UNIVERSITETET I AGDER

Labor Integration in Rural Norway:

What are the main barriers to refugees accessing employment in small Norwegian municipalities?

The Case of a Typical Rural Municipality in Southern Norway

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University of Agder, 2020
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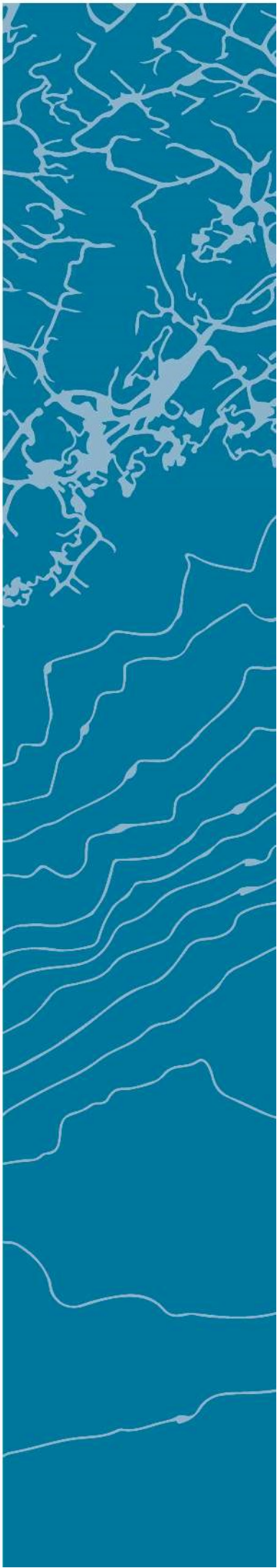

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September 2020

This master's thesis was conducted as part of the academic requirement for my master's program in the Department of Global Development and Planning, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Agder. However, it is worth mentioning that the University was not responsible for the research design, research methods, or the conclusion of findings therein.

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Vito Laterza

a. Abstract

Recent figures of people seeking refuge have been unprecedented in history. As the number of refugees has increased, so have the debates about their integration in the host countries, particularly their integration into host countries' labor markets. Despite ample research in the field of labor integration of refugees, the need for further research, especially in rural contexts, has been evident in the literature. Therefore, in the form of a master's thesis, this qualitative study was conducted to investigate the main barriers to refugees' labor integration in rural Norway, specifically in a small-sized remote municipality in Southern Norway. Twenty refugees, four potential employers, a policy implementer, and an NGO representative were interviewed in a semi-structured setting, and their interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a mixed technique of coding and thematic analysis.

The data results highlight a mixture of multiple barriers to refugees accessing employment in the target municipality in Southern Norway, i.e., barriers related to refugees' human and social capitals, challenging acculturation due to the relatively homogenous demography of the municipality, a lack of market capacity to accommodate refugee job seekers and policy shortfalls in terms of helping refugees effectively get their first jobs in Norway. Though some of these barriers exist across cities and rural districts of host countries, Norway, in this case, barriers related to market and policy shortcomings are somewhat exclusive to rural contexts, at least it has been so in the target municipality. Emerging from the challenges, some issues such as integration policy/program reform both at national and local levels and a strategic investment of integration grants by rural municipalities stood out as the possible way forward.

b. Acknowledgements

I want to take this occasion to thank the University of Agder for providing me with the opportunity and necessary guidance through my professors in the Department of Global Development and Planning to advance my academic knowledge and helping me prepare for my master's thesis project. The two years of attending lectures, participating in group discussions, and working on group and individual assignments were foundational in enhancing my academic knowledge and inspiring me to pursue my academic goals.

I would also like to thank my esteemed supervisor, Dr. Vito Laterza for his helpful instructions and continuous support during my master's program at the University of Agder, especially during my master's thesis project. Although my master's project coincided with the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic, making physical meetings impossible and thus challenging the conduct of my fieldwork as planned, Dr. Vito's continuous follow up to help me adjust my methods of data collection without breaching any respective legal and/or ethical rules and regulations was of tremendous value and help for me.

I also want to express my appreciation to my distinguished boss and colleagues who did not refrain from extending their continuous support during this challenging period. Likewise, I want to express my gratitude to all my research participants who showed interest in my topic and participated in my research project. This thesis would not have been conducted and accomplished if it were not for their interest and participation.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for their unlimited support throughout my two-year master's program, especially during my master's thesis fieldwork, which was a challenging time for my family and me as we have also been mourning the death of my father. My father used to inspire and encourage me all the time. If it were not for him and his belief in me, I could not have come where I am today. May his soul rest in peace.

c. Declaration

I, Sanjar Botoon, hereby declare that this master's thesis, focusing on Labor Integration in Rural Norway: *What are the main barriers to refugees accessing employment in small Norwegian municipalities?* is my original work. It is of utmost importance to also state that neither the thesis nor any parts of it has been submitted to any academic institution other than the University of Agder.

Place:

Kristiansand, Norway

Date:

September 2020

Signature:

Sanjar Botoon

d. Abbreviations

BBC – British Broadcasting Corporation

CV – Curriculum Vitae

GDPR – General Data Protection Regulation

IMDi – Integrerings- og Mangfolds Direktoratet (the Norwegian Directorate of Integration and Diversity)

IRC – International Rescue Committee

NAV – Ny arbeids- og velferdsforvaltning (New Labor and Welfare Administration)

NGO – Non-governmental Organization

NOKUT - Nasjonalt organ for kvalitet i utdanningen (the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education)

NOMKUS – Norges Multikulturelle Senter (Norway's Multicultural Center)

NSD – Norsk Senter for Forskningsdata (Norwegian Center for Research Data)

SSB – Statistisk Sentralbyrå (Statistic Norway)

UiA – Universitetet I Agder (University of Agder)

UK – United Kingdom

UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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CHAPTER ONE

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Although there have always been forcibly displaced people in the world, either internally within their countries of origin or fleeing out to seek refuge in other countries, it seems that the number of refugees has significantly increased during recent decades. According to statistics by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are more than 70 million forcibly displaced people today in the world, with about 26 million of them being registered refugees, half of whom reported to be children (UNHCR, 2019). Given the status of recent waves of refugees, mainly from war-torn Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan and the fact that most of them have been entering the host countries without any official registration or documentation, it is safe to claim that the actual figure is probably much higher than the official statistics. This claim is supported by the Norwegian statistics, putting the figure of refugees who had entered Norway on their own and without any documentation as high as 58 percent (IMDi, 2019). We can expect that this figure is not going to shrink anytime soon, at least not under current circumstances and courses of action. This statement seems to be backed by UNHCR highlights, i.e., one person in every two seconds faces forced displacement due to ongoing conflicts and violence (UNHCR, 2019).

As the figure of refugees keeps increasing, so does the debate on their legal and humanitarian circumstances, demanding increased international cooperation regarding the provision of equal opportunity for a fair asylum application and the provision of minimum humanitarian assistance while they are living in refugee camps across the world, particularly in Europe. Though concerns over the humanitarian situation of refugee camps exist across Europe, Greece has been witnessing the most severe humanitarian crises, primarily for being the gateway to Europe for refugees/asylum seekers coming from Turkey. A BBC article from last year underscores that the situation in Greek refugee camps is as harsh and severe as it possibly could be with overcrowded camps, more than 37000 refugees in five camps to be precise that have increasingly been witnessing violence and mayhem (BBC, 2019). According to International Rescue Committee (IRC), the number of asylum seekers stranded in Greece is as high as over 50,000, most of whom unable to make their way into the rest of Europe (IRC, n.d.). Hernes (2018) believes that one of the reasons for the recent refugee crisis in Europe is that Europe was not prepared to tackle an unprecedented crisis of such magnitude, even though the

vast majority of refugees, as per UNHCR (2019), are being hosted by countries neighboring to their countries of origin. Regardless of the reasons and contributing factors to refugee crisis, we have been witnessing a worldwide humanitarian crisis unfolding before our eyes in real-time, what Care organization calls "the worst refugee crisis in history" (Care, n.d.).

Those asylum seekers who finally make their ways to a host country in Europe and, more importantly, obtain a legal residence permit of some sort become the subject of a new debate i.e., their integration in the host societies generally and their integration in local labor markets specifically. Integration debates in Europe are as old as the arrival of asylum seekers in Europe, notably when Europe received a considerable number of asylum seekers fleeing from the war in former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s (Van Mol & de Valk, 2016; Hernes 2018). However, debates surrounding immigration and labor integration of refugees in Europe today, as stated by Fasani (2016), have intensified as a top priority in recent years. As unprecedented waves of refugees hit Europe, mainly as a result of wars in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, heated debates between pro and anti-immigration activists and media outlets have spiked in the socio-political sphere of the continent with the bulk of focuses centering around the importance and urgency of labor integration of the newcomer refugees. It seems fair and safe to assert that immigration and integration-related topics have never been as controversial and politicized as they appear to be in the current era.

Having had years of work experience with the United Nations in Afghanistan in civil affairs and conflict resolution interventions to, among other matters, prevent conflict-induced internal displacement and been living in Norway since November 2015 as a refugee myself, I became interested in advancing my knowledge about this global humanitarian crisis. Additionally, my Master's program at the University of Agder in the field of Global Development combined with my work for a non-governmental organization that delivers a variety of services in the field of integration of refugees in Norway, provided me with the necessary motivation and expertise to look at the issue of refugees and their integration from a professional perspective. In other words, I have both professional and personal take on the topic of immigration and integration, which have served me as a tool to strengthen the quality of my research project.

1.2 Problem Statement

The core problem statement for this master's thesis research concerns labor integration in rural Norway that is narrowed down to a central question, "*what are the main barriers to refugees accessing employment in small Norwegian Municipalities?*". Given the study's scope and timeframe, a rural municipality in Southern Norway was selected as the case study (see The Study Area in Chapter One). As briefly stated above, the topics of immigration and integration have been somewhat overwhelming and controversial in recent years. Even though there is ample literature about these topics, the need for further research is evident in order for us to better our understanding of the phenomenon and be able to come up with effective and efficient solutions, not just in the integration field but also in the prevention of further displacement of people across the globe. The below figure by UNHCR (2019) provides a clear illustration of the magnitude of the crisis as well as helping us comprehend the need for necessary actions, both in terms of academic research and provision of humanitarian and relief assistance:

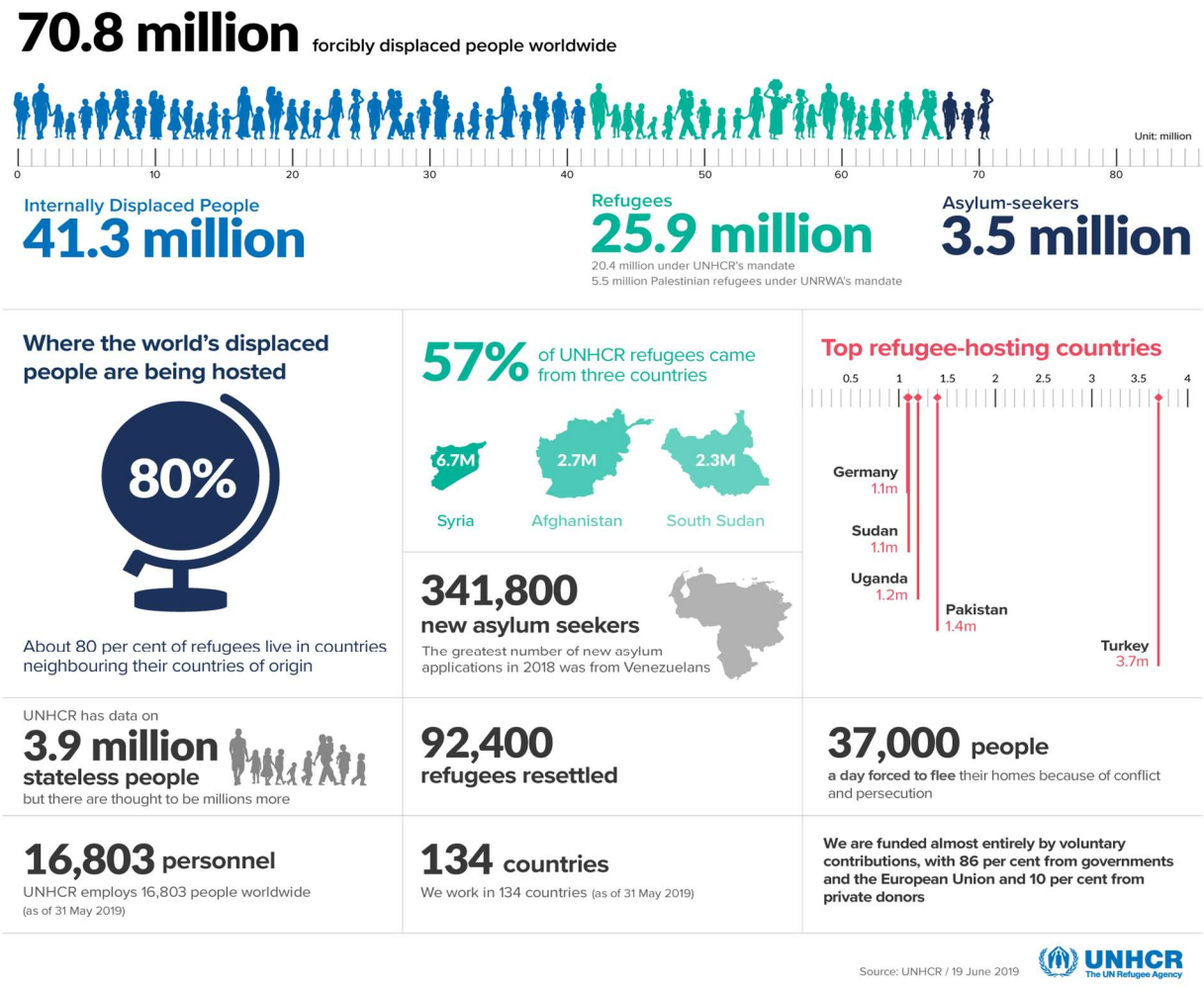

Figure 1

Given the scope of this research project as a master's thesis, I chose to explore the labor integration aspect of such a vast and multifaceted topic. More specifically, I have narrowed down the focus of my study to rural contexts in Norway, which appears to be under-represented in the reviewed literature compared with those of the larger cities. In addition to feasibility reasons for choosing this topic, I was interested in investigating the most crucial component of the integration affairs, namely the labor integration, which according to the literature, is the backbone of the overall integration process. As per the literature, the unemployment of refugees has a significant influence on growing skepticism regarding refugees and immigration generally. For instance, findings of Pinotti (2016) indicate that Europeans are more worried about refugees increasing crimes and criminality in their societies than anything else, for example, stealing their jobs. Additionally, Pinotti's findings highlight a correlation between unemployment among refugees and their vulnerability to crimes and criminality (ibid).

Though such perceptions prevail across all host countries, the sensitivity seems more durable in countries with a welfare system, such as the Scandinavian ones, understandably due to a potential susceptibility of refugees to depend on the taxpayers' money should they continue to remain unemployed, as highlighted in a Norwegian report by Wong (2020). Emphasizing the fact that some Danish people think refugees are a burden on their welfare system, Zimmermann, Kahanec, Constant, DeVoretz, Gataullina, and Zaiceva (2007) portray the dependence on social help as a barrier to integration. Highlighting the 'dependence on social help' as a stigma in Norwegian society. Hammer (2007), in a similar note, claims that there is an objective relation between early dependence on social help and prolonged unemployment among the youth coupled with mental health consequences. As expected, the literature is unequivocal on the negative impacts of unemployment on the integration, welfare, and wellbeing of refugees as well as the status of public perceptions regarding refugees (see Chapter Two).

Though the participation of refugees in the labor market is a goal for all host societies, one can assume that the lack of it is perhaps not perceived as a burden or stigma in societies that do not have a comprehensive welfare system like the ones in the Scandinavian countries. In other words, though every host society wants refugees in the labor market as productive members of the society, the ones with welfare systems have an extra focus on their employment, partly due to fears of their possible dependence on social assistance and hence lack of motivation to integrate. Therefore, I came to an understanding that the core focus of integration should be paid on labor integration, specifically in welfare societies, as this can have crucial impacts on the status of overall integration and social inclusion of not just refugees but every

other migrant group. Based on my knowledge and personal experience, I believe it is challenging to address the unemployment of refugees without an adequate understanding of the barriers to their employment.

1.3 Study Subjects

This study focuses on refugees and not any other group of immigrants, such as economic migrants and asylum seekers because economic migrants enter the host country either with a job contract in hand or with a plan to work (Zwysen, 2018) and asylum seekers are not usually required to work before they obtain some form of a legal residence permit (Skjeggestad, 2016). According to the Norwegian Directorate of Integration and Diversity (IMDi, 2019), people with refugee status in Norway form four percent of the total population of the country and 30 percent of the total number of immigrants. Before explaining the reason for singling out refugees further, I would like us to understand refugees as a group, i.e., who they are and what makes them different from other groups of immigrants. The universal definition of refugee in the 1951 convention, cited in UNHCR Emergency Handbook, reads as below:

> Owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (ibid, 2020, p. 2).

Although this definition is accused of having shortcomings by some scholars such as Lister (2012), to accommodate every eligible people and provide a broader understanding of the term, it is the only one with an international application, nonetheless. Based on this universal, yet controversial, definition, refugees are those people who are forced to flee from their countries fearing violence and/or persecution, in other words fleeing from home was the matter of life or death which often happens in a matter of short time as well as the fact, as indicated by Care (n.d.), that they either cannot return home or are afraid to do so. An unexpected journey towards an unknown destination is in fact what that separates refugees from the rest of immigrant groups, for example, the economic migrants who, unlike the refugees, plan and make preparation for their immigration to the countries of their choices. In addition to their unexpected and unplanned journeys, refugees come with disturbing experiences, some

even with some sorts of post-traumatic stress disorders, as highlighted in the literature (see Chapter Two), something that is usually not experienced by other migrants. All that makes the process of refugees' integration complex, challenging, and different from the rest of the migrants, requiring a continuous understanding of their integration processes.

That is why focusing on the integration of refugees, specifically their integration in rural labor markets, becomes of utmost importance and instrumental value for overall integration processes. So, the central target group of this study was made up of 20 refugees of both genders who were between 24 to 55 years old that had completed their compulsory Introduction Program (a two-year program to learn Norwegian and receive civic education for newcomer refugees) in their respective host municipalities. Additionally, I interviewed two public and two private employers, a local policy implementer (Program Advisor/in charge of integration services at local NAV, short for the New Labor and Welfare Administration, office) and a non-government official who also deals with integration policy implementation on a daily basis (a non-governmental company delivering integration services across Norway). I see them as the primary stakeholders of integration, especially at the grassroots level, where they experience barriers to integration firsthand, something that is rather lost in the theoretical and conceptual narratives of the literature I reviewed.

1.4 Study Objective

Integration of refugees generally and their integration in local labor markets particularly has always been a highly debated topic, not just in Norway but throughout all host countries, as highlighted in the literature. Though integration is an increasingly debated and discussed topic both in the socio-political sphere and in academia, the literature shows a lack of understanding, especially a comprehensive and objective understanding of the opportunities and constraints of a dreamed status of integration should it ever be something achievable. This study aims to generate new knowledge in the field of labor market integration, explicitly focusing on rural contexts that, based on the literature review, require more research, especially in rural Norway. The reason for focusing on a rural context is partly because rural Norwegian municipalities, as per the general perceptions, have rather homogenous demographics and limited market opportunities, making the competition for local job openings difficult for refugees. Although the study was conducted in one single rural municipality, its findings have the potential to reflect

the relative realities of other rural municipalities as most Norwegian municipalities share the same demographic, geographic, and social characteristics.

