sources is deemed appropriate for this research considering their individual strengths and weaknesses. The primary data consists of semi-structured, in-depth interviews while the secondary data is obtained from laws, policies, conventions, other literature, reports of non-government and government organizations.

The main source of primary data in this research is qualitative interviews. Through these interviews, the researcher collects very detailed, original narratives of respondents. This is valuable in answering the questions of this research especially as this research deals with the experiences of highly skilled refugees as it relates to their finding work in The Netherlands and their definition of decent work. Qualitative interviewing gives the opportunity to hear the undiluted, objective, subjective experiences of refugees (Korac 2003). Officials from four different organizations involved in the employment processes of refugees also share what their organizations do to help highly skilled refugees access the labour market. The use of primary data gives the opportunity to collect independent and current data which specifically addresses the object of this research (Hox and Boeijs 2005). Using primary data also enables this research to contribute to the existing body of knowledge and literature on decent work for highly skilled refugees.

Secondary data such as literatures, laws, conventions, policies, webpages of organization, news are used in this research to clearly articulate the extent to which research has been carried on this subject. This gives a clear indication as

to where the gap in research concerning the labour market integration of refugees exists (O'Leary 2014). It helps the researcher to explain the right to work and decent work for highly skilled refugees. Secondary data is used in laying out the conceptual framework. Explaining concepts and theories such as human capital and knowledge economy sets the stage for an understanding of why highly skilled refugees should easily find decent work in a knowledge economy as The Netherlands. Migrant precarity and how deskilling occurs among refugees are explained. These literary explanations are useful for reflecting on and analysing the findings of the research

## 2.3 Interviews

As this research includes questions as to what kind of work highly refugees find, factors affecting their labour market integration, and their own definition of decent work, these questions of interest were discussed by the researcher with her supervisor. It was agreed that the voices of the refugees should be made dominant in this study, considering that studies about the labour market integration of refugees do not give enough voice to the refugees who are most affected by these topics. Highly skilled refugees take the centre stage in this research. The researcher mapped out crucial actors relevant to the research to include refugees, Non-government and government organizations etc. As some organizations are highly involved in the labour market integration of refugees, it was pertinent to visit some of these organizations which had come up repeatedly in the findings of this research to get a better understanding of their work, whether it helped refugees or not.

In The Netherlands, apart from the government through the IND (Immigration and Naturalisation Service. 2018) which gives the decision on the application of asylum of refugees and recommends the successful ones to the appropriate organizations. The municipalities help the refugees settle in and other organizations support refugee integration into the labour market. Such organizations include, Vluchtelingenwerk. VluchtelingenWerk supports refugees through the asylum process, family unification process and labour market integration process etc (Vluchtelingenwerk Nederlands. 2018). Another organization Nuffic conducts evaluation of credentials of refugees (Nuffic. 2018) and partners with UAF which is the Foundation of Refugee students which advises refugees on study programs and supports them through paying for their books, transportation and coaching and easing them into the labour market (UAF. 2018). There are many other organizations involved in this. Some universities in The Netherlands have different initiatives which supports refugees in trainings or preparations to begin a new course or in sharpening their skills so they can gain access to the labour market (Martin et al. 2016).

The researcher collected data from VluchtelingenWerk, Nuffic, UAF and the Municipality of The Hague as these were the most important in the opinion of the researcher to this research. One official each from VluchtelingenWerk, UAF, the Municipality of The Hague and two from Nuffic were interviewed. These officials work around issues of refugees' integration into the labour market. Ten highly skilled refugees were also interviewed. The refugees had a minimum of a bachelor's degree before coming to The Netherlands. The researcher believes that it is easier to measure the quality of skills of a person with a qualification.

## 2.4 Sampling Technique and Size

In this research, purposive sampling technique was used to identify the respondents. The researcher was introduced to an alumnus of the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) of Erasmus University and her husband who are information rich respondents for this research as they are both highly skilled refugees. The researcher was able to learn a great deal from interviewing one of them. Snowball sampling was employed here after as the researcher was introduced to other refugees. The researcher was able to set up more interviews with refugees to understand the subject matter and gain insight into their work experiences in The Netherlands. As qualitative samples are usually small because of the in-depth nature of the interviews, fifteen respondents were interviewed with the use of close ended and open questions.

Before the interviews, the researcher made an interview guide. Close ended questions were used to collect specific data like name, age, marital status and country of origin, to better situate the context of the experiences of the refugees. For the officials, the questions included names, organization and job designation. The open-ended questions for the officials allowed them to explain in detail their work and how it helped highly skilled refugees to integrate into the labour market. For the refugees, the open-ended questions allowed them give detailed explanation of their qualifications, work experience before coming to The Netherlands. It included their experiences of the validation of skills processes, finding a job in The Netherlands, the kind of jobs they could find, factors which contributed to their finding a job in The Netherlands or factors that prevented them from finding a job. The questions also asked whether the jobs they found were at par with their qualifications and skills, their definition of decent work etc. These combinations of questions were necessary as it enabled the researcher collect valuable data for answering the research questions.

The interviews took place in Delft, Rotterdam and The Hague, on Skype and WhatsApp<sup>2</sup>. For the officials, the researcher visited the organizations. For the refugees, the researcher agreed on locations most favourable to the refugees. The researcher's priority was to make the respondents as comfortable as possible. While planning for this research, I had an interview guide which contained a check list of questions that should be asked. I was supposed to follow this in the interviews. However, I had to adjust on the field. I discovered being very flexible and allowing the refugees to tell their stories beginning from why and how they came to The Netherlands was more productive. These stories contained valuable information needed for this research. The interviews were fully recorded after obtaining permission from the respondents and transcribed in English language, recordings are safely kept.

While choosing the sample size, the resources and time available for the research was considered as the interviews were qualitative. It is useful to note that "within a qualitative research design, the data collection strategy typically involves collecting a large amount of data on a rather small, purposive sample, using techniques such as in-depth interviews..." (Hox and Boeije 2005: 593).

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<sup>2</sup> Skype and WhatsApp interviews were carried out for respondents who were unable to grant a physical interview.

## 2.5 Socio-demographic Characteristics of Respondents

To account for a diverse data set, the researcher interviewed respondents from different continents including Africa, Europe and Asia. Study has shown that refugees from different part of the world are treated differently especially with regards to accessing the labour market and integration in general (Mestheneos and Ioannidi 2002). This diversity is necessary as it makes the research more credible, valid and complementary as it contains different insights depending on where the refugee comes from. For a better understanding of their views and opinions, it is pertinent to provide background information about the respondents. Below is a table showing the demo-graphic characteristics of the refugees and officials who were respondents in this study.

**Table 1. Socio-demographic of refugees who were respondents in this research**

Name	Country of Origin	Male/ Female	Educational Qualification	Work Experience before Arriving in The Netherlands	Marital Status/ Whether they have Children	Age
Mr M	Syria	Male	Master's degree	2 years	Nil/Nil	31
Mr O	Syria	Male	Master's degree	3 years	Engaged/Nil	35
Miss K	Syria	Female	Master's degree	4 years	Nil/Nil	31
Mr A1	Pakistan	Male	Master's degree	10 years	Yes/Yes	45
Mr E	DRC	Male	Master's degree	8 years	Yes/Yes	40
Mr C	DRC	Male	Master's degree	2 years	Nil/Nil	32
Mr A2	Georgia	Male	Master's degree	10 years	Yes/Yes	31
Mr D	DRC	Male	Master's degree	2 years	Nil/Nil	32
Mr A3	Syria	Male	Bachelor's degree	2 years	Nil/Nil	28
Mrs M	Syria	Female	Master's degree	4 years	Yes/Yes	34

**Table 2. Officials of organizations interviewed**

Description	Gender	Organization
R1	Female	Nuffic
R2	Male	Nuffic
R3	Female	VluchtelingenWerk
R4	Male	UAF
R5	Male	Municipality of The Hague



## 2.6 Limitations of Study and Challenges Encountered

Qualitative interview was conducted with ten refugees and five officials from four organizations. The sample size is considered a limiting factor in this research, so the conclusions of this research cannot be generalized (Castro et al. 2010). I could not reach more refugees to interview and some organizations refused to grant me interviews. Apart from time constraint, it was difficult to access many refugees who met the criteria of this research. Some of the respondents introduced their friends to me. However, some refugees refused to grant me interviews because they were tired of researchers always coming to talk to them with no positive result or nothing to offer them which can change their situation.

My lack of Dutch language skills also limited this research. Most refugees in The Netherlands learn the Dutch language and as I was unable to speak Dutch and could not afford an interpreter, I targeted only refugees who could converse in basic English. Dutch language skills would have helped to expand my range of respondents, thereby enabling more data collection. This language skill limitation also hampered my reading of webpages and law as I had to find already translated ones or use google translate. I also had the challenge of finances. I truly did not consider that I would have interviews in other cities such as Delft and Rotterdam. I had to cover transportation, paying for coffees and teas with my upkeep. In a way, this affected my research as I had to consider every choice of interview carefully so as not to waste my financial resources. The timeframe for conducting this research was also short.

