**A Window of Opportunity? Refugee Staff’s Employment in Migrant Support and Advocacy Organizations**

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**Abstract:** This article presents an analysis of the experiences of refugee staff in migrant support and advocacy organizations in the UK, Austria and the Netherlands. It takes refugees’ success in finding employment as a starting point and foregrounds refugees’ reflections to identify the unique features of the migrant support service sector with its attractions and pitfalls. I revisit the common explanatory concepts of ‘labour market segmentation’ and ‘ethnic niche’ and demonstrate that these fail to capture the unique pathway from client to service provider and the skilled character of this specific sector in which (intersectional forms of) ‘refugeeness’ can become capital.

**Keywords:** refugees; employment; NGOs; third sector; ethnic niche; labour market

This article contributes to current research on refugees and employment with an analysis of the experiences of refugees who found employment in migrant support and advocacy organisations. Quantitative research on refugees and the labour market tends to focus on identifying determinants for refugees’ employment success or failure (van Tubergen 2011; Cheung and Phillimore 2014; Konle-Seidl and Bolits 2016), while qualitative studies look at institutional programmes targeted at refugees (Shutes 2011), or refugees’ strategies to find work (Willot and Stevenson 2013; Piętka-Nykaza 2015). This emphasis on (lacking) labour market access is unsurprising given that refugees occupy a disadvantaged position, facing both similar and additional obstacles compared to other migrant and ethnic minority groups. This article takes a different approach, first, by taking as its starting point refugees’ ‘success’ rather than ‘failure’ in finding employment, and second, by foregrounding the reflections of refugee employees. I focus on a specific sector, namely the migrant support service sector[[1]](#endnote-1), comprising of large NGOs (partly) contracted by the state, semi-governmental institutions, autonomous grassroots NGOs and migrant self-organisations, which deliver support and advice services to migrants, with the aim to nuance generalised findings about refugees’ employment, revisit dominant explanatory concepts, and argue for an intersectional analysis of ‘refugeeness’ as capital in this unique sector.

Two characteristics of this sector make it a particularly interesting case. First, since the sector does not have an equivalent in most refugees’ countries of origin, it constitutes a new area of work rather than a continuation of former professions. Secondly, it is a sector, which most refugee staff members have encountered before their current employment, namely as so-called clients receiving support.

I draw on the analysis of 41[[2]](#endnote-2) semi-structured interviews conducted between 2012-2015[[3]](#endnote-3) with refugee staff members in the migrant support service sector in Austria (n=15), the Netherlands (n=15) and England (n=11). Austria, the Netherlands and the UK were selected as case studies because each has overlapping as well as differing migration histories and policy regimes[[4]](#endnote-4), following Lachenmann’s conception of ‘comparing by contextualising’ (2008, 24). The interviews were conducted in the context of a broader research project on the role and position of refugee, migrant and ethnic minority staff members in the migrant support service sector, against the backdrop of contemporary and historical (colonial) practices of cultural brokerage (cf. de Jong 2018). Most research participants worked for ‘state-sponsored or -endorsed voluntary sector organizations’ (Vickers 2016, 442), which have taken on tasks associated with governmental responsibilities, such as VluchtelingenWerk in the Netherlands, Migrant Help in the UK, and Caritas and Diakonie in Austria. Since the research focussed on the *distinct* position of staff who shared a migration history and/or ethnic background with the so-called clients, the sample focussed on white-normed organisations and excluded migrant self-organisations where peer support is more common.

The refugee staff members that I interviewed had previously applied for asylum and had subsequently been granted a form of status.[[5]](#endnote-5) I consider their ‘refugee identity’ a social category in the making, with ‘refugeeness’ being ‘an ongoing, constitutive process’ (Jackson and Bauder 2013, 36) of ‘becoming a refugee [through] negotiating one’s identity vis-à-vis the refugee label’ (Ibid., 362). The 26 male and 15 female research participants were recruited through purposeful and snowball sampling and originally came from a range of countries, including former Yugoslavia, Zimbabwe, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Chechnya, the DRC and Somalia. The interviews generally lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours and were conducted in German, English and Dutch; the dominant languages of their professional context. Interview themes included the trajectory into the job, skills, and relationships with colleagues and clients. The analysis was carried out with structural coding, combined with open coding, using qualitative data analysis tool QDA Miner (Saldaña 2009).