The core objective of this master's thesis project is to explore and understand the status of labor integration in rural municipalities of Norway. However, the central focus here is to address the research problem statement, which is to identify and describe the main barriers to the employment of refugees in rural contexts. Another essential point to be highlighted is that the study, despite having deduced its problem statement and the research questions from a literature review, tries to define its objective from the points of view of refugees and the potential public and private employers in more of an inductive approach, simply because they are the ones who face and experience the barriers to employment firsthand. Definition of barriers to refugees' employment the way refugees themselves feel and experience them is something the reviewed literature either has not focused on or reflected on abstractly. Therefore, hearing about barriers to employment of refugees from the refugees themselves and the potential employers would firstly provide us with a better understanding of the problem and secondly, direct our attention toward the actual solutions, something the literature has often overlooked. Given the qualitative nature of this study and my personal and professional relation with the topic, it became possible, as intended, to address the research objective based on the narratives and experiences of the primary stakeholders, particularly the refugees.

Although it is a small-scale research in the form of a master's thesis project, the objective has been to generate as genuine and objective knowledge regarding the labor integration of refugees as possible. Despite the limitations related to the scope and focus of the project, such a qualitative knowledge about such an important, yet controversial, topic of the day will surely be of tremendous contribution to academic research and policy improvements, primarily due to the fact that it looks at labor integration in a rural context and from the points of view of the primary stakeholders of labor integration i.e., refugees, potential employers, and local policy implementers. My personal intention for choosing this particular topic, firstly as a student and secondly as a refugee, was to contribute to the ongoing national and international efforts, aimed to expand our knowledge regarding a smooth and sound labor integration of refugees, so that they become taxpayers in their new societies rather than a burden as is the case now according to some views in the literature. To align the focus and the scope of the project with its core objective, the study has used the following research questions:

1.4.1 Research Questions

- To what extent does human capital or lack of it impact refugees' employment opportunities?
- What is the role of social capital in securing employment for refugees? /How do refugees acquire it, especially in a small municipality?
- How do employers and refugees describe diversity at the workplace, a constraint, or an opportunity?
- How effective are the current policies/measures helping refugees enter the labor market?

1.5 Overview of the Thesis Structure

This study, in the form of a master's thesis, contains the following six chapters:

- CHAPTER ONE (this chapter) introduces the thesis in terms of its conceptual background, problem statement, study subjects and objective, research questions, an overview of the thesis structure (current section), and the Study Area. This chapter describes the reasons for conducting this study on refugees' labor integration, aiming to explore and understand the main barriers to refugees accessing employment in rural municipalities of Norway, specifically in the target municipality. The chapter further sheds light on the research questions and the composition of research participants as well as the relevance of geographical, demographical, and local market factors to the study and its overall objective.
- CHAPTER TWO provides a summary of the core discussions in the literature and outlines the main theoretical and conceptual themes in previous similar research. The literature review begins more broadly, discussing labor integration across several host countries and gradually narrows down to Norway. As conducting academic research means standing on the giants' shoulders, this chapter informed me of what is previously known about labor integration and, more importantly, highlighted what requires more research, which was understanding the barriers to refugees' labor integration in rural Norway in this case. This chapter was also instrumental in deducing the research questions and guiding the semi-structured interviews.
- CHAPTER THREE informs us of the methodological approaches employed in the design, conduct, and conclusion of the study. It elaborates that this qualitative study is based on the interpretive epistemology and constructionist ontology, which has

employed a mixed approach of deduction and induction to address the study's problem statement. The chapter further explains that the study, based on a case study design, has recruited the research participants through purposive and snowball samplings, collected data via semi-structured interviews, and analyzed the findings using a mixed technique of coding and thematic data analysis. The chapter concludes with ethical considerations and data validity measures employed in this study to meet academic research standards.

- CHAPTER FOUR, the longest chapter of the study, presents the results or the empirical findings of the study. The results are presented thematically, i.e., under four main conceptual themes (human capital, social capital, implications of ethnocultural diversity and structural limitations) that had emerged from the data during the analysis. Each central theme contains some subthemes that were accordingly organized and categorized during the analysis based on their contextual relevance to both the main themes and the research questions. As the findings' chapter, it does not include any element of discussions or analysis, i.e., it is a description of findings in the form of either direct or indirect citations of the research participants.
- CHAPTER FIVE takes us through the discussions of the results or analysis of the findings. Like the previous chapter, it is organized thematically as an attempt to make it easily followed and contextually comprehended. I believe employing such a uniform approach in presenting the findings and organizing the discussion of their results has made these two chapters more consistent and thus more comfortable for the reader to follow. After a thorough discussion of the themes, including their respective subthemes, and their interpretation in the light of previous research, each research question is addressed under the relevant theme.
- CHAPTER SIX is the last chapter of this thesis, which concludes the study as qualitative research, conducted as part of an academic requirement for this master's thesis. After providing a concluding summary of the discussions as well as illustrating the study's theoretical and conceptual framework, which provides the gist of the discussions in a nutshell, it also reflects on the research process as a whole. I believe the illustration of the study's theoretical and conceptual framework helps us make a better sense of the complexities of refugees' labor integration. The chapter concludes with outlining some policy recommendations inspired by the findings, underscoring study's limitations and stating some recommendations for future research.

1.6 The Study Area

1.6.1 Introduction

This qualitative research was conducted in a rural district of Agder county in Southern Norway. For reasons of anonymity and protection of participants' privacy, I chose not to mention the name of the target municipality. However, the information presented in this chapter provides a holistic introduction of the district, specifically in terms of the geography, demographics, and market opportunities/limitations of the target municipality, without giving away its identity. The information in this chapter is taken from several official sources, but their links are not referenced because of confidentiality reasons as they could have indirectly given away the participants' identity otherwise. I have also avoided providing specific numbers (e.g. distances or population figures) so that the municipality cannot be identified from available public statistics. Additionally, I have also used some information from my findings and observation of the municipality in the period of my fieldwork. The chapter breaks down the information in geographical, demographic, and local market categories, each presented separately.

1.6.2 Geography

The study was conducted in a district municipality in Agder county, Southern Norway. The target municipality is situated several dozen kilometers outside Kristiansand, the capital city of Agder county. As indicated, Kristiansand is situated in the South (between Oslo and Stavanger cities) with an approximately 300 kilometers distance from Oslo and 250 kilometers from Stavanger. Like many other Norwegian districts, the municipality under study is situated in a valley surrounded by mountains on both sides. According to the Store Norske Leksikon (the Great Norwegian Encyclopedia), the municipality has an area of several hundred km², which is stretched alongside a long valley. Despite its mountainous terrain, the municipality stands out as one of the most significant areas of the county in terms of agriculture, with livestock farming being the central part of local agriculture.

Given its distance from the county capital, the municipality is an excellent example of a typical Norwegian rural district. Although the distance between the target municipality and its five neighboring municipalities are relatively short (averagely a 30 kilometers distance that takes 30 minutes by car and 45 minutes by bus), its distance with the county capital

(Kristiansand) is significantly more (it generally takes 60 minutes by train, 90 minutes by car, and 150 minutes by bus to reach Kristiansand). The use of personal passenger cars is perhaps the common means of transport in the municipality, especially from and to the neighboring municipalities for work and/or shopping trips. For most of the refugees, though, the primary means of transportation is the public one, particularly the train or the local buses because of not owning personal cars.

The train station is located on the outskirts of the municipality center at a relatively short distance by car, but not easily accessible for those without a car, among whom many refugees, who have to rent a taxi which can be both expensive and unavailable in certain days and hours. Additionally, the municipality's public bus service is not the same as that of the bigger cities. Although there are daily buses to and from the neighboring municipalities, the number and the frequency of bus tours are somewhat limited, i.e., on average, there are five bus tours from and to the municipality with an average of 90 minutes in between the tours. Some days, however, especially weekends and holidays, there is either no or just a few tours outside the municipality, unlike the bigger cities where buses are accessible every day and in every 15 to 30 minutes. Though not the same, many rural municipalities in Norway share the same characteristics in terms of opportunities and/or constraints.

1.6.3 Demography

The target municipality has a relatively small population, like many other remote and rural municipalities in Norway. According to Statistics Norway (statistisk sentralbyrå), the municipality has several thousand inhabitants (but below 10,000), with several hundreds of them being immigrants or having immigrant backgrounds, including refugees. At the national level, though, immigrants form 14 percent of Norway's population as of 2018 (Statistics Norway, 2018). Almost half of the immigrants have a European background, among whom Germans and Poles form the two largest ethnic groups. According to Statistics Norway (2018), the Polish immigrants (98,200 persons) form the largest ethnic group among immigrants at the national level in Norway. Though there is no distinction between migrant workers, economic immigrants, and refugees in official statistics, refugees seem to make up the smallest group of all, especially in the light of the ethnic composition of the immigrants indicated above. Although not very significant, national statistics indicate a population decline of approximately 100 people every year for the municipality. Like most other small municipalities in Norway, the

majority of inhabitants belong to a homogenous group, usually called after the municipality's name, as indicated by the Great Norwegian Encyclopedia (Store Norske Leksikon).

According to national statistics, the secondary industry; health and social services; and sales, hotels, and restaurants are the three largest sectors in terms of having had a significant number of employees throughout the municipality. As per a local newspaper article from 2019, the municipality has witnessed an eight percent increase in the unemployment rate during 2019. It is a significant difference to compare with the 4.2 percent rate of unemployment at the national level (Statistics Norway, 2020). Though I could not find any official statistic or report breaking down the demographic aspects of the unemployment both locally and at the national level, my observations led me to conclude that the refugees, especially those who are new, are likely to be a considerable part of the municipality's unemployed inhabitants. In terms of housing, most of the people, as per the statistics, live in detached houses (more than 2500 houses), with only over 100 people reportedly living in apartments. According to the statistics, nearly 90 percent of the people own their houses, and only 10 percent live in a rented house/apartment. Though the statistics do not provide any demographic information about the house owner or renter groups, refugees are most likely among the latter group as employment is a precondition for owning a house or an apartment in Norway.

The municipality has an average size vocational high school, a lower secondary school, and five primary schools. So, those students who will attend a comprehensive high school or a University must travel several dozen kilometers out of town to pursue their education. Perhaps due to these geographical limitations and the lack of local opportunities, the municipality, as per a local public official, has a low-education status, i.e., the municipality has a fewer University graduate in comparison with bigger cities. This is also reflected in the national statistics – putting the figure of municipality's university graduates at about 10 percent. According to the statistics, approximately 50 percent of the population are high school graduates, and 25 percent have just completed a lower secondary school. In Norway, from first to seventh grade is defined as the primary school (barneskole) and from eighth to 10^{th} grade is called the lower secondary school (ungdomsskole) (EuroEducation, n.d.) that is a compulsory pre-upper secondary/high school education for every child. There is apparently a correlation between the lower rate of university graduates and the lack of jobs that demand a professional education, as reflected in the findings and analysis chapters (see Chapters Four and Five).

1.6.4 The Local Market

The local market is rather small and limited, something that is typical of a small rural municipality across Norway. Though employment opportunities seem to be equally limited both in public and private sectors, the latter is perhaps the smallest of the two, with the exception of an industrial corporation that has reportedly had a significant number of employees. As described in the findings chapter (see Chapter Four), the local labor market has a limited number of factories and business centers, specifically businesses of significant size, with the potential to employ more people. As I observed and understood the local labor market during my fieldwork, most of the private businesses are of a smaller size and limited capacity that is primarily run by family members. The public sector, specifically healthcare institutions, schools, and kindergartens, seem to be among the largest workplaces of the municipality where an average inhabitant, including the refugees, might foresee a potential employment opportunity.

Due to geographical and demographic limitations, local businesses, particularly the smaller ones, seem to struggle hard for their survival. Bankruptcy is not an unknown phenomenon in the local market and seems to be a significant threat, especially to local small-sized enterprises such as restaurants and coffee shops. Though municipality's four food stores seem to meet the local needs, many people make daily trips to neighboring municipalities for shopping purposes, particularly in terms of clothes and electronics, as the local options are significantly limited with three small-size clothing stores and just one small electronics store. Almost all the clothing and the electronics stores are run by a limited number of workers, not more than two in most cases, mainly due to their size and the lack of customers. The food stores are the largest ones, both in terms of employees and customers. Each food store has an average of 10 to 15 employees, which makes them a potential workplace for an average inhabitant, including the refugees.

CHAPTER TWO

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Reviewing the literature, as an attempt to gather relevant findings of other research, was quite a challenge as there was not specific information related to the problem statement of this study "main barriers to refugees accessing employment in rural municipalities of Norway." Although the literature review shows a gap in terms of the status of integration in rural contexts, particularly in Norway, it provides an overview of the core debates regarding immigration and integration in a general sense, nonetheless. As outlined below, the literature review first presents the status of integration in Europe and some countries in North America and gradually narrows down the focus on Norway. I believe such a comparison of the literature helps us to put the study's topic in a contextual perspective. The literature review is broken down into two components, beginning with an overview of the literature which summarizes the core discussions regarding integration in Norway and across several other host countries and concluding with some of the theoretical and conceptual highlights regarding labor integration.

2.2 Overview of the Literature

The integration of refugees, particularly their integration in labor markets, has long captured the central focus of politicians, academia, and the civil society in Europe, especially during the last couple of decades. Though immigration, as per Mestheneos and Ioannidi (2002), arose as an issue in Europe as early as 1945, recent experiences of the continent have never been so overwhelming and challenging. According to Fasani (2016), unemployment and immigration are the two top political priorities of Europe as of today. Despite increased political debates and discussions and academic research, Europe does not seem to have a good grasp of integration priorities, something, according to Hernes (2018), is partly due to the unpreparedness of Europe to tackle the recent unprecedented influx of refugees. Zimmermann et al. (2007, p. 57) assert that both social and labor integration of ethnic minorities (all categories of populations of foreign origin, including refugees) continues to be one of the top challenges of European countries. In a broader, yet similar, note, Constant, Kahanec, and Zimmermann (2009, p. 6) stress the fact that integration of not just the immigrants but also their descendants

and indigenous ethnic and religious minorities, be it in social life or labor markets, remains as a considerable challenge in the European Union.

Even though Norway is not a member of the European Union, it somewhat shares the same priorities and challenges with other European countries when it comes to the status of integration of refugees generally and their successful integration in the Norwegian labor market, particularly. As a welfare country that is mostly financed by its working citizens' tax money, the Norwegian government prioritizes labor integration of refugees/immigrants and participation of every citizen in the labor market by large as a national priority (Eriksen, 2013). According to Valenta (2008), most parts of the integration focus in the socio-political debates of Norway center around the labor integration. Since scholars, such as (Banik, 2015; Bloch, 2007; Blom, 2004; Godøy, 2017; Heilbrunna, Kushnirovichb, & Zeltzer-Zubida, 2010; Lundborg, 2013; Poutvaara and Wech, 2016; Valenta, 2008; Zimmermann et al., 2007) describe the labor integration as the foundation of overall successful integration of all ethnic minorities, including refugees, it becomes obvious why immigration and integration debates overwhelmingly focus on employment/unemployment of refugees. Despite all the focus on the importance of labor integration, Norwegians believe that the current status of integration is far from satisfactory – blaming the immigrants/refugees themselves for the failure (IMDi 2011, cited in Swe, 2013, p. 230).

In spite of the emphasis of scholars on the paramount importance of employment in integration and prioritization of national policies and practices to address refugees' unemployment, the current status of labor integration across Europe, not just in Norway, seems far from a success story. Some scholars believe that the failure in labor integration, or at least lack of successful progress, can relate to individual factors (barriers related to refugees) such as language barriers (Godøy, 2017; Heilbrunna et al., 2010; Rietig, 2016; Swe, 2013; Wilkinson & Garcea, 2017), lack of social networks (Badwi, Ablo & Overå, 2018; Gericke, Burmeister, Löwe, Deller & Pundt, 2018; Valenta, 2008), lack of self-motivation (Hagelund, 2005; Zwysen, 2019), and trauma/mental disorders (Abebe, Lien & Hjelde, 2014; Hardoy & Zhang, 2019; Hauff & Vaglum, 1993; Lamba, 2008; Joyce, 2019). As per the literature, the mental problems of refugees could have been caused either before/during their migration journeys (Bloch, 2007; Hardoy and Zhang, 2019) or during their long waiting time to get their asylum applications processed by the host country (Joyce, 2019).

While agreeing on the importance of individual factors, some other scholars refer to more structural, institutional and systematic problems as the primary cause of malfunctioning

labor integration, e.g., xenophobia (Constant et al., 2009; Eriksen, 2013), discrimination (Bloch, 2007; Eriksen, 2013; Fangen, 2006; Hagelund, 2010; Midtbøen, 2016; Lamba, 2008; Zimmermann et al., 2007), cultural differences (Constant et al., 2009; Fangen, 2006; Zimmermann et al., 2007) and policy-related shortcomings (Bloch, 2007). As highlighted above, challenges of labor integration, particularly for refugees due to their unplanned journeys of migration (Desiderio, 2016), are complex and multidimensional, which cannot be summarized as 'black and white'. Therefore, it is crucial to explain the barriers of labor integration using some of the main theoretical and conceptual discourses in the literature.

2.3 Theories and Concepts

Like any other topics in social sciences, the issue of human immigration generally and the forcible displacement of refugees and their integration in host societies particularly is a complex and multifaceted problem. Although it is a complexly challenging task, if not impossible, the real grasp of an issue of such magnitude hugely depends on the development of functioning theoretical and conceptual frameworks that break down the various underlying factors and provide an easily comprehendible picture of the phenomenon. Though there is a great deal of literature regarding immigration and integration of refugees, they, specifically those reviewed here, are not as holistic and comprehensive as they should or could have been. The three central theoretical breakdowns of the literature, as elaborated below, circle around refugees' human capital, social capital and perceptions of the general public about refugees.

Although these theories provide a foundational insight into immigration and integration generally, they fall short of establishing the necessary interrelations and interdependencies between the various concepts and theories as well as not accommodating the voices of the refugee groups, especially from rural places that hugely differ from cities. For example, 75 percent of the integration research in Norway, during the recent decade, lack interviewing of refugees as a method of data collection (Wong, 2020). By using the existing theories as well as remaining open for possible new themes or theories, the study establishes reliable connections between different theoretical and conceptual segments and illustrates their crucial influence on each other alongside the integration process (see Chapters Five and Six). These connections are not just a theorization in an analytical or statistical context; they are instead reflective of the complexities revealed by the empirical findings of the study.

2.3.1 Human Capital

Though definitions of the human capital theory can differ from each other depending on different contexts, they all, however, focus on the same core theme, i.e., educational, and intellectual qualifications of the citizens generally and the working class particularly. From a social sciences perspective, Olaniyan and Okemakinde (2008) define human capital as an investment in human beings, aiming to enhance their capabilities and productivity. Though the human capital theory, in principle, is not applicable to refugees due to their involuntary migration, it becomes somewhat relevant because refugees must integrate into their new societies, including the labor market (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003). Therefore, a great deal of the literature rightly focuses on the relevance of refugees' language skills, educational qualifications, and work experiences concerning their integration in the host countries, especially their integration into the labor markets. For example, Zimmermann et al. (2007, p. 16) state that human capital theory (education, language abilities, and work skills) can perhaps describe some of the barriers ethnic minorities, including refugees, face while trying to integrate themselves into the labor markets of their host countries.

Although the human capital theory seems rather self-explanatory and straightforward, grasping its actual role and comprehending its influence, to some extent, seems challenging and confusing, if not impossible. For example, questions regarding forms, places, and levels of human capital remain unclear and challenging to answer, particularly in the case of refugees who do not choose to migrate to sell themselves in a new labor market using their human capital, unlike economic migrants, for example, as underscored by Colic-Peisker and Walker (2003).

Theoretically, it seems easy to understand the importance of refugees' human capital in securing employment, especially the role of their language fluency in their labor integration (Bloch, 2007; Joyce, 2019; Zwysen, 2019). Likewise, it makes sense that refugees' lack of human capital, particularly their poor language skills, can appear as a primary barrier to their labor integration (Badwi et al., 2018). For example, Badwi et al. (2018, p. 35) further elaborate that refugees who are low-skilled and new in Norway with poor Norwegian language skills face extra challenges, which are worse if they happen to be women and illiterate with no contact with Norwegians. However, it is not that easy to make sense of refugees' acceptable human capital and their actual role in their employment opportunities in practice. It means that there is a distinct contradiction between theory and practice when it comes to refugees' human capital in the literature.