Despite these limitations, I am convinced that I conducted this research not to generalize my conclusions but to add the body of knowledge concerning the subject matter and amplify the voices of the refugees concerning their decent work situation in the Netherlands.

## 2.7 Ethics, Positionality and Reflexivity

When conducting a research of this nature, it is necessary to consider ethics, positionality and reflexivity as these choices must be carefully made as they impact the integrity of the research directly (Bryman 2016). Reflexivity can be defined as “a dialogue that people engage in, through which they define their beliefs, attitudes, goals, evaluate social circumstances and define their action based on their main concerns” (Piętka-Nykaza 2015)

Critically reflecting on the different choices, I made in this study and how that has affected this study is pertinent as my position affects the production of knowledge in this research. As Crossa aptly writes, “positionality...considers the multiple trajectories and relations that influence our subject formation and show how that multiplicity can affect different aspects of our research, from the ontological to the methodological, from the theoretical to the empirical” (Crossa 2012: 115-116).

So, each time I met a respondent for an interview, I introduced myself as a student of the ISS and a researcher. After stating my interest, I encouraged them to participate freely and willingly in this research. They were informed that they could opt out at any time they wanted to as I understood that telling me these stories about their livelihood might trigger reminders of their lives as refugees.

Following the do no harm principle. They were informed that they could also refuse to answer any question if they were uncomfortable with it. Their consent was sought to record the interviews as this was better and faster than trying to take notes.

While transcribing and analysing, listening to the interviews helped as they are most laden with emotions and expressions that field notes might not have done justice to. My respondents who are refugees were also informed that their identity will be kept confidential by anonymising them in this research. I was worried about bringing them harm in their professional lives as some of them mentioned organizations which they work for, names, etc. These are left out for this reason. I also bought teas and coffees for some of my respondents. One of the respondents insisted and bought me coffee.

My position as an African, female, master's student helped me to identify with the refugees. During this research I positioned myself as a highly qualified migrant and a researcher. I "recognized positionality as a central component in the production of knowledge which entails a self-introspective or critical reflexive exercise which is necessary to identify power relations embedded in the research process" (Crossa 2012: 114). I positioned myself as a highly qualified migrant living in The Netherlands who understands what it means to be highly skilled and very experienced. As a researcher, I expressed my interest in migration especially forced migration and decent work. This set the stage and encouraged the flow of discussions during interviews. The respondents who agreed to be interviewed were quite fascinated by my interest in the subject and the added value especially officials of the organizations.

Reflecting on my choices, gave me an opportunity to think through my reasons for using the theories in this research, the whole research design and my biases. My positionality as a highly skilled migrant shaped my biases, my thoughts and perceptions (Crossa 2012). My background in law and guidance from my supervisors shaped my theoretical framework. As a master's degree student at the ISS, I have learnt about different theories from which I choose the best fitting ones for this research. Apart from being sympathetic and already taking the side of the refugees, I also believed that skills validation led to deskilling of refugees as their certificates are not recognised. As I began this research, my supervisor encouraged me to keep an open mind. Prompted by this, I decided to explore what the government of The Netherlands and other organizations were doing to help highly skilled refugees integrate into the Dutch labour market. This led to my studying the laws, policies, conventions some of which are mentioned in this research. I also visited a few organizations and interviewed their officials.

## **2.8 Conclusion**

A combination of the different data sources used in this research is useful for holistically examining the subject-matter at hand. The use of literature helps me to understand the subject and identify the gap. The laws, policies, conventions and frameworks prove that refugees have the right to work (Ruiz and Vargas-Silva 2017) and the framework on decent work pushes for that right to work to expand to cover decent work. Examining how organizations are helping refugees integrate into the labour market and analysing the experiences of refugees against these makes this study more comprehensive.

## Chapter 3 Conceptualizing Decent Work

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter explains the right to decent work for refugees, aided by conventions, laws and policies. It traces this right through national, regional and international legal frameworks to which The Netherlands is signatory. It is suggested that the right to decent work can be better exercised by a person who is highly qualified applying the human capital theory. Examining The Netherlands as a knowledge economy, this chapter reviews literature on precarious work, different barriers to migrants' labour market integration, and labour market segmentation. Deskilling and downward occupational mobility are also discussed.

### 3.2 The Right to Decent Work for Refugees

The right to work for refugees is a human right and is embedded in a framework of legal instruments. Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Right (UDHR) states that “everyone has the right to seek asylum and protection in other countries” (United Nations 1948). The Refugee convention which builds on the UDHR and the Convention against Torture (non-refoulement when it has to do with refugees) (United Nations 1984), defines and guides states in the treatment of refugee while guaranteeing their right to work (UNHCR 1958). In addition, Article 6 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) states that everyone is entitled to work, which they freely choose (United Nations 1966). Article 7 states that everyone is entitled to be remunerated equally for work done without any form of discrimination, also the working conditions must be favourable and safe (United Nations 1966).

In line with all these, the European Union (EU) has made an agenda to integrate refugees into the labour market, with its “Reception Condition Directive (2013/33/EU), Qualification Directive (2011/95/EU), Action Plan on the integration of third-country nationals and Asylum Procedures Directive (2013/32/EU)” (The Adecco Group 2017). The European Union makes available guidelines and tools with which refugees can be integrated into the labour market. These policies provide for obligations of member states and active measures, making sure that refugees can gain access to trainings and measures for the recognition of their certificates and equality with regards to employment opportunities (The Adecco Group 2017).

The EU also emphasizes the integration of third country nationals, as they find it quite difficult to integrate into the society and the labour market. Article 26 of the Qualification Directive (2011/95/EU) affirms the need for refugees to be treated equally with other members of the society and stresses the need for member states to support integration of refugees into the labour market through educating refugees of opportunities (European Union 2016). However, it is the responsibility of the states at the national and local levels to make policies and laws that can either encourage the integration of refugees in the labour market or otherwise. For example, in The Netherlands, refugees can work. The Aliens Act 2000 spells out the procedures through which foreigners can work in The

Netherlands (Government of the Netherlands 2000). Assistance is often given to refugees by both government and non-government organizations to enable them to integrate into the labour market.

Having established that refugees are entitled to work, it is good to stress that refugees should be entitled to decent work. The International Labour Organization promotes decent work for migrants (inclusive of refugees). Decent work means not just any kind of work but work as objectified by the ILO in the Decent Work Agenda. This includes;

- work which promotes and respects rights which are fundamental,
- equal employment opportunity for everyone no matter their gender in institutions which are sustainable and environments which are economic,
- social protection measures must be developed, enhanced and dialogue in the workplace and tripartism are encouraged (ILO. 2018)

Lastly, the ILO also insists that organizations and the government should implement the Decent Work Agenda (ILO 2015: 2-3). As there is a right to work for refugees, and a framework for decent work for refugees, refugees must also be capable to work. These capabilities might be in form of qualifications, skills or expertise. In other words, a refugee must have some human capital investment to be able to assert these rights. As this research is concerned with highly skilled refugees, this leads to the discussion on human capital, knowledge economy theories and their implications for highly skilled refugees in the labour market.

### **3.3 Human Capital and Knowledge Economy Theories**

Human capital theory is founded on the idea that people or a society invests in themselves for future reasons and not for current enjoyment (Blaug 1976). This theory holds that the learning capacities of people can be compared to other resources used in production whether it be goods or services (Nafukho et al. 2004). A good example of what human capital theory means is the need of getting a higher education so one can use them to get jobs with higher pay in the future. This theory holds that the labour market can absorb workers who have higher levels of education. However, many writers have criticized this theory as people with higher levels of education are not absorbed into the labour market, and education does not translate into more earnings (Nafukho et al. 2004, Sweetland 1996, Colic-Peisker and Walker 2003). Benson also criticized human capital theory on the grounds that people become more productive while learning on the job and do not only depend on training they received before (Sweetland 1996).

As this research focuses on highly skilled refugees, applying the human capital theory, refugees who have higher education should easily get decent jobs in the Dutch labour market. This should be the case because The Netherlands is a Knowledge Economy which is “directly based on the production, distribution

and use of knowledge and information” (Smith 2002: 6). Their economic performance also relies on inputs of knowledge (Usher 2002). The Netherlands needs knowledge workers. These are workers who have high investments of human capital. Highly qualified refugees fit this category of workers. As knowledge workers, these refugees should find it easy to translate their human capital into decent work.

However it seems like getting decent work does not only depend on the decision of the refugees on how they can use the education they had invested in before fleeing to their country of destination but also on how the environment perceives their capital, the labour market, their other skills, languages and backgrounds (Colic-Peisker and Walker 2003). As a matter of research, human capital of refugees has less or no significant value in the labour market. They are undervalued and underused, it might be safe to say that the performance of refugees in the labour market largely does not depend on the human capital they brought to their destination (Lamba 2003). In The Netherlands, education acquired by the refugees in their countries of origin and work experience are undervalued and sometimes not significant as education in The Netherlands is preferred (De Vroome and Van Tubergen 2010).