In the following section, I will present the context of the experiences of refugee staff in the migrant support service sector by drawing on the broader insights from studies in this field and discuss variations between migrant support service sectors in different countries. In the subsequent section I will tease out the specificities of the migrant support service sector and revisit dominant concepts from the literature on refugee, migrant and ethnic minority employment in general, such as ethnic niche and labour market segmentation. I will argue that these concepts need to be refined through close intersectional analysis to capture the unique window of opportunity as well as potential career traps that the migrant support sector presents for refugee employees.

**Context**

**Refugees and Employment**

The relative success story of the refugees in this study can only be understood against the backdrop of refugees’ general employment situation. Since so-called ‘successful integration’ has conventionally been measured with reference to labour market participation, employment rate has been of long-standing interest. As reiterated in a recent overview report requested by the Employment and Social Affairs committee of the European Parliament, some of the obstacles that refugees face, are shared with other migrant populations, such as those relating to competence in the language of the host country and recognition of degrees, and with ethnic minorities, including labour market discrimination. Other barriers are specific to refugees, including trauma, interrupted educational and professional careers, and substantial periods of unemployment due to asylum procedures, which prohibit (most types of) employment (Konle-Seidl and Bolits 2016). In the UK and the Netherlands the labour market participation of refugees is 40-50%, significantly lower than that of the ethnic majority population (comparable data for Austria is unavailable) (Home Office 2010; VluchtelingenWerk 2014; Allinger 2016). The disadvantaged position of refugees extends into employment, for instance in deskilling and overrepresentation in temporary positions and the secondary labour market (Home Office 2010; UNHCR 2013; VluchtelingenWerk 2014).

There is a paucity of studies focussing on refugees as staff members in the migrant support service sector (see for an exception: Haggis, Schech and Rainbird 2007). The frame of reference is therefore limited to research on refugee volunteers (Tomlinson and Erel 2005; Yap, Byrne, and Davidson 2010; Vickers 2016) and studies on refugees or on refugee organisations with a different research focus, which in passing provide evidence that the sector offers employment opportunities to refugees. For instance, Tomlinson and Egan quote a director of a refugee agency in England who is ‘so pleased to have as many refugees working for us as we do’ (2002, 1029). Madeline Otis Campbell’s ethnographic research of Iraqi military interpreters resettled to the United States reveals that some gained employment as refugee caseworkers (2016). Bosnian refugees in Sweden accepted jobs as mother-tongue school teachers, in care jobs with a Croatian client group, as well as in programmes with a Bosnian refugee target group (Povrzanović Frykman 2012). From these studies we can derive that when migrants or refugees constitute a substantial part of organisations’ client groups, the demand for cultural and linguistic knowledge increases, which can provide potential job opportunities for refugees and migrants.

Research on migrant service providers constitutes another set of relevant literature, but lacks reflection on the specific situation of refugees (Lutz 1993; Türegün 2013; Bauder and Jayaraman 2014; Martin 2014). Synthesising studies on the migrant support service sector with the aforementioned research on refugees, and with general studies on migrant women and ethnic minority women and employment (Erel 2010; Kofman and Raghuram 2015), it becomes clear that the sector indeed provides employment opportunities, albeit often of a precarious nature. Moreover, it demonstrates that while the sector allows a degree of social mobility, there is little upward mobility to management positions within the organisation or horizontal mobility to other social sector organisations with a different (not predominantly migrant) target group (Lutz 1993). This is closely connected to the fact that entry into front-line positions in the migrant support service sector is generally based on linguistic and cultural competences which are regarded as ‘natural’ skills or experiential knowledge, while formal qualifications and work experience of refugee and migrant staff remain unrecognised (Bauder and Jayaraman 2014). Helma Lutz, in a study on Turkish female social workers in Germany and Netherlands in the late 80s, argued that ‘“being a Turk”, and not education and training, was their ticket into the labour market’ (1993, 487). Kofman and Raghuram refer to migration experience as the recognised competence ‘that is seen to make them appropriate for this task’, intersecting with migrant women’s gendered identity of community carers (2015, 125). Since this culturalised knowledge is not equally recognised as relevant for management positions within the migrant support service sector or for social sector jobs with other client groups, precisely those features that are an entry ticket into migrant support jobs become a menace for other careers.

