

Female Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Norway:
Agency and Victimization from Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

Master's Thesis in
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Spring 2020

Abstract

Objective: The study aims to determine the perceptions of Norwegian NGOs' representatives of the possibilities and constraints for female asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants' agency during the asylum process, and the access of SGBV victims to support services

Method: Semi-structured interviews conducted to seven participants who represent NGOs that work as service providers and in advocacy. The interview transcripts were coded using the Atlas.ti qualitative analysis software.

Results: The informants perceive women's individual agency as constrained by the asylum structure which reduces the opportunities for their action oriented to achieve their personal goals. Similarly, individual factors for instance lack of education, financial resources, networks, Norwegian knowledge, and SGBV victimization constrain their agency. Concerning collective agency, NGO representatives lack awareness of efforts from women to create groups and do not perceive explicit obstacles for women to establish organizations. The informants perceived that the absence of systematic procedures to identify vulnerability within the asylum process has a negative impact on SGBV victims' prospects to access support services and exercise agency.

Conclusion: The informants perceived that the characteristics of the asylum system restrict women's agency and enhance their vulnerability to SGVB.

Keywords: Agency, sexual and gender-based violence, asylum, Norway.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Aim of the Study

This study aims to determine the perception of representatives of Norwegian NGOs about the possibilities and constraints for female asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants' individual and collective agency during the asylum process, as well as the access of SGBV victims to services and support from institutions in Norway. The method of the study was qualitative based on a sample of seven participants who are employed at NGOs that work as service providers and doing advocacy, interviewed with a semi-structured guide. The first part of the document presents the literature review on asylum and gender, the impacts of gender-based violence in the women's migration journey, as well as the Norwegian asylum and integration policies. A detailed description of the method is presented in the second part of the text. Afterward, the results concerning each of the research questions of the study are described. Finally, the discussion provides a summary of the findings, the limitations and implications of the study, along with suggestions for future research.

1.2 Literature Review

1.2.1 Asylum in the International Law

A person needs international protection when they are outside of their home country and cannot return there due to the inability or unwillingness of the local authorities to protect them from threats. These hazards can be directed towards people's life, freedom or physical integrity during periods of armed conflict, generalized violence, natural or man-made disasters. Besides the aforementioned reasons, there could be other motives that force people to cross international borders. Not all these people in need of international protection always qualify as a refugee according to the law. Therefore, other forms of temporary or long-term protection exist under international or regional legislation (United Nations & Eurostat, 2018).

Within the international legislation, asylum encompasses the protection measures provided by a country to any person that requires international protection inside its territory. The first asylum's legal framework was established in 1951 with the Convention Related to the Status of Refugees, and later in 1967 with the Protocol Related to the Status of Refugees. However, the recognition of the right to seek and receive asylum origins can be traced back to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The principle of non-refoulement is at the core of asylum international law, and includes the process of admission to a safe territory as well as the attainment of a lasting solution (United Nations & Eurostat, 2018).

Asylum seeker and refugee are different terms, the first one refers to a person claiming or applying for protection under refugee law, but who has not received a final decision, or has not submitted an application due to lack of fulfillment of administrative requirements in the country's law. Until the claim for asylum is reviewed and a decision over it made, the asylum seeker has the right to not be returned to the country of origin -the principle of non-refoulement- and to be treated according to international human rights law. When countries are unable, unwilling or have not implemented fair and efficient asylum procedures to determine the refugee status the UNHCR may do so (United Nations & Eurostat, 2018).

The 1951 Convention defines a refugee as someone with a well-founded fear of being persecuted who is not in the country of nationality or is unable to obtain the protection of that country. The reasons for the persecution experienced by a refugee include race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group. There are 150 countries members of the 1951 Convention and/or the 1967 Protocol approximately (United Nations & Eurostat, 2018).

People who flee their countries due to several reasons not always fall into the categories established by the 1951 Convention. However, they might need international protection because their country of origin lacks the laws or the efficiency to protect their human rights. The complementary or subsidiary protection was created to address this special case and aim to provide permission to remain based on national legislation or administrative procedures known as humanitarian protection. The type of protection arrangements encompassed as well as the entitlement to rights of the persons under humanitarian protection varies from special visa categories to discretionary-time limited protection (United Nations and Eurostat, 2018).

1.2.2 Gender in International Refugee and Asylum Law

The inclusion of gender in international refugee law and policy has been analyzed by different researchers. Subsequently, a brief overview of the main elements explored by them will be presented. The starting point for addressing international law regarding refugees is the creation of the 1950 Statute of the UNHCR and the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Both legal instruments and international law instruments existing at this point do not include gender and discrimination against women (Edwards, 2010).

This represents a failure of international law to recognize the different experiences of women refugees and asylum seekers that prevent the legislation to acknowledge that women face specific forms of persecution due to their gender, for instance, domestic violence, genital mutilation, forced marriage and human trafficking. In consequence, even though women are more vulnerable, they have a differential access to asylum and lack effective protection that men have widely recognized, both at

the international and the national level through the state's compliance with the 1951 Convention to determine the recognized types of persecution (Bloch, Galvin & Harrell-Bond, 2000).

The next stage regarding the inclusion of gender in international law is the introduction of specific guidelines to recognize and address gender-related persecution within asylum claims at the state level. Unfortunately, the terms for including it were not homogeneous, nor the recognition of the need to explicitly incorporate gender-related persecution as ground for protection in the 1951 Convention. The recognition was limited to express that sexual violence is a legitimate form of persecution (Edwards, 2010). Additionally, it is difficult for women to provide evidence necessary for their asylum claim, especially in cases of sexual violence, and consequently, their experiences of persecution are dismissed by the authorities due to lack of credibility (Bloch et al., 2000).

Furthermore, a hierarchy regarding violations that are ground for asylum claims was developed causing that violations to civil and political rights are prioritized, meanwhile, infringements of economic, social or cultural rights were not considered justification for asylum claims. This is problematic for women because they are often victims of poverty and social marginalization. Moreover, women are not directly involved in the type of political activism that is recognized as a ground for asylum protection due to cultural restrictions (Edwards, 2010).

Bloch et al. (2000) argue that the status and roles of women impact the type of political activity they conduct, its level of visibility and its perception as more or less dangerous. Therefore, it makes women's political activism difficult to fit within the traditional definition of fear of state persecution, which creates obstacles for women to be capable to prove their political persecution and use it as a ground for asylum protection. Women also perceived this misrepresentation of their persecution experiences within the 1951 Convention and have been facing exclusion from the reports that track persecution in contexts of conflict in several countries.

Subsequently, the level of protection women receive is distinct to their male counterparts, for example, the practice of granting women humanitarian leave instead of refugee status has been generalized and contributes to reinforce the perception that gender persecution is less serious. This directly affects women's possibilities to receive adequate protection, as well as to enjoy family reunification, for instance, a right granted exclusively for people with a refugee status (Bloch et al., 2000).

1.2.2.1 Gender-Related Persecution

The inequalities women experience to access refugee protection due to the characteristics of international and national procedures are present as well in the power relations that shape gender norms, roles, and practices that cause specific forms of violence and persecution that affect them.

According to Freedman (2018), gender-related persecution is both persecution of women because they are women, as well as persecution that expresses in certain forms when the victim is a woman. Seven types of persecution fall within this definition, harmful traditional practices, forced pregnancy or abortion, persecutory laws, domestic violence, persecution on the grounds of sexual orientation, rape and wartime sexual violence, and rape and sexual exploitation by protectors.

Harmful traditional practices include FGM, dowry murder or forced marriage. FGM has been recognized as a ground for asylum protection, especially in cases of young women and girls who need protection due to their opposition to this practice. Likewise FGM, forced pregnancy or abortion are harmful tactics to control women's bodies that force them to abide by the traditional gender norms in society. Nevertheless, harmful traditional practices often are not recognized as a ground for asylum protection because it is not perceived as political (Freedman, 2018).