As their educational or training certificates are not recognized, they are occupationally downgraded. In some cases, they must write examinations to prove their skills, take another course or do an internship. They also have issues with adapting to their new countries, they are dealing with huge losses, stereotyped in the labour market as passive, workers whose status are uncertain, they are negatively portrayed by the media in the society and the labour market (Psoinos 2007). These reduces their chances of decent better jobs. In the end, refugees who have high human capital but cannot translate it into work that is at par with their skills end up frustrated, depressed, with serious mental health problems or give up on accessing the labour market (Colic-Peisker and Walker 2003, Lamba 2003).

In contrast with human capital theory, it seems that their acquired capital in their countries of origin is not enough. Other factors mediate their integration into the labour market. This proves that the labour market has national and international barriers and the global labour market does not offer a level playing ground for every individual who has invested in human capital as there are differences in country groupings and labour markets (Souto-Otero and Villalba-Garcia 2015). This refutes the claims of human capital and knowledge economy theories and acknowledges the need to consider other factors and labour market segmentation as these mediate access to the Dutch labour market. Refugees often find themselves in precarious positions because of these different factors. These often leads to deskilling, underemployment or no employment (Psoinos 2007).

### **3.4 Labour Market Segmentation and Precarious Work**

Labour market segmentation simply means that the labour market is divided and segmented into different submarkets. These submarkets are characterized by different rules and behaviours including types of workers, whether migrants or native born, types of contracts etc. (International Labour Organization. 2018). It

explains why migrants are often employed in low skilled jobs with little or no job security, and jobs low in social status. As there is a constant demand for labour to do menial jobs, foreign workers labour is unavoidable. Because of the occupational hierarchies, foreign workers occupy the bottom of this hierarchy and the dualism of labour and capital comes into play. There are different sources of labour segregation including: the concept of hiring queues where employers discriminate based on ethnic groups, how they are stereotyped by societies, if skills and qualifications are equal, employers choose by race; social networks and how it is used to fill jobs as employers love to hire through social networks; skills and knowledge acquired on the job, where previous employees share with new employees knowledge on how to get the work done, this makes employers consider the view of their workforce while hiring (McGovern 2007). These reinforces labour market segmentation, refugees and migrants often find themselves at the bottom of the ladder. Some of them engaging in precarious work.

As governments of different countries have taken steps to curb illegal immigration by tightening borders, random checks at workplaces and heavy fines on workplaces which are caught hiring illegal immigrants, formulate and implement policies to discourage migration (Anderson 2010). 9/11 makes it even worse and migration is securitized by governments. This securitization of migration and tightening of borders has opened business opportunities for organized crimes, traffickers of people and those who are willing to take the risk to cross to a country with greener pasture are left at the mercy of traffickers. This has helped produce more precarious workers. Workers who work in shadowy and unstable jobs, anti-social hours, always available, exploited, abused, workers who are vulnerable socially and economically, who work out of fear of being displaced (Anderson 2010). Migrants including refugees are mostly in the bulk of this category because they are discriminated, they do not speak the language, their qualifications are not recognized and government make their lives more difficult, they are continuously put in more precarious situations (Anderson 2010).

Precarious work can be described in four parts including: it's short duration and uncertainty; job insecurity, work that threatens the dignity of workers, work which the workers lack control over working conditions, wages, etc.; (Siegmann and Schiphorst 2016) work that lacks social protection for workers and poorly paying jobs (Anderson 2010). It becomes more precarious when work permits are granted only on the needs of employers. Migrant workers have to bend to every whim of their employers so that they get them a work permit and they often find themselves as modern day slaves (Anderson 2010).

Refugee workers also tend to work in areas other than the ones they have skills in leading to skills mismatch, they do the "3D jobs, dangerous, demanding and dirty jobs" (Anderson 2010: 160). They work in jobs where their educational attainments are different from the requirements of the job, and the education can either be above or below the requirements of the job. In either case, they are mismatched (Visintin et al. 2015). Studies show that migrants are likely to be overeducated for their job and engage in labour which is forced and underpaid (Lewis et al. 2015).

Most immigrants are highly educated and the fact that they do not have good jobs can only mean they are not employed in highly skilled jobs because of their ethnicity. As study show, "for new immigrants...taking their human capital endowment into account does not reduce their ethnic penalty at all as regards

access to higher occupational statuses, but it actually increases it” (Fullin and Reyneri 2011: 141). Faced with economic realities refugees, they are forced to bring down their professional expectations and take jobs lower than them with a plan to upgrade in the long term. Such jobs maybe precarious and job which they are overqualified for (Fullin and Reyneri 2011: 144-145). The labour market segmentation between work that is permanent and temporary is a barrier for refugees’ upward mobility in the labour market (Ramos 2014). This often leads to deskilling.

There are many explanations as to why deskilling occurs amongst highly skilled refugees. In The Netherlands, one of such explanations would be the validation of skills and qualifications. Skills validation can be defined as an assessment of an individual’s skills or qualifications to ascertain her competence and abilities (Andreaswennberg 2017). Skills validation can be done for formal learning, non-formal or informal learning (Souto-Otero and Villalba-Garcia 2015). Validation of skills makes skills more visible through recognition, identification, assessment and documentation (Souto-Otero and Villalba-Garcia 2015). It is worth noting that the key legal instrument with regards to recognition of qualifications in Europe is the Lisbon Recognition Convention (U. Council of Europe 1997). Article 111. 1 and Article 111.2 provides that assessment on qualifications should be carried out per request without discrimination of any kind, with transparency (U. Council of Europe 1997: 5).

For refugees and other immigrants, validation of skills has great consequences on their lives, as it either validates their professional experience and helps in the recognition of their qualifications or does not recognise them. This determines their access to the labour market or not (Souto-Otero and Villalba-Garcia 2015). If their qualifications and experiences are not recognised, then they must either go back to school or take a lower job. Study show that “half of the employed refugees are overqualified for their present jobs” (Ahlberg 2002: 71). This is how deskilling and downward occupational mobility occur.

Another explanation of how deskilling occurs is the dual segmented nature of the labour market. Where migrant labour is needed in the secondary market as natives fill up the primary market and the jobs that are in the secondary market are not needed by natives. Migrants take up the jobs rejected by the natives (Siar 2013). As the host country wants to preserve the social order, it institutionalizes discrimination against migrants so that natives remain superior in the labour market (Siar 2013). “Deskilling may be viewed in several ways including: a host country’s way of filling up labour scarcities in the secondary market by exploiting cheap enclave labour, as a transitional phase for migrants to adjust to the ‘standards’ of the host country, or as a form of institutionalized discrimination” (Siar 2013: 1). “Examples of deskilling experiences of different migrant groups show that it is a complex phenomenon that demonstrates the interplay of race, ethnicity, and gender” (Siar 2013: 1). Experiences acquired in the country of origin, lack of language skills and cultural know-how are factors that also contribute to deskilling (Siar 2013). “Host countries may deny that it is a form of racism or discrimination, but empirical evidence is clearly pointing to that direction” (Siar 2013: 15). This racism or discrimination makes it a matter of human rights.

Studies find that when comparing refugees with native-born Dutch speakers, although both groups may have tertiary education, they do not obtain the same pay (The Adecco Group 2017). This might be due to discrimination faced by non-Dutch and non-native speakers. Institutionally also, the fact that non-

Dutch formal qualifications are often not recognized can add to the challenges refugees face in trying to access the labour market and gain equal pay (The Adecco Group 2017).

### **3.5 Other Factors in Labour Market Integration**

Apart from the qualifications of refugees and the segmentation of the labour market, there are other factors that affect the labour market integration of refugees. These factors include racism, discrimination and social networks. These are key determinants to the accessing of the labour market by refugees. Below, the following factors are explained as to why they hold such great consequence.

#### ***3.5.1 Dutch Language as an Asset***

Language is a means of communication. In The Netherlands, Dutch and English languages are spoken. However, Dutch language is the official language. Dutch skills proficiency is considered as an advantage while trying to gain access into the labour market. Succinctly put by Berry “lack of language proficiency reduces the opportunities for migrants to interact with mainstream society but also has the potential to drive migrants into the irregular workforce, and so increase the risk of exploitation and ill-treatment” (Berry 2017: 5). The difficulties faced by refugees in accessing the labour market become amplified when they lack Dutch language proficiency as speaking the language determines to a certain extent the probability of getting decent employment (D. Auer 2018, Campion 2018).

The government of The Netherlands provides refugees with language training as part of their integration process. However even after studying the language, getting employment is still difficult. Often, refugees are told their Dutch language is not good enough (Ghorashi and Van Tilburg 2006, van Heelsum 2017). Ghorashi and Van Tilburg also argue that women who have studied the Dutch language and acquired some form of education from Dutch institutions still find it difficult to integrate into the Dutch society and labour market (Ghorashi and Van Tilburg 2006). They also consider the Dutch integration policies to be very exclusive towards migrant as these policies fuel negative discourses about migrants and no space is created for migrants no matter their educational or Dutch language proficiency (Ghorashi and Van Tilburg 2006).