**Case Study Countries**

The trends identified above cut across the different country contexts in which the various studies have been conducted and represent structural features of labour markets, migration regimes and social welfare systems. Moreover, as I will demonstrate below, an actor-centred approach demonstrates more commonalities than differences between refugee staff’s experiences. However, while it is not possible in the context of this article to give an exhaustive comparative overview of the national variations between Austria, the Netherlands and the UK, in this section I will highlight some of the distinct ways in which nationally specific political discourses and the regulations of professions impact on refugees’ pathways into the sector (for a detailed analysis of the Austrian case, cf. de Jong 2017).

The interviews and background document analysis revealed some institutional, discursive and structural differences between the UK, the Netherlands and Austria. In the UK, for instance, the Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner (OISC), sponsored by the Home Office, regulates immigration advisers. Social work in the UK voluntary sector remains unregulated compared to work in the statutory sector. In Austria, the migrant support service sector has also remained unregulated and there is no equivalent to the OISC, though funders can require that staff on certain programmes have formal social work qualifications. Moreover, a qualified social worker generally has a higher salary level than a non-qualified worker. In the Netherlands, no equivalent system exists. The topic of formal qualification was therefore much more significant for England-, and especially Austria-based refugee staff. Their considerations reflected concerns that ‘professional credentials are more about the monopolization of opportunities than about the requirements of actual work’, given that the native-born population is more likely to have obtained these credentials (Türegün 2013, 599). As illustrated by Jan, an ethnic minority Hungarian from Romania, Austrian staff frequently stated that they considered obtaining a social work degree, not to enhance their work practice, but to improve their employability.

I would say that after so many years [of working in the field, the degree] doesn’t make a difference anymore. [But] in Austria [the degree] is very important. [...] I hope I don’t have to look for a job anymore. Because when you are job hunting, it is very important that you have a degree. Either they know you, or you have the papers.

An expected structural difference between the three countries was that it was more common for the England-based refugee staff to already have advanced English language skills prior to their arrival. Cheung and Phillimore’s observations for the UK of the ‘unambiguous importance of language for access to employment’ (2014, 533), echoed in studies on the Netherlands and Canada (Ghorashi and van Tilburg 2006; Jackson and Bauder 2013), explains their relatively advantaged position. In contrast, language acquisition was central to narratives of participants in Austria and the Netherlands, with particularly Austrian staff members recounting individual, creative strategies to learn German, faced with oversubscribed or ineffective language courses.

The interviews reflected some unique features of the migrant support service sectors in each of the countries. At the time of the interviews in England (January and February 2015), the institutional landscape had recently undergone a radical transformation. Following a Home Office decision, from April 2014, Migrant Help became the single supplier for Asylum Support Services. Consequently, the consortium of organisations operating under the Asylum Support Partnership (ASP), which included previous main providers Refugee Council and Refugee Action, lost substantial funding and some of their redundant staff members were moved to Migrant Help. While in some cases staff members even remained in the same offices, there were also significant changes, including the massive reduction of face-to-face client service in favour of telephone communication. Moreover, staff had to sign a clause in their new contract that they would not advocate on behalf of their clients. As the Finance Manager Asylum Support of the Home Office explained: ‘The HO [Home Office] has made it explicit in the terms of the new agreements that they should not be used to fund advocacy.’ (Meeting Note: Scottish Refugee Council Stakeholder Event on Asylum Advice Service Provision from April 2014, 9th of April 2014). Some refugee staff members that were transferred to Migrant Help subsequently decided to leave the organisation, unwilling to work under the new mandate, whereas others mentioned a decrease in their job satisfaction. The interviews also showed another side effect of this staff turnover: the reorganisation gave some refugee staff opportunities for upward career mobility into leadership positions.