Persecutory laws affect women who do not follow the established paradigms concerning acceptable behavior, and they face not only social censorship but also legal consequences for their transgressions. Domestic violence is not considered a proper ground for asylum claims and women often do not think about seeking help with local authorities, even more rarely they will seek international protection on these grounds. Persecution on the grounds of sexual orientation is the persecution experienced by lesbians, often made invisible. This persecution is difficult to distinguish; therefore it is not easy to get protection based on it (Freedman, 2018).

Rape and wartime sexual violence is part of conflict strategies used as means to demoralize the enemy, promote ethnic cleansing, terrorize the population, and dehumanize the enemy, while it reinforces the power of the State. Rape and sexual assault are recognized as war crimes, however, the refugee claims based on it are rejected often. Additionally, women victims of sexual violence face social exclusion, rejection, lack of spaces to talk about their experience, and overall insensitivity to their victimization (Freedman, 2018).

Rape and sexual exploitation by the protectors refer to the representation of women as vulnerable victims with no agency, which increases their vulnerability to further victimization (Freedman, 2018). For instance, women and girls in refugee camps have been forced to exchange sexual favors for food, water or medical treatment. During the last few years, there have been well-known scandals involving members of UN peacekeeping missions in the sexual exploitation of women in conflict-affected areas.

1.2.2.2 Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Refugee and Asylum-Seeking Women

Gender-based violence against women is defined as “any act that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life” (United Nations 1995,

48). It encompasses a wide variety of “harmful behaviors that are directed at women and girls because of their sex and that perpetuates female subordination” (Heise, 2002, 6). For instance:

a) Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, including battering, sexual exploitation, sexual abuse of children in the household, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence and violence related to exploitation. b) Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring within the general community, including rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere, trafficking in women and forced prostitution. c) Physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the State and institutions, wherever it occurs. (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2003, 11)

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2003), there are several types of Gender-Based Violence. First, sexual violence encompasses practices in which any part or opening of the body of the victim is invaded with sexual organs, objects or parts of the body of the perpetrator, who can be any person in position of power or authority. Some examples of sexual violence are attempted or forced anal rape, intercourse, sexual abuse, inappropriate touching and so forth.

Second, sexual exploitation refers to any abuse of differences in vulnerability, power or trust to profit in any form, that comprises several practices, for instance, traffic of persons, coerced marriage and/or childbearing, participation in pornography, sexual slavery or sexual extortion. The perpetrators of sexual exploitation can include humanitarian aid workers, soldiers, smugglers and members of trafficking networks, generally people with privileged access to money, resources, services or power (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2003).

Third, physical violence consists of beating, punching, burning, or killing without regard to the use of weapons that can be perpetrated by any person. Along with psychological violence, that refers to any type of abuse, humiliation, insulting, degrading in public or private conduct by anyone with power and control (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2003).

Fourth, sexual violence is often used as a weapon of war and torture among refugees, internally displaced people, and migrants that refers to acts or the threat to commit any practice of a sexual nature to cause suffering and/or pain mentally or physically. Sexual violence aims to obtain information, confession or to punish, intimidate or destroy the victim, others, or any group that shares nationality, ethnicity, race or religion. Women in this context are victimized in multiple ways,

including but not limited to rape, sexual slavery, forced abortion or sterilization, forced pregnancy, and delivery. (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2003).

Fifth, harmful traditional practices include besides the ones mentioned earlier, honor killing and maiming that refer to different types of punishment ranging from pouring acid on women or girls to murder in connection with acts considered inappropriate. Women's behaviors perceived as a source of shame to the family or the community are defined socially and culturally, subsequently, creating the need to redeem the offenses and preserve the honor of the family. This category also includes denying women and girls access to education or training at any level by her parents, partner, extended family/community or even the state (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2003).

Finally, socio-economic violence refers to discrimination, exclusion and/or denial of access to services, opportunities, remunerated employment, property rights, social benefits and the exercise of all types of rights caused by family, societal or governmental institutions or actors (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2003).

Refugee women are particularly vulnerable to SGBV during different moments of their migration journey and their victimization can be analyzed from a cycle perspective. Initially, before having to flee due to the conflict situation, women often experience battering, sexual assault, rape and forced pregnancy by different armed groups. In armed conflict scenarios, women are more vulnerable to violence, for example, while they seek asylum families are separated and often women have to take solely the responsibility to provide for the household. Subsequently, amid the escape sexual violence, human trafficking, slavery and, extortion is often employed by smugglers, border guards and other actors against women. The economic vulnerability of women restricts their possibilities to pay for the journey, consequently, smugglers can demand sexual relations in return (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2003).

After women's arrival to the country where they will apply for asylum, women might experience as well sexual and domestic violence, coercion, forced prostitution and sexual exploitation in their path to access assistance or resources from authority personal. Furthermore, if women are repatriated legally or forcefully, again they can experience sexual violence themselves or their children. Finally, in the integration stage, women might experience exclusion, denial or obstacles to access the decision-making processes, resources and/or documentation they need (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2003).

International organizations have identified risk factors for SGBV in refugee and internally displaced populations that include the dismantlement of social or family support networks and to live in high crime locations. In the case of refugee camps, the risk factors associated with SGBV are overcrowded locations, the existence of multiple housing buildings or a communal shelter system, the lack of access to different kinds of resources and participation in the organization, leadership and,

design of the camp, as well as absence of personnel from relevant authorities, besides nonexistence of an individualized system for identification. These characteristics create conditions that exacerbate vulnerabilities and the victimization risk of refugees to a different extent (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2003).

Likewise, academic studies (Araujo et al., 2019) have demonstrated the higher prevalence of sexual violence against adult women refugees, although men and children can also be victims of it. The perpetrators can be intimate partners, military, guards and, police largely in the country of origin in the cases of refugees coming from Africa in which the most frequent form of victimization is rape. The occurrence of this phenomenon might be higher, unfortunately, many victims do not report sexual violence experiences due to fear to be excluded, stigmatized, blame or because they are ashamed or threatened.

Women are more vulnerable to sexual violence, especially during the immigration process given the language barriers, economic insecurity, the increased pressure on relationships, along with the changes at all societal spaces during periods of war and postwar, in which violence becomes a tool for men to exercise power and reestablish control over women. Furthermore, armed conflict situations enhance cultural norms of men superiority even before the migration starts (Araujo et al., 2019).

During the journey physical and psychological violence in the families is also prevalent, many women are victimized by their partners throughout this time which increases female's feelings of insecurity, unprotection, and fear of traveling alone or with the children. Women in this situation have difficulties to get out of the violent relationship and often do not get enough support from authorities when they arrive at their country of destination (Freedman, 2018).

Moreover, often humanitarian organizations that provide help to refugees treat them as family groups and assume men are protectors of the women. However, many of these apparent families are formed by several people traveling together and not necessarily by biological relationships, even though, men become the focal point during the process of attention to the group. This dynamic contributes to make women's voice silent, dismisses the relationship of power and domination within those groups, increases the barriers for women to express themselves, and to denounce violence towards them (Freedman, 2018).

1.2.3 European Migration Policies

The procedures adopted by European countries to deal with female asylum applicants are not standardized, for instance in France, Germany, Norway, and Switzerland female personnel conducts the interviews, while in Spain women do not have a separate process and are included in the asylum application of their male spouses unless the women specify the opposite. In the United Kingdom,

women can apply separately, although, many decide not to and become dependent on their husband's asylum applications. Generally, both social and cultural gender norms prevent women from being the principal applicant even though they may have stronger grounds than the males that accompanied them (Bloch et al., 2000).

Other countries have been recognized for having best practices regarding gender sensitivity in the asylum-seeking process, for example in Belgium, exists a brochure available in seven languages with information specifically tailored for women that aims to inform them about their rights to apply for asylum and all the services available for them. Similarly, in Malta and Montenegro, special attention is given to women that have experienced trauma and they receive extensions to complete the interview and the administrative procedures. Furthermore, in the Montenegro regime, it is recognized the claims on the grounds of being part of a particular social group related to gender identity, and SGBV is considered an act of persecution (Alam et al., 2019).