#### ***3.5.2 Racism, Discrimination and Social networks***

Migrants, refugees inclusive have been faced with a lot of hostility due to the fear of terrorism, lack of economic stability and poor climate etc. The rate of intolerance for refugees even in very welcoming countries has grown (D. Auer 2018). Discrimination, xenophobia, hate crimes have been reported even in the most accepting countries (D. Auer 2018). Racial discrimination is defined as “...differential treatment on the basis of race that disadvantages a racial group, and treatment on the basis of inadequately justified factors...” (Busetta et al. 2018: 2). Racial discrimination can also be defined as “differential treatment that leads to unequal outcomes based entirely on ascribed features such as race, ethnic background, name origin, and foreign appearance” (Tjaden et al. 2018: 419).



It has been reported by the European Union's Fundamental Right Agency that there is "an increase in discrimination and hate crime towards migrants and their descendants, particularly those of Muslim origin" (Berry 2017: 2).

Shaped by media representation and political debates, public opinion is stirred to understand migrants and refugees as threats who come to take away the jobs of natives, disrupt their cultures, peaceful countries and destabilize the welfare system by enjoying taxes paid by hardworking natives (Berry 2017). These intolerances hamper on the ability of the refugees to integrate properly into the society and into the labour market. Refugees because of discrimination face restricted access to employment opportunities. Some study shows that refugee status itself reduces employment chances (Bauböck and Tripkovic 2017).

Discrimination can also be systematic. In a study where in response to employment opportunities, African-American name was put on resumes with higher qualifications and experiences which met the job requirements and White American names were put on low quality resumes, the white American resumes received 50% call back rate over the African-American resumes showing a racial discrimination in the labour market and explaining why African Americans do not do well in the labour market (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004). In addition, a Muslim refugee is less likely to receive a call back than a Christian refugee, this is in advent of the 9/11 terror attack (Busetta et al. 2018). Other studies confirm that names on a resume also affect whether a candidate receives a call back or not (Dahl and Krog 2018).

Refugees therefore suffer from an intersectional discrimination based on ethnicity, name, being a refugee etc. In an online recruitment procedure conducted in The Netherlands, it was found that job applicants with Arabic names were not even called back despite their age or qualifications, this discrimination was ascribed to their names (Blommaert et al. 2013: 957). This study also showed that "Dutch -named applicants are 60 percent more likely to receive a positive reaction than Arabic-named applicants" (Blommaert et al. 2013: 957). "Therefore, the role of discrimination as a major barrier preventing foreign-born workers from fully participating in the labour market should be not neglected" (Cooray et al. 2018: 2). To beat the discrimination in the Dutch labour market, refugees tend to depend on social networks to gain employment.

Social networks are a type of social capital and is particularly important in accessing the labour market. After being uprooted to a new country, in trying to gain access into the labour market, some refugees fall back on social networks (L. A. Beaman 2011, Gericke et al. 2018). Social capital is often defined as "resources embedded in social relations and networks" (Griesshaber and Seibel 2015: 376). When refugees move to a new country, they build a community either by reason of ethnicity, geography, new friendships, taking on voluntary jobs and as information about jobs are shared using social networks, a lot of jobs are also found using social networks. Lori and Jeremy states that in India about 45 percent of people find their jobs using help from their relatives, the use of social networks in finding a job is also more cost effective for job seekers (L. Beaman and Magruder 2012). Social networks are a source of encouragement, motivational support and employment opportunities. Application processes are transmitted faster through social networks than through formal means, and this information is more trusted and more detailed.

### 3.6 Conclusion

Legally, refugees can work in The Netherlands. This right to work is best exercised if refugees have high investments in human capital as The Netherlands is a knowledge economy. However apart from human capital, a lot of other barriers mitigate the integration of the labour market of refugees; these factors include discriminatory policies, recognition of qualifications, racism, language, social networks etc. Refugees often exhibit four strategies when they encounter these barriers “acceptance, compromise, ambivalence, and withdrawal” (Piętko-Nykaza 2015: 539). When their qualifications are not recognized, their human capital is devalued, and they end up working in lower jobs thereby experiencing deskilling (Vidal-Coso and Miret-Gamundi 2014). This puts the refugees in precarious and economically disadvantaged positions. They end up being overeducated for their jobs. (Vidal-Coso and Miret-Gamundi 2014, Delaporte and Piracha 2018). As a result, “Many authors argue that immigrants cannot rely on human capital to the same extent as natives” (Vidal-Coso and Miret-Gamundi 2014: 341). If a country which provides refuge for highly skilled refugees fails to recognize their qualifications and experiences skills, this is a disregard of their right to work. Coming from an angle of human rights, deskilling is type of human right abuse which can be called brain abuse (Bauder 2003). As it results from discrimination, it violates the rights of refugees as enshrined in the Refugee Convention, UDHR, ICESCR, and the Lisbon Convention (United Nations 1948, United Nations 1966, UNHCR 1958, U. Council of Europe 1997). Deskilling causes economic losses, psychological and health problems. “Deskilling represents a loss for destination countries as they are not fully utilizing the skills and talents of skilled refugees and affects refugees negatively” (Siar 2013: 2-3).

# Chapter 4 Experiences, Frustrations, Successes

## 4.1 Introduction

The findings of this study are presented in this chapter. Using the theoretical and conceptual framework discussed in chapter three, the findings from respondents in this research are analysed. This chapter also contains the factors which the refugees believe determine their integration into the Dutch labour market and their definitions of decent work.

## 4.2 Experiences of Refugees: Mixed Results

All the refugees interviewed as respondents in this research had two common features. They had at least a bachelor's degree in their countries of origin before fleeing and also had the zeal to work. They took steps towards accessing the labour market either by finding work or getting additional education to be better placed to find a good job in the Dutch labour market. As one respondent puts it, "working gives a person dignity and enables the refugee to integrate faster into the society"<sup>3</sup>. His view is supported by some studies, one of which states that "refugees who find work in their societies adapt faster than those who are not working and their psychological well-being is better" (Phillimore and Goodson 2006: 1720). A study carried out in Canada explains thus;

"...work is not merely a rational and economic activity but a human occupation. It improves the subjective well-being of asylum seekers [refugees] by contributing peace of mind, a broader sphere of action and the development of identity, thus overcoming their socially and spatially isolated position in society. Having nothing to do forces people to reflect not only on their past but also on their present, leading to what is described as a state of personal uselessness that diminishes physical and psychological well-being..."(Lintner and Elsen 2018: 76)

The respondents in this research have different experiences as it relates to their qualifications and work. Some of these experiences, trainings and kinds of work that they find are respondents are shared below.

One of the respondents holds a master's degree from a University in the Netherlands and is currently working in a Non-government organization as an Integration Officer. He came to The Netherlands in 2014. I asked him if he found a job with his bachelors' certificate after he had arrived in The Netherlands and was given refugee status, he said;

"Before I did my Masters, I did not apply to get a job with my bachelors, my plan was to do a masters first. Here in Archelogy, you have no big chance to get a job, it is better to get a certificate from Dutch university, their university is better. If two people apply to get the same job, same qualification, the one with a Dutch qualification would be given the job... I applied to study here, I met all the requirements and got admitted"<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with Mr M, 31 years old at a café in Delft

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Mr M, 31 years old Syrian at a café in Delft

As a graduate of Archaeology, he decided not to find a job immediately because he knew he had no real chance at getting a job. I could not understand why he felt like he had no chance with his certificate from Syria. I probed further to understand where that idea came from. I grappled with perhaps blaming it on the workshops that they are usually given by organizations to tell them about their opportunities in The Netherlands. In my opinion, it seemed like he already devalued his human capital by himself, considering that it is common for the human capital of refugees to be devalued (Colic-Peisker and Walker 2003). It strengthened the finding from a study that states that refugees feel like their qualifications are of no value and their experience in their home country does not matter at all, “as one asylum seeker from Burkina Faso in West Africa explained, some countries accept the qualifications but I think I would have problems with it here . . .” (Phillimore and Goodson 2006: 1727). I decided to interview other respondents to hear their own views and understand whether they agreed with this line of thought or they had different opinions.

Another respondent in this research agreed with this opinion on certificates from other countries not having their true worth in The Netherlands. This respondent had a bachelor’s degree before fleeing to The Netherlands. He also holds a master’s degree in International European Law from a University in the Netherlands. During the interview, I asked him whether he applied for a job after he received his refugee status in The Netherlands and he replied:

“I knew very well that with a bachelor’s degree in law from Syria, you cannot do anything, I had to be in the game, I had to have what Dutch people have, Dutch certification, so I studied for a master’s degree in International European Law majoring in Taxation...”<sup>5</sup>.