In the Netherlands, the effect of organisational mergers was also felt, albeit to a lesser degree. The organisation VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, which effectively has a monopoly in the support service sector for refugees (not asylum seekers), is an independent national NGO with regional foundations across the country offering services and advocacy. Interviewed refugee staff as well as the managers expressed that the organisation was not ‘diverse enough’. One explanation was that with each downsizing phase, refugee staff were the first to lose their jobs as they generally had fewer years of employment with the organisation. The other central actor in the Dutch migration field is the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA), an independent administrative body accountable to the Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice. While the mandate and ideologies of the two organisations are very different, in practice some research participants had been employed by both organisations, for instance working for the COA reception facilities where they had once been residents themselves, during their asylum procedure.

Similar to the Netherlands, where COA is linked to one of the national ministries, the Austrian Integration Fund (ÖIF), is a partner of the Austrian Federal Ministry for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs, and hence limited in its political independence. While questions around autonomy and ideology are often prominent in migration support and advocacy organisations themselves and considered key in (critical) migration studies (cf. de Jong and Ataç 2017), in the interviews with staff of the ÖIF and COA there was little reflection on the implications of working within an institution linked to the state versus working for an NGO. Moreover, compared to the UK and the Netherlands, in Austria reorganisation was a less prominent theme in the interviews. In Austria, the faith-based organisations Caritas and Diakonie, together with Volkshilfe, which has close links with the social-democratic party, and the humanitarian Red Cross, are major players in the refugee and asylum support service sector, which receive (indirect) funding from the state, regions, cities or social welfare services. Two main contentions that found their way into the Austrian interviews were the variation between these four organisations with regards to staff diversity and the degree to which experiential knowledge, linguistic and ‘cultural competences’ were valued and remunerated compared to professional social work degrees. The difference in the degree of emphasis that the four main NGOs put on professional qualifications mattered for employment chances for refugees. As has been found in Canada, professionalisation of the migrant support service sector carries the risk of progressively making it a ‘less permeable profession’ (Türegün 2013, 601-602).

**A Window of Opportunity?**

**Labour Segmentation**

This section will present a detailed analysis of the interview data to discuss the specific features, attractions and pitfalls of refugee employment in the migrant support service sector, and revisit common analytical concepts in light of its particular character. Studies on the position of migrant, ethnic minority or refugee paid and unpaid staff in the migrant support service sector often draw on two interrelated key concepts: ethnic niche and labour market segregation or segmentation. Helma Lutz refers to Dutch and German studies from the 1980s, which found that the majority of well-educated migrants were working in social work and mother-tongue teaching, asking whether this is as another instance of “ethnic labour market segregation” (1993, 487). Bauder and Jayaraman (2014) use labour segmentation theory as a framework to argue that migrant staff tends to be employed in the lower second tier of the migration support sector, that is in smaller ethnic-community-specific agencies, rather than the major players, with little chance of upward mobility. Povrzanović Frykman (2012, 13) refers to the job opportunities that arose for Bosnian refugees in Sweden from the demand for BSK language skills as a ‘specific kind of “ethnic niche”’.

Neither of these concepts, however, can capture the very unique combination of opportunity and trap represented by this specific sector. While describing the migrant support service sector in terms of labour market segregation or segmentation has currency in highlighting limited access to management positions and the general precarity of the third sector, it negates that it is a better paid, skilled sector with a higher social status than the ‘so-called 3D (dirty, dangerous, and degrading) jobs’, common among migrants in Europe (Taran 2016, 17). A recent UK study found that refugees and asylum seekers are vulnerable to severely exploitative and forced labour (Waite, Lewis, Dwyer and Hodkinson 2015). Several of my research participants in different countries suggested that the limited support system for asylum seekers forces people into illegalised work. As a Georgian refugee in Austria explains: ‘The state must know exactly that with 290 euros a month, no Austrian dog survives.’ Especially male refugees recounted in the interviews how they initially had been employed in demanding physical work, such as street sweeping or factory work, before finding a route into the migrant support service sector. Hajar, an England-based male refugee from Iraq, for instance, describes the obstacles he encountered in accessing the labour market, recounting that he was unable to enter university with his accountancy degree from Iraq:

I started getting tired of the work in the factory because that is something out of my area. But you have no option. […] I tried to find an office job and I tried to be with Refugee Council or somewhere else. But I found this the problem with this country, they say ‘have you got any experience? Do you have any experience in the UK? Could you show me your CV?’ But there is nothing on my CV of work in the UK at all. […] And you need to survive. You have family and they are in a very bad situation.

**Volunteering and Interpreting**

Hajar’s route into the migrant support service sector, which included volunteering and interpreting, is an apt illustration of the strategies employed by many refugees facing the non-recognition of their country of origin work experience and qualifications. However, the accounts of research participants who fled as children and attended school in their new countries of residence, also suggested that despite their ‘native’ qualifications, their (label of) ‘refugeeness’ continued to hinder their access to the general labour market, leaving the migrant support service sector as the only viable option beyond unemployment or menial labour.

Next to his factory job, Hajar volunteered in the mornings as an interpreter for a third sector organisation, utilising his Arabic, Kurdish as well as Farsi language skills. The latter he had learned during his time in a refugee camp in Iran. Much interpreting work is done on a voluntary basis and often begins with supporting friends and acquaintances. Moreover, voluntary work is often seen as a necessary step to acquire ‘host country’ work experience, which is often a precondition for labour market access, as Hajar’s account illustrates. Hence, seemingly paradoxically, voluntary work becomes compulsory. It is therefore important to recognise that much voluntary work happens when asylum seekers are excluded by law from regular paid employment (Vickers 2014), or under circumstances where paid employment is out of reach, and that it can become exploitative (Bauder and Jayaraman 2014). At the same time, in a situation where refugees only have access to ‘undesirable […] unfulfilling’ jobs, voluntary work became a ‘means of reconstructing identity and fostering a sense of belonging’, allowing refugees to reconnect with their past professional identities (Jackson and Bauder 2013, 375). As a Pakistani asylum seeker evocatively described her voluntary work to me:

These [migrant support] organisations are the filter of society. […] They’re recycling people, from not useful to useful. […] All the time I was sitting at home, what was I doing other than taking anti-depressants? […] But this organisation has polished me, made me help others.

Hence, the distraction, community, and fulfilment it can offer can be a lifeline for asylum seekers and refugees who face depression due to the disempowering asylum procedure. Hajar’s narrative is one of continuous development and ‘self-improvement’, a theme I will return to later. From his own account, he productively used his early time in the UK to attend courses at different colleges. He then trained himself to be an advice worker during his volunteer position as an interpreter:

When the person asked any question to the client, and when the client asked any question to the advisor, I was in the middle; I was listening to both answers and questions. And through that I started learning.

**Skilled Labour**

Currently, Hajar is the only Kurdish staff member left in his organisation after four others were made redundant following funding cuts. To make himself indispensable, he has developed a wide portfolio and presents himself as an efficient staff member who can do case work without the need for a paid interpreter.

While the concept of labour segregation or labour segmentation can account for the structural forces that pushed him into low-skilled factory labour, and can perhaps explain the precarity of his colleagues, it does not capture the fundamentally different *status* attributed to work in the migrant support service sector compared to factory work. An Australian study, which found that recent refugees were concentrated in cleaning, care, construction, meat processing and transport sectors, refers to casual interpreting and cross-cultural social work as just another employment niche that demonstrates migrants’ labour market segmentation (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2006). Apart from a short reference that ‘bilingual settlement workers expressed satisfaction with their job and the sense of purpose it gave them’ (Ibid., 216), the authors make no fundamental distinction between the migrant support service sector and other sectors. This belies the effort and resourcefulness that Hajar, as well as many research participants, presented to escape from or avoid jobs that they considered to be at the lowest segments of the labour market. Without casting judgment on the value of menial jobs, one fundamental distinction of the migrant support service sector lies in the fact that while it might be based on undervalued and naturalised skills, it is regarded a skilled profession nonetheless. Instead of lumping employment in the migrant support service sector together with menial jobs as yet another example of migrants’ labour market segmentation, a more apt comparative case could be the general voluntary sector, where blurred boundaries between provider and recipient and peer-support programmes, are commonly found (Billis and Glennerster 1998).