Women encounter difficulties across their migration journey due to several factors, initially due to the absence of female interpreters and translators, the lack of experience from border officials and other governmental authorities involved in their registration to deal with victims of gender-based violence or trauma, the diversity of the procedures to complete and the difficult interaction due to social and cultural differences (Alam et al., 2019).

At the reception centers women continue to experience problems, few accommodations are safe for them and their lack of knowledge of the procedures increases their victimization risks and vulnerability. For instance, there are not always separated facilities for women, many of the refugee camps do not have spaces exclusive for women, and their placement along with men makes female refugees subject to harassment and other forms of violence. Generally, at reception centers, there are obstacles to access medical and psychological care, lack of gender-sensitive information and often women face complications to access feminine hygiene products because they have to ask male camp workers for those (Alam et al., 2019).

Furthermore, there are significant barriers particularly for women who have been victims of SGBV during the asylum process which includes the difficulty to provide enough material evidence, so their claims are considered credible. Additionally, female victims of SGBV face obstacles to discuss the details of their experiences during interviews with someone from the opposite sex, or in the presence of their husbands and children (Freedman, 2018).

Although policies have been established in Europe to assess the vulnerability of asylum seekers and provide them with special attention, however, this process presents two problems. On one side, the system to identify vulnerability focuses on its visible parts and stresses the attention on physical dependency and weaknesses. Consequently, it is difficult for asylum seekers to get support regarding

vulnerabilities that are not obvious, for instance, mental health afflictions or experiences of gender-based violence (Freedman, 2018).

On the other side, the process primarily involves a short meeting where it is difficult, first for the women to disclose painful situations of violence given the lack of trust with the professional. And second for the aid worker to get a deep understanding of the situation of the women along with their vulnerability beyond what is visible. Additionally, the lack of staff to conduct these assessments makes longer the waiting time (Freedman, 2018).

1.2.3.1 Migration Policies and Increased Female Refugees and Asylum-Seekers Vulnerability

The increase in the restrictions for migration as come accompanied by the closure of borders across the EU and the deterioration of the conditions for asylum seekers that try to arrive to the continent after the 2014-2015 refugee crisis. These measures have contributed to the creation of conditions that exacerbate the vulnerability of migrants that are forced to take more dangerous routes to reach their destination. Simultaneously, there has emerged the concept of vulnerability and more attention has been given to the specific vulnerabilities of certain refugee groups (Freedman, 2018).

Overall, the policies and practices towards refugees and immigrants placed by countries throughout legislative or social mechanisms configure a scenario increasingly difficult that particularly enhances women's vulnerability. No matter the political motivation behind them, its impacts at the micro-level affect greatly asylum seekers and refugees that endure the harms of restrictive policies that create barriers for the improvement of their lives and restricted the scope of opportunities to escape violence (Canning, 2019).

Even though female asylum seekers are considered vulnerable in the Nordic countries their asylum policies and practices heighten the vulnerability risk of women towards violence. For example, exchanging sex to gain access to accommodation, money or an increase in their autonomy within the system. Both the restrictive policies and the lack of autonomy and certainty about the future are sources of emotional distress for asylum seekers, furthermore, their effects are worse in women that have survived sexual violence, torture and, domestic abuse, who as well experience anxiety, problems to sleep, nightmares and general PTSD, all symptoms that jeopardize their wellbeing (Bloch et al., 2000).

Freedman (2016) who also states that even though women mostly fled their countries due to gender-based violence or persecution and are vulnerable to a certain degree during their journeys seeking asylum in Europe, this is not inherent to them being women. On the contrary, women's vulnerability is created by the deterioration of the conditions for migration that forces women to take difficult and dangerous routes to reach their destination.

The restrictive policies within the EU and its negative effect on the wellbeing of women contrast with the obligation placed on the governmental authorities to identify vulnerable asylum seekers and refugees to provide them special protection through particular procedures, which intent to benefit women victims of SGBV. Nevertheless, the placement of women in this category might be perceived by themselves as a limitation to their autonomy that constitutes a form of symbolic violence. For instance, women easily identifiable as Muslims experience it when they become objects of pity for humanitarian and aid organizations (Freedman, 2016).

1.2.4 Norway Asylum Seekers and Refugee Policy

The authority responsible for handling asylum applications is the UDI and the main regulations are comprised of the Immigration Act. It includes the definition of refugee as a foreigner that either can be categorized within the 1951 Convention, or that is entitled to protection from Norway due to the ECHR. Even if the asylum seeker does not meet these criteria, the person may still get a residence permit on humanitarian grounds. Norway also receives refugees as part of a resettlement quota set up annually and admits resettlement cases identified by the UNHCR (Thorud, 2017).

All asylum seekers that arrive at Norway stay at temporary reception facilities, which are supervised by the UDI, although its operation can be handled by private or third sector organizations. There are special sections within accommodation facilities as well as separate reception centers for asylum seekers with particular needs, for instance, unaccompanied minors between 15 to 18 years old (Thorud, 2017).

After receiving either a residence permit on humanitarian grounds or refugee status recognition, a person can choose to settle in any municipality, however, those who depend on public assistance have to settle in the assigned municipality to get access to economic support and housing. Asylum seekers wait for a decision on their application at a reception center where they have access to monetary support to subsist. Those who receive a negative decision are offered accommodation in reception centers until they depart from Norway (Thorud, 2017).

Within the settlement regulations, the national government and the local authorities have an agreement to collaborate that clarifies the responsibilities through the process, however, municipalities can decide how many refugees to settle annually. Municipalities receive financial compensation for additional expenses incurred due to the settlement of each refugee, the grant provided by the government for five years is NOK 786 500 (€ 82 800) for single adults, NOK 736 500 (€ 77 500) for other adults, and there are additional grants for other groups, for example, elderly people or unaccompanied minors (Thorud, 2017).

The regulatory system for humanitarian protection in Norway recognizes a particularly vulnerable group, human trafficking victims. The victims of this crime during 2019 were principally from

Albania, Bulgaria, and Romania, along with an increase in victims that came from Brazil and Colombia. These women and men are used in sex and labor trafficking, the latter particularly for domestic services and construction work (United States Department of State, 2019).

As part of the government strategies, on the one side, to provide assistance as well as safe housing to victims of human trafficking, and on the other side, to raise awareness on it, the ROSA project was funded by the Ministry of Justice and part of the National Plan of Action Against Human Trafficking (Weldehanna, 2018). During 2017, 118 potential victims of human trafficking approached ROSA, while in 2018 there were 77 victims, finally, 45 and 35 victims accepted to stay at the shelter respectively. Moreover, 30 victims were referred to ROSA by government entities in 2018, a decrease of 8 victims in comparison with the previous year (United States Department of State, 2019).

One of the main obstacles for providing adequate assistance in connection with human trafficking is the lack of a formal identification procedure along with a national referral mechanism established by the Norwegian government, besides the limited participation from the NGOs in developing these measures (United States Department of State, 2019). Nevertheless, within the directorate of immigration, it is considered to provide assistance and protection to victims of human trafficking through safe housing at a crisis center, legal assistance to report the crime to the police, as well as the option of returning home with help of the IOM or to apply for a residence permit or asylum for victims of human trafficking in Norway (UDI, 2020).

The type of residence permits available for victims of human trafficking include first, the period of reflection which is valid for six months, not renewable and requires the women to report the traffickers to police. Second, a limited residence permit limited to one year, although, it can be renewed if the investigation and prosecution of the traffickers requires to do so. Third, a residence permit for witnesses in human trafficking cases or a residence permit on grounds of strong humanitarian consideration for those who have testified in a human trafficking case. Finally, there is also the option of applying for asylum as a victim of human trafficking, this also can protect the victim's children in Norway (UDI, 2020).