Some studies also agree, including a study conducted in The Netherlands found that education acquired by the refugees in their countries of origin and work experience are undervalued and sometimes not significant as education in The Netherlands is preferred (De Vroome and Van Tubergen 2010). Still on foreign educational qualifications not being recognised in The Netherlands, a female refugee who is also a respondent in this research had a Bachelor of Law degree and had worked for four years before fleeing to The Netherlands. She wanted to study for a master’s degree here as she felt like she had no real chance at a decent job with her bachelors from her country, she said:

“It was very difficult, I had to choose to study. Two universities refused to accept my degree, they asked me to do a pre-master. I considered that to be more waste of time, as I had already wasted one and half year in refugee camps... I applied to another university and I had to write an English examination TOEFL. I got a high score and they accepted me”<sup>6</sup>.

It does seem like the educational bias that the west has for other countries also applies in The Netherlands. This infringes on their rights as protected by UDHR, ICESCR, Refugee Convention and specifically the Lisbon convention which encourages states to accept foreign qualifications without being discriminatory (U. Council of Europe 1997, United Nations 1948, UNHCR 1958, United Nations 1966). The easiest idea seems to be to get a Dutch qualification as soon as they arrive in The Netherlands to be able to access the labour market.

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with O, 33 years old Syrian at a café in Rotterdam

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Miss K, 32 years old Syrian, on Skype

As human capital theories hold that refugees with high investment of human capital can easily gain access into the labour market, one would presume that in The Netherlands, a knowledge economy, these refugees should be able to find decent work easily, however, this does not seem to be the case (Smith 2002, Usher 2002, Colic-Peisker and Walker 2003, Lamba 2003). An example would be one respondent who practised in his country as a lawyer for three years and has a master's degree from a University here in The Netherlands. He also loves international tax law. However, the human capital theory does not seem to apply to his case. When I asked him if he was working, he said

"I only have an internship, it is hard, I couldn't find a job up to one year after graduation... For a refugee to get the kind of professional work he wants, there must be a trade for example, I traded the welfare monetary support that the Government of Netherlands with the shitty payment of a volunteer position in an organization as a Program Manager. I was paid poorly but because it looked good on my CV, I took it. I did not have much choice in the matter. While working there, I was offered an Intern position in a top taxation firm. With my experience and qualifications, I should be given a better position...the internship was to last three months but because I am good at the job, it was extended for 6 month and another 3 months...I hope that they retain me permanently"<sup>7</sup>

I was prompted by this to investigate two propositions; firstly, are organizations just taking advantage of these refugees who are highly skilled and experienced? Secondly, what is the government and other organizations doing to prevent these refugees from being unfairly taken advantage of and put in precarious positions? With these questions in mind I interviewed two representatives, one from the Municipality of The Hague and the other from VluchtelingenWerk. I specifically asked a representative of the Municipality if it was true that refugees must trade their social security money if they get a job and how this is balanced as some of these positions are volunteer positions? He replied:

"This is a very political discussion, as people who are working should earn better, there was a phase that they could keep the money, now they cannot, but entrepreneurs have some kind of support. I do not know much about this subject and if you like, I can put you in contact with my colleague who can give talk to you more about this"<sup>8</sup>

I also asked him whether he believed that refugees are taken advantage of by companies, as refugees have no choice and what the government was doing to ensure that refugees were not taken advantage of in the labour market, to this he replied:

"Individually, I find this very worrying, there is a kind of fear in the policies regarding Asylum seekers, we have this strange village idea of multicultural societies"<sup>9</sup>

This seems to suggest that he considers the integration policies as flawed and reflecting fear for refugees by policy makers. As he had said he does not know enough about it, he gave me his email and told me to write him, so he

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<sup>7</sup> Continuation of interview with Mr O, in Rotterdam. CV means Curriculum Vitae and AIESEC is an organization which offers a platform where volunteer, internship and other positions can be found.

<sup>8</sup> Interview had with a representative of the Municipality of The Hague in The Hague

<sup>9</sup> Continuation of interview with the representative of the Municipality

could put me in touch with his colleague. I wrote to him severally but sadly none of my emails was replied. I moved on and visited VluchtelingenWerk and spoke to a representative there, I asked her whether highly skilled refugees in The Netherlands could easily find jobs she told me:

“It depends on what kind of business you are in, for example if you studied law or medicine, you cannot do anything here in The Netherlands, you need to start all over with your studies...It is more difficult for highly educated people to find work in The Netherlands, depending on what they studied. It is more difficult than someone who is good with their hands, for example plumbers, they can learn on their jobs, people are searching for plumbers to employ...It's not so easy for people who are highly educated. It is most difficult”<sup>10</sup>

This suggests that less skilled refugees find work more easily in The Netherlands. Then why is The Netherlands a knowledge economy? If it is easier to find a lower job, then refugees will abandon their foreign high qualifications, get a Dutch certification or give up on finding work and depend on the stipends given by the government. This further strengthens Halleh Ghorashi's assertion when he says that “what is striking in the case of The Netherlands is that the Dutch welfare system makes refugees dependents of the state and then blames them for their dependency on the state” (Ghorashi 2005: 186).

As I progressed in this research, I interviewed another respondent whose case was quite interesting. He is in his 40's and came to The Netherlands in 2014. He fled his country of origin because of fear of persecution. He moved to The Netherlands with his family. He bagged a master's degree in his country of origin and worked for years in his country of origin. He describes his experiences thus:

“I have a master's degree in Business Administration from my country, I worked as a high-profile journalist in my country for years before changing career paths and I went into the NGO sector and worked there for about 10 years before coming to The Netherlands. I was NGO Executive, Communication Specialist, cum Journalist...”<sup>11</sup>

By knowledge economy and human capital theories, he has invested in himself and should easily gain access to the labour market considering the fact that The Netherlands is a knowledge economy and he is a knowledge worker (Psoinos 2007). However, this respondent has been unable to find work. When I asked what kind of employment he has, he replied:

“There is no job for me here, the other day I went to Courier Company to ask for a job, the man looked at my CV and said you are overqualified for this job and I know that you can drive too but I cannot give you the job”<sup>12</sup>.

Human capital theory postulates that once a person has invested in human capital like education, other skills and expertise, then the labour market opens up to accommodate such people. However, this has been challenged by some writers (Souto-Otero and Villalba-Garcia 2015). They argue that human capital theories do not realistically take in other factors that determine access and integration into the labour market but rather present the labour market as a level playing field for people who are well invested in human capital. Adding another experience, this respondent is a Lawyer/Journalist from his country. He applied

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with a representative of Vluchtelingenwerk

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Mr A, in his 40, s from Pakistani in a café in, The Hague

<sup>12</sup> Continuation of interview with Mr A as described in footnote 7

for asylum in 2009 and was given refugee status. When I asked him about his experience of finding a job in The Netherlands, he said:

“This was a fight. In my municipality, it was very difficult to accept people to work in their fields, I learnt the language, but this is not enough... The consultant at the municipality decided to send me to a job house. I was sent there, and they told me you must learn, you do not have a choice. It was a flower job; this job is normally meant for disabled people or people who have not studied. I told them I do not belong here, I have studied, I am a lawyer, a journalist, why am I here?”<sup>13</sup>.

As a Lawyer cum Journalist who reported on international and national affairs especially as it had to do with the courts. With his level of qualifications, experiences and exposure, he seemed like an ideal refugee who could translate his human capital to decent work in The Netherlands. It is disheartening that he was sent to work in a flower job house. Was this the only job that was available? Considering that The Netherlands, especially the city of The Hague plays host to a plethora of international organizations and court mechanisms. These experiences show how refugees experience deskilling, downward occupational mobility and finds themselves in precarious work. Human capital seems not to be enough. Evidence suggests that other factors mitigate against the labour market integration of refugees.

### 4.3 Explaining the Skills Gap: Refugees' Views

Refugees often find other factors other than a well invested in human capital mediating their access to decent employment, such as language, racism and discrimination, validation of skills and recognition of qualifications, sexism, culture and depending on which country there are the notion of free work (D. Auer 2018, Psoinos 2007). These factors contribute in explaining the skills gap experienced by refugees. Respondents in this research had many explanations as to why they experience gaps in their access to the labour market.

A respondent in this research pointed out how racism and discrimination affect refugees' integration in the labour market. He explained that even children of refugees who are born in The Netherlands also experience this. As he leads an organization of refugees, he shared a conversation that he had with a Pakistani girl, who was born in The Netherlands, but her parents had moved to The Netherlands as refugees with me thus:

“A Pakistani girl, born and raised here with a Master's degree in Psychology, whenever she attends a job interview, they ask her where she is from, she's says: I'm Dutch, they ask me this because of my skin color, I am from Amsterdam, she mentioned the street, he asked, where are your elders from, she said, it has nothing to do with the interview...”<sup>14</sup>.