Badwi, Ablo and Overå shed some light on the existence of such contradictions by narrating the story of a Ghanaian refugee woman in Bergen city of Norway, a previously university lecturer in Ghana who has married a Norwegian man and learned to speak fluent Norwegian. Despite all efforts, she was still not recommended for a professional job even by her husband or her husband's family, partly due to the reason that they thought she was not integrated enough into the Norwegian culture as well as the perception that she was not competent enough in the Norwegian context (Badwi et al., 2018, p. 33). Bloch (2007) also highlights a similar situation in the UK, i.e., some refugees are unemployed despite speaking fluent English and possessing university degrees and long work experiences. According to a Norwegians study, an equally qualified refugee, should he/she happen to secure a job, earns 14 percent less than a native (Brekke & Mastekaasa, 2008). Given the prevalence of such contradictions between propositions of the importance of refugees' human capital in theory and the narratives of refugees' experiences in practice throughout the literature, the actual role of refugees' human capital comes under question.

It seems that perceptions that undervalue human capital of foreign origins are prevalent across all the host countries, not just Norway or Europe. Researching on the economic integration of refugees in Canada, Wilkinson and Garcea (2017, p. 14) state that refugees who receive a university degree or supplement their education with some form of complementary courses in Canada have a better opportunity of getting a decent job. In a similar note, Bloch (2007) asserts that refugees who obtain qualifications in the UK are in a better position of getting a job and a better salary than those whose qualifications were obtained from their countries of origin. These assertions again raise some critical questions, for example, does everyone need to receive university education or supplementary courses in order to get a job? Is it impossible to make use of refugees' existing competence and work skills in labor integration?

According to Zimmermann et al. (2007), educational degrees and vocational skills of people with minority backgrounds cannot be easily translated into human capital. Similarly, Lamba (2008) indicates that refugees' professional experiences in Canada are insignificant concerning their employment opportunities. In a similar note, Hardoy and Zhang (2019) state that the refugees' education is simply not transferrable in Norway. The observation of literature shows that there is a strong correlation between the undervaluing of refugees' human capital and most refugees ending up either unemployed or with jobs they are overqualified for and, therefore, being unsatisfied and unmotivated. For example, a study in Canada reveals that 70%

of 616 refugee participants were dissatisfied with their jobs, and 60% of them were overqualified for their jobs (Lamba, 2008). Though counterproductive and unpractical, it seems that current integration policies and measures force refugees to acquire fresh human capital instead of supplementing their existing qualifications and making productive use of their competence, which could be a win-win situation both for refugees and the host countries.

Referring to current policy shortcomings, Rietig (2016) asserts that early screening of skills, via profiling, evaluation of individual competence and identifying capacity development needs, and improving recognition of previous qualifications can play a vital role in accelerating the integration of refugees into the labor market. For example, Sweden's reform of the Introduction Program in 2010 (Establishment Reform) that introduced an early screening of newcomers' qualifications and a continuous and consistent induvial follow-up (something in line to Rietig's recommendations) has been quite successful in improving labor integration by helping refugees get their credentials approved in Sweden and make their career development plans as early as possible (Joona, Lanninger & Sundström, 2016, p. 20). Sweden's reform regarding recognition of refugees' human capital and supplementing it with short-term courses, possibly on the job training, sounds both economical and more pragmatically feasible.

Although, there is a government organization, NOKUT (the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education), for accreditation of immigrants/refugees' human capital in Norway, specifically their higher education, e.g., university, college and vocational school (NOKUT, n.d.), the requirements are unrealistically demanding, and the process is very long (see Chapter Four). For example, when I applied to get my bachelor's degree in political science accredited, it required a tremendous amount of paperwork and took a very long time. Specifically, I had to present my university diploma and transcripts (something impossible for most of the refugees who had not prepared and packed for their migration journeys) and attend three exams (a telephone interview, a written test and a final face-to-face oral exam in Oslo), all within a one-year timeframe.

It is, however, important to manage our expectations of capacity building of refugees within the timeframe of existing mechanisms, such as the Introduction Programs in Scandinavian countries which, according to Wong (2020), Fernandes (2015) and Hagelund (2005), is a two-year language and civic education program for new immigrants and refugees in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. According to the literature, the two-year timeframe seems too short, except for perhaps a few, to either acquire fresh human capital or supplement their existing ones. It becomes easy to understand the notion when we look at what Zwysen (2019,

p. 77), asserts that it takes at least five years for refugees and their reunited family members to found human capital (getting new education, equalizing their previous educational credentials or a combination of both) that corresponds to market demands of their host countries. Hardoy and Zhang (2019), likewise, asserts that integration into a new society is a long process.

Based on the literature's observation, it is safe to conclude that barriers to operationalizing refugees' human capital in the host countries are mostly policy/system-related barriers, unlike the social capital that mainly depends on individuals' attitudes and culture. Bloch (2007) is critical of the fact that integration-related research often solely focuses on the relevance and importance of refugees' human capital in their labor integration without including respective structural and psycho-social factors in the equation. According to Bloch, addressing the barriers related to the human capital of refugees cannot succeed without tackling the structural barriers simultaneously (ibid). It would be interesting to see how the situation, in terms of the utilization of refugees' human capital, looks like in rural Norway where, as per general perceptions, constraints are ample and opportunities scarce.

2.3.2 Social Capital

In addition to the human capital, scholars emphasize the importance of social networking regarding career development, particularly for refugees who struggle to integrate and enter the labor markets of their host countries for the first time as Portes (2000) also refers to, in a similar note, in the case of newly arrived migrants in American society. According to Lin (2017), social networks and social relations among and within individuals and groups form the very foundation of social capital. Despite its complex nature and multiple applications, social capital, according to Portes (2000), can simply be defined as strong ties/bonds between individuals. In more specific terms, Lin (2017, p. 6), citing Lin (2001), defines social capital as an "investment in social relations with expected returns".

The literature highlights the social capital of refugees, in the form of their networks with the natives and among themselves as an essential factor of labor integration. Gericke, Burmeister, Löwe, Deller and Pundt (2018, p. 47), who have focused on labor integration exclusively through the social capital lens, believe that there is a shortage of research regarding refugees' social capital and its potential influence and role in labor integration. In other words, the focus of the literature on refugees' social capital is minimal, especially in comparison with

that of their human capital, which justifies the need for further research, ideally at the grassroots level, where most of the refugees begin their new lives.

Distinguishing between four stages of social capital support for refugees' labor integration (early integration support, preparation for labor market entry, support entering the labor market and support at work), Gericke et al. (2018) concludes that both bonding and bridging social capitals can be helpful for labor integration. They expand the traditional bonding and bridging social capital into horizontal bonding social capital (family members and friends of a same ethnic group), vertical bonding social capital (institutions based on shared religion, nationality or ethnicity), horizontal bridging social capital (friends with different nationality) and vertical bridging social capital (social system contacts, volunteers, colleagues, and supervisors) (ibid, pp. 51 – 52). While agreeing on the crucial importance of refugees' network with family members, friends, and other refugee groups (refugees of different nationalities or languages) in labor integration, Badwi et al. (2018) emphasize the crucial importance of refugees' social network with the natives. They support their assertion with the example of Ghanaian refugees in Bergen city of Norway, who, due to having no social network among the Norwegians, faced a significant barrier to access employment, resulting in either not being able to find a job or not finding an appropriate job (ibid, p. 34).

The negative impact of lack of refugees' social networks with the natives is also emphasized by Lamba (2008), indicating that social networks of refugees in Canada just within and across their family members and friends have not been as helpful in securing them decent employment. The lack of refugees' social contact with Norwegians seems quite widespread as it is highlighted in other studies too. For example, findings of a multi-nationality study by Djuve and Hagen (1995), cited in Hauf and Vaglum (1997, p. 413), highlight that 40 percent of Tamils, Kurds, Iranians, Somalis, Chileans, and Vietnamese, having lived in Norway for six to seven years, had no contact with a Norwegian during the last year. One can assume the worse for refugees who are new and live in a remote rural municipality of Norway.

As it appears in the literature, the nature and extent of social capital are instrumental in overall integration, not just labor integration. However, the literature also indicates that establishing such an extensive and well-functioning network, contrary to our expectations, is usually time-consuming. References such as the longer the residence is, the better the integration is (Blom, 2004) or better integration of refugees with citizenship than the ones with temporary residence permits (Badwi et al., 2018; Zwysen, 2019) seem to support this point. In a similar note, Eriksen (2013) also indicates that participation of refugees in the labor market

improves gradually over time, albeit controversies continuing to surround the nature, gender, and ethnic composition of the participation.

Although not very clear why, the literature highlights differences in the employment status of different refugee groups from different backgrounds. For example, Olsen (2019) states that refugees from Eritrea, Myanmar, Ethiopia, and Afghanistan have increased employment rates in Norway compared with refugees from Somalia, Iraq, Syria, and Russia. While branding social capital as an essential facilitator of effective labor integration, Valenta (2008) refers to a paradox, i.e., refugees need social capital to find jobs while having a job is an important factor in building social capital. It also becomes apparent that enjoying a functioning social network is not feasible for refugees in Norway as they are not able to leave the municipalities they were settled in when they first came, especially in the first few years, otherwise, they would lose their welfare entitlements, as also indicated by Joyce (2019). Godøy (2017) sees the limitation in the mobility of refugees as a barrier to their labor integration, which indicates another paradox in labor integration discourses, i.e., if a refugee cannot succeed in one place, it is almost impossible for him/her to try his/her luck elsewhere. Under such paradoxical circumstances, refugees' success in establishing a broader network is solely dependent on local opportunities.

The above stated paradoxes are what we need to increase our understanding about to be able to address the problem of integration in a comprehensive and holistic approach. For example, Breidahl (2017, p. 6), by referring to the highly praised status of work in Scandinavia ("work ethic"), asserts that participation in the labor market has a crucial impact on being accepted in these societies while failing to elaborate on how they can find jobs if not accepted by the public in the first place. The literature illustrates a need to define the nature and contextual relevance of social capital of refugees and what the existing mechanisms are that facilitate it, particularly in rather homogenous and smaller municipalities in which securing both human and social capitals are more challenging and restricted, especially for refugees than in larger cities. Based on Lin's definition above, most forms of refugees' social contacts or interactions within their families and friends, as well as other refugee groups, cannot qualify as social capital, simply because these networks lack those embedded resources that Lin (2017) attributes to the social capital.

2.3.3 Public Perceptions

Here, public perceptions mean the take of the public (general people, the media/social media, the politicians, and the social activists) on the issue of refugees and their integration. Summarizing public perceptions or attitudes regarding labor integration is quite challenging, especially given the complexity of their underlying factors – be it in support of refugees or against it. Swe (2013) highlights a diversity of such attitudes in Norway, meaning that some people think immigration has helped Norway's economy and enriched its culture while others believe it has threatened their safety and wasted public resources. Such perceptions that form around national, racial, religious, ethnic and class differences are usually sensitive and controversial, even worse if weaponized by politicians and the media, which has increasingly been the case during recent years across all hosting countries.

Regarding the inception and the development of such perceptions, Constant et al. (2009) assert that our attitudes, which define our behavior, are a product of our socio-political and economic processes that are influenced by our public policies and mass media. When Mestheneos and Ioannidi (2002) label multi-ethnic societies prone to ethnocultural tensions, generally, it becomes easier to comprehend why so many controversies surround the topic of immigration and integration of refugees into the host societies. According to Hardoy and Zhang (2019), such cultural tensions or differences are counterproductive in integration efforts, making it a time-taking and challenging process, not to mention their potential psychological implications on refugees and their subsequent consequences on the society.

Reporting the results of the IZA Expert Opinion Survey, conducted in 27 European Union countries, Zimmermann et al. (2007, p.6) highlight the situation of ethnic minorities in European labor markets as "severe and worsening" with Roma and Africans being among the most affected ones. Instances of ethnic, gender and religious disadvantages seem to be widespread across the literature. Since the situation of ethnic minorities, most of whom are second and third generation immigrants, is generally highlighted unpleasant in the literature, one can logically imagine the worse for newcomer refugees who have problems in speaking the language and understanding the culture of their host countries, specifically in the initial stages of their integration, as is the case with this study's target subjects.

Though the overall status of integration of refugees and immigrants seem disappointing across Europe, certain ethnic groups or nationalities are in a worse situation than others, e.g., the highest unemployment rate of Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, and black Africans in England, the

worst status of Iraqis in the Danish market and equally bad experiences of Turkish people in Danish and Dutch labor markets (Zimmermann et al., 2007, p. 13). In a similar note, Wilkinson and Garcea (2017) reiterate that though refugees generally have a higher rate of unemployment than native Canadians and other economic immigrants, Middle Eastern refuges score the highest rate of unemployment. In terms of gender-based differences, findings of a study by Joyce (2019) highlight a higher rate of unemployment among female refugees than male refugees, primarily due to their limited human capital.

However, the literature is rather ambiguous about why certain ethnicities seem to lag so far behind than the rest of the group. Could it perhaps be due to lower levels of human and social capitals or racial and religious discrimination, or a combination of all? Although the IZA Expert Opinion Survey's findings in Europe are not conclusive regarding the relevance of race and religion in exclusion of minorities from labor markets, one can see that the listed nationalities, e.g., Bangladeshis, Turkish, Middle Eastern, some in the African group and former Yugoslav or Balkan are presumably Muslims and majority of them most probably have a darker skin (Zimmermann et al., 2007, p. 45). Indicating an increase in Islamophobic perceptions in Norwegian society, also Eriksen (2013) highlights that instances of discrimination in the Norwegian labor market are a documented fact, despite being forbidden by law.

It is not just Zimmermann et al. (2007), and Eriksen (2013) that refer to possible ethnic or religious-based differences in the status of labor integration of refugees/immigrants, Münz (2007) also similarly indicates that Asian, African and Middle Eastern immigrants seem to have the highest unemployment rate across Europe, particularly among women. Though refugee women, as highlighted above, might have relatively lower human capital than refugee men, which can explain their comparatively lower rate of unemployment, the impact of their appearance, especially those of the Muslim women who wear hijab, cannot be neglected as an additional potential factor of exposing them to discrimination and hence social exclusion.

Though there might be elements of relative human/social capital shortages with specific ethnic groups, it seems that there is more into their marginalization than what the literature reflects here, e.g., among other factors, xenophobic, Islamophobic and racial discrimination play an influential role in widening such disadvantages. Indicating patterns of inequality in European labor markets and their challenging impact on labor integration, Midtbøen (2016) also reflects on the prevalence of discrimination of second-generation immigrants in Norway. Based on the findings of his study, he further elaborates that the Pakistani name of a job applicant (who has had the same qualification, reflected on his CV and job-application in fluent

Norwegian, as his competitor with a Norwegian name) had reduced his chance of being called for an interview by 41% (ibid, p. 264).

One can assume that the percentage of reduction might have been even more significant should the Pakistani applicant had shown a weaker Norwegian language skill, which is often the case with most refugee job seekers, particularly those who try to get their first jobs. The underlying factors of integration challenges, highlighted in academic literature, are not known by the general public, at least not in its complexities. Based on the literature observation, it appears that the lack of a real understanding of immigration and integration processes which, according to Joyce (2019), are slow and yet needed processes for the Scandinavian markets in the light of their fast-aging workforce, make some elements of the general public think that immigration is nothing but a waste of public resources.

When we look at the findings of Banik (2015) regarding the integration of Jews in Norway between 1900 –1942, a relatively smooth and successful integration of Jews in the Norwegian labor market who did not face a considerable discrimination or risk of exclusion from the labor market, neither due to being Jews nor due to having a different ethnic/national background, it seems that such instances of discrimination are relatively new in Norway. The relatively successful integration of Bosnian refugees in Norway in the 1990s due to, as indicated by Selm, Sam and Van Oudenhoven (1997), positive and supportive attitudes of Norwegians against them, which had resulted in increased life satisfaction and feelings of competence, also show that possible changes in public perceptions against refugees are rather quite young in Norway, perhaps triggered by politics and media twists of refugees, if not created.

Among other factors, perhaps the shallowly baseless and exaggeratively harmful portraits of refugee-related topics by media (Fasani, 2016) can explain some of the reasons for relatively growing negative perceptions against refugees, at least against some specific ethnic, racial or religious groups which do not have anything to do with their human and/or social capitals. Fargen's interviews with Somali refugees, highlighting that instances of discrimination in the Norwegian labor market is triggered by media misinformation, seem to support this claim (Fangen, 2006). Observation of the literature and the public debates show that refugee and immigration topics are hugely politicized. One logical reason could be the misuse of these topics, by certain political parties, to win hearts and minds of their voters, particularly in the current era, in which populistic, nationalistic, and conservative politics are globally on the rise.

CHAPTER THREE

3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the methodological principles/steps applied in the design, conduct, and completion of this master's thesis research project. The different methodological practices employed in this study, as outlined below, all concentrate on addressing the research's problem statement, "*what are the main barriers to refugees accessing employment in small Norwegian Municipalities?*". However, the primary focus of the methodology, in order to be able to address the research problem effectively, was to explore answers for the research questions (see Chapter One).

As elaborated below, this is a qualitative study in the form of a master's thesis that is conducted on people (refugees, employers, and policy implementers) to understand the barriers to labor integration of refugees, mainly based on their accounts of the topic and the way they describe it. Therefore, it is based on interpretivism epistemologically and constructionism ontologically. By using the qualitative method in research and a case study design, the study has based its reasoning on a combination of inductive and deductive strategies that are founded on interpretive epistemology and constructionist ontology. Likewise, it has used snowball and purposive sampling methods to identify and interview the most relevant stakeholders i.e., research participants. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed within the coding and thematic analysis framework.

3.2 Epistemological and Ontological Considerations

3.2.1 Epistemological Considerations

Epistemology is of utmost value in science, simply because it is through epistemology that we come to realize 'what' we know and how we know it, be it within the natural science or in the field of social sciences. According to Bryman (2012, p. 27), "an epistemological issue concerns the question of what is (or should be) regarded as acceptable knowledge in a discipline." In a similar note, Matthias and Ram (2020) define 'epistemology' as the foundation on which we base our understanding and constitute the rationale of the degree of our confidence

in what we know. Even though, both the natural and the social sciences, employ some form of epistemological stance on their quest for truth, the paradigm of their stances differs from each other. As Bryman (2012) discusses, the natural sciences typically operate within positivism, an epistemological stance in research that often begins with an established theory and testing of hypotheses, using deductive logic of reasoning. The social sciences, however, often use interpretivism as an epistemological approach which, unlike positivism, distinguishes human beings from that of the natural objects; in other words, it values narratives of the experiences and meanings of humans more than their statistics, usually using an inductive logic of reasoning (ibid).

Given its qualitative nature, this study is based on an interpretive epistemological stance, what Creswell and Poth (2018) refer to as the social constructionism. This epistemological stance enabled me as the researcher studying the barriers to labor integration of refugees to construct the participants' interpretation of their experiences and meaning in relation to the research problem as genuinely as possible. Interpretive stance in research, as Bryman (2012) and Creswell and Poth (2018) indicate, enables social researchers to address their research problems using the subjective meaning of respective social actions, as well as distinguishing people from objects of natural science. This stance was very crucial in this project as it aimed to understand the main barriers to employment of refugees in rural Norway, not in the form of numbers or statistics, but in terms of the stakeholders' experiences and meanings, especially those of the refugee participants. Due to the complex nature of immigration and integration as a topic and its distinct characteristics, depending on each refugee group and every host society, the interpretive epistemological stance was instrumental for this study. To have considered the use of other epistemological stances, such as positivism, was not relevant as the study did not have a theory or a solid hypothesis to begin with.