1.2.4.1 Data on Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Norway

In the last twenty years, the number of asylum seekers who arrive in Norway has experienced two peaks, the first one in 2002 with the arrival of 17.500, and the second, between July and November 2015, with approximately 30.000 applications. By 2016, the number of applicants decreased rapidly to 3.500, most of the asylum seekers who arrived during this period were originally from Syria and Eritrea with percentages of 17 and 15 respectively. During the same year the number of people that received refugee status was 11.600, of these 400 applicants received protection on other grounds, and

500 people were granted a residence permit on humanitarian grounds. The resettlement quota for 2016 was 3.120, who were mainly Syrian refugees, only 120 persons were from other nationalities. The low number of applications continued in 2017, when the country received 3.400 applications for asylum, of this 1.250 arrived from Greece and Italy as part of the EU's relocation program (Hernes, Hernes, Nielsen Arendt, Pernilla Andersson, & Tronstad, 2019).

According to data of the UDI in 2018, the total number of applications for asylum were 2.655, which included 1.565 male and 1.090 female applicants of Turkish, Syrian, Eritrean, Iranian and Iraqi nationality. In 2019 there were 796 applications, 332 from women and 464 from men, which represented a significant decrease from the previous year, most of the asylum seekers were Syrian, Turkish, Eritrean, Stateless and Afghans. During January 2020 there were 225 asylum applications in total, of them 80 were from females, and 145 from males, regarding their nationalities, the majority of them came from Syria, Turkey, Eritrea, Stateless and Russia.

Concerning asylum decisions for 2019, data of the UDI shows that from 2.936 asylum seekers, 1.647 received asylum, 95 were granted protection on humanitarian grounds, 589 were rejected, in 277 cases was applied the Dublin Convention -which states that an asylum claim must be handled at the country on which the applicant arrived first- and 96 obtained residence in a safe third country. The countries where people granted asylum came from was Turkey with 770, Syrian with 446, Eritrea with 161, Stateless with 55 and Afghanistan with 37.

1.2.4.2 Integration Policy in Norway

It aims to ensure that everyone living in Norway participates in society, either studying or working thus people can contribute as taxpayers and citizens to the long-term development of the country. The governmental authorities first, expect and require immigrants to participate in the integration process, and second, to the community to guarantee for each of its members the possibilities to use all their capabilities. The integration process the coordinated efforts of everyone and is led by the Ministry of Justice and Public Security, moreover, it is a responsibility of all authorities in the public sector to adapt and make available services to different users according to their needs (Aboagye, 2017).

The implementation of the integration policy is determined by the Introduction Act and entails the contribution of the municipalities through the offer of programs for the newly arrived immigrants residents in it. Participation in the integration program is restricted to persons between 18 and 55 years old who have lived in the municipality for less than two years when the decision for their involvement is made. The components of the program are 600 hours of Norwegian language training, 50 hours of Norwegian social studies for adults, and preparation for further education or work participation. Those who participate in the program have the right to receive 700 000 NOK for five years (Aboagye, 2017).

The introduction program gives equal rights to women and men and considers them ordinary people in an extraordinary situation, therefore the program acts as assistance in the process of refugees starting a new life and intends to balance personal and social values within its approach to integration. The program provides physical and psychological assistance individually and collectively, additionally offers interpretation and translation services in 50 languages (d'Alessandro, 2016).

During the integration, each participant has an individual professional contact to prepare an action plan, approximately 40% of the participants integrate either to the labor market or to an educational institution through it. For those who do not succeed, around 40% exists the second chance program, that involves workers in diverse fields who collaborate with the Welfare office to guarantee the integration of its participants, who continue to benefit economically while they find a job. The adults with 15.000 Nok in addition to 27 Nok per each child daily (d'Alessandro, 2016).

Most of the participants in the second chance program are women providers of care who had difficulties to finalize the initial introductory program, for instance, low or no educational background and slight Norwegian knowledge. Within this program, the participants receive a personalized work plan based on their wishes and follow up by a mentor-like contact person. The components of the program are Norwegian language training, internship, conversation groups, and thematic courses that range from social norms to IT skills (d'Alessandro, 2016).

1.2.5 Agency in Female Asylum Seekers, Refugees, and Immigrants

The concept of agency has been researched by several authors that address it from different perspectives and focus on particular aspects of it. According to Sen (1985), agency is the possibility of a person to freely pursue the goals or values consider relevant by them. Meanwhile, Charrad (2010) states that at the core of agency is not only individual choice and action but also the restrictions imposed by the societal structures on it. Furthermore, Maitra (2013) discusses the impact of specific ideas, for instance, from feminist associations in women's agency because it provides the women space to speak, act and plan for themselves. Similarly, Charrad (2010) points to the significance of the social context in all its diverse forms as a key element to understand the possibilities for the action of individuals. Moreover, González Ramos & Torrado Martín-Palomino (2015) point out that women's agency is their ability to act and resist the structures, situations, and forces that oppress them, even though women are bound by gender.

The agency of female asylum seekers faces additional constraints due to the intrinsic migration problems. For example, to arrive in a different country involves contact with different cultural settings, social norms, and physical spaces, which creates communication difficulties. Besides, migration status can prevent immigrants from working or studying which increases stress

for them, giving that often immigrants migrate to improve their economic conditions, or to flee an unstable political situation (Bayley, 2012).

The experiences of women with migration include perceptions of lack of autonomy or freedom but also of opportunities to become better persons and have access to new possibilities. Therefore, agency is linked to women's capabilities for actively choosing to participate in society and to determine by themselves their lives (Bayley, 2012). Although women's agency may be constrained for example by gender structures in their country of origin and at the country of arrival, the migration conditions and the asylum policies. Women often find the ability to act in their interests and benefit themselves through actions that can be either individual or collective.

Moreover, Bayley (2012) argues that local grassroots organizations can be a form of bottom-up political integration that resists the stereotypes of asylum seekers and refugee women in the host country, while empowers them in the public spheres of life. The organization acts as a channel to make female asylum seekers visible and to connect them with a wider community in which the emergence of solidarity is possible this contributes to create agency opportunities.

1.2.6 The Vulnerability Approach

Vulnerability according to Fineman (2008) describes the inexorability and universality of the prospect of humans to experience harm or adversity on account of events that regardless of intentionality, level of risk or consequences, often are beyond human control. However, vulnerability is experienced in specific forms by individuals due to their differentiated access to quality resources provided by the institutional structures. Therefore, there are relational and societal aspects embedded in the analysis of vulnerability, particularly concerning the creation of conditions that heighten or mitigate it through the advantaged or disadvantaged access to assets organized in the form of programs or institutions (Fineman, 2010).

Vulnerability is always a possibility in the lives of individuals; thus, it is analysis intents to identify how institutions not only exacerbate it (Fineman, 2008) but also produce inequalities that affect the resilience capabilities of people (Bjørnholt, 2019). Moreover, analyzes the possibilities to manage common vulnerabilities within the structural system of society (Fineman, 2008). Both individual and social aspects of people's lives are influenced by vulnerability and it is not possible to understand these dynamics without addressing its institutional aspects (Fineman, 2008).

The differentiated access to resources faced by individuals is also influenced by gender which contributes to the reproduction of inequality (Bjørnholt, 2019), consequently, constitutes an aspect to analyze within the vulnerability approach. Furthermore, specific institutional structures and responses to incidents of victimization can either interrupt it or increase it, thus it is not the particular

characteristics of the individual which explains the higher victimization risk but on the contrary, the context that creates possibilities for been victimized (Bjørnholt, 2019).

The vulnerability analysis also addresses the possibilities of an individual to access and develop the resources for resilience to manage vulnerability (Fineman, 2008). Hence, it is not only about the creation of structures that more or less exacerbate vulnerability, but also how these structures contribute to people's possibilities for being resilient, better equipped and positioned to access opportunities at all spheres. Subsequently, individuals might be privileged or excluded in their access to resources relevant for their resilience, thus being less able to cope with vulnerability (Fineman, 2017).