The Netherlands celebrates itself to be a very multicultural and diverse society. However, evidence like this seems to suggest that racism and discrimination is still being perpetrated in the labour market. For example, a study conducted here in The Netherlands supports this claim. The study shows that if names of foreigners are put on CVs, then they are less likely to get a call back from the recruiters. Applicants who have very Dutch names will likely

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with Mr E, 45, from the Democratic Republic of Congo in The Hague

<sup>14</sup> Continuation of interview with Mr A, described in footnote 7

receive a call back and get the job (Blommaert et al. 2013). This study advocates for blind recruitment as Arabic named applicants are discriminated against even in The Netherlands (Blommaert et al. 2013). Language barriers, cultural differences and exclusive immigration laws can reinforce racism and that forces refugees into precarious.

Obstacles and opportunities facing professional refugees may also depend on the gender, the country of origin and the religion of individual refugees (Ghorashi 2005, Pittaway et al. 2009, Mestheneos and Ioannidi 2002). There are studies which prove that a Muslim refugee who applies for a job will less likely receive a call back than a Christian refugee (Busetta et al. 2018). So, refugees are disadvantaged at different intersections with barriers that block their access into the market.

Another closely related factor here is the Dutch working culture and the lack of trust for foreigners in The Netherlands. One of the officials I interviewed from one of the organizations said;

“A lot of employers want to know if he or she fits in a Dutch organization...they think do you fit in our Dutch working culture...A lot of people feel that you need to fit in the Dutch working culture...As long as you do not have a Dutch working experience, they doubt and then choose a person who has worked in The Netherlands before. ... They just really don't know what people are allowed to do or not, some people get permission to stay for about 5 years, if their country is safe, then they must go back, so a lot of Dutch working places do not know, whether people will leave after a few years, the biggest obstacle is that people do not know each other, and they prefer to take the people they like...”<sup>15</sup>

This seems like a combination cultural discrimination and uncertainty in the statuses of refugees. In whatever way it is explained, employers in The Netherlands seems to be uncertain about refugees and discriminate them on that basis that they do not fit a Dutch working culture. People are different, refugees especially having been raised in places other than The Netherlands, so a requirement that the refugee fits into the organization is what I have been unable to wrap my head around. It seems to be the distrust for foreigners and this is a nice way to be racist and discriminatory in the job market. One of the respondents Miss K pointed to this as a barrier which prevents refugees from accessing the labour market in The Netherlands, she said;

“The hair dresser was a little bit in doubt to hire my client as he was Surinamese and my client Syrian, he had a little bit of trust issues. I stood guarantee for my client. Employers in The Netherlands should trust, and give chance to this people, its mutual, maybe the first two months they will have difficulty in communication and working methods, but they will be harmony later with the help of good communication, being open and flexible”<sup>16</sup>.

So apart from being uncertain about refugees, discriminating them based on them not fitting into their organizations, they also distrust these refugees and require referees from The Netherlands. How can new refugees really get referees from The Netherlands? This seems to be an uphill task. This can prove difficult and does not even give them a chance in the labour market

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<sup>15</sup> Continuation of Interview with the representative VluchtelingenWerk

<sup>16</sup> Continuation of Interview with Miss K



Another factor that explains the skills gap is the validation of skills and recognition of qualifications. There is a lot of politics and struggle for supremacy surrounding the recognition of qualifications and validating skills of refugees. Refugees from the third world often find it very difficult to get their skills validated and sometimes their qualifications are not recognized. For example, one respondent said:

“There is something called the IDW, if you send your credentials to them, they evaluate the level of your certificate according to the educational system in The Netherlands, according to their system, I am a graduate even with my MBA. I have to do another masters to get to my former level of education. I have a friend who was a Doctor in Pakistan, with experience of more than 12 years, she had to do some courses, and pass the language course for her to be called a Doctor here in The Netherlands, because they are called third world countries...”<sup>17</sup>.

This respondent as earlier described holds a master’s degree in Business Administration from his country. This non-recognition of qualifications and non-validation of skills has led to the underemployment and deskilling of refugees. Some of the refugees also experience downward occupational mobility because of this. Some respondents in this study tend to avoid the validation and recognition process altogether. They take up more study to acquire a Dutch certification as earlier seen in this study. This study agrees with other studies that find that migrants, refugees inclusive are usually overeducated for their jobs. A good example of this is Mr A in this study, who has his master’s degree and over 23 years of valuable experience, yet he has not been able to find a decent job in The Netherlands. He even applied to be a driver in a courier company, yet he was still not given the job. This pushes refugees just like other immigrants to take up the 3 D jobs, non-recognition of certificates puts refugees in very precarious and dangerous positions. I agree with a study that holds that “lack of recognition of qualifications from third world countries... make refugees unable to be easily included in the labour market at the level of their education and professional qualifications” (Mestheneos and Ioannidi 2002).

Curious about the validation process, I visited Nuffic and spoke with two representatives who directly work on validation of qualifications for migrants and refugees:

“We have the credential evaluation for people following the inburgering, this is for all third world migrants, they can apply until three years after getting their residence permit. The issue is that they do it early so they can know their opportunities earlier, this year is about 6000 applications, last year was less, 2015 was 500, maybe it’s because people know about it more now. We do the international recognition, there is an international convention, Lisbon convention we apply this ...”<sup>18</sup>.

Curious as to what would happen if the refugees did not have their certificate or their institutions were burnt down, I inquired about how such cases can be handled. The Nuffic representative said:

“The Lisbon Convention talks about refugees without documents and there should be special procedures. We have a practical procedure in place. It could

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<sup>17</sup> Continuation of interview with Mr A

<sup>18</sup> Interview with representatives of Nuffic, at the Nuffic office in The Hague

be a student card, picture, some other documentation. We have developed, we make this comparison and we evaluate them. Still, we developed a toolkit for admission officers with standard questions and formats with this kind of procedure. Universities can decide [whether] to admit the students”.<sup>19</sup>

It was relieving to know that refugees can still prove that they are qualified even if they do not have their certification at hand. I presumed that this might happen very often. However, the reiteration that this evaluation really has to do with third world countries migrant is staggering. This brings us back to the educational bias that the western countries have for so called developing countries and their educational institutions. This bias also affects refugees who are highly skilled but because of the technical provisions for translating these skills into work, they are not able to translate these skills into work. Using the same example of Doctors in The Netherlands, who qualified outside the European Economic Area and are not able to practise their profession in The Netherlands, they end up working as cleaners, studies show that “half of the employed refugees are therefore overqualified for their present jobs” (Ahlberg 2002: 71) if they find jobs at all.

The fact remains that countries such as The Netherlands seem to systematically discriminate against migrants with certification from third world countries. As refugees often are faced with little or no choice, they take jobs lower than their qualifications or sometimes completely different from their field. One study even holds that

“Limited recognition of immigrants’ foreign qualifications in the receiving countries – claimed by 40 percent of survey respondents for the category of non-EU and undocumented immigrants – is identified as a significant problem, possibly indicating educational marginalization of immigrants” (Kahanec et al. 2013)

Another factor is the ability to speak Dutch language. In The Netherlands, one of the main obstacles to decent employment is the language skills gap that many refugees have. This can present a considerable hurdle for professional refugees because professional employment is generally facilitated by an ability to speak the Dutch language at a high level of proficiency (Ghorashi 2005: 181,185). Respondents often had to learn the language and for some jobs they are expected to speak at a very proficient level. All the respondents in this study cited Dutch language as a very important factor for accessing the labour market. One of the respondents said:

“I applied to DHL, and they said they cannot hire me because my Dutch was not too fluent, he said it was not about my cv as I didn’t match the job, but it is about the language, how much do I have to talk? I receive packages from courier services and all I do is sign. The hirer said, you have to talk to the elderly people, you have to talk to them as they are retired and might not have someone else to talk to. They always strike up conversations and you need to be fluent to be able to have a conversation with them”<sup>20</sup>.

The Dutch language skill is very crucial and one of the first things refugees do when they are given refugee status to stay in The Netherlands is to take up language training. However, a foreigner might not be able to speak as fluently as a native. Once their Dutch is laced with foreign accents, they are not considered

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<sup>19</sup> Continuation of interview with Nuffic representatives

<sup>20</sup> Continuation of interview with Mr A

proficient. This can be barrier to their gaining decent employment. A study confirms this and states that that refugees are often told that their Dutch is not good enough for them to get a job in the labour market (Ghorashi and Van Tilburg 2006).

Four respondents in this study had a very interesting view on another factor which they considered as crucial in finding a decent job in the Dutch labour market. This factor is voluntary work. Voluntary work can be taken up in organizations, the workers are referred to as either interns or volunteers. Volunteering is taken up for several reasons; to learn on a job; to give back to a society through carrying out free work for an organization; to gain international experience to put on ones curriculum vitae. However sometimes, volunteering becomes the only option. When refugees cannot find any other form of work, they take up volunteer positions. These are characteristics of precarious work. Refugees are paid poorly, with no good contracts, little or no protection under the law or rights to determine what happens at work and the inability to negotiate because they are trying to acquire international experience because they have been told so, refugees' slave away working for little or no remuneration. One respondent said;

“There is a culture of volunteerism in The Netherlands, this gives us problems, people who do not pay their bills take up professional jobs as volunteers, so if you apply to a job, they ask you to come and work for free. Volunteerism is normal for Dutch people, it is their culture. This is quite difficult for us”<sup>21</sup> .