3.2.2 Ontological Considerations

Ontology is also an important consideration in the philosophy of science, just like epistemology. While epistemology is concerned about the origin of knowledge, ontology is concerned with existential questions or, as Creswell and Poth (2018) indicate, it relates to the nature of reality and its attributes. Hofweber (2018) defines some common questions in ontology to be centering around the existence or absence of a thing or a universal entity, like the big question of whether there is a God. However, ontology in social sciences or social

ontology, as is referred to in the literature, bears somewhat a different definition or attributes, though remaining the same in its core principles. According to Bryman (2012), the core focus of social ontology is on whether social entities are or can be considered objective entities with externally based reality, or they are simply a construction of our perceptions. One of the central topics of social ontology, as per Epstein (2018), is the existential analysis of social groups i.e., Do they exist? What are they? Who created them? etc. Like epistemology, there are different ontological considerations in different research paradigms, commonly categorized as objectivism vs. constructionism. According to Bryman (2012), objectivism treats the existence of social phenomena independent of social actors, whereas under constructionism social phenomena are seen as things that are created and constantly revised by the social actors, something that is also stressed by Blaikie (2010).

In terms of ontological considerations in this study, I took a constructionist position because it created a good combination with the interpretive epistemological stance. As defined by Bryman (2012) and Blaikie (2010), constructionism means that social actions and their meanings or interpretation of the meanings are socially constructed. Such an ontological position combined with interpretivism epistemologically allowed me to look at the social phenomenon 'the main barriers to refugees accessing employment in rural Norway' as a construction of the social actors, the refugee participants, employers, and policy implementers, based on their experiences and interpretive meanings. As highlighted in the Findings and Analysis section, such data conveying personal experiences and narratives under varying circumstances could not have been generated in a different paradigm, for example, using an objectivist position. The reason for that is simply because barriers to employment of refugees are different for different refugee individuals and different in different localities due to ample reasons ranging from human and social capitals of refugees to local perceptions regarding refugees and market opportunities. As Arghode (2012) states, it was very important for me as a qualitative researcher student to allow my conclusions to be shaped by the interpretive meanings of the participants without imposing my personal interpretation, particularly my biases.

3.3 Research Strategies

A research strategy is a preliminary and yet an essential plan for researchers. According to Blaikie (2010, p. 81), "a research strategy, or logic of inquiry, provides a starting point and set of steps by means of which 'what' or 'why' questions can be answered." He highlights four

different strategies, e.g., inductive strategy (mainly exploring the 'what' questions), deductive strategy (answering the 'why' questions), retroductive strategy (discovering the underlying cause of 'why' questions) and abductive strategy (able to answer both questions) (ibid). As elaborated above, the adoption of a research strategy depends on the research method(s) and the researcher's logical approach to explaining his/her research findings. Bryman (2012), provides a more straightforward breakdown of the conventional approaches to research strategy, i.e., the deductive approach, which generally begins with theory and proceeds to findings and the inductive approach that usually starts with findings and comes up to a theory. Although they are two independent approaches to determine the relationship between theory and research, Bryman (2012) asserts that they often entail some elements of each other in practice. This qualitative study has used both inductive and deductive approaches and logics of reasoning. The inductive approach was helpful for the study to remain open in terms of possible new themes and/or theories emerging from the data. The use of deductive approach, on the other hand, was instrumental in developing the research questions and interview guides which were influenced and guided by the literature review and some of the core existing theories in the literature.

Through the use of these two research strategies, I was able to reflect the social reality (labor integration of refugees in rural municipalities of Norway) I investigated as it unfolded and as it was perceived and described, not just by me as the researcher, but also by the participants themselves and based on the narratives they provided. I believe such a combination was instrumental for this research project as any one of them alone could have had possible shortfalls to address the research problem as holistically as possible. For example, the use of a deductive approach helped me as a researcher to understand some of the existing theories and concepts regarding labor integration of refugees in the literature and identify gaps and shortcomings related to my problem statement, i.e., the main barriers to labor integration in rural municipalities of Norway. Additionally, this approach helped me to deduce relevant research questions that in turn guided my interview questions, designed in a semi-structured setting. The main strategic approach of the study, however, has been of an inductive nature. Using induction as the main research strategy, I was able to answer my research questions in a fashion that described my findings with, what Blaikie (2010) states, as limited generalizations as possible. Inductive logic of reasoning was particularly important in this study as the description of the barriers to employment of refugees, specifically the way they see, perceive, and experience them, falls short in the literature, if not entirely absent. Although this was not a typical ethnographic study, it might have had some aspects of an ethnography, particularly

given my refugee background as the researcher and the fact that I had gone through the same integration processes not long ago. In order to have contained my possible biases, I refrained from having any solid theoretical assumptions or hypotheses, which helped me remain relatively open-minded in terms of the outcome of the data. I have, however, had some sorts of preconceptions and/or expectations in terms of what might have come up in the findings, which, as per O'Reilly (2012), is quite normal in qualitative studies, including ethnographies.

3.4 Research Design

Having defined a research problem, formulated relevant research questions, established solid epistemological and ontological stance, and chosen the right research strategies, it is of crucial necessity and importance to craft a corresponding research design. According to Bryman (2012, p. 46), "a research design provides a framework for the collection and analysis of data." As scholars such as Blaikie (2010), Bryman (2012) and Mitchell and Jolley (2013) indicate, the research design is instrumental in planning, streamlining, and navigating and controlling the research process effectively and efficiently. There are different research designs in our disposal as researchers that we can choose the one that best suits our specific goals and objectives. Blaikie (2010) outlines the following as common classifications in research design:

- Experiments
- Social surveys
- Field work/ethnography
- Longitudinal study
- Cross-sectional study
- Case study
- Comparative/historical
- Secondary analysis
- Action research
- Evaluation research
- Impact assessment (Blaikie, 2010, pp. 39 – 40)

Choosing one design over the others, as per Bryman (2012), depends on researcher's choice of priorities given to various dimensions of the research process such as highlighting connections between variables, being able to generalize data to a broader context, understanding

behaviors and their meanings in a social context and appreciating the complexity of social phenomena. In a simpler term, Blaikie (2010) asserts that the primary focus of a research design is on answering the what, why and how questions of the study regardless of which classification is used.

This master's thesis project is based on a case study design. It is a case study of labor integration of refugees in a small Norwegian municipality. The reason for choosing this design was primarily due to the target participants of the study, being refugees, and the geographical setting, being a small rural municipality in southern Norway. As emphasized by Bryman (2012), an in-depth analysis of a single case i.e., labor integration of refugees in a typical Norwegian rural municipality, was of the utmost importance in this study. Given the scope of my thesis project (January - September 2020) and its qualitative nature, the case study design was the best suit, particularly in allowing me as the researcher to make good use of the given timeframe to choose just the refugees in a specific Norwegian municipality as the target group and not all migrants and certainly not in entire Norway. Although the study's findings primarily represents the perceived social reality of the target municipality in relation to the research problem, they can somewhat be generalized to reflect the status of other municipalities with similar characteristics, especially given its in-depth qualitative 'case study' nature.

3.5 Methods of Sampling

Sampling the participants and methods of doing it is another vital component of the research methodology. According to Blaikie (2010, p. 172), "a sample is a selection of elements (members or units) from a population and may be used to make statements about the whole population." Sampling participants is of utmost importance in social research; simply because, as Bryman (2012) indicates, it is impossible for social researchers to be able or in a position to interview every individual of a target population. According to Monson (2002), sampling in qualitative research is of importance due to strategic and practical reasons as it streamlines the focus of the research and makes the use of resources effective and efficient. There are different sampling methods in different research designs/methods. Blaikie (2010, p. 173) divides methods of sampling into three main categories i.e., single-stage probability (simple random, systematic, stratified, and cluster), multi-stage, and single-stage non-probability (Accidental/ convenience, quota, judgmental/purposive and snowball). Bryman (2012) asserts that often (not

necessarily always) quantitative studies tend to employ some form of probability sampling methods, while qualitative studies prefer non-probability sampling methods.

Since this was a qualitative study in the form of a thesis project, I employed a combination of two commonly used sampling methods, purposive sampling, and snowball sampling. According to Bryman (2012) and Blaikie (2010), the purposive or judgmental approach is a form of non-probability sampling which is concerned with theoretical considerations and the research questions in order to identify the most relevant participants. Snowball sampling, the most broadly used approach in qualitative research, in accordance with Noy (2008), was used to reach to relevant participants through the contact/networks of the initial participants, which could have been difficult otherwise, if not impossible, to reach all the participants (Bryman 2012 & Blaikie 2010). In the case of "using more than one sampling approach," Bryman (2012, p. 427) asserts that using mixed sampling approaches is quite commonly practiced, for example, identifying the right target population through purposive sampling and after initial contacts using snowball sampling to get to other potential participants within the population. In this study, the use of purposive sampling approach, as Blaikie (2010) also indicates, was helpful in identifying the refugee communities living in the target municipality and making the initial contacts with key members of different refugee groups as well as selecting those public and private stakeholders that are dealing with integration on a daily basis. The snowball sampling approach was used only in relation to refugee groups, specifically after the first contact/s, which was based on more of a purposive or, as Blaikie (2010) phrases it, a judgmental approach.

3.6 Method of Data Collection

Data collection is the most important part of a research process, which is conducted using either interviewing or distribution of questionnaires (Bryman, 2012). As per Gill, Stewart, Treasure and Chadwick (2008), there are three methods of interviewing, i.e., structured, unstructured, and semi-structured. Given its qualitative nature, the study's data was collected through semi-structured interviews. As indicated by Bryman (2012), the semi-structured interview method helped me keep an open mind in terms of the outcome of data collection and analysis, i.e., allowing the data to communicate its concepts and theories. As highlighted by Gill, et al. (2008), the limited number of questions in my semi-structured interviews was more

of a guide to the participants than anything else, helping them formulate their narratives within the study's context.

As indicated above, the data was collected from 26 individually conducted semi-structured interviews of four different participant samples, the length of interviews ranged from approximately 30 minutes to 70 minutes. The participants consisted of 20 refugees, four potential employers (two from the public sector and two from the private sector), a local policy implementer (integration advisor of NAV) and an official in a leading position from an NGO (delivering integration services across Norway). The interviews were conducted both face-to-face and by telephone. From early February to middle of March 2020, I conducted 15 face-to-face interviews with refugees at the places of their choosing. From the middle of March, the data collection was suspended due to Covid-19 related restriction and the lockdown of Norwegian society. After being instructed by my University, I conducted the remaining 11 interviews by telephone at the end of April 2020.

All interviews were recorded by a digital recorder and the sound files were uploaded on my University's OneDrive on daily basis and deleted from the recorder immediately. The interviews were transcribed one by one directly on my University's OneDrive, using University's online Microsoft Word. Since all the interviewees, research participants, spoke Norwegian, including the refugees, the interviews were conducted in Norwegian. To safeguard the quality and authenticity of the data, all interview recordings were transcribed in Norwegian, the original language of the interviews. Since I speak the Norwegian language fluently, I kept the transcripts in Norwegian throughout the coding and thematic analysis process and only translated those portions that were used in citations I inserted in the final thesis' write-up.

3.7 Methods of Data Analysis

As this was a qualitative research, the data was gathered through semi-structured interviews. I opted to analyze the data using a mixed technique of coding and thematic analysis since all the interviews were transcribed. As Bryman (2016) indicates, coding was a good starting point for my data analysis, specifically in terms of organizing and streamlining my analysis process in later stages, i.e., developing themes and/or theories. According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79), "thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data." Bryman (2016) and Terry, Hayfield, Clarke and Braun (2017) believe that thematic analysis is a broadly used methodological approach to analyzing

qualitative data despite being relatively young and lacking the recognition it deserves. So, the main reason for choosing the thematic approach to analysis for me was, however, its flexibility in qualitative research and its compatibility with the constructionist paradigm of my master's thesis study, as indicated by Braun and Clarke (2006), as well as its suitability to analyze various forms of data (Terry et al., 2017). Both the coding and theme development were done in a bottom-up inductive approach (Terry et al., 2017) even though some of the questions in my semi-structured interviews were inspired and formulated under a rather deductive approach. By limiting my deductive approach within the scope of my research questions and tentative interview questions, I managed to let the data speak for itself in a rather inductive fashion. To proceed with my data analysis, I followed the six phases of the thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87) – i.e., familiarization with the data, initial coding, exploration of themes, reviewing themes, definition, and naming of themes and production of a report. In a step by step manner, it will look as follow:

1. I familiarized myself with the data by going through the transcripts of all my 26 interviews word by word and line by line several times, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Bryman (2016). I did my readings of and familiarization with the data using the online version of Microsoft Word on my University's OneDrive, where all my interview transcripts have been stored. Microsoft Word allowed me to underline or highlight key parts of the text and make remarks or comments throughout the process. Given the qualitative nature of the study's analysis, this was a time-consuming exercise as I intended to immerse myself into the data as thoroughly and comprehensively as possible and refrain from skipping portions of the data here and there or being selective, as rightly advised by Braun and Clarke (2006).

2. Having familiarized myself with the data in its entirety and known the kinds and orders of the information, I began coding them sentence by sentence, what Bryman (2016) refers to as the open or initial coding. What I mean by coding at this stage was basically giving names to small portions of the text (Bryman, 2016) or coding interesting features of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As indicated by Bryman (2016), I ended up with a vast number of codes, some of which were repetitions, while others had overlapped each other, which helped me remain as inventive and imaginative as possible (Bryman, 2016). From this stage onward, I used the online version of Microsoft Excel on my University's OneDrive. So, I created an excel sheet and transferred all coded chunks of the data from Microsoft Word to the excel-sheet. The following figure is an example of the excel-sheet:

Participants	Data	Codes
P A	Being able to speak the language of our host country can help us secure a decent job.	Speaking the language
P B	There is not enough jobs in this municipality, especially for us.	Less job
P C	If you don't know people, you can't get a job here no matter how good your cv is.	Knowing the locals
P D	Attending the free langauge course is a good start in labor integration.	Langauge learning
P E	There are fewer businesses in such a small municipality	Fewer businesses
P F	The more references you have on your CV the closer you are to a job	References

Figure 2

It became a rather long list of codes at this stage with a lot of repetitions and overlaps, as seen in the example above (language fluency and language learning – less job and fewer businesses – etc.).

3. Having got a long list of codes, I categorized them or sorted the different codes into potential themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this phase of the analysis process, I reviewed and evaluated my initial codes to see which, and how many of them form or fit in a theme or a subtheme. As Bryman (2016) says, a common way of identifying themes is to look for how many times a topic occurs, which is what I did, i.e., explored the relevance and similarities of the coded data. To keep it simple and straightforward, I used the same excel-sheet and added one more column to it. For example, see the following figure:

Participants	Data	Codes	Themes
P A	Being able to speak the language of our host country can help us secure a decent job.	Speaking the language	Language fluency
P D	Attending the free langauge course is a good start in labor integration.	Langauge learning	
P B	There is not enough jobs in this municipality, especially for us.	Less job	Market limitations
P E	There are fewer businesses in such a small municipality	Fewer businesses	
P F	The more references you have on your CV the closer you are to a job	References	Social networking
P C	If you don't know people, you can't get a job here no matter how good your cv is.	Knowing the locals	

Figure 3

4. By now, I had a shorter list of themes or better to say subthemes as I was still sorting the codes and the themes. This phase of the analysis is called reviewing the themes by Braun and Clarke (2006) in which some themes/subthemes collapsed into others, and some other themes broke down to sperate themes. For example, let us say if I had the language fluency as

a subtheme and obtaining a school or university degree as another subtheme somewhere down the list, I combined the two in a broader theme, calling it Education. Let us take it one step further and say that I had Education as one theme and previous work experiences as another down the line. Though I could have worked with having them as separate themes, I combined the two and called it Human Capital as a giant theme, as it also existed in the literature. The same logic and practice were applied across all other subthemes/themes. As I was going from one stage to another, for example, from coding to sorting, categorizing, identifying subthemes and consolidating the subthemes into broader ones, being able to track my steps all the way back to the initially coded data was of utmost importance. As Braun and Clarke (2006) indicate, at the end of this phase, I had a definite number of reliable themes and a clear picture of what story they tell about the data.

5. In the fifth phase of the analysis, I did a final review of the themes or what Braun and Clarke (2006) call, the final "defining and refining" in terms of their relevance to the research questions and their ability to communicate the thematic story of the data in a comprehensive fashion. Additionally, I explored possible relationships within each, between two and across all themes (Bryman, 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2006). To do it successfully, it was vital for me to have a system of identifying subthemes of each central theme, as Braun and Clarke (2006) indicate, they play a structural role in broad and complex themes. Three stages of my data analysis took place on Microsoft Excel (initial coding, searching for subthemes, and consolidation of relevant subthemes into main themes). Excel enabled me to keep all three stages of the data analysis in one document, i.e., sheet 1: initial coding – sheet 2: development of subthemes – and sheet 3: development of central themes. As being able to go forth and back throughout the process is of necessity in qualitative data analysis (Bryman, 2016), my excel-based approach was instrumental in facilitating that for me.

6. The sixth and the last phase of my data analysis was the write-up of the analysis. In other words, I started writing up the final themes I created so far or, as Braun and Clarke (2006) put it, to tell the complicated story of my data in a thematically convincing manner. To keep it easily understandable, I made sure that the use of data extracts and quotations were relevant to each theme separately and to the research problem in the bigger picture. I was aware that I had to be analytical in my writing so that it will not look like a pure description of the data, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). I also made sure the write up of the analysis engages with the literature and my arguments are justifiable throughout the process (Bryman, 2016).

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues are of utmost importance in academic research. As Etikkom (2014) articulates, academic research is a quest for the creation of new knowledge that must be of high quality and ethical reputation e.g., among several other principles, adhering to human dignity, human rights, informed consent, confidentiality, integrity, impartiality, etc. All these have been relevant and important for me and my research project. As well as committing myself to strict adherence to these universal ethical principles in academic research, I remained cautious and determined to avoid possible instances of plagiarism and any damage to freedom of research, e.g., in terms of openness, trustworthiness vs. conflicts of interests, etc. Similarly, Etikkom (2016) defines ethics as a morality in science, an important aspect of which is doing No Harm. According to Diener and Crandall (1978), cited in Bryman (2012, p. 135), "physical harm; harm to participants' development; loss of self-esteem; stress; and inducing subjects to perform reprehensible acts" are all considered harmful acts.

Likewise, according to my University's ethical guidelines, avoiding misconduct, establishing trust taking responsibility in the protection of research data, and being respectful are of priority ethical principles for any researcher. These have also been among foundational guidelines for my research project, especially given the nature of my study on labor integration of refugees, a rather controversial topic concerning a vulnerable group. In practical terms, I introduced myself and my research project to the participants in the Norwegian language, both verbally and in writing. I interviewed them when they voluntarily stated their interests and gave their informed consents. The place and the time of each interview was decided by each respective participant. It is of utmost importance to state that, due to the need for the collection of personal data in this study, the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD) was notified of the research project and an NSD approval was obtained prior to the collection of any personal data (NSD, 2019).

Since my research was focused on labor integration and thus I had to interview refugee participants, it was possible, though very unlikely, that some of my questions could have been perceived harsh and/or as a reminder of past trauma, which could have caused ethical problems for me. In order to avoid such an unethical dilemma, I made sure that I remained vigilant regarding such possibilities and got some data in an indirect manner, specifically questions related to age, religion, and racial discrimination instances. Through this method/approach, I was able to prevent instances of harm and/or humiliation from occurring in my interviews as

well as acquiring valuable data regarding those mentioned sensitive aspects. I believe my refugee background played an important role in refugee participants opening to answer my questions as well as elaborating on those sensitive and yet relevant pieces of information in a relaxed and comfortable manner, although they were not directly requested.

Since I implemented my research in a rather smaller geographical area (see The Study Area in Chapter One), risks of a possible leak of confidential information were of high priority for me. I was aware of this risk and therefore took every necessary step to make sure that privacy of every participant was respected and, thus their confidentiality sealed according to the respective regulatory and ethical rules and procedures, e.g., de-identifying, anonymizing and encrypting personal and sensitive data, not acquiring them if unnecessary and not storing them longer than necessary, using just my University's OneDrive, etc. I interviewed the participants individually at the places of their choosing (in the case of face-to-face interviews) and at the right time (especially in the case of telephone interviews). I uploaded my interview recordings on my University's OneDrive on the same day of the interview as well as locking up their signed consent letters in a safe at home. I did not keep any personal data in my personal computer as all my transcription of interviews were done directly on my University's OneDrive.