The possibilities of agency can also be analyzed through the vulnerability approach as an expression of the resources that individually or collectively are within people's reach to achieve their goals. Similarly, to resilience, agency is influenced by the context and the institutions in which people participate and the possibilities for individual action are differential (Charrad, 2010).

1.3 Research questions

How NGO's representatives perceive that the interaction of female asylum-seekers, refugees and immigrants victims of SGBV with the Norwegian asylum institutions contribute to women's empowerment or victimization?

- a) What are the perceptions of NGO representatives as key stakeholders of the possibilities and constraints for female asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants for individual agency when interacting with institutions during the asylum process?
- b) What are the perceptions of NGO representatives as key stakeholders of female asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants access to support after SGVB victimization when interacting with institutions during the asylum process?
- c) What are the perceptions of NGO representatives as key stakeholders of the possibilities and constraints for collective actions from female asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants as an alternative for them to access services, to support victims of SGBV, and to express their agency during the asylum process?

2. Method

2.1 Sample

This analysis draws from seven interviews with participants, who were employees at different Norwegian NGO's working with asylum seekers, refugees or immigrants at different stages of the process. For instance, recently arrived or during the integration plan; focusing on particular topics

like human trafficking, honor violence or SGBV within the church context; and providing diverse services like shelter, legal advice, practical information or support. This combination provides a broad perspective on the field and gives insight into the variations across it to enrich the analysis.

2.2 Instrument

The informants were interviewed during January 2020 through Skype using semi-structured interviews and were encouraged to tell their perspectives on the topics. The interviews focused on the informant's perceptions of the agency capabilities of female asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants, the possibilities of them to access support in connection with experiences of SGBV, and the role of collective action for accessing services, support or services otherwise restricted. The list of questions can be found in Appendix B.

2.3 Procedure

The informants were recruited through email invitations after scouting their information through a desk review that identified relevant organizations. Some of them were also suggested by other people contacted during the preliminary search.

The interviews lasted between 52 and 90 minutes: most of them were 80 minutes. All of the informants were willing to participate, share their perspectives and discuss the topics. During most of the interviews, participants were talking freely about the subject, even beyond the proposed questions, however with some of them, the interviews were more structured following a Q&A arrangement, and responses were more concise. Interviews were recorded, notes were taken during them as well as afterward, and transcripts were made.

The analyses were based on categories and indicators derived from the literature review, that focused on the agency as possibilities for individual as well as collective action, and the different nuances of experiencing SGBV victimization during the refugee cycle, particularly the interaction with institutions during the process of getting protection and support at Norway. The complete list of the indicators can be found in Appendix C.

The transcripts were searched for all references to the indicators and were coded using the Atlas.ti qualitative analysis software. Later the codes were organized into bigger analytical categories called "Families", and links between different codes were established to clarify how they relate to each other conceptually. Upon these, tables and graphics for data visualization were elaborated, these were used during the analysis of the results.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

All participants remain anonymous and the study was carried out following the principles concerning human research ethics of the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013), and guidelines for the responsible conduct of research (Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity, 2012). The names of the informants and the NGOs were not included in the interview transcriptions and numbers were used instead to identify them. To present the results of the study fictive names were assigned to each informant for anonymity purposes when quotations from the interviews were included in the text. These contain grammar errors; however, the fragments are verbatim transcriptions of the interviews.

3. Results

3.1 General Overview of the Findings

The findings of the study identified three trends concerning the NGO's representatives' perceptions of the interaction of female asylum-seekers, refugees and immigrants victims of SGBV with the Norwegian asylum institutions in terms of agency and access to support. Firstly, regarding women's interaction with institutions to access support related to SGBV victimization several constraints were found given the structural characteristics of the asylum system. For instance, the lack of an effective procedure to determine vulnerabilities that are not visible impacts women's possibilities to discuss their experiences of victimization and the institutional capabilities to identify the victim's needs, make services available for them, and prevent their revictimization.

Additionally, the strict regulations and the emphasis on assessing the credibility of the claims of women through physical evidence within the asylum system inhibits women's agency and resilience. Moreover, the institutions that aim to render individuals autonomous and self-sufficient create the conditions that exacerbate the vulnerability of women through the prioritization of the visibility of weaknesses. Consequently, there is no agreement regarding the definition of vulnerability and the informant's perceptions of it is highly influenced by the specific traits of the people they attend, this leaves unattended multiple psychological affections of women victimized.

Specific legal figures within the asylum system create opportunities for the revictimization of women, for example, through family reunification they become dependent on their husbands for the residence permit, which makes women more vulnerable to experiences of SGVB from their partners. Likewise, female human trafficking victims experience revictimization due to the regulations of the asylum system that requires them to identify their handlers to access protection through a special residence permit. Even though the vulnerability of this group is recognized by the authorities and the legislation has special regulations to protect them, these also contribute to enhance their vulnerability.

Secondly, regarding the perception of opportunities and constraints for individual and collective agency of female asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants the informants recognized, on one hand, the relevance of women speaking for themselves, and creating or participating in women's groups as a means to get peer support. And on the other hand, the informants identified aspects of the regulatory asylum framework that restrict to certain degree women's agency. Particularly, the emphasis of the authorities on women to complete the asylum and integration process meanwhile it is neglected to identify their underlying needs and interests which affects female asylum seekers' resilience and agency capabilities.

Finally, the findings highlight the valuable work of the NGOs in advocacy towards the improvement of the procedures, mechanisms, and regulations that impact female asylum seekers. This is perceived by the informants as an essential part of their work to ensure the improvement of the support to victims of SGBV, reduce the conditions that exacerbate women's vulnerability and promote their agency.

3.2 Agency, Vulnerability and Access to Support for SGBV Victimization in the Norwegian Asylum System

3.2.1 *The Different Uses of Vulnerability*

Across the interviews, the informants discussed the vulnerability of asylum seekers, identified the specific characteristics of the asylum system that inhibits women's agency and resilience, and provided insight on the aspects that require improvement. The use of the concept of vulnerability by the informants focused on particular characteristics of individuals or groups and covers a broad range of practices, behaviors, and situations. This understanding of vulnerability opposes to Fineman (2008) who states that it is a shared human condition, often beyond human control and shaped by the societal institutions that provide individuals with more or less adequate resources to manage their universal potential to experience harm or adversity.

On the contrary, the informants have difficulties to agree on the meaning of vulnerability, and how to identify it to ensure female asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants adequate support as well as access to services. For instance, some of the informants emphasized signs of stress, avoiding other people, and the use of expensive clothes. For others, vulnerability is related to women who have a non-supportive husband, lack knowledge or financial resources. In other cases, the vulnerability is associated with the status and the access to certain types of documentation, for instance being under family reunification. Nevertheless, some of the informants referred to similar indicators of women's vulnerability, for example, low levels of education, either in connection with general training,

Norwegian knowledge, or particularly about the procedures within the asylum system, including their rights and the mechanisms for SGBV protection.

The informant's perceptions of vulnerability are highly influenced by the specific traits of the people they attend. Those participants who work with women victimized from SGBV focused on issues linked to the revictimization or exacerbation of the risks to experience violence. Meanwhile, the informants who work with asylum seekers emphasized the lack of knowledge, resources, and documentation more often.

In contrast, the informants discussed to a lesser degree the categories of gender-sensitive information or practices, access of women to spaces for participation and the aspects that hinder the interaction of them with the institutions, all gaps that characterize the asylum system to a certain degree as recognized by them in other sections of the interviews. This opposes as well to the claims of Fineman (2010) who states that it is essential to address the relational and societal aspects in the analysis of vulnerability, particularly concerning the creation of conditions that heighten or mitigate it through the differentiated access to assets.