Even organizations which can really afford to pay these refugees, get volunteers and interns. Also, this culture of volunteerism seems to be validated by the government of The Netherlands, while visiting Vluchtengwerk, I asked my contact if the government was sponsoring them as they are an NGO and she responded:

“Yes, the government sponsor us. We collaborate a lot with the municipalities, the municipality comes to us and says, we will support the refugees with housing, paying for their language skills and support them with stipends but for us to continue doing that you have to ensure that the refugees get work even though it is voluntary”<sup>22</sup>

As the government encourages highly skilled refugees to volunteer in organizations in exchange for welfare, it seems that organizations and the government benefit from the cheap labour of highly skilled refugees under the covering of volunteerism and internships (Siar 2013).

## 4.4 Highly Skilled Refugees Define Decent Work

The type of jobs which highly skilled refugees find in The Netherlands, their experiences and factors which they consider important as mediating their labour market integration was investigated in this research. An important component was to investigate the definitions of decent work by refugees who are respondents in this research. Decent work promotes social justice in the global labour

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<sup>21</sup> Interview conducted with one of the respondents

<sup>22</sup> Continuation of interview with representative of Vluchtelingenwerk

markets. The International Labour Organization promotes decent work for migrants (inclusive of refugees). Decent work means not just any kind of work but work which promotes and respects rights of workers, where workers are protected as (ILO 2015). Decent work has eleven indicators namely:

“Employment opportunities; Unacceptable work ;Adequate earnings and productive work; Decent hours; Stability and security of work; Balancing work and family life; Fair treatment in employment; Safe work environment; Social protection; Social dialogue and workplace relation; Economic and social context of decent work” (Anker et al. 2003: 153-154, Kubo 2018: 452, Nizami and Prasad 2017).

As studies about labour market integration is usually top-down, this study takes a different approach and defines decent work according to the definitions of refugees who are respondents in this understanding of it an what was truly important to them in an employment.

One respondent in this study defined decent work thus: “Decent work is all about the work that I have experience and I have qualified for”.<sup>23</sup> This respondent defines decent work as work which refugees have experience for and they are qualified for same. For example, a refugee who studied to become a teacher in their country of origin should be given the opportunity to work as a teacher in The Netherlands. For him, decent work is linked to human capital, by way of qualification and experiences. Experiences here could be a life experience, work experience or a combination of both. So, decent work means working in a place where the academic knowledge acquired, and industry experience can be applied. In alignment with his definition, another respondent defines decent work as “jobs that meet my skills, qualifications and life experiences”<sup>24</sup>. This definition expands to cover skills. Skills here might be life acquired skills, skills learnt, or skills developed overtime. To be able to exercise a combination of skills, qualifications and experiences make an employment decent for this respondent.

Elaborating more on the components of the above definitions of decent work by two respondents, it pertinent to point out that if their definition of decent work is followed, then there will be no room for deskilling, downward occupational mobility or over education of refugees. Refugees would be able to work in jobs that they love and can perform optimally thereby contributing to better economy of their host country, their individual development and mental health. This also helps protect their dignity and cushions the effect of their fleeing from their countries of origin on their careers and economy. To further explain what I mean, let us take the example of one the respondents in this study, a highly qualified Asian who was working when he was in his country of origin. He was able to take care of himself and his family, having moved to The Netherlands and as he has been unable to find a decent job, he has become a stay at home father or house husband as I might call it. For an Asian, this might be quite difficult as he has the belief that he ought to provide for his family, this affects his dignity and might be detrimental to his mental health. This would apply to an African too, so depending on the context and their cultures and traditions, getting a decent job becomes very crucial in the lives of highly skilled refugees.

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<sup>23</sup> Continuation of interview with Mr A

<sup>24</sup> Continuation of interview with Mr O

Considering that “decent work... juxtaposes the generation of employment itself with the conditions under which it is generated as well as workers’ rights and their voice in the community” (Burchell et al. 2013), defining decent work then by refugees should take priority and with that decent work should be measured. Another respondent in this study defines “decent work as work that people get satisfaction from and when they are going to do it, they go with a smile”. Gaining satisfaction from a job translates into better productivity. A good job is one that the workers attributes to getting satisfaction from, job satisfaction also matters for living a good quality of life (Burchell et al. 2013). Satisfaction from a job can also be used in measuring the quality of the job. Decent work does not only examine the quantity of the work but the quality too (Barrientos et al. 2011). As decent work examines the quality of work then it further reiterates the fact that such examination needs to be carried out by the workers themselves (Burchell et al. 2013).

Decent work not only brings satisfaction. It is a kind of job that allows for productivity, individual development, looks out for gender gaps, balances family and work life, security and social protection, where workers have the power to negotiate their hours etc. for example, a respondent in this research says, “I can get a better position with my certificate and experience...”<sup>25</sup> A respondent who qualified as a lawyer in his country and practiced for three years before coming to The Netherlands where he has also acquired a master’s degree from the University in law said;

“I like the environment that I work but I am not well paid... I wish that they can retain me... I am an intern, the senior associate is younger than me, refugees do not get jobs that match their skills, you need to trade so many things in order to get the top, it is very hard to get a place like the place you were in back in your country, yesterday I was speaking to a friend who studied Literature in Syria, here he is studying to be a nursery school teacher, it is a trade, teachers are needed here, people who get to where they want are very rare”<sup>26</sup>

This does not sound like this individual gets satisfaction from his job. In my understanding, a job which a person is satisfied with has several components such as; good wages, social protection, qualifications and experiences match the position, hours which allows a person to balance their work, family and social life, employment where workers are treated with respect. Where a refugee worker is probably more qualified than those ahead of him or her at work, there will be an additional cause of dissatisfaction.

As decent work “is expressed in terms of universal values such as freedom, fairness and dignity” (Burchell et al. 2013: 473), universal means that decent work is for everyone, there should not be any differentiation in the application of decent work globally, decent work for native-workers and decent work for refugees. In the spirit of freedom, fairness and dignity, refugees should be able to freely choose jobs which they can take or not take and not be made to trade between taking volunteer jobs or losing their stipends from the state. Instead they should be supported to work in jobs which meets their qualifications and experiences, in positions which they are trained for or have acquired skills for,

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<sup>25</sup> Continuation of interview with Mr M

<sup>26</sup> Continuation of interview with Mr O

jobs in which they experience security and social protection. Highly skilled refugees should be paid well for the work they do just like native born workers are paid.

## 4.5 Conclusion

Refugees have different experiences in The Netherlands. In a bid to translate their skills to work, most of them try to get another qualification in The Netherlands as their qualifications and work experiences are generally not recognised. They often face discrimination which occurs culturally and systematically. They take jobs which are under their skills level, causing them to migrate downward on the occupational ladder. They even take jobs they consider not decent, mainly because they feel obliged to do so. They struggle with the language, to fit in and find it difficult to start all over again. The lack of recognition for their qualifications can lead to deskilling of refugees, brain waste and over-education as they find themselves unable to benefit from their previous education and work experience (Griesshaber and Seibel 2015). Simply put it seems that

“...whilst newly arrived asylum seekers and refugees (ASRs) have both skills and qualifications, they are currently experiencing high levels of unemployment and those who are employed are working in low-skilled jobs with earnings far below the average.” (Phillimore and Goodson 2006: 1715).

This is an injustice to the refugees and does not adhere to the decent work framework as defined by the ILO and the definitions of decent work as explained by the refugees. It is also a violation of different rights of highly skilled as contained in the UDHR, Refugee Convention, Lisbon Convention etc. (UNHCR 1958, United Nations 1948, U. Council of Europe 1997)

## Chapter 5 Conclusion

Taking the specific case of The Netherlands, this research focuses on how highly skilled refugees are able – or not – to translate their skills into the new context in which they come to live and whether they consider the employment that they have as ‘decent work’. This research consists of five chapters. Chapter one introduces the subject of the research, explains its context and the problem. It shows the gap in literature as it relates to decent work and refugees. It shows that this subject is barely touched on in the literature. It also shows that studies on ‘decent work’ are almost always confined to the Global South. This means voices of refugees in the Global North are rarely heard and the quality of work rarely examined.

Chapter two explains the methodology and strategies employed in this research. It contains the ethical choices, biases and reflections from the researcher. Chapter three begins with a legal framework tracing the right to work for refugees and explains the decent work as per the ILO. Considering that this research is about highly skilled refugees, there are explanations of human capital and how useful it should be in a knowledge economy as The Netherlands. It also explains labour market segmentation, precarious positions refugees find themselves, de-skilling and other factors that affect the labour market integration of highly skilled refugees.