In summary, any lack of scientific integrity, trustworthiness, respect for human dignity, respect for individual and group privacy, plagiarism, and leak of confidentiality, could have posed serious ethical issues for me as a student researcher and thus jeopardize my thesis project in its entirety. So, I made sure that I fully adhered to all the above highlighted legal, ethical, and regulatory practices throughout my research project. Among other practices, I introduced myself as a researcher wherever I went, and whomever I met in relation to my research project. It was an attempt to avoid possible breaches of the legal and/or ethical principles. As a crucial ethical responsibility, I promised the participants to report on the outcome of my research project, especially regarding processing and safeguarding of their personal data under what is referred to as 'rights of access by the data subject' in GDPR (2018) if and when it be necessary.

3.9 Data Validity

Validity is of utmost importance in science, which ensures the integrity of the results and conclusions that come out of a research project (Bryman, 2016). According to Bryman (2016), the main types of validity include Measurement Validity, Internal Validity, External

Validity, and Ecological Validity. Although all forms of validity have the same aim, their application and degrees of validity vary from each other depending on research methods and methodologies. Given my mainly indictive approach to my qualitative study, ecological validity appeared to be more relevant and appropriate. According to Bryman (2016), the central aim of ecological validity is to make sure whether social scientific findings truly reflect people's everyday social realities. As per Bryman's presentation, adhering to the criterion of ecological validity is easy in qualitative research because it gets lost the more, we as researchers, intervene in natural settings, which is a common practice in quantitative research.

As indicated above, my study was based on a qualitative method using semi-structured interviews as the method of data collection. Though unstructured interviews would have provided a better insurance of ecological validity, I tried to ensure that my research participants get the freedom to express their views/narratives the way they felt fit and the best way of reflecting on their personal and collective social realities. The predetermined interview questions were more of a compass or guide, to remind them of the thesis' problem statement, than controlling the interviews, as is the case of structured interviews. So, the data collection through semi-structured interviews in Norwegian (the language participants were most comfortable with), transcription of all the interviews also in Norwegian and the data analysis using a mixed technique of coding and thematic analysis played an important role in making sure that my findings were ecologically valid. It is important to mention that my refugee background was also instrumental in making sense of refugees' social realities, their labor integration, as naturally as possible.

CHAPTER FOUR

4. Empirical Findings

4.1 Introduction

As indicated in the introduction (see Chapter One), this qualitative study, in the form of a master thesis, aims to understand the barriers to labor integration of refugees in rural Norway. Under its problem statement, the study focuses on exploring the main barriers to refugees accessing employment in small municipalities of Norway – choosing a small municipality in Agder county as the case study (see The Study Area in Chapter One). Inspired by the literature review (see Chapter Two), the scope of the study's focus is streamlined by the following research questions (they were also previously presented in Chapter One):

- To what extent does human capital or lack of it impact refugees' employment opportunities?
- What is the role of social capital in securing employment for refugees? /How do refugees acquire it, especially in a small municipality?
- How do employers and refugees describe diversity at the workplace, a constraint, or an opportunity?
- How effective are the current policies/measures helping refugees enter the labor market?

The research questions played a central role in guiding the semi-structured interviews, especially in terms of developing an interview guide for each sample group and navigating the conduct of interviews within the scope of study's focus. As an attempt to address the research problem and fulfill the objective of the study, the focus of the questions was narrowed down to rural contexts generally and to local realities of the target municipality particularly. Despite semi-structuredness of the interviews, the research participants were free to express themselves and narrate their stories in a fashion they perceived fit and relevant to the interview questions and purpose of the study. It was important to make sure the interview questions, deduced from the research questions and the literature, will not impact the inductive approach to data collection and analysis.

The data in this study was collected by conducting individual qualitative interviews using a semi-structured interview method (see Method of Data Collection in Chapter Three). The participants of the study consisted of 20 refugees (12 male and eight female), four local employers (two from the public sector and two from the private sector), one local policy implementer (the Program Advisor for the integration of refugees in the NAV, short for the New Labor and Welfare Administration) and one top official of an NGO (an NGO that delivers integration services across Norway). All 26 interviews were conducted and transcribed in the Norwegian language and analyzed using a mixed technique of coding and thematic analysis (see Methods of Data Analysis in Chapter Three). The findings are presented in a completely anonymized manner without using any directly or indirectly identifiable names or pseudonyms - not because of carelessness, but due to NSD regulations stopping me from the use of assumed names or following the same people across the data.

The study's findings shed light on a variety of personal, systemic, and geographical barriers to labor integration of refugees in the target municipality. The barriers to refugees accessing employment, especially for the first time, that were identified and categorized through an analytical coding and a thematic analysis, range from barriers related to refugees' human and social capitals to implications of ethnocultural diversity, and structural limitations (related to local policies and local market opportunities). The findings of this study are presented within various theoretical and conceptual themes and subthemes that have emerged from the collected data as an attempt to make it easily followed and contextually understood.

4.2 Human Capital

As highlighted in the literature (see Chapter Two), the concept of human capital in social sciences is primarily referred to educational competence and productivity of the citizens, particularly the working class. In the case of labor integration of refugees in rural Norway, especially in the target municipality, barriers related to their human capital was reported under different sub-themes, such as the accreditation of their educational degrees or credentials from their countries of origin, their supplementary education/courses in Norway and last but not least their Norwegian language literacy/fluency. The breakdown of the human capital of refugees as a general (theoretical) theme, as it emerged from the data, is as follow:

4.2.1 Accreditation of refugees' educational credentials in Norway

Accreditation of refugees' educational degrees and/or scholastic credentials appears to be an essential and yet challenging process to operationalize the use of their existing competence and thus facilitate their integration into the Norwegian labor market. It seems that due to administrative and procedural complexities, most refugees, specifically those with a university degree, fail to get their credentials accredited in Norway. Regarding the complicated and demanding nature of the accreditation process, a refugee participant with a bachelor's degree in pharmacy asserted:

> I could not unfortunately get my education accredited because the process required several things, which I could not obtain them from my university in Afghanistan. Although the Afghan Embassy in Oslo confirmed my education in Afghanistan, it was not enough as it required a detailed transcript of my courses. It was not common 27 years ago at the universities, it was just the semester list back then. (a male refugee from Palestine)

According to the study's findings, it does not seem easy to get a university degree from a non-Western country completely accredited in Norway due to differences in curriculum and study length with universities in Norway and non-Western countries. For example, a refugee participant with a master's degree in psychology who has obtained a partial accreditation said, "because of system-related differences between my country and Norway, I need to study one more year to get a master's degree in psychology in Norway" (a female refugee from Kyrgyzstan). In a similar note, another refugee participant with a university degree and work experience as a dental technician stated the following:

> When I came to Norway, I sent all my papers to NOKUT [the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education] and got a feedback that my education is accredited as one year of higher education due to different rules governing universities in Damascus and Norway. It means that I must study at least two more years to be able to work as a dental technician here, though I possess a complete degree ... (a male refugee from Syria)

As reported by the research participants, it seems that the accreditation by NOKUT is not enough for some degrees, especially those in the field of healthcare provision. It means that doctors, nurses, and healthcare providers must also obtain an authorization from the Ministry of Public Health in Norway, in addition to accreditation of their degrees by NOKUT, to be able

to practice medicine or work in the health sector. A refugee participant who could get his degree accredited as a nurse said, "... I could not work as a nurse; it was not enough with NOKUT's approval of my degree as I had to apply for the authorization by the Ministry of Public Health" (a male refugee from Eritrea). In summary, the data highlights a general sense of dissatisfaction and frustration over the complexities and lengthiness of the accreditation process.

Even though one fulfills the demanding requirements of the accreditation process, as per the study's findings, some degrees or studies cannot be accredited at all due to their irrelevance in Norway or to the Norwegian labor market. A young refugee participant who had studied and worked in the field of central air conditioning of buildings in his home country asserted, "I could not get my education accredited because it was a special education, which is not in use in Norway" (a male refugee from Syria). According to some participants, degrees from certain countries cannot be accredited regardless of their relevance in the Norwegian context. For example, a refugee participant with a university degree and work experience in business administration said, "I could not actually get my education accredited because NOKUT does not grant accreditation for degrees from Iraq. It does not trust the Iraqi certificates" (a female Lebanese refugee). However, it is important to mention that I did not find anything on NOKUT's website to either confirm or deny the above assertion.

Almost all refugee participants with higher education of some sort or accomplished degrees from their countries of origin, eight refugee participants in this study to be precise, have highlighted accreditation of their credentials as a facilitator and the lack of it as a barrier to their integration into the Norwegian labor market. In terms of their challenges to access employment due to the lack of accredited credentials, a refugee participant stated, "my biggest challenge is to get my degree accredited" (a male refugee from Palestine). Another example of a refugee failing to get a paid job due to not having his degree accredited was highlighted as this; "the employer [at the dental laboratory he has had job-training] liked my work and said he wants to employ me, but he cannot employ me as a dental technician because I do not have the authorization" (a male Syrian refugee).

4.2.2 Education in Norway

As expected, most of the participants emphasized the importance and relevance of either taking a new education or supplementing their existing ones in Norway in relation to boosting

up their employment opportunities. Twelve out of the 20-refugee participants related to lack of an educational degree, at least at the high school level, as a barrier to their labor integration. A refugee participant with a university degree in mass media explained his job training at a restaurant, hoping for a paid job in the future, saying, "I could not go any further there [the restaurant] because of not having an education in that field. It is stressful to work [have a job training] somewhere that you know you cannot go any further than just the training" (a male refugee from Sudan). Another refugee who has recently completed her high school education as a health worker asserted the following regarding her opportunities in the local labor market:

> It was very difficult [to find job] before high school, not just for me, but for everyone. Now that I have a high school diploma in the field of healthcare provision, and that I have had a practical job training [apprenticeship] in the Home for the Elderly and have known my colleagues and many more, I believe it is easier for me to get a job. In other words, I believe it is easier to get a job with certificate of apprenticeship in hand. (a female refugee from Syria).

It seems that most refugee participants, as well as the employers who were interviewed in this project, agree that obtaining some form of education can facilitate refugees' employment, and the lack of it will prevent them from either finding a job or finding a decent one. Statements such as, "in Norway, it is important to possess a high school diploma" by a male Somalian refugee, "if you have an education, you get 100% job here in Norway" by a female Eritrean refugee and "it is difficult to find jobs for people without an education or at least a high school diploma" by a public employer were prevalent across the data, particularly those portions of the data that relate to the relevance of education in labor integration. Another refugee participant, educated as a nurse in his country, who had to take some supplementary courses in Norway to get an authorization, stated his work experiences before and after receiving an approved degree like this:

> When you obtain your papers [degree/diploma] and try to work, they [the labor market] need you. I work as a nurse because I have obtained my papers. I was the same person who wanted to work as an assistant before [before obtaining the approval of his degree], but I could not get the opportunity to work. The documentation [of education] is important. (a male Eritrean refugee)

Although almost every participant, particularly the refugee ones, described obtaining some form of education in Norway as something positive in labor integration, some refugee participants asserted that acquiring scholastic qualifications in Norway is a challenging and time-consuming process. Referring to the demanding nature of the Norwegian education system, a middle-aged refugee participant said, “everyone does not need to go all the way to obtain new education. Middle-aged people like me must be able to access employment relatively sooner” (a female Syrian refugee). Not just the elderly, some young refugee participants also expressed their frustration over their long schooling journeys in Norway. For example, a 24-years-old refugee participant explained his feelings regarding his high school journey in Norway as follows:

> My education in Norway was not relevant to my education from my home country at all. It was a new field and a new interest. My school from my country did not help me. I wanted to avoid taking high school again. Since it [education from the home country] was not accredited, I had to repeat the whole high school. It was a waste. I wasted two years. (a male Syrian refugee)

As pointed out by some participants, both the refugees and employers, the differences related to school curriculums in Norway and other countries also seem to have contributed to making obtaining of education for adult refugees even more challenging and complicated. For example, a refugee participant with an educational and work background within accounting and business administration who wants to pursue advanced education in her field in Norway asserted, "they [Norwegian educational institutions] do not consider the interests of people whether they like writing or not. I, as a person, do not like writing, but I like to work with numbers, in other words, more with statistics than text" (a female Lebanese refugee). Regarding refugees’ challenges with education, an employer who happens to be headmaster of the language school (Introduction Program) for newcomer refugees in the target municipality stated, "it is difficult, especially if you happen to be between 35 to 40 years old and have to learn Norwegian, English and Mathematics" (a potential public employer).

4.2.3 Language Fluency

Language fluency or refugees’ ability to communicate in Norwegian was one the thematic concepts emphasized by all participants across the data samples, despite differences in the perceived degree of its level and relevance to employment. Thirteen refugee participants,

all 4-potential employers, the local policy implementer, and the NGO representative specifically related to language competence both as a facilitator of and a barrier to refugees' employment, particularly when they try to enter the Norwegian labor market for the first time. Statements such as "it is difficult to get a job for foreigners because of the language" by a male refugee from Afghanistan, "language is the first thing one needs to get a job..." by a male refugee from Syria and "it is a challenge, especially in the beginning, to be able to communicate" by the owner of a local shop are some of the examples of the assertion.

Though emphasized by every participant, it seems that the relevance and importance of language concerning refugees' carrier development are more tangible with the ones who think of a professional carrier or office work, which often demand higher language competence. Referring to a new language requirement for refugee jobseekers, one of the refugee participants said, "a new requirement was introduced this year that every refugee must pass B1 language test [an intermediate level of fluency] to be able to work. This is something that takes one year for some and four years for others" (a male refugee from Somalia). A young refugee who has established a film production company and is concerned with the provision of quality service narrates his struggle with professional terminology as this:

> Language becomes a barrier when it comes to professional terminology. It is easy for a Norwegian to follow the professional terminology, for me however, it becomes difficult to follow sometimes. There is often a lot of talking concerning our assignments and at the end they [colleagues] say, ok, we should do it now, while I have not understood what it is that we should do. Therefore, professional terminology has been a barrier for me. (a male Syrian refugee)

According to the participants, there are no national criteria to determine the language competence of refugees in employment, at least nothing written as a rule. As per what headmaster of the language school for adult newcomer refugees said, "determining the language competence is difficult as there is no such table to define language competence for each job class" (a potential public employer). So, the common practice to decide if a refugee jobseeker speaks good enough Norwegian, as per the data, is to test them personally in a job interview or during a job training. For example, the second employer I interviewed who happened to have had ten employees with an ethnic minority background, including refugees, said, "regarding the level of language competence, it is important that we understand what they say and they understand what we say" (a potential public employer). Responding to the same question,

another employer likewise said, “they have to make themselves understood” (a potential private employer).

The dominant use of local dialect(s) was also highlighted as a challenge by some refugees and potential employers and related to as barriers to sound communication. This problem was emphasized as “language is a big barrier, especially when the majority speak dialect at work” by a female Syrian refugee, and “language can sometimes be challenging as some people speak just dialect” by a male Sudanese refugee. Regarding the dominance of dialect, headmaster of the language school for adult newcomer refugees said, “at school, we speak slowly, and we speak Bokmål [the standard written Norwegian]. In real life, however, no one considers it” (a potential public employer). Speaking of everyday experience and knowledge of the problem, the second public employer, likewise, asserted, “we have employees who speak dialect and they speak very fast while passing messages” (a potential public employer).

Regardless of the dominance of local dialects at the workplace or the use of professional terminology, language-related challenges was highlighted as a barrier both by refugee participants and the employers. The refugee participant with the film production company mentioned above who had problems comprehending professional terminologies, also stated, “language will continue to be a barrier when it comes to professional terminologies” (a male Syrian refugee). Another refugee participant who is trying to open a restaurant similarly asserted, “the better you speak the language, the better opportunities you will have, though not enough in itself” (a male Palestinian refugee). Referring to the language-related challenges of some job/language trainee refugees, one of the employers said, “we have to work with our assignments plus the assignments of the trainees” (a potential public employer). In summary, the data highlights language, despite variables, both as a facilitator and a barrier depending on competence status and job requirements.

4.3 Social Capital

The importance of social capital in labor integration of refugees, particularly in a relatively small municipality, was among the most stressed concepts in the data. All 26 participants of the study emphasized the paramount and foundational relevance of refugees’ social capital in their overall integration generally, and their integration in the labor market

specifically. This thematic concept, as it emerged from the data during coding, could be divided into two similar and yet distinct forms of social networking for easier comprehension of such a complex and multifaceted theme. The two forms of social networking (Socialization with the Locals and Networking with Potential Employers), as outlined below, cover every essential element that could be translated as social capital for newcomer refugees in a rural municipality of Norway.

4.3.1 Socializing with Local Population

Socializing with the locals, primarily getting to know the natives, but also people with minority backgrounds such as fellow refugees from other countries, was the most and a widely emphasized element of refugees' must-do investment in establishing a fruitful social capital. The codes highlighted in relevant chunks of the data defined socialization of refugees in their new society as a facilitator of and the lack of it as a barrier to their successful integration in the labor market. References such as "without contact with Norwegians, you cannot do anything" by a male Syrian refugee, "the most important thing is to be a part of the society" by a potential private employer and "the difficulty [to find a job] is because of our lack of a social network" by a male Somalian refugee are some of the examples of the participants' statements.

Though the data displayed a unanimous agreement regarding the crucial importance of socialization, most of the participants reported a lack of or very limited contact with the natives in their everyday lives, among other things, due to geographical and cultural barriers. For example, a well-educated refugee participant said, "knowing the natives plays an important role in securing employment, something that is difficult in a small municipality" (a male Palestinian refugee). Referring to the impact of cultural differences on socialization, headmaster of the language school for adult newcomer refugees asserted, "Norwegians need time to open up and sort of let you in" (a potential public employer). Another refugee participant narrated her hopeless struggle to make Norwegian friends as follows:

> I do not have a wide network. I know myself very well. I have never been successful in networking despite trying very hard and trying it more than once, maybe because our traditions are not the same. This would not have been a problem should we have come here as kids, because our kids get along with Norwegian kids very easily. We came as adults and that is different. I think a lot

> about finding a way to become friends with them [natives], but I do not know how I do it. (a female Eritrean refugee)

As pointed out by some of the participants, it seems that language and age-related barriers also contribute to making socialization for adult refugees difficult. For example, a refugee participant with limited schooling said, "language is the key to social networking" (a male Sudanese refugee). Another refugee participant who had come to Norway as a child and has been living here for the last 13 years asserted the reasons for differences in the status of socialization of the youth and the adult refugees as below:

> It is easier for children to get to know others as they are not afraid of mistakes, saying something wrong or asking several times. This threshold, however, is much higher for the adults. They either do not dare to speak or they are afraid of saying something wrong. It is also possible that they are not extroverts to go out and get to know people, but instead they prefer to remain indoors under their safe roofs. (a female Egyptian refugee)

As I kept filtering the coded data regarding obstacles of the socialization between refugees and the natives, a pattern emerged in the language used by the participants - connecting all those stated challenges to a cultural skepticism on both sides. What seems to be the problem, as they have narrated, is taking the first step as both sides seem to be cautious of not invading one another's privacies. This thesis seems to be backed by statements such as, "I am afraid of someone not wanting me … or the natives perhaps think that I am a Muslim and do not want to talk to them" by a hijab-wearing young Syrian refugee, "we think that they do not want [to socialize with us], but what we think is not maybe true" by a female Eritrean refugee or "it is possible to get to know Norwegians, but it takes time" by a female Sudanese refugee.

Though the participants indicated all forms of socialization as a good thing, some refugee participants defined contact with the natives as the only meaningful socialization, particularly concerning their employment. For example, a refugee participant stated, "I know almost everyone from Syria, but it does not translate into a network as they are unemployed too and do not have a workplace. (a male refugee from Syria). On a similar note, another refugee participant pointed out, "I know my neighbors, those I went together to school and Muslims in other cities, but it does not take me anywhere if I do not have contacts with Norwegians" (a male refugee from Syria). References underscoring socialization with the natives as the only

meaningful and constructive contact, especially in terms of labor integration, was evident across the relevant parts of data.