Nevertheless, the findings reveal that the informants identified multiple structural and relational aspects of vulnerability in the interactions between female asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants with institutions regarding individual action. To begin with, the vulnerability is linked to the mandate of immigration authorities and all the organizations working with female refugees and asylum seekers to treat them as a vulnerable group that needs special attention, along with other specific groups. As stated by 'John' who is an operations manager of a reception center for asylum seekers, "single women are considered a special vulnerable group, as well as people with disabilities, diverse sexual orientations and gender identity and unaccompanied minors."

Consequently, to the mandate comes the requirement of spotting signs of vulnerability in the women, "regulations given by the immigration authorities and their work is that women are seen as vulnerable, that is deemed as a fact" (Interview number one). Unfortunately, the requirement to identify vulnerability does not mean a low threshold system of support for these women. The lack of systematic ways to identify women's vulnerabilities creates gaps in access to services, especially for women victims of SGBV.

This finding is in line with the claims of Bloch et al. (2000), who state that even though female asylum seekers are considered vulnerable in the Nordic countries, the asylum policies and practices in these states heighten the vulnerability risk of women towards violence. The policies fail to properly and systematically identify those who are in a vulnerable position and required differentiated assistance.

Accordingly, the existing system often identifies and provides support to those women in whom vulnerability is extremely evident, openly disclosed or visible to authorities. Meaning that many of

the needs of women are not met, and that less evident, often psychological problems are unnoticed and unattended.

Generally, accessing psychological and medical care it is difficult for multiple reasons. To begin with is not easy for victims of SGBV to identify and separate by themselves the emotional impact of their victimization experience, from the stress of the asylum applications. Although often the emotional impacts translate into physical symptoms, women do not associate those with needs for psychological and medical care. In contrast, as ‘Clara’ who works as a manager of a shelter for human trafficking victims explains, it is easy for victims that live in an institution to access assistance.

“For those who live in an institution like this is easier because they get access to social workers and they help them to get in touch with the health center even if they don’t have the rights. There is always someone available to talk to them.”

This finding is consistent with the claims of Freedman (2018) who points that current systems to identify vulnerability focus heavily on the visible parts of it, putting attention on physical dependency and weaknesses, making it particularly difficult for women to get support regarding vulnerabilities that are not noticeable for example mental health afflictions or experiences of SGBV. Additionally, the characteristics of the procedure for the assessment of vulnerability rely on a short interview conducted by a professional who does not have opportunities to develop a trust fold relationship with the women. Such a relationship would facilitate the women’s efforts to disclose their experiences. ‘Rose’ who works at a church crisis center with victims of SGBV explains how the system in Norway relies on the visible aspects of vulnerability:

“Women that get help are the ones very damaged is really obvious in a way... what many women have experienced and also what many women have developed ways to deal with it so it is not so obvious to the others, and then people look at other things.”

This finding suggests that women who have developed mechanisms to cope with their experiences of trauma or who do not talk openly about SGBV incidents might easily fall within the cracks of the system failing to get the support they need it. Similarly, to the arguments of Fineman (2008), concerning the impact of the societal structures in the resilience capabilities of people to cope with vulnerability. The emphasis of the asylum system in Norway in the visibility of weaknesses to access support often compels women to act against their wishes, conceal their resilience and agency capabilities. Female asylum seekers make evident their vulnerabilities and reproduce stereotypes about it to fit the categories established by the system, for instance being a single woman with children.

This is in line with the findings of Edwards (2010) concerning the perception of female refugees as vulnerable due to their sex and the absence of protection from male family members. The negative perception of women as vulnerable and dependent is reinforced. Similarly, Freedman (2018), who argues that this might encourage dependent behavior from refugees to reaffirm their victim status.

This type of behavior difficult to establish a relationship between them and NGO workers or authorities, perceived as the helpers, on equal footing.

Furthermore, the lack of a systematic procedure to assess female refugees' vulnerabilities might cause them to face several obstacles while participating in the activities part of the integration program, and in the long-term even to fail to finish it. The components of the program are 600 hours of Norwegian language training, 50 hours of Norwegian social studies for adults, and preparation for further education or work participation (Aboagye, 2017). In many cases it is necessary an individualized and flexible approach, this was established in the Integration Act as part of an amend to aligned courses with individualized plans (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2016), however, this is not what refugees experienced according to 'Rose' who described the overall situation as follows:

"I think that we should map, as they have a context then of course to follow them but of course, there are difficulties to women to complete the program, and I think that when you are new to a country there are new rules, new social codes, new language, a lot of new things and then we don't take into consideration."

Additionally, 'Rose' mentioned that in some cases, it is essential to recognize the different situations that women experience before and during this process that might prevent them to succeed at it. The relevance of a broad understanding of the factors influencing the performance of refugee women will allow the authorities to get a deeper perspective on the type of assistance needed and the most effective way to provide it. It is fundamental to be aware of the background of these women beyond what is evident as 'Rose' states:

"Maybe we need to also have time with some of them if you have children for example and you haven't been able to get a good education from your home country it is not so easy to go through this program."

This includes being attentive of the general experiences of women while migrating, particularly trauma and different forms of SGBV victimization, as well as the pressure of what is expected from them by society, their families and themselves, in terms of adapting and understanding a new system in which women have to maneuver, including the social codes of their new context, and achieving certain milestones within the program designed for them. 'Rose' draws attention to the high expectations that female asylum seekers encounter from authorities and NGO workers, "we expect too much of them particularly regarding cultural and social codes that we expect them to have with a system that is particularly overwhelming" (Interview number two). This kind of pressure is inflicted by women themselves according to 'Rose's' perception, "sometimes I think that women have really big expectations of what they should achieve in the home and in society even as newcomers" (Interview number two).

3.2.2 Family Reunification and Enhanced Vulnerability

The family reunification regulations within the asylum system illustrates the arguments of Fineman (2017), who discusses the role of societal structures and institutions to create or exacerbate vulnerability. These structures can contribute or not to the possibilities of people to be resilient, better equipped with resources and well-positioned to access opportunities at the social, political and economic spheres. Additionally, institutions can tolerate or interrupt the victimization cycles that affect individuals.

To begin with, the regulations to apply for family reunification have become stricter over the past decades and it is more difficult to fulfill the requirements. For instance, in 2000 the amount of money demanded for subsistence was increased and ten years later it was introduced a demand for the sponsor to live in Norway studying or working for four years before granting family reunification. Additionally, the regulations emphasized to provide enough proof of the relationship, this includes to supply more documentation and to pass a stricter credibility assessment during the interviews to verify the information of the applicants (Gustafsson Grønningsæter & Brekke, 2017). Generally, the informants perceive that authorities believe that some women might be forced into relationships or to be mothers to have a legal right to stay in the country, so the credibility assessment in all cases of asylum application is being strengthened.

“They had the impression that their residence status depends on the reunification of the family, women may have been tricked, some of them were told to get pregnant fast to secure their status, this may expose them to be in force relationships to stay in the country.”

The legal residence of women that come to Norway under the figure of family reunification depends completely on their partners. According to Norwegian legislation only after three years, these women can apply for residence documents on their own. Nevertheless, under this law, it is also recognized that women may apply to an independent residence permit based on their or their children been abused in the household (Gustafsson Grønningsæter & Brekke, 2017). However, the requirements to prove the victimization are difficult to meet. Bloch et al. (2000), who argues these structural aspects of the Norwegian system make women vulnerable to violence. First, women become dependent on their husbands for the residence permit and economically. Second, the system increased the pressure on women to make their stories of SGBV victimization credible for the authorities to apply for their visa.