**Niche and Networks**

In contrast to the channelling and partitioning associated with the concept of ‘labour segregation/segmentation’, the concept of (ethnic) ‘niche’ carries the connotation of providing an ‘opening’. Hence, in some ways it better describes the (ambivalent) window of opportunity that some research participants, such as Hajar, discovered, and which other research participants, such as Maja, were offered. As Maja, a Bosnian refugee in Austria explains:

A woman that I knew from church had a neighbour who worked for Caritas. She had once told him, I know someone from Bosnia, she has learned German amazingly quickly […] and he then said, we actually need a lot of staff that speaks German-Bosnian, because there are so many refugees. […] He talked to me and saw that my German was really good and he found a job for me. […] I got a job as a refugee caseworker, and actually my main role was to interpret for the social workers. And that’s how I got to know about social work.

However, the notion of ethnic niche as the ‘sorting of categorically distinctive workers into an identifiably distinct set of jobs’ (Waldinger 1994, 27) is ineffective in describing the networks that underpinned the refugees’ trajectories. Moreover, since the migrant support service sector is neither dominated by one or two ethnic groups (but instead by a variety of migrants, minorities and ethnic majorities), nor owned by a particular ethnic group, the term ‘ethnic’ is misleading. Moreover, while ethnic niches are usually associated with ethnic networks (Waldinger 1994; Schrover, van der Leun, and Quispel 2007), in the case of my interviewees, recruitment was not dominated by these (though they did play a role in some cases). In Maja’s case, a woman from church facilitated her entry, whereas for others the providers of services that they accessed as ‘clients’ were key in finding employment. A refugee from Kosovo recounted that the job coach of the refugee organisation, which had funded her higher vocational degree in the Netherlands, told her at their first meeting: ‘You can do *this* type of work!’. Hazel, a Zimbabwean woman in England felt encouraged when she noticed that some caseworkers of the organisation that she approached for support were black and African like herself. This challenges the problematic ‘tendency to focus on bridging ties exclusively in relation to ethnicity’, as it overlooks ‘migrants’ interpersonal attachments and social networking’ (Ryan, Erel, and D’Angelo 2015, 12). In Hazel’s own words:

Just to see them and to be talking to them, because they understand what you are going through, because they have also been through the same thing. I could help do the same and be encouraging and be the face that somebody can identify with.

A study from Australia about resettled refugees’ own definitions of social capital indeed recognised ‘the pivotal role that settlement service providers can play in strengthening social capital in refugee communities’, both by bridging to the wider community and by strengthening ethnic communities (Pittaway, Bartolomei, and Doney 2015, 9).

**‘Refugeeness’ as Capital**

The migrant support service sector is different from most other skilled sectors in that ‘difference’, in this case ‘refugeeness’, becomes the competence that is recognised over formal qualifications. Studies that use a human capital approach and consider capital as static ‘property’ of individual refugees fall short of interpreting the position of refugee staff in the migrant support service sector. Umut Erel (2010) highlights the ways in which the value of migrants’ capital is negotiated as the result of the interplay between migrants’ strategic agency and the host society’s validation of that capital. Hence what ‘refugeeness’ as diversity capital exactly constitutes, is a complex negotiation between social and institutional recognition and refugees’ own strategies. A UK based refugee staff member from Iran, recalls the recruitment of refugee workers by his former employer and draws a link between the experience of precarity and motivation, as discussed in the previous section:

The [organization] was clever to pick up people from with language skills, with other abilities they had and then to set up an organisation that was incredible in terms of talent. […] That opportunity that [the organization] grabbed and used, it makes a huge difference actually. It brings fresh blood, it brings ideas, it brings cultural differences, it brings a world of wealth of experience, of information, of commitment. Of hard working people with the right approach. […] They have been fighting for years to get to that point where they got an opportunity and they wouldn’t lose it very easily.