Although some participants, especially those of the employers, stated that there are enough arenas for refugees to socialize in the target municipality despite all mentioned limitations, most of the refugee participants made clear statements that local opportunities are limited, if any at all. For example, indicating the geographic and demographic limitation as something helpful in socialization, the local policy implementer I interviewed said, "it is easier here to establish a good network and get to know the locals", for example, through what he referred to as "... leisure activities" (the policy implementer). Refugees, on the other hand, though, had the opposite perception regarding the opportunities. For example, a refugee with a university degree in nursing said, "there were not enough meeting places. I do not say that it was me who did not want to have a network, but I say that there was no opportunity for me to establish contacts" (a male refugee from Eritrea).

4.3.2 Networking with Potential Employers

As highlighted above, all participants stressed the importance of social interaction between refugees and the natives despite their varying perceptions regarding its nature and local opportunities and/or barriers. However, a significant number of refugee participants (9 out of 20) as well as the potential employers (3 out of 4) and the NGO official, made an extra emphasis on the critical role of networking with potential local employers, those in a position to possibly offer them job opportunities. They related professional networking with the work-culture and trust in Norway. For example, a refugee participant, having lived seven years in Norway, stated, "In Norway, it is the network culture. It does not have anything to do with fairness; it just concerns knowing and trusting people" (a male Somalian refugee). Comparing Norway with Syria, another refugee participant said, "the most important thing in Norway is the network, while in Syria it was the qualifications" (a male Syrian refugee). Regarding the relevance of network culture, a refugee participant with 13 years of life experience in Norway narrated the following story:

> I began to work at a very young age. My first summer job was when I was 14 or 15, but it has always been through someone I knew. I have never gone through the long job-search process. Here [the target municipality], it has always been easy, for example, when I got my job at a gas station, it was the father of one of

> my classmates, who run the station. So, for me it was just to go and ask him because he knew me very well. (a female Egyptian refugee)

The concept of networking with potential employers, within the data, forms around the status of refugees' contact with companies or factories as their potential future workplaces or with people who possess a decision making power in the labor market, both in the public and the private sectors. Seven participants specifically highlighted access to the workplace, even if it might be in the form of practical job training, as a precondition for building and/or expanding one's professional network. Some of the examples of their statements stood out as the following in this regard: "I believe the most important thing is work" by a male Syrian refugee, and "the workplace is a good arena to establish a good network" by a potential private employer. According to the data, workplace experiences lead to references, something that is a crucial component of a professional network. The official of the NGO that delivers integration services in Norway asserted the importance of references as below:

> Most of the employers evaluate their workers based on how good they work, not based on their background. Therefore, the language/work training places are very important as they get the opportunity to show what they can and be recognized and known. So, good references are crucial as employers talk to each other. The opposite is true with a bad reference that can be catastrophic. If you do a bad job somewhere, it will be difficult for you to work elsewhere. (the NGO official)

Just like the barriers to socializing with the natives, some participants referred to the lack of enough workplaces in the target municipality as an obstacle in establishing a professional network. A history teacher from Syria who used to also work as a professional cook at hotels and restaurants in his country, for example, indicated, "it does not help much if one does not have contact with Norwegians, especially those Norwegians who have companies and restaurants and there are not many of them here" (a male Syrian refugee). This statement was backed by the local policy implementer too – saying that "this is a small municipality with fewer factories … fewer workplaces that can receive people without education" (the policy implementer). This fact was further supported by headmaster of the language school for adult newcomer refugees, putting it as "there are many people who cannot find jobs due to various reasons, the labor market is one of them" (a potential public employer).

Despite the hardships and limitations, some refugee participants reported relatively successful socialization and networking, primarily due to their personal efforts and initiatives. While agreeing on the lack of opportunities, a refugee participant reasoned, "we too are responsible to some degree. We prefer to stay home and read in Arabic" (a female Syrian refugee). One of the few refugee participants who claimed to have had a good network said, "I was lucky that I started with the Red Cross when we first moved here … I have a good network with everyone I got to know through my volunteer work" (a male Sudanese refugee). Though challenging and time taking, these refugee participants stated that it pays off to take the first steps and have a plan for life. The second refugee participant, defining his network as broad and rich, narrated his plan for social networking as follows:

> I have a good network, something I worked on from the beginning. Basically, I created a goal for me, which was to get to know someone who could help me know 5 more people. I was inspired of a theory that said, you get to know whoever you want through several others, step by step. So, I got to know someone who had a big network and took me to parties, and I got to know his friends. I looked different with a different name and Norwegians were curious to ask me a lot of questions. That is how we became friends. (a male Somalian refugee).

4.4 Implications of Ethnocultural Diversity

One of the major themes that emerged from the data during coding and thematic analysis centers around perceptions and implications of ethnocultural differences in the context of labor integration. This portion of the data provides us with information regarding feelings and experiences of the participants concerning the mix of different cultures, religions, languages and nationalities at a workplace, particularly in a rural municipality that is rather a homogenous population. This theme was formed by combining two sub-themes (local perceptions of diversity and association of cultural differences). As elaborated below, these sub-themes, not only describe the concept of ethnocultural diversity from a definition point of view, they also indicate their implications for employment and labor integration.

4.4.1 Local Perceptions of Diversity

As the data displayed, local perceptions of diversity generally and diversity at the workplace specifically, seem to be positive and constructive. Though almost all participants highlighted diversity as something beneficial and necessary in modern societies, 20 of them (out of the total 26 participants) provided reasoning examples of why it is important, especially in terms of labor integration. Some of their reasonings, in this regard, stood out as such, "we learn from each other" by a male Syrian refugee; "it means sharing cultures and experiences" by a female Lebanese refugee; "I see it as a strength because of the fact that [with it] we have enough people to work" by a potential public employer; "we just have good experiences with it" by a potential private employer; and "diversity of cultures, languages, values, and experiences are crucial in development and innovation" by the NGO official.

As summarized above, the notion of diversity is mainly appraised in the data as well as being labeled as a necessary element of societal development. Fifteen refugee participants, all four potential employers and the NGO official highlighted diversity as an opportunity to facilitate integration and improve social inclusion of ethnic minorities, especially the newcomer refugees who happen to be the most vulnerable of all other minority groups. For example, a refugee participant, with a job training in a Home for the Elderly as part of a multicultural team, said, "It is good. One gets to know other people. We [I] work with people from Africa, Asia and different other countries" (a female Syrian refugee). Another refugee participant elaborated on positive impacts of diversity on integration and social inclusion as follows:

> It is positive to have diversity at workplaces. One learns more and dumps xenophobia the more he/she gets to know other cultures, and that will have a ring effect. If you work somewhere and you work with people from other cultures, you will not have xenophobic feelings. And you go home and talk about your good colleagues at work, so, they get the same picture. That is how it will have a ring effect on reducing xenophobia. (a female Egyptian refugee)

As shown above, the study's findings emphasize the importance of social contact between Norwegians and the newcomer refugees, as a strategic attempt to improve local perceptions of diversity and thus combat xenophobia. Otherwise "it can absolutely go the wrong direction" (a potential public employer). The summary of participants' narration of the topic can be limited to the emphasis on getting to know one another; in other words, meeting each

other in person rather than judging each other. Underscoring information as the key to making diversity a valuable opportunity, a refugee participant said, "those who work with people from other countries have more knowledge about other countries and people …" (a male Sudanese refugee). Another refugee participant who has recently begun to work as a nurse at a Home for the Elderly narrated his personal experience of diversity at work as below:

> Diversity is very helpful. If I speak about my profession, there are elderly people and when they see diversity/foreigners, they ask questions about different things, about the history, about the culture and about the religion. It can be of interest for everyone. I think diversity is very important in a society. (a male Eritrean refugee)

Though a few, some participants indicated some downsides of diversity, particularly in relation to work and workplaces. Not that they were critical of it entirely, three refugee participants shed some light on the challenging aspects of diversity, nonetheless. For example, a refugee participant said, “it can be challenging too because you have to know how things work with different cultures” (a male Syrian refugee). Relating diversity to skeptical natives, another refugee participant, who has been considering opening a local restaurant, stated, “... that is not easy as Norwegians are skeptical to taste my food” (a male Syrian refugee). Their statements were more of a reference to negative perceptions regarding diversity and their possible implications for their opportunities. As per the third refugee participant, though, “the majority in the municipality think diversity is something positive, but there are also those who are somewhat critical of it here and there” (a male Somalian refugee).

4.4.2 Association of Cultural Differences

The data has distinguished perceptions of diversity at the workplace from personal experiences of multiculturalism at work. As presented above, the data displayed generally a positive description of the notion of having diversity at the workplace, expressed both by the refugees and the employers. However, their experiences of the association of different cultures seem far from being optimal and smooth. Referring to an example of culture-clash, the manager of one of the biggest food store in the target municipality said, “it [culture] is different from one country to another, some people have a culture of hardworking while others are a little bit laid back or so” (a potential private employer). Highlighting cultural differences and the way

forward, a refugee participant, working as a nurse, described his personal experiences as follows:

> It can be a little bit challenging when you live and work in a new culture, but it is important to be conscientious and patient. For example, I work as a nurse which is not a [typical] men's job. You work with a lot of women, so you experience a lot of thing that concern culture and religion. One must think how to tackle the challenge, right? Our lives are full of challenges, but we must come [stand] up and tackle those challenges. (a male Eritrean refugee).

Some of the main points stressed as a way forward to alleviate the negative implications of cultural clashes in a society related to individual ethics, like accepting and respecting one another. This point was emphasized by statements, such as "I want to keep my culture and respect your culture" by a male Eritrean refugee, "respecting each other and being timebound are important here in Norway" by a female Eritrean refugee and "it comes down to the attitudes at the workplace" by the NGO official. It seems that a lot of the misconceptions and stereotypes, as identified in the data, are due to the lack of contact between natives and refugees, especially in the work context. The local policy implementer who introduces the newcomer refugees in the labor market, after they finish their compulsory language training, asserted this:

> They [employers] are generally skeptical when they do not know people, [but] when they get some people in, they want to keep them because they are so good. We have actually experienced quite the opposite. Those who were skeptical have got refugees in a practice [job training] and instead of saying no thanks we do not want; they have asked us are there more or someone else like him because he is so good. (The local policy implementer)

Though cultural differences were referenced to be somewhat challenging generally throughout the data, it seems that the religious part of the differences is even more problematic. This was especially stressed by those of the participants who identified themselves as Muslims. For example, a refugee participant said, "there are some of us [Muslims] who cannot work where there are alcohol and pork. That is what they will ideally avoid" (a male Syrian refugee). Admitting that this could be a barrier or cause limitations in labor integration, another refugee participant, likewise, stated, "these differences can sometimes cause difficulties. For example, if the workplace has a party to celebrate something, there are always wine and beer or food

containing pork" (a male Syrian refugee). Implications of religious/cultural differences seem to go far beyond alcohol and pork, as the following story by a refugee participant expresses:

> I felt it [cultural/religious differences at work] somewhat challenging. For example, when I had a language/work training in Kristiansand city, it was Ramadan [the fasting month for Muslims] and as you know, almost all Muslims fast during this month. Some of the workers used to ask me why I do not eat lunch with them, and I had to explain that it was Ramadan and we fast during this month. Some of them treated me in a strange way, while some others showed me respect". (a male Syrian refugee)

In addition to the challenges mentioned above, Muslim women seemed to have been facing extra challenges, especially those who wear the hijab (that cover up their hairs). Three out of the six Muslim women I interviewed explicitly asserted that their hijabs attract unwanted attention and, thus, cause challenges. These are some of their statements in this regard: "it [religion] can be a hindrance, especially for me, a 50 years old woman who wears the hijab" by a female Syrian refugee, "my first problem would be my hijab when I apply for jobs" by another female Syrian refugee and "I believe it is challenging, especially if you are a Muslim and wear the hijab" by a female Eritrean refugee. The problem related to religions, specifically to Muslims who appear to have had extra difficulties trying to fit in, was also mentioned by some Norwegian employers. For example, headmaster of the language school for adult newcomer refugees described the following:

> In a country like Norway that does not have an Islamic background, it becomes challenging for employees who want to say their Friday prayers or do not want to have pork. It can be fasting and handshakes, there are some people who are not comfortable to work in shops that sell pork or beers. The labor market becomes even more limited if there are such strong beliefs. (a potential public employer)

The data also indicates that these challenges are not very serious, and hence they can be worked out with information, time, and opportunity. For example, referring to the problematic nature of Muslims work in some areas, a refugee participant stated, "it is possible to solve this [the problem of handling beers and pork] and to work in such places provided that there is an opportunity" (a male Syrian refugee). Indicating that cultural and religious differences cannot hinder him from working somewhere, another refugee participant, similarly, said, "in Syria also,

we have diversity, different cultures, and religions" (a male Syrian refugee). Highlighting these as challenges but not real barriers to employment, the local policy implementer also indicated, "one thing is experienced that employers facilitate it [the prayer times] should it be necessary" (the local policy implementer).

According to the data, such differences are typical and somewhat expected, particularly at the beginning of the integration process. As a refugee participant stated, "when you come to Norway, there is stress in the beginning and that everything is new" (a female Eritrean refugee). However, some societal factors seem to contribute to either prolonging the challenge or exaggerating it. For example, the NGO official described that "it is perhaps a weakness that we [the society] have a tendency to generalize and judge people based on nationality, what religion they belong or their migration status" (the NGO official). The following assertion by headmaster of the language school for adult newcomer refugees provides us with a summary of the possible contributing factors to some of the problems highlighted above:

> I believe that all the information about, for example, terror incidents carried out by extremist Muslims and that there are people who believe all Muslims are like them [play a role]. They are not like them, but such a false information they get from the TV and they interpret it wrongly. And, also, it is not helpful that we have politicians who are into this. (a potential public employer).

4.5 Structural Limitations

The concept of structural limitations to labor integration of refugees in the target municipality emerged from a cluster of codes and subthemes. As the whole purpose of this study was understanding the barriers to labor integration in rural municipalities of Norway, the participants, not surprisingly, related almost every concept to local realities, particularly the effectiveness and efficiency of respective local policies and measures within the capacity of the local labor market. Though every concept highlighted above so far also demonstrated the influence of structure in some form or fashion, this specific concept, however, seems to be entirely structural with minimal agency influence, if any at all. This concept is made up of two subthemes (Local Labor Market and Local Policies) that, as shown in the data, go hand in hand from an administrative and geographic perspective. For a better understanding of the concept, these subthemes are presented individually, despite their inter-related nature.

4.5.1 Local Labor Market

According to the study's findings, challenges related to the local labor market are mostly of geographic and demographic nature. As a refugee participant stated, "a larger number of inhabitants play an important role in jobs" (a male Syrian refugee). As elaborated below, geographic and demographic needs and capacities, however, seemed to have influenced the types and numbers of policies and measures in this regard. As a concept stressed by all 20 refugee participants, two potential employers, the local policy implementer, and the NGO official, local labor market encompasses issues, such as lack of jobs, lack of relevant workplaces, overqualification, and the lack of geographical mobility. As per the data, though these limitations impact every inhabitant of the municipality, they can affect the refugee groups harder due to being new in Norway and facing many other challenges that are described throughout this chapter.

As indicated above, geographic, and demographic limitations were among the most referenced factors, either directly as a barrier or a contributing factor to other barriers. For example, a refugee participant who has recently got a job after a long struggle said, "I know the reason why refugees cannot find jobs, it is a small place" (a male Eritrean refugee). Unsure of the reason for her unemployment, even after acquiring a high school education, another refugee participant responded, "in my case, I do not know, it is difficult to find work, maybe because it is a small place" (a female Eritrean refugee). It seemed that due to this limitation, some refugees prefer moving to bigger cities in search of work. It was pointed out by a refugee participant who had otherwise reasoned in favor of smaller places, i.e., smaller places are ideal for better integration. He further asserted, "it is difficult in a small place, and refugees move to bigger cities..." (a male Somalian refugee).

The data has linked geographic and demographic limitations to every possible barrier of labor integration. For instance, most of the research participants who had commented about these limitations related them to a lack of jobs in the municipality. For example, a refugee participant said, "it is difficult to find jobs when you live in a small village" (a female Eritrean refugee). Several other refugees asserted that they would have been better off in larger cities. One of the refugee participants who named the market limitation as the core cause of refugees' unemployment, likewise, indicated, "opportunities [job opportunities] in small municipalities are fewer than in bigger cities" (a male Syrian refugee). At least two of the employers I interviewed, similarly, described the market limitation as a considerable factor in barriers to labor integration. For example, a potential employer said, "it [the target municipality] has a

limited labor market" (a potential private employer). Likewise, headmaster of the language school for adult newcomer refugees asserted the following:

> There are many people who cannot find jobs due to various reasons, the labor market is one of them. This municipality is a relatively small place with small or limited labor market for people generally, not just the refugees, people who have not obtained a high school diploma or university education. (a potential public employer)

According to participants' accounts, jobs are generally scarce in the municipality regardless of its kinds and durations, as elaborated above. However, jobs with a fixed-term contract seem even more scarce if not absent. A refugee participant who could not find a job and thus had to establish his own company in the area of film production, asserted, "I have worked with different small things, but nothing long term" (a male Syrian refugee). This issue was also stressed by headmaster of the language school for adult newcomer refugees, stating that, "there are fewer fixed-term jobs [in the target municipality]" (a potential public employer). In the absence of long-term jobs, what seemed to be the common practice was daily wage jobs and/or job training without salary, not necessarily because of lack of refugees' competence but usually because of lack of job opportunity. For example, the manager of a big food store said, "what seems to be usually challenging is that we get people on training [language/job], but we do not have any job to offer" (a potential private employer).

According to the findings' highlights, market limitations has led to fewer jobs and the lack of jobs has resulted in a big competition for job openings. As indicated by a refugee participant, "there is a tough competition for jobs. It is extra difficult for me because I do not have a Norwegian background" (a male Syrian refugee). Additionally, as shown by the data, lack of jobs makes it difficult for refugees to work in relevant branches. A refugee participant who has a degree and a long job experience as a pharmacist, for example, stated, "there is no opportunity for me to work here because there is just one pharmacy with around ten people presently working" (a male Palestinian refugee). Another refugee, with lower education but extensive experience in construction, also asserted, "in my field, to work with concrete, there are no companies" (a male Eritrean refugee). It is essential to mention that most refugee participants cited the issue of not finding the right workplace for training and eventually working.

Although the lack of jobs and market limitations seem to have affected every refugee class in terms of their qualifications, those with higher education reportedly appear to have had the least employment opportunity. Relating to this problem, a refugee participant asserted, "what I can say in this regard is that it is not easy for people with higher education to find work [the right work]" (a male Syrian refugee). It was also stressed as a fact by the local policy implementer, asserting, "in principle, it is a low education municipality; in other words, those who live here have lower education..." (the local policy implementer). In a similar and yet distinct note, the NGO official responded, "it is pretty good for professions that do not require special education" (the NGO official). In addition to refugees who understandably cited a state of hopelessness, some employers also referred to the negative impact of the limitations on refugees' motivation. As an example, headmaster of the language school for adult newcomer refugees asserted the following:

> I believe many of them [the refugees], when they arrive in Norway or on their way to Norway, think that they will find jobs very fast and that Norway is a rich country and needs a lot of workers. When they see the limitations, a lot of them, most of them lose their motivations. (a potential public employer)

Some refugee participants expressed their desire to move to bigger cities because of the lack of job opportunities locally. They, however, also indicated that it is complicated to move to a new municipality without first securing a job there. Answering my interview question regarding how easy and practical the option of moving to a new city is, a refugee participant stated, "I do not want to describe it as easy [option] as you lose the assistance [social assistance] you get from your municipality" (a male Syrian refugee). According to the findings, some refugees, instead, try their chances in the neighboring municipalities without having to move far away and risking the loss of their financial incentives. This was also emphasized by the local policy implementer as a practical measure to alleviate the implication of lack of relevant local workplaces: "because of the limited labor market, we have to look further away, we have to see if there are relevant workplaces in neighboring municipalities" (the local policy implementer).