Consequently, several women endure different types of violence from their partners, especially economic, psychological and sexual, which are most difficult to prove with physical evidence. This occurs while the women are dependent on their husbands for the legal residence and due to the lack of housing alternatives. The absence of a network for immigrant women to get support as well as the difficulties in providing physical evidence from police or doctors of the violence they have experienced, makes it hard for them to access protection from the Norwegian authorities. This finding

is consistent with the arguments presented by Freedman (2018), who states that there are significant barriers particularly for women who have been victims of SGBV during the asylum process, for example, to provide enough material evidence so their claims are considered credible. ‘Martha’ who is the administrative director of a program that provides information to immigrants, expressed the negative impacts of this gap in the system:

“We see that many women have come to Norway on family reunions to stay with their husband, and immigration in Norway has been strict on the requirements. You have to have been living with your partner for 3 years, many have experienced violence and continue living in a very problematic home situation being victims of violence, suffering for fear of losing their papers, their legal right to stay in the country...we have women that have to suffer considerable psychological terror, never been victims of physical violence, some of them are, but the majority have experienced sexual violence and economic violence which is really difficult to prove with physical evidence.”

The lack of family networks, knowledge of Norwegian, information about the asylum procedures and generally about the system is perceived by the informants as elements that increased the vulnerability of women towards SGBV revictimization. Moreover, the heightened vulnerability makes difficult for women to exercise individual choice even more in a restricted context by the regulatory system.

The structures of the family reunification system create spaces for the increase of women’s vulnerability towards violence and revictimization who have already experienced trauma during their migration journey. The higher risk of these women to violence it is not on account of their particular characteristics but due to the conditions created by the institutions. This structures favor the increase of vulnerability and create the possibilities for victimization in intimate relationships (Bjørnholt, 2019). The negative impacts of this institutional arrangement should be further analyze given that women more often apply on spousal visas, given their persecution is not always deemed political (Canning, 2019).

3.2.3 Gaps in Access to Support for Human Trafficking Victims within the Vulnerability Approach

The case of the victims of human trafficking is useful to illustrate the biggest findings of the study in terms of understanding the possibilities and constraints that female asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants face to access adequate support after SGBV victimization. The main trend identified through the discussions with ‘Clara’ was that even though the vulnerability of this group is recognized by the authorities and the legislation has special regulations to protect them to some extent, these also contribute to enhance their vulnerability.

The results suggest that the core problem of the asylum system is the difficulty to assess the vulnerability of women victims of violence beyond what is evident to create procedures that reduce

their vulnerability in the context of increasingly strict migration policies. ‘Clara’ describes it as follows:

“Victims of trafficking most of the time end up being asylum seekers, this group is supposed to be recognized as an extra vulnerable group in the UDI system as well, although is not sure what it means. e.g. during interviews, we are asked to come along with them and to express opinions on behalf of the women.”

The informants perceived that although the needs for specific assistance of these women is recognized and the Norwegian legislation has specific forms of protection for them, they still endure different types of obstacles to access it due to the characteristics of the system. To begin with, the access to government’s protection through a residence permit which varies in length and characteristics requires the victims to expose the smugglers to the police and provide them with information that contributes to take the case to court. ‘Clara’ describes the process as follows:

“Seeking reflection: temporary permit stay based on EU countries model, in Norway, is mostly for 6 months, it can be longer if you have a valid reason, it is a period of time that you get to stay in Norway, you get most rights available in the society but you have to collaborate with the police and give them information about traffickers and the situation that get you to Norway, they evaluate possibilities for taking the case court women have to press charges. Often cases are dismissed by the police.

During this period, you have the right to work, health service, accommodation, minimum allowance, this distributed and organized by the welfare system, the municipality of Oslo takes care of victims. After the period ends you lose these rights.”

Unfortunately, as described earlier by ‘Clara’, many aspects constrain the possibilities of these women to come forward and disclose their experience. For instance, human trafficking victims face fear, trauma, indoctrination, and shame besides the obstacles already associated with the arrival to a new country. As stated by ‘Clara’:

“Sometimes they don’t share the details until they feel in a corner, almost on their way to exiting the country, because they see no other choice. The process can take years, they are afraid to be exposed, e.g. Eastern European mafias are dangerous they can hurt you or your family easily and just telling the truth is difficult.”

Women’s fear for their safety is a significant obstacle for them to disclose their experience of SGBV. Therefore, women need from the authorities reassurance of their security, time to build trust and feel comfortable discussing their experience, as well as continuous support. ‘Clara’ explains the relevance of understanding the safety concerns of these women:

“Having reassurance of being safe of the threats of exposing your traffickers, it is difficult to trust and ask for help, there is word that is hard to get your case on court, so the risk is too high. When you go to the police you have to report your traffickers, and safety issues aren’t clear for them, and this high risk.”

This finding is consistent to the claims of Eapen & Nielsen (2009) that female victims of SGBV find difficult to identify who is trustworthy, lack the knowledge of the language to communicate and ask for help, have difficulties to access information about their rights, and often are unaware of their

legal status in the country, or do not have their travel documents. These aspects create obstacles for the interaction of women victims of violence with institutions to access support and protection.

The organizations that help these women have an important role to make immigration authorities aware of these obstacles to help victimized women to access protection. Nevertheless, the biggest problem for human trafficking victims is the difficulty to take their cases to the court, the long waiting time for a decision about asylum, and the security of the victims and their families after their experience is disclosed. ‘Clara’ who pinpoints that “exposure to the authorities also means exposure to the handlers, which becomes a part of that thinking to leave when the process is perceived as not going anywhere.”

The long time of the process takes a toll on the emotional wellbeing of the women and becomes an obstacle for them to continue with their lives. Likewise, Bloch et al. (2000), who argues that lack of autonomy and certainty about the future are sources of emotional distress during the asylum process which includes practices that heighten women’s vulnerability towards violence. ‘Clara’ describes it as follows:

“It is sometimes difficult for them to sit and wait for the answer on their application for asylum, so they give up, many of them disappear a couple of years ago or give up the process at least for a period the victims of trafficking. The word got around that they are not gonna get protection and it was better to leave.”

Leaving in the middle of the process or even deciding not to start the asylum application prevents women victims of SGBV to access psychological and medical care and protection from the authorities. Additionally, it might expose women to revictimization by their former handlers or by others, in a context of high vulnerability due to their illegal residence, economic problems, lack of support networks, unfamiliarity with the society and the language.

The findings indicate that the normal operations of the Norwegian asylum system render women victims of human trafficking as less resilient. Furthermore, it contributes to the creation of conditions that exacerbate their vulnerability through restricted access to support and opportunities to disclose women’s experiences of victimization. Consequently, women are revictimized through an institutional design that fails to deal with their common vulnerabilities. Likewise, Fineman (2017) states that it is the societal characteristics and not the individual ones that determined the degree of vulnerability, and the capabilities of people for resilience.

3.2.4 SGBV Victimization and the Norwegian Asylum System

During the interviews, three of the informants mentioned different measures taken by institutions to address incidents of SGBV that involve female asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants. For instance, “reception centers have a special location for women traveling alone, family rooms, in a

way, there are measures for the prevention of harassment in those areas” (Interview number four). This finding differs from a key trend in literature on the topic, explained by Alam et al. (2019), who states that often at the reception centers, few accommodations are safe for women and children, increasing the risks of victimization. The informants’ discussion suggests the opposite for the Norwegian context, this improvement could be related to research concerning safety at reception centers conducted between 2005 and 2007 that revealed there were several problems (Skogøy, 2008).

Furthermore, the reception center’s staff encourages victims to come forward and report incidents through their internal system, afterward, “police comes interviews her, it is also reported to the immigration authorities” (Interview number one) because it can affect the asylum case of the perpetrator. Later further measures to separate the victim from the perpetrator are taken as explained by ‘John’:

“The organization looks for separation of the victim and the offender if the women want it. She can decide whether to stay or move, as well as if she wants the aggressor to move or to stay on the premises, we try to make the other person transfer to another center.”

The informants emphasized the requirement of the victim to come forward to the authorities and disclose their experience of SGBV, as explain by ‘John’, “we only know if it’s reported or someone says something about it directly” (Interview number one). Nevertheless, several factors influence the ability of women to openly discuss their experiences, for example, cultural constraints to talk about issues of a sexual nature. ‘Rose’ explains further this:

“This is not an easy thing for people to address I think that we have still a long way to go to be able to provide the security context for the women to talk and to address....I think we have to work on, sexual abuse it so much related to shame and guilt, so it is difficult to start talking unless you have a relationship with the victim.”