The public and third sector is a site where ‘the social justice case and the business case for diversity’ come together (Tomlinson and Schwabenland 2010, 102). The two arguments for diversity, for instance, coincide when refugee staff explained how their ability to address their ‘clients’ in their mother tongue was both an important instrument to make ‘clients’ feel at ease and a significant asset in a context where hiring external interpreters posed a financial burden on organisations. The stakes concerning the recognition of ‘refugeeness’ as skill become higher when refugees’ other qualifications are denied value. The neoliberal element of the logic of diversity as capital also became apparent when, as this Afghani refugee in Austria explained, one must ‘sell’ distinctive skills:

The [cultural| differences also create chances. […] Because I also thought to myself, what can I offer what an Austrian job applicant cannot offer. […] In the beginning, that was of course difficult to have this confidence, and to say, I bring something: one just thought, I am only a poor foreigner, I don’t have anything, I am a refugee.

The entrepreneurial spirit that underpins this narrative needs to be situated in a normative integration discourse, which expects migrants to be resilient and pro-active, as Yap, Byrne, and Davidson (2010) have observed in relation to refugee volunteering. This discourse was partly internalised by the refugee staff that I interviewed and imposed on their ‘clients’.

‘Refugeeness’ could be employed in various forms besides language skills and ‘cultural’ competences, including brokerage, credibility as authentic representative or ‘token’ migrant, role model, as well as experiential knowledge. In the interviews, refugee staff members described that some of their ‘clients’ considered them ‘one of us’, while others considered their role as service provider as disrupting this shared identity. The frame of employment also compelled refugee staff to position themselves as similar to, but also *beyond* the situation of their ‘clients’. This resonates with one refugee advisor interviewed in a study by Tomlinson and Egan, who ‘refer[red] to herself as a refugee in the past tense, suggesting something temporary about refugee identity – that it is perhaps no longer salient once full-time employment is found’ (2002, 1040). Another ambivalence in relation to experiential knowledge was that staff considered their first-hand experience of flight, marginalisation and adaptation helpful in supporting ‘clients’, but at the same time noted that it was accompanied by significant emotional labour, which often remained unrecognised or was considered unprofessional. In an increasingly target-driven and rationalised climate, this was ‘hidden labor’, despite being a ‘significant portion of the quotidian work’ (Martin 2014, 24).

**Who Does the Job?**

The migrant support service sector has correctly been characterised as feminised, as a largely a non-profit or public sector, with relatively low wages and substantial unpaid labour. Apart from management positions, most jobs in the sector, especially those requiring direct ‘client’ contact, are filled by women and ‘feminised “others”’ (Peterson 2005, 507), such as migrants. Moreover, the (devalued) competences required for the job are associated with feminised qualities such as care and empathy. In this light, it is unsurprising and relevant that studies in the field with a gender approach have tended to focus on the experiences of refugee women as volunteers or staff (Tomlinson and Erel 2005; Halleh and van Tilburg 2006; Jayaraman and Bauder 2014). Strikingly, among Iraqi military interpreters in the United States who became caseworkers for refugee agencies, the majority were male, which Madeline Otis Campbell explains with reference to the fact that they were seen as ‘more appropriate authority figures’ in the context of cultural assumptions (2016, 159). This could prompt further research into whether organisations with predominantly migrant female workers have a different status and remuneration system than those with mostly male employees. It also should encourage further critical reflection on researchers’ own gendered interpretations, relating, for instance, the presence of migrant female workers with exploitation and of migrant male workers with authority.