4.5.2 Local Policies

The role of Local policies in labor integration was one of the most emphasized subthemes in the data, if not the most emphasized one. Seventeen refugee participants, three potential employers, the policy implementer, and the NGO official specifically talked about the

importance of local integration policies and practices, highlighting their shortcomings and recommending improvements. The breakdown of coded elements in this portion of the data includes irrelevant language/job trainings, long job trainings, lack of dialogue between NAV and the trainees, lack of communication between NAV and the employers, and rather ineffective use of integration grants by the municipality. Each mentioned element is presented as a separate paragraph as an attempt to make the story easy to read and contextual to comprehend.

After refugees complete their compulsory language school, assigning them to irrelevant job trainings was among the overly emphasized critique of the current integration policies. Calling the common practice of a job training just a training and nothing but a training, a refugee participant elaborated, "those who work at NAV are just concerned of sending you to a practice [a job practice/training], it is not important for them whether the practice is suitable for you or not" (a male Syrian refugee). According to some refugee participants, they have very little or no say in the planning processes of their career development or labor integration. The refugee participant with a master's degree in psychology, who has a job training in a food store, asserted the following:

> When I talked to NAV [about job training] I did not get any offer, an offer that begins with a practice with the potential to result to a paid job in the future. I also think that it is important for them to have training place, but they do not care about what kind of place. They do not consider your interests, for example, what kind of education you have and what you want to do in the future. (a female Kyrgyz refugee).

The issue of irrelevant job training was also criticized by some employers, especially those with personal experiences with the training. For example, the manager of a food store said, "there are many people [refugees] with higher education in job training, but it is not in the field of the store" (a potential private employer). As indicated above, the data highlights a communication problem between job trainees and NAV and relates it to shortsighted labor integration measures. Defining what an ideal approach as the way forward would be, a refugee participant described, "it could have been better if they [NAV] tried to understand what refugees experience and how they think" (a male Syrian refugee). With 20 years of work experience in the field of integration, the NGO official underlined the need for, and importance of, a close follow-up of refugees from day one until employment. She explained some of the complexities of early procedural engagement as follows:

> … it is so important to start the follow up as early as possible so that the Norwegian language training is of interest to their existing competence and their motivation to go forward. We will risk it otherwise - if people go to work [job training] for an extended period without being contacted once [and] that nothing is expected of them, it can result to depression. People will lose their self-confidence which will make it even more difficult to access the labor market. (the NGO official)

As shown in the data, there is also a lack of communication between NAV and workplaces that take in job trainees. The problem seemed to be related to the lack of a visionary plan for refugee trainees. The employers especially stressed this point as they are the ones who receive and supervise the refugee trainees in coordination with NAV. Emphasizing the importance of cooperation between NAV and the workplace, particularly at the beginning of the training, the manager of a local food store asserted that "communication and dialogue are very important in this transition" (a potential private employer). In this regard, the NGO official recommended a broader cooperation, asserting that "the private sector, NAV and the language school must work together" (the NGO official). One of the public employers who had the most significant number of ethnic minorities (including refugees) under her supervision stated the following:

> When NAV will want them [refugee trainees] in a practice [job training], as we have experienced, NAV let them totally free and there is no follow up. We miss a close dialogue with NAV during the training to be able to say what works well and what could be done differently. NAV tends to let free and escape from the responsibility because we are responsible now. (a potential public employer)

Some of the policy-related shortfalls were narrated in the form of recommendations, things that participants wanted to have differently, meaning that they are not quite sufficient and useful. One of these recommendations, by a refugee participant, reads like this; "the practices [job/language training] must have more job orientation than just language" (a male Syrian refugee). What he stressed in this context was using the opportunity to orientate refugees in the Norwegian work/lifestyle in a respective branch. Questioning the work aspect of the training, another refugee participant indicated, "I believe they [job/language training] are effective to teach us the Norwegian language, but not to find jobs" (a female Eritrean refugee). The policy implementer, representing NAV, also supported the notion of extra focus on the work aspect of integration measures. He asserted, "I wish I could have used some of the

resources we use in the school [the language school for adult newcomer refugees] in a workplace, a workplace that employs refugees" (the local policy implementer). Effective use of integration resources was also stressed by the NGO official as below:

> The grants that come with the refugees must be used for capacity development. Of course, it is different that some people find jobs sooner than others, but they must, however, be used for a capacity development program and that they do not go in municipality's operational account. This money must be used rightfully and that it is not used for any other purposes. (the NGO official).

CHAPTER FIVE

5. Analysis of the Findings

5.1 Introduction

As described in the introduction (see Chapter One), the study, as part of an academic assignment for my master's thesis, took the exploration of the main barriers to refugees accessing employment in a rural municipality of Norway (see The Study Area in Chapter One) as the problem statement. This qualitative research had a total of 26 participants (see Study Subjects in Chapter One) who were interviewed in a semi-structured setting (see Method of Data Collection in Chapter Three). The interview guides were developed based on and in-line with the four central research questions (see Chapters One and Four) that were deduced from the literature review (see Chapter Two).

Though the interview questions were developed using a deductive approach and asked in a semi-structural setting, the dominant approach to collect and interpret the data was based more on an inductive approach (see Research Strategies in Chapter Three). All 26 interviews were conducted and transcribed in the Norwegian language and analyzed using a mixed technique of coding and thematic analysis (see Methods of Data Analysis in Chapter Three). The use of induction in data collection and analysis was tremendously helpful in allowing the participants to narrate their stories the way they felt relevant and thus let the data speak the thematic story of the thesis as well as keeping my possible biases contained. For practicality and management reasons, I opted to present the findings and analysis in two separate chapters.

The literature (see Chapter Two) described barriers to refugees' labor integration as a challenging and, at times, controversial process. Besides, it illustrated the involvement of multiple factors in the integration status of refugees across host countries, particularly Norway. Concepts such as refugees' human and social capital disadvantages as well as relatively rising negative public perceptions against refugees, were among the core highlights of the literature. What seemed to be a noticeable gap in the reviewed literature, though, was the lack of a distinction between cities and rural areas, which seems to hugely differ from each other, especially in terms of integration arenas and potential employment opportunities.

The study's empirical findings (see Chapter Four) are organized around different conceptual and theoretical themes that had emerged from the data. As a discussion of the results, this chapter (Chapter Five) takes an analytical look at the themes, i.e., Human Capital, Social Capital, Implications of Ethnocultural Diversity, and Structural Limitations. The core focus of the analysis chapter is to underscore every theme's relation to a relevant research question and highlight their connection or disconnection with the literature, as an attempt to address the research's problem statement in the best possible manner. Each research question is accordingly addressed at the end of each relevant theme, after a thorough discussion of the results of each theme, including its subthemes.

5.2 Refugees' Human Capital

The human capital theory, as indicated by Colic-Peisker and Walker (2003), does not apply to refugees in principle due to their involuntary migration. However, it becomes somewhat relevant because refugees must integrate into their new societies, including the labor market (ibid, 2003). The theme 'human capital' in the empirical findings (see Chapter Four) encompasses accreditation of refugees' educational credentials, their supplementary education in Norway, and their Norwegian language fluency/literacy. It seems that accredited credentials, supplementary education, and language skills are what that could be translated as human capital for refugees should they be recognized and operationalized. According to the findings, the operationalization of refugees' human capital seems very limited, if not nonexistent, in rural Norway, something in line with findings of a large European study by Zimmermann et al. (2007), defining it either a human capital disadvantage or a brain waste. In line with the literature (see Human Capital in Chapter Two), the study's findings indicate a structural undervaluing of refugees' human capital, specifically those with a foreign origin, which seems to have contributed to refugees' loss of motivation and hence their prolonged unemployment. As discussed below, barriers related to refugees' human capital disadvantage are complex and multifaceted.

5.2.1 Accreditation of Refugees' Educational Credentials

Since most refugees have some sorts of educational and work background from their home countries, accreditation of their credentials forms the very foundation of their human

capital, something that is somewhat neglected by both policy and practice. The refugee participants I interviewed, particularly those with higher education, described the accreditation process challenging for everyone, limited for some and impossible for others. According to them, getting their credentials accredited in Norway depended on documentation, something most refugees had not packed for and demanded both written and oral exams, which is hard to prepare for after a relatively long time since graduation. It also seems that certain studies and studies from certain countries cannot be accredited, reportedly due to certain studies' lack of relevance in Norway and the lack of contact between Norway and universities in some countries, which forces the concerned refugees to take a new education from scratch. Hardoy and Zhang (2019), in a generalized fashion, justify the above by stating that certain countries' educational institutions have lower standards than the Norwegian ones.

A similar fact is also highlighted by Zimmermann et al. (2007), indicating that refugees' credentials are mostly untransferable in the host country and by Lamba (2008) underlining that professional experiences of refugees in Canada are insignificant regarding their employment. Both the literature and this study's findings agree concerning constraints regarding the utilization of refugees' existing human capital for labor integration. However, this study sheds light on the emotional burden and devaluing feelings of refugees struggling to get their education accredited and, as a result, enter the local labor market as soon as possible that the literature review seems rather blank, at least in giving the due diligence it deserves. That is why more refugees, particularly the ones with higher education, often end up either unemployed or with jobs that they are overqualified for, as shown in my study and two other similar studies, e.g., Badwi et al. (2018) on labor market integration of Ghanaian immigrants in Bergen city of Norway and Lamba (2008) on employment experiences of refugees in Canada. Based on my findings and findings of other related studies, it is safe to conclude that the accreditation process' administrative and procedural complexities have significantly undermined refugees' human capital, resulting in a loss both for concerned refugees and the host country.

5.2.2. Refugees' New Education in Norway

The importance of acquiring new education in Norway, specifically obtaining a high school or a college degree, was one of the most emphasized points in my findings, by 12 out of 20 refugee participants. The essential role of new education or some form of supplementary training in the host country on refugees' employment opportunity is also emphasized in other

relevant studies, such as Hardoy and Zhang (2019) from Norway and Lamba (2008) from Canada, both demonstrating a correlation between new education and an increased employment opportunity. However, what they and other relevant literature, at least those I reviewed, fail to justify is that forcing everyone to go through a formal education again is neither practical nor an effective and efficient measure, both for the refugees, especially the elderly with limited education, and the host country. According to my findings, while acquiring a fresh education is perhaps the right investment in some refugees, for instance, the youth, for some others, particularly the middle-aged ones with limited literacy, it is perhaps an unattainable goal and thus an inefficient use of time and resources. The ideal scenario, based on my findings, would have been to complement refugees' existing qualifications, similar to what Rietig (2016) stresses in the case of early screening of refugees' competence and planning their individual capacity development needs. As per my findings and the literature, it appears that supplementing refugees' education dependents on a well-functioning accreditation system, which seems either nonexistent or not well-functioning.

5.2.3 Refugees' Language Fluency

Understandably, language fluency was perhaps the only concept in my findings that was highlighted as the must-have competence in labor integration, something all research participants have commented about. Likewise, there is an overwhelming focus in the literature on the importance of mastering fluency in the host country's language for labor integration (Bloch, 2007; Joyce, 2019; Zwysen, 2019). Though my findings agree with the literature on language fluency facilitating and the lack of it hindering refugees' employment opportunities, they differ in perceptions, e.g., regarding the degree of fluency of different individuals in different contexts. For instance, Zwysen (2019) concludes that refugees' language fluency may improve their participation in the labor market, meaning they may find jobs, but not their pay raise, meaning they will be underpaid for their jobs despite speaking the language fluently. On the other hand, my findings indicate that language fluency is somewhat subjective, which seems to be partly in line with Zwysen's assertion, something to be decided by an employer in each profession. It means that while simple communication in Norwegian is considered good enough by an employer, for example, in cleaning work, it is far from enough in a different work context that demands a professional command of Norwegian. Another essential barrier, yet the neglected one in the literature, is the widespread use of local dialects, which is quite different from the standard written Norwegian but predominantly spoken in local workplaces. The use

of local dialects at work and a shortage of advanced language learning opportunities have appear to have widened the human capital disadvantage of refugees in my study area.

5.2.4 Research Question 1: *To what extent does human capital or lack of it impact refugees' employment opportunities*?

According to my findings, acquiring some kind of degree or diploma from a Norwegian college or a vocational high school potentially improves employment opportunities, something that is also stressed in the literature, but not necessarily their earning's prospects (Brekke and Mastekaasa (2008). Since refugees' human capital consists of accreditation of their educational credentials, their new education/capacity building trainings in the host country, and their language skills, obtaining a degree approves of all three components and, more importantly, provides an assurance of quality to Norwegian employers. It appears that when refugees fail to get their scholastic credentials or professional qualifications approved and accepted in the host country, it is perceived as a lack of human capital or human capital disadvantage as per Zimmermann et al. (2007). Based on my findings and the relevant literature, it seems that there is a systematic tendency across all host countries to undervalue and to not trust credentials and qualifications of foreign origin generally, forcing refugees to either acquire a fresh education or accept a job he/she is overqualified for. Challenges related to refugees' human capital and its utilization seem to be more widespread in rural districts of Norway due to lack of educational institutes and relevant professional workplaces (see The Study Area in Chapter One), a distinction that is not dealt with in the literature I reviewed.

5.3 Refugees' Social Capital

As the human capital theory, social capital is also somewhat not applicable for refugees, at least not in its full sense (see Social Capital in Chapter Two). Refugees, particularly those who are relatively new as was the case with my research participants, could not have made the necessary investment in their social capital, even in ideal conditions, which does not usually seem to be the case for newcomer refugees. Though social capital, as per Lin (2017), includes all forms of social networking and social relations among people, social capital in terms of refugees labor integration seems to most concern refugees networking with the natives, something that is widely emphasized both in my study and the relevant literature, particularly

in a similar study in Bergen city of Norway by Badwi et al. (2018). In my findings, the theme 'social capital' emerged as an outcome of two forms of social networking, i.e., socializing with the local population and networking with potential employers.

5.3.1 Socializing with Local Population

Socializing with the local population, specifically with the natives, seems challenging and, at times, impossible, but a significant step in labor integration as it appears to be the case both in my findings and findings of Badwi et al. (2018). Despite admitting to the positive impact of getting to know the locals for integration, especially in securing employment, most refugee participants asserted a lack of contact with the natives of the target municipality, similar to the findings of some other studies. For example, Badwi et al. (2018) assert that the Ghanaian immigrants in Bergen city faced a significant barrier to their labor integration due to their lack of contact with Norwegians. Some of the barriers to socialization with the natives, identified in my study, included language barriers, demographic limitations, and cultural differences. As per the refugee participants, their contacts with their fellow countrymen or their horizontal bonding social capital as per Gericke et al. (2018), is good and beneficial in socialization and information sharing. However, it cannot translate into a social network with the potential to provide them work because of the lack of what Gericke et al. (2018) label as the horizontal bridging social capital. It appears that there is a paradox in the notion of networking with the natives and its actual impact on refugees' employment prospects. For instance, findings of Badwi et al. (2018) demonstrate that contacts with Norwegians, even marriage with the natives in some cases, could not benefit refugees in terms of employment. Findings of both my study and Badwi et al. (2018) indicate some level of skepticism and mistrust against immigrants/refugees regardless of their social status, which makes socialization difficult.

5.3.2 Networking with Potential Employers

Networking with potential employers, which seems to fit Gericke et al. 's (2018) vertical bridging social capital model, was stressed as the most effective form of social capital in my findings (see Chapter Four). This form of networking is also in line with Lin's (2001) definition of social capital that it must be an investment in social relations, which can return an expected benefit. According to my findings, getting to know the local business owners can alleviate the

negative implications of skepticism against refugees and, more importantly, provide refugees with an opportunity to demonstrate their ability during their state-sponsored job training. Another finding of my study, unlike the literature, indicates the prevalence of network culture in Norway, especially in rural Norway, that has rather homogenous demography, which means that employers are more interested in who the job seekers are than what appears to be written on their job applications. This puts refugees, specifically those living in rural Norway in smaller heterogeneous groups, in a tough position to compete for job openings. Similar to Valenta's (2008) findings, my findings reveal a paradox in terms of having a well-functioning social network to find jobs while having a job is often the precondition of establishing a professional network.

5.3.3 Research Question 2: *What is the role of social capital in securing employment for refugees? How do refugees acquire it, especially in a small municipality?*

As elaborated above, my findings and other relevant studies in the literature emphasize the paramount importance of refugees' social capital in securing their employment opportunities. The role of social capital, as per my findings, can be summarized in establishing trust between refugees and the host society, presenting refugees with an opportunity to show their personality and demonstrate their abilities. It can also relate to the Norwegian labor market's network culture, which is referenced as the "work ethic" by Breidahl (2017, p. 6) concerning being accepted in the Scandinavian society by participating in the labor market. As indicated both in my study and the literature, the more a refugee has lived in the host country, the better his/her chances of finding a job is, which somehow points out the role of getting to know the host society and the people better on increasing one's employment opportunity. Regarding how refugees acquire a functioning network, my study indicates that they begin with their caseworkers, language teachers, neighbors, and voluntary organizations, though challenging and restrictive, particularly in rural municipalities.

5.4 Implications of Ethnocultural Diversity

The study's attempt to gauge research participants' perceptions regarding the implications of ethnocultural diversity at the workplace was mostly positive. Though measuring people's perception about something is not easy, at least not in an objective manner, my findings

reflect some personal experiences and feelings of both the refugee participants and the potential employers about the topic, which are of a significant importance in this regard. Since the participants were assured of full anonymization and protection of their identity at all costs, it is safe to believe that their narratives are a true reflection of their perception of diversity. The theme 'implications of ethnocultural diversity', as analyzed below, encompasses two subthemes, i.e., local perceptions of diversity and association of cultural differences toward acculturation of refugees.

5.4.1 Local Perceptions of Diversity

As briefly mentioned above, local perceptions of diversity, as they appear in my findings, are mostly positive and encouraging. Refugees see diversity as something colorful and empowering, something most of them had experiences with before they came to Norway. Norwegian participants were likewise positive about diversity, relating it to Norway's need for foreign workforce and a must-have demography for Norway's development and innovation. Swe (2013), on the other hand, provides us with a broader picture of such perception in Norway, i.e., some Norwegians believe immigration has been helpful for Norway's economy and culture, while some others perceive it as something negative and threatening for Norway's security and public resources. It is quite natural to see such a spectrum of opinions about any sociocultural issue, especially immigration, that is often politicized and mis-portrayed by some media outlets. As Constant et al. (2009) defines, our perceptions are a product of our attitudes and our attitudes are shaped by our policies and practices as well as the influence of our modern mass media. As pointed out by some refugees, the only downside of diversity entailed a constant need to understand cultural sensitivities at the workplace and make necessary adaptations.

5.4.2 Association of Cultural Differences

Though almost every participant described diversity as something positive, their answers regarding physical contact between cultures were not all that positive. It seems that our perceptions of something do not necessarily match our physical experiences with it, at least not always. Culture and religion-related differences seem to be the two challenging elements of multiculturalism; perhaps it is more sensible in rural Norway due to its homogenous demography and lack of historical experience with people from other cultures, especially from

non-Western countries. That is perhaps why Mestheneos and Ioannidi (2002) define multiethnic cultures prone to ethnocultural tensions. Among refugee participants, those who identified themselves as Muslims seemed to have had more challenging experiences, primarily due to religious prohibitions that prevented them from participating in events where there are alcohol and pork and adaptation of their fasting/prayer timetable with their work/school schedules. As it also appears in my findings, Muslim women, especially those wearing hijabs, have been subjected to more skepticism, if not discrimination, making them look at their hijabs as a barrier to their employment. Though in a broader context, instances of ethnic and religious disadvantages, specifically concerning refugees with a Muslim background, can also be seen in the findings of Fangen (2006), Munz (2007) and Zimmermann et al. (2007) from Europe, Wilkinson and Garcea (2017) from Canada and Midtbøen (2016) from Norway.