Chapter four discusses the findings of this research as obtained through the interviews. An analysis of these interviews using theories and concepts earlier discussed in Chapter three are also presented. The experiences of the refugees in terms of their qualifications, work experiences before arriving in The Netherlands and factors affecting their finding work in The Netherlands are discussed. Their definitions of decent work are also part of this chapter. Chapter five concludes the study.

Refugee workers are a sizeable workforce with a global perspective that can contribute positively to The Netherlands’ economically. As shown, refugees right to work is a human right protected by a plethora of legal instruments. Occasioned by the lack of work for refugees and migrants in general, the ILO, in line with SDG 8, promotes decent work for all and elaborates a decent work framework for migrants, encouraging employment of refugees in sectors other than the informal sector (ILO. 2018, UNHCR. 2018a, ILO 2016).

Considering that The Netherlands is a knowledge economy which is need of knowledge workers, and holding up to the responsibilities of the different legal obligations that they have, the Netherlands seems to be the ideal place for highly skilled refugees who are knowledge workers to thrive in. As all refugee respondents of this research had at least a bachelor’s degree in their country of origin before moving to The Netherlands, they have substantial human capital. It should be quite easy for them to gain access into the labour market and be employed on the levels which they ought to be going by knowledge economy and human capital theories.

However, other factors apart from educational attainment and their experiences mediate their entry into the Dutch labour market. It seems that their experiences are not quite useful for the terrain in which they are in. Factors such

as the validation of skills and certificates which determines whether their qualifications and skills are recognised in The Netherlands play a deciding role on whether they can work in decent jobs in the Dutch labour market or not. If their qualifications and skills are not recognised in The Netherlands, then they have limited options including working in jobs lower than where they ought to work or getting qualified in The Netherlands. Some of the respondents in this study have experienced validation, their qualification and skills are not recognised. This leads to deskilling, downward occupational mobility and working in precarious jobs. Some respondents try to bypass the validation of skills by getting a Dutch qualification which should help them get decent jobs in The Netherlands. This leads to over-education of refugees.

Validation seems to be a form of structural discrimination as discrimination can occur through several ways, including; (mis) or unrecognition of skills and qualifications, by skin colour, name, or what employers called 'Dutch working culture', a perceived lack of 'fit' of refugees within Dutch organizations, or lack of Dutch language fluency (Campion 2018). This study found that all these deny highly skilled refugees' access to decent employment in The Netherlands. Refugees unable to speak Dutch fluently or with a foreign accent are disadvantaged in the labour market for 'decent work'. Different studies in Europe also show that refugees' unemployment rates are often higher than those of native-born workers and they are usually overeducated for their positions as compared to their native-born counterparts (Bauböck and Tripkovic 2017)

Also worthy of note is the concept of volunteering in The Netherlands. The respondents in this research mostly volunteered for three reasons; to widen their network, to be able to put it on their CV and to acquire experience in The Netherlands. This may work for single people, but less so for married people, with families to support here in The Netherlands and elsewhere. It proves to be more difficult for them. As volunteers, some of the respondents were very poorly paid and ended up in precarious positions in the labour market. The local governments in The Netherlands through their organizations can even require voluntary work by refugees as a condition for continuing to receive welfare benefits.

This voluntary work is carried out by highly skilled refugees even in organizations which can afford to pay them at their appropriate occupational cadre. This raises questions like whether the government is deliberately making refugee labour a cheap commodity for organisations. Considering that The Netherlands especially The Hague is home to many international organizations that do not require Dutch as the official language at the company, questions as to whether this is a deliberate attempt to keep refugees from gaining decent work arises through a continuous exploitation of their cheap labour (Siar 2013).

Decent work is defined by the ILO as work which promotes and respects the rights of the workers in terms of equal opportunities for all to engage in work which is sustainable and economic, where workers are socially protected and there is a dialogue for better working conditions for the workers (ILO 2015). The respondents in this study have defined decent work as work that meet their skills, qualifications, experiences; work where their pay recognises that they are highly skilled and qualified, and where they are paid competitively with others who have comparable skills and qualifications, and more importantly, it is defined as work which they derive satisfaction from.



If these definitions of decent work are followed and refugees get work according to these definitions, then issues surrounding deskilling, over-education, downward occupational mobility, and waste of human capital will all be avoided. Refugees are an under-utilized workforce, who struggle to find decent work to contribute to their self-development and the development of the economy of their host and home countries. If properly employed, refugees could even help to turn the global economy around. Yet so many factors militate against their 'decent work', including in the case of refugees in The Netherlands. What seems to happen is a trade-off; in exchange for doing voluntary work, work which they do not consider 'decent', they are provided with social support, and this is supposed to help them build their CV as well as meeting their immediate needs. It is not clear whether this helps them build their career in the longer-term.

As the ability of these refugees to access and favourably compete with native-born workers in The Netherlands depend on different factors (Bauböck and Tripkovic 2017), recommendations are not straightforward and therefore we suggest a paradigm shift and incremental changes (Aleinikoff 2015). This should begin with a new narrative about refugees, from dependants to self-reliant, from being threats to human beings in need of protection. What is clear is that there has to be a change amongst three top actors, policy makers, employers and service providers.

- Policy makers can begin by expanding the right to work for refugees to include 'the right to decent work'. They can also promote a more multicultural and diverse society, address various barriers, by recognising certificates of refugee, insisting on paid work for refugees or perhaps even subsidising positions for a period for refugees.
- Employers can help by changing their attitudes concerning issues of language, and perhaps trust refugees by giving them a chance to learn better Dutch on the job and employing them in a position they qualify for in terms of their skills level. Hiring should base on non-discrimination.
- Service providers should target labour integration services at refugees, and design them to meet the needs of highly skilled refugees. Hearing and listening to refugees on what their needs are can be particularly helpful.

Overall, a more flexible system of recognition of qualifications could benefit employers, the economy, and the refugees. This could reduce skills wastage, serving both justice and the rights of refugees as employees (Hawthorne 2013, Sumption 2013). Employing more highly skilled refugees could also enable more Dutch employers to fill their skills deficit, whilst benefiting individuals who are employed and even the national economy. This could be a win-win situation for all.

With regards to further studies, a comparative study into how highly skilled refugees and decent work can be conducted in the labour markets of countries in the Global North. A good starting point would be Europe as there seems to be issues with the quality of work that highly skilled refugees find or not find and there are not enough studies that investigate this. The study can be carried out over a longer duration allowing the researcher to incorporate any noticeable changes overtime. These studies should aim at both listening to the voices of the refugees and taking note of which policies are effective or not, what can be

changed and better solutions. This might contribute to more effective policies, scholarly literature, wellbeing of refugees and even the global economy.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Interview Guide

### For Refugee Respondents

- ✚ Name:
- ✚ Pseudonym (I will not use your real name in my study):
- ✚ Age:
- ✚ Country of birth:
- ✚ Are you Dutch: YES/NO
- ✚ If No, what is your nationality:
- ✚ If Yes, do you have a second nationality: YES/NO
- ✚ Former profession in home country:
- ✚ Highest Education level reached:
- ✚ When did you come to Netherlands?
- ✚ When did you get asylum?
- ✚ After you got asylum, did you pass through a skills validation process?
- ✚ If YES, can you tell me a bit about the process?
- ✚ Was it easy or difficult, finding a job in The Netherlands as a refugee?
- ✚ Are you currently working?
- ✚ If YES, how did you get your current job?
- ✚ If NO, have you worked before in The Netherlands? YES/NO
- ✚ If Yes, at what job.
- ✚ What factors do you think prevented or helped you find work?
- ✚ Do you think your job matches your qualifications and skills?
- ✚ If NO, what kind of job did you expect before
- ✚ What is decent work
- ✚ Do you consider your job to be decent?
- ✚ What kind of job would you consider suitable for yourself?
- ✚ Do you know other highly educated refugees I could talk to?
- ✚ How could refugees get work on a par with their skills, in your opinion?
- ✚ Are there any other experiences about finding a job that matches your skills, that you'd like to share with you?

### For Officials from Organization

- ✚ Name
- ✚ Organization and position
- ✚ Tell me about your work and the work your organization does
- ✚ What does your organization do to help highly skilled refugees?



## **Appendix 2: List of Respondents**

### ***Highly Skilled Refugees Interviewed***

- Mr M
- Mr O
- Miss K
- Mr A1
- Mr E
- Mr C
- Mr A2
- Mr D
- Mr A3
- Mrs M

### ***Officials of organizations interviewed***

- Respondent 1, representative of Nuffic
- Respondent 2, representative of Nuffic
- Respondent 3, representative of Vluchtelingenwerk
- Respondent 4, representative of UAF
- Respondent 5, representative of the Municipality of the Hague

## **Appendix 3: List of Tables**

Table 1: Socio-demographic of refugees who were respondents in this research

Table 2: Officials of organizations interviewed