Focussing solely on refugee women staff also leaves certain gender dynamics unexplored. The interview data derived from my own sample which was skewed towards men, showed that the complex pathways into employment in the migrant support service sector followed gendered patterns. Whereas women were resisting being channelled into care work, domestic cleaning, and retail (Koyama 2014), male refugee staff frequently had stints of heavy manual labour behind them. In light of the intersection between racialised and feminised labour (Schrover, van der Leun, and Quispel 2007), it is crucial to consider how ‘refugeeness’ interacted with or disrupted gendered expectations. A male refugee, who valued his job, but had the impression that he was hired to tick the ‘refugee box’, admitted that he had previously not considered social work as he associated it with ‘feminine skills’. A female refugee staff member described how she had become the breadwinner, out of necessity as her husband had suffered serious injuries. Both female and male refugee workers told me that care responsibilities had inhibited their labour market access and mobility, or prevented them from gaining social work or other qualifications. While reconciling care duties with work is a general challenge, forced migration limits reliance on family and other networks for support. In cases where status to remain or family reunification depended on a certain income level, refugee staff was prevented from pursuing part-time education.

Whereas most studies highlight the gendered and racialised character of the migrant support service sector, it is important to explicitly consider the less prominently discussed role of class (for an exception see: Vickers 2016). The high educational profile of the refugee staff that I interviewed suggested that the proactive strategies to gain entry to employment, such as the successful ‘capitalisation’ of ‘refugeeness’, English language skills or quick acquisition of the ‘host’ country’s language, were class-dependent. Also, people’s resilience must be understood in relation to Tom Vickers’ finding that higher class refugees showed a ‘subjective belief that their longer-term trajectory was a middle-class one, and that their present position was a temporary deviation’ (Vickers 2016, 448). This is critical in explaining, for instance, why Hajar and others continued to aspire to leaving menial jobs and finding employment in the migrant support service sector.

**Conclusion**

Common explanatory frameworks from the literature on employment of refugees and migrants, such as labour market segmentation and ethnic niche fail to capture the unique qualities of the migrant support service sector. They need to be complemented with careful intersectional analysis of refugee staff’s strategies, obstacles, and opportunities in light of structural features of labour markets, migration regimes and social welfare systems, inflected by national institutional, discursive and structural settings. Drawing on interviews with paid and voluntary refugee staff in the UK, the Netherlands and Austria, I have shown that the migrant support service sector provides a window of opportunity for highly educated refugees against the backdrop of refugees’ general overrepresentation in unskilled sectors and non-recognition of qualifications and work experience. The sector provides unique opportunities since access through volunteering and interpreting is facilitated by refugee staff’s former status as ‘clients’. Also, it recognises ‘refugeeness’ as a form of capital, both from a social justice and efficiency perspective. The recognition of this capital contributes to its status as a skilled sector, though paradoxically refugees’ qualifications from the country of origin are rarely acknowledged. Importantly, recognising the desirability of employment in the sector in the face of limited alternatives should not blind us to the fact that it also entails significant traps, including inadequate horizontal and vertical career mobility as well as hidden, devalued and unremunerated emotional labour. While restricted career prospects and emotional labour are pervasive in the feminised sector as a whole, the particular racialised, gendered and classed ways in which this plays out for refugee staff need to be acknowledged and addressed.

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1. I use the term ‘migrant support service sector’ as an adaptation of the term ‘immigrant service sector’ (Bauder and Jayaraman 2014) to highlight that many organisations understand themselves as support organisations in addition to service deliverers. Adding ‘support’ also helps to avoid confusion with the general ‘service sector’. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. This was a subset of a larger sample that also included research participants who had a migration but not refugee history, research participants from ethnic minorities, and managers in the migrant support service sector. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The interviews in Austria were conducted before the so-called refugee crisis significantly increased the number of asylum applications (from 28,100 in 2014 to 88,300 in 2015), adding to pressure on the migrant support service sector (Statistik Austria 2016, 8). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For instance, Austria and the Netherlands have in common a strong welfare state, while the UK and the Netherlands share a history of multicultural politics later denounced as ‘failed’. The geographic location and colonial or imperial history of each country has influenced the refugee populations they host. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For reasons of confidentiality, the research participants are not identified by their real names. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)