5.4.3 Research Question 3: *How do employers and refugees describe diversity at the workplace, a constraint, or an opportunity?*

My findings show a complex result regarding local perceptions of diversity at the workplace. The majority believe diversity is positive, in a sense that it is colorful and empowering – serving as the right approach to address Norway's need for an innovative and sustainable workforce. However, when I separated personal opinions about diversity from personal experiences of encountering other cultures during my analysis, the latter did not sound as smooth and comfortable. While their perceptions about diversity pointed more toward an opportunity, their physical experiences, on the contrary, underlined it as somewhat a constraint. Among the refugee participants, the Muslims seemed to have been in a more ethnic/religion disadvantaged position, subjected to skeptical views due to some drastic cultural differences such as fasting during Ramadan and praying during the day and the use of hijab by some Muslim women.

Though my study did not find instances of direct discrimination, some other studies, e.g., Eriksen (2013) and Midtbøen (2016) from Norway and Zimmermann et al. (2007) from 27 European countries, indicate the prevalence of ethnic-religion based discrimination in European labor markets, including Norway. According to my findings, skepticism against refugees, particularly against Muslims, appears to be the primary constraint, at least in the early phases of life as a refugee in a rural Norwegian municipality. It seems that positive public perceptions against refugees can improve their integration status as highlighted in some Norwegian studies,

e.g., Banik (2015) indicating a relatively successful integration of Jews in Norway and Selm et al. (1997) highlighting Bosnian refugees' feelings of satisfaction in Norway. As pointed out by Fasani (2016), public perceptions against refugees have recently been increasingly negative, partly due to media misinformation.

5.5 Structural Limitations

Findings related to structural limitations included obstacles that are outside refugees' control (limitations related to the local labor market and local integration policies), unlike their human and social capital and their adaptation to Norwegian culture and way of life, for which their efforts can make a difference. Except for a few isolated references, the literature seems generally blank when it comes to the impact of mentioned limitations, specifically in rural areas. As you will read throughout this section of the analysis, structural limitations have a foundational impact on all other areas described in this chapter. As an attempt to take an analytical look at local labor market capacity and its respective integration policies and measures, the theme is broken down into two subthemes, e.g., the local labor market and local policies, to define both of them in light of each other.

5.5.1 The Local Market

The local market (see The Local Market in Chapter One) is very small, with limited employment capacity both in private and public sectors. Limitations related to the local market was stressed almost by all research participants. Though these limitations reportedly affect every local, particularly the refugees, refugees with higher education seemed to be among the most hopeless in terms of employment opportunities. The municipality has limited public and private offices, and it is not often that they have new vacancies, not that refugees would have easily filled them should they have existed. According to some refugees, competition for jobs is understandably very tough, which puts refugees naturally in a more disadvantaged position to compete with Norwegian job seekers due to some apparent barriers highlighted in this chapter. Additionally, skepticism and discrimination against refugees can further reduce the odds of refugees' recruitment. For example, a controlled Norwegian study by Midtbøen (2016) finds that the Pakistani name on a job application could reduce the applicant's chance of being considered for the job by 41 percent against the same job application by a Norwegian name. As

a result of lack of vacancies, most refugees seem to go in long job-trainings without any hope for a permanent paid work. It is perhaps not a surprise that several refugee participants spoke about their considerations of moving to bigger cities, primarily for job search.

5.5.2 Local Policies

Barriers related to local integration policies, programs, and measures have a national and a local component, meaning that all of them cannot be addressed locally. For example, the introduction program, which according to Fernandes (2015), Wong (2020) and Hagelund (2005), is a two-year language and civic education program for newcomer refugees in Scandinavia, is a national program. It means that individual municipalities cannot change it based on their specific needs and local realities, making integration at the grassroots level challenging. The introduction program, as the most significant integration measure (Wong, 2020), is the only official arena where refugees learn Norwegian language and culture and start their career development, usually through language and job training at a public or private workplace. As per my findings, these training programs are often not relevant to refugees' fields of expertise, resulting in extended training programs with little to no hope for a paid job. It appears that there is an obvious need to reform the introduction program like what neighboring Sweden has done. According to Joona et al. (2016), Sweden has witnessed an improvement in labor integration of refugees by prioritizing early profiling of refugees' qualifications, facilitating accreditation of refugees' educational credentials, and preparing a career development plan at the early stages. However, at the local level, both refugees and the employers seemed unsatisfied with the way NAV organizes language/job training. Inadequate communication between NAV and refugee trainees and NAV and potential employers appears to have been widening the impacts of structural limitations on labor integration at the local level.

5.5.3 Research Question 4: *How effective are the current policies/measures helping refugees enter the labor market?*

The single primary integration measure in a Norwegian municipality is the compulsory introduction program, where newcomer refugees learn the language and receive civic education in a two to three-year period. As part of the introduction program, several other measures are being used to improve refugees' chances in the labor market. However, these programs, e.g.,

language/job training or practices at real workplaces, do not seem to have met anyone's expectations, neither refugees' expectations nor employers. Although the apparent reasons for malfunctioning measures are reportedly due to a lack of cooperation between concerned stakeholders such as NAV, the refugees, and the employers, the limitations of the local market seem to have as much contribution to the problem. As a result, more and more refugees seem to have been thinking of trying their luck elsewhere, ideally moving to larger cities in search of work. According to my findings, there is a need to make local integration measures more effective, especially the work aspects of the introduction program.

This study's highlights of the structural limitations in the field of labor integration in rural Norway can be considered relatively new information. New in a sense that it does not appear in the literature I reviewed, at least not as an independent contributing factor to labor integration barriers. As discussed above, this theme describes those aspects of the labor integration challenges that are distinctly related to rural contexts, i.e., smaller labor markets, lack of relevant professions for work or job training, restriction in socialization, and difficulties in advancing human capital as well as policy shortfalls. When we consider all these aspects, we realize that the same problem's actual implications can potentially be different in cities and rural areas. For example, a refugee job seeker with 50 percent chance of being contacted by an employer in a city, though challenging and time taking, still has a bigger chance of getting a job than a similar refugee with a similar chance in a rural municipality, because 50 percent chance in a city is most probably more significant than the 50 percent chance in a small rural municipality. Therefore, it is fair to conclude that policy shortcomings can significantly undermine labor integration, worse if they are coupled with relatively restrictive and limited market capacity.

CHAPTER SIX

6. Conclusion

6.1 Concluding Summary of the Discussions

As indicated in the introduction (see Chapter One), my master thesis's problem statement concerned exploring the main barriers to refugees accessing employment in rural Norway, targeting a rural municipality in Southern Norway as the case study (see The Study Area in Chapter One). Twenty-six participants were recruited using a mixed method of purposive and snowball sampling and interviewed in a semi-structured setting. All 26 interviews were manually transcribed and analyzed using a mixed technique of coding and thematic analysis. Barriers to refugees' labor integration, specifically their integration into the target municipality, emerged under four main conceptual themes (see Chapters Four and Five) and each theme was broken down into respective subthemes to cover various aspects of the themes. As discussions of the data results outline, barriers to refugees' labor integration are complexly interrelated. The following diagram illustrates a theoretical and conceptual framework for the thesis.

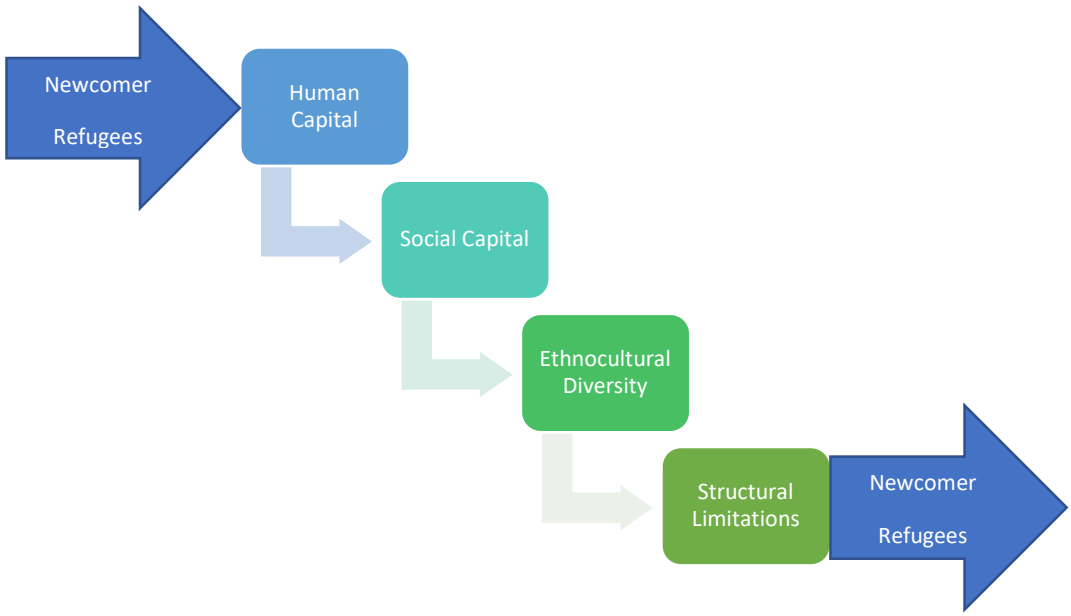

Figure 4

As discussed in the previous chapter and shown in the diagram above, refugees face multiple barriers trying to enter the Norwegian labor market, especially in rural Norway. The first barrier they face is related to their human capital, i.e., getting their educational qualifications accredited, taking new or supplementary education in Norway, and learning to speak fluent enough Norwegian. It appears that the utilization of refugees' human capital is very challenging, if not impossible. The accreditation process is long and unrealistically demanding that most refugees cannot meet the requirements. Taking supplementary courses in Norway depends on the status of refugees' certified credentials and taking a new education from scratch is not practical for everyone, particularly for those who must repeat school/university. Likewise, language fluency seems a critical yet ambiguous element of refugees' human capital. In the absence of national criteria, determining refugees' language fluency solely depends on employers' subjective evaluation. Additionally, the dominance of local dialects, especially in rural municipalities, has made language fluency further difficult for refugees who do not learn dialects at school.

Having gone through the challenging and demanding process of operationalizing their human capital, refugees face another disadvantage, the lack of social capital, in their struggle to enter the local labor market. Their social networking with the local natives seems to be very limited, primarily due to geographical and demographic limitations. Though the refugee participants seemed to have had regular contacts with other refugees, they described their socialization with the natives and their network with potential employers as weak and almost nonexistent. As shown both in my findings and the literature, refugees face a paradox in establishing a functional social capital, e.g., they need to have a job to create a professional social network, while having a professional network is often the precondition for securing a job. Though time-taking and challenging, refugees seemed to be working toward building their social capital by networking with their neighbors, teachers, social caseworkers, and voluntary organizations. It is of utmost importance to mention that refugees with human capital disadvantages are more prone to social capital disadvantage.

Now that refugees have done the best they could regarding their human and social capitals, they deal with implications of ethnocultural diversity, i.e., among other things, skepticism, stereotyping, and discrimination. Though general perceptions of diversity seemed positive both among refugees and the potential employers, their physical experiences with ethnocultural differences, especially those of the refugees (Muslim refugees to be more specific) appeared somewhat bothersome and uncomfortable. It seems that cultural differences have been

somewhat challenging for every refugee group, particularly in the early stages of their integration/acculturation, but certain groups such as the Muslims have reportedly had more challenges than others. Religious differences, e.g., Muslims' daily prayer, fasting, and use of hijab by some women, seem to be more controversial and thus contribute to integration challenges, especially in rural areas with more homogenous demography and limited experience with multiculturalism. Based on my findings, implications of cultural differences can be perceived as more severe for refugees with lower human and social capital because of not being able to demonstrate their personalities and competences in the local labor market.

The last barrier refugees' face during their integration into a labor market, specifically into a rural labor market like the one in my study's target municipality, exclusively concerns market limitations and the lack of customized policies. According to my findings, market limitations coupled with policy shortcomings, which I have named structural limitations, appear to be the most significant barrier to local labor integration, regardless of one's human and social capitals and adaptation to Norwegian culture, something that is not shown in the literature I reviewed. The market limitation part of structural barriers included fewer workplaces, limited vacancies, and a fierce competition for new job-openings, which means a considerable challenge for every jobseeker, specifically for refugee jobseekers due to their distinct disadvantageous circumstances. In terms of respective policy shortcomings, though, lack of necessary communication and coordination between NAV, refugee job-trainees, and the receiving workplaces seemed to have contributed to further challenging nature of local labor integration. The need for some sort of reform of current integration measures is evident both in my findings and the literature.

6.2 A Summary Reflection on the Research

In the form of a master's thesis, this research aimed to explore the main barriers to refugees accessing employment in rural Norway, i.e., identifying the main barriers to labor integration of refugees in the target municipality as the case study. The in-depth qualitative case study design best suited the study, especially given its scope and timeframe as a master's thesis. I believe that the study's results have the potential to help us understand barriers to refugees' labor integration in a wider context too, especially in the case of other similar Norwegian municipalities. The study's problem statement was inspired by the literature review (see Chapter Two), displaying a relative lack of knowledge about rural areas, not just in Norway but

throughout the host countries. The problem statement was further broken down into four research questions (see Chapters One and Four) to better guide and streamline the study's core objective.

As indicated above, the study was conducted in a typical rural Norwegian municipality (see The Study Area in Chapter One) in Southern Norway. Given the study's scope and timeframe, 26 research participants were recruited using a mixed method of purposive and snowball sampling, i.e., identifying a potential participant, especially in the case of refugees, and through him or her coming in contact with other potential candidates. The interview questions were deduced from the research questions and the literature review and asked in a semi-structured setting. However, the data collection and analysis were done using mainly an inductive approach. The barriers to labor integration in rural Norway, as they emerged from the data (see Chapters Four and Five), included challenges related to refugees' human and social capital, their adaptation to a new culture and structural limitations of rural municipalities.

Though some of the barriers identified in this study have already been known in the literature, some other barriers, e.g., barriers related to structural limitations, can be considered relatively new findings that do not exist in the literature, at least they do not appear in specific terms and with specific objectives. Besides, some aspects of all the barriers to labor integration exclusively relate to rural Norway, specifically to the target municipality, e.g., limited educational facilities to supplement refugees' human capital and demographic restrictions in terms of social networking and implications of ethnocultural tensions, which could also be considered new findings in this particular field. They are considered new in a sense that rural realities, as they appear in my findings, are often very different from those of the larger cities, yet they are rather overlooked in the reviewed literature as if opportunities and constraints of integration were the same regardless of the geographical and demographical variables.

The last, yet distinct, aspect of this study was defining barriers to refugees' labor integration solely based on the research participants' viewpoints and narratives, especially those of the refugees and the potential employers whom I believe are the most concerned stakeholders in this regard, something 75 percent of the recent research in Norway seem to lack as per Wong (2020). These new aspects of the findings that were presented in a bottom-up approach could be considered the study's main contribution in academia and academic research. Finally, the study, as an attempt to address the problem statement, summarizes that the main barriers to refugees accessing employment in rural Norway are of complex and multidimensional nature, i.e., barriers caused by refugees' human and social capital disadvantages/hardships, their

acculturation obstacles and limitations of the local market and a the lack of customized policies and programs.

6.3 Policy Recommendations

As discussed under structural barriers, current policies do not seem to have met the local needs, specifically in terms of labor integration of refugees. Both refugee participants and the potential employers I interviewed seemed to be critical of the effectiveness of integration policies, especially post-introduction program (the two to three-year compulsory language and civic education program for newcomer refugees) measures, i.e., planning and implementation of practical job-trainings to help refugees secure their first job in Norway. As per my findings, these measures are perceived to lack strategic objectives and the necessary effectiveness and efficiency to result in a sustainable ordinary job for refugees. These policy shortfalls, especially in a market with relatively limited capacity, indicate an obvious need for policy improvements. Based on my findings, I summarize the study's policy recommendation as follows:

1. The first step in policy improvement would ideally be the development of an individual career development plan for every refugee, a plan that takes refugee's competence and field of expertise into consideration for work and possible capacity enhancement. It will help the policy implementers send the right refugee in the right workplace where they have a better chance to succeed in the training phase and possibly secure a paid job there in the future.

2. The second policy recommendation is concerning the start of job training. It seems that currently, the job-training begins when a refugee is done with the introduction program (two-three years). It would have been ideal to start the training earlier, for example, after a year of introduction program. The second half of the introduction program could be 50 percent school and 50 percent job-training. The early start of job-training can potentially improve refugees spoken Norwegian, including the local dialects.

3. The last recommendation is about practicing policy implementation. Productive and continuous dialogue between NAV, the trainee refugee, and the receiving workplace was highlighted to be vital, something that does not seem to be functioning so well now. According to my findings, good dialogue can detect early errors and misunderstandings and improve the relationship between the trainee and the workplace.

6.4 Limitations of the Research

As indicated above, this study was conducted in a rural district of Norway (see The Study Area in Chapter One) to explore the main barriers to refugees' labor integration. Though the study targeted just one rural municipality, primarily due to feasibility reasons of this master's thesis with limited timeframe, its results that emanated from in-depth take of the case study might be relevant in other similar Norwegian municipalities. In the form of a master's thesis, the study was conducted as part of the academic requirement of a master's program (Master in Global Development and Planning) with the University of Agder in Norway. Since I, as a student researcher, lacked the prior experience in scientific research and that the nationwide Covid-19 related lockdown in Norway coincided with my fieldwork, the study could have faced some limitations. The limitations, at least those I perceived as the most important ones, are primarily related to the data sample and data collection methods.

Since the primary objective of my study was investigating the main barriers to refugees' labor integration in a rural district of Norway, I opted to focus on a single rural municipality (see The Study Area in Chapter One), as a case study, and recruited all my research participants from the target municipality (see Study Subjects in Chapter One). Though the data (see Chapter Four) provided a detailed description of the local opportunities and constraints in labor integration, including some local politicians (policymakers) in the sample could have shed some light on underlying factors of the barriers. It would be worth considering in a similar study in the future.

In terms of data collection methods, I had initially planned to employ semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation. However, due to the suspension of my fieldwork by University of Agder during the Covid-19 related lockdown and freezing of almost all job-opening and recruitment processes in Norway, non-participant observation of some of the refugee participants became not applicable. I believe obtaining some data through some form of observation (participant observation or non-participant observation) could have better-contextualized refugees' narratives collected through the semi-structured interviews. Though I could not employ non-participant observation as a data collection method, I was able to obtain some in-depth insight into refugees' previous job-hunts via the in-depth semi-structured interviews.

6.5 Recommendations for Future Research

As indicated in the introduction (see Chapter One), immigration of people has significantly increased during recent years. Besides, it seems that the number of people fleeing from their home countries, due to numerous reasons such as ongoing wars, conflicts, and violations of human rights, is not going to reduce anytime soon. It means that immigration and integration topics, especially in the light of relative surrounding controversies and sensitivities of the topics in the host countries, need continuous research to keep us up to date with this important global phenomenon. Based on my observation of the literature, my own research and my 11 years of experience with the United Nations in Afghanistan and three years of work in the field of integration in Norway, I recommend more qualitative research on refugees' personal experiences with immigration and integration. Topics I would recommend for other researchers, especially student researcher such as myself, about labor integration, include the following:

- To what extent national labor integration measures meet individual needs?
- To what extent refugees' desire and/or ambitions are considered during their early career development planning?
- How do refugees' get their first job, especially in rural municipalities?

Current literature on integration is more focused on barriers related to refugees' inabilities to integrate into their host societies effectively, apparently due to their human and social capital disadvantages, prolonged unemployment, lack of motivation, and psychological instabilities. Though they are valid points with a great significance in the literature, they are often the symptom of a more structural limitation/limitations that are usually not well covered, perhaps due to some form of research limitations. Though my research highlights some of the underlying external obstacles and shows the complexity of barriers to labor integration, it is not enough to portray the big picture of a successful labor integration, justifying the need for further research.

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