Likewise, female victims have concerns associated with the impact that will have to disclose their SGBV victimization experiences on their extended communities and the perception of others of them. ‘Rose’ describes this concern:

“With migrant population there is the belief that I come forward with my story it will stigmatize my people and that the majority in Norway will believe e.g. all the Ethiopians are violent and Christian pretending to be nice, so all of this things can come up.”

Additionally, there are cultural barriers that make it difficult to talk about certain issues even with doctors which represents an obstacle for assessing different forms of care. ‘Martha’ explains some of the factors that influence the decision of female victims to talk about their experiences openly, “it is not easy for these women to talk about these issues due to cultural constraints to talk about sex, sexual violence, discuss rape within marriage, the thing you never talk about” (Interview number three). Consequently, the findings indicate that for women is usually difficult to disclose experiences of SGBV, this is consistent to the claims of Canning (2019), who states that structural barriers exist

that prevent women victims of SGBV to access psychological support, especially due to the uncertainty about the time available to conduct impactful treatments to asylum seekers.

Victimized women that are not able to talk about their experiences of SGBV face several negative consequences, for instance, an increased difficulty to get the support they need from the authorities, higher risks of revictimization and bigger constraints to determine their lives autonomously. As described by Fineman (2008) the institutions can exacerbate the vulnerability of individuals through restrictions imposed on the development of resilience capabilities. Similarly, these findings support the arguments of Bjørnholt (2019) who states that institutions can either tolerate or prevent revictimization of women victims of violence.

Furthermore, Canning (2019) who argues that the impossibility to disclose experiences of sexual violence either related to inner or structural constraints influence women's asylum case. The impact could be on one side that their cases are dismissed due to a lack of credibility, evidence, and strong grounds. And on the other side, to receive a lower level of protection for example humanitarian leave which does not grant women the right to family reunification (Bloch et al., 2000).

Finally, one relevant finding of the study was the need for spiritual support from victims of SGBV to whom faith and religion have a central role in their lives. Unfortunately, these women do not have easy access to specific support on that. Even if the women experiences of victimization were not in the context of the church or connected to their faith, women need a place in which it is recognized the relevance that faith has for them. 'Rose' explains it:

"They experience that their faith is not a part of the therapeutic conversations, this is an important part of their life is not so important when they meet healthcare in society in general, so it is important for them to feel that all their life, all the aspects of it, can find a place where they actually can bring in, were it can actually be a part of the all-healing, not only the healing but to live their lives."

The organizations that provide a safe space for women with needs for spiritual support are a minority in Norway and often have strong ties with the traditional churches. However, a particular NGO representative interviewed highlighted the recent efforts to establish the trust that could lead to a partnership with churches in immigrant communities. Additionally, this organization provides support to victims of SGBV through open dialogue spaces to share their experiences and concerns with others from a perspective that includes faith in the process.

3.2.5 Inner Resources, Individual Choice and Agency in Female Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Immigrants

The findings suggest that the informants perceived the ability of female asylum seekers to exercise individual choice in the interaction with institutions as small. Generally, the informants mentioned briefly situations in which these women would actively choose to participate in activities of their

initiative organized during the asylum and integration process. Similarly, the possibilities for them to determine their lives and be autonomous were also perceived as slight in a system that is highly regulated and standardized. Moreover, finding individual paths or to make decisions about the future is not deemed relevant by the authorities within the asylum system.

On the contrary, authorities emphasize that women finalize a series of steps within a given time frame as part of what is stipulated in the regulations for asylum and integration into society. 'Clara' describes the irrelevance of individual interests and the inexistent space for individual choice within the government's framework, "from the government point of view is not that relevant when you enter a regulated system, whatever wish you have everything is stipulated, whatever you want there are rights, there is already decided so it is not individualized" (Interview number six). This finding contrast with the arguments Sen (1985), who claims that at the core of agency, is the possibility that a person can freely pursue the goals or values that deems relevant. This is highly unlikely in the system in Norway due to its characteristics.

Concerning the inner resources of female asylum seekers, the informants mentioned the relevance of resilience, to have positive childhood experiences, strength, being capable to return to a healthier mindset, use religion and faith. These were mentioned as examples of inner resources, and as factors that enable women to deal with the emotional pressure of the asylum process, the experiences of violence and trauma.

It is important to note that all informants remarked as positive actions to improve the asylum system, women being able to discuss strategies for SGBV prevention, and to improve their participation in the asylum process. For instance, women's participation in the decision-making processes within the reception center was recognized as a high impact strategy to improve gender-sensitivity and to provide better support to migrant women through the inclusion of their needs and concerns (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2003).

A positive example identified in the study was described by 'John':

"As part of the management of the reception center there is a resident's council in which minimum one women must participate. They must come up with suggestions for improving the management of the center, the daily work, provide suggestions for the immigration authorities, planning and budgeting of activities at the center."

Conversely, given the characteristics of the system, it is difficult for these women to find spaces for participating, furthermore their strengths, capabilities and potential are ignored. Women often are asked about their weaknesses and not enough about what makes them endure difficult and traumatic situations during their migration journey. Consequently, to the emphasis of the UDI in identifying vulnerability, even the NGOs tasked to support female asylum seekers tend to focus on the displays

of weakness and need for assistance. However, the informants recognized that these women might have particular inner resources or characteristics associated with strength as discussed earlier.

Nevertheless, NGOs' efforts remain focused on spotting vulnerability in women and assist them, instead of inquiring more about the inner resources of women, how to put them in motion through the asylum process and use it as a strategy to promote women's agency. A possible explanation for these in line with the arguments of Bjørnholt (2019), might relate to the impact of the institutional design on women's possibilities to access, control and use their resources. On one hand, the reduced space available for individual choice enhances women's vulnerability, and on the other hand, the same regulations make that NGO's workers have to comply with the mandate of searching for vulnerability in the women. Consequently, the recognition of women strength does not translate into concrete actions that promote real autonomy to make decisions on their lives.

'Amy' a researcher on the refugee topic in Norway and former advisor to people working with trauma, mentioned the relevance of changing the focus on weaknesses, "ask more often about what are their strengths, recognizing people's inner value and agency, empowers them, rather than focusing on the weaknesses, which is the pattern" (Interview number five). This finding highlights how the informants perceived that for these women it makes a difference to inquire about the values that bring them strength. This finding correlates to the arguments of Charrad (2010) who points to the significance of the social context in all its diverse forms to understand the possibilities for the action of individuals. 'Amy' describes this as follows:

"Strength is cultural, the values that they have learned as children from their parents, standing up for yourself and taking responsibility for your actions and your life. The universal human values: what makes you strong is to take care of others, respect others, agency values and taking care of your life. It is very rare that they are asked about their strength."

In this sense, stressing either weaknesses or strengths as part of the recognition of the inner resources of these women could influence their self-perception and their ability to act in their benefit, even in restricted scenarios like the asylum process. Therefore, this study indicates that immigration authorities, aid workers and other actors putting the spotlight on the enabling factors, and the resources these women have been using throughout the migration journey to endure its obstacles, could open avenues for them to find strength and improve their wellbeing even in problematic situations through dialogue and self-discovery. Furthermore, as stated by Fineman (2017) the institutions have an important role to grant access or to exclude individuals from the resources needed to develop resilience to cope with vulnerability.

Women's agency is perceived by the informants as constrained through the access and control of inner and external resources, for instance, resilience, education, Norwegian knowledge, among others, but also by the characteristics of the asylum system. This finding is consistent with Bayley (2012)

who pinpoints to the inherent problems to migration and arrivals to a new country, particularly how the differences in culture, social and physical norms, spaces, and forms of interaction become factors that limit the agency of immigrant women.

During the interviews, the general framework of the Norwegian governmental institutions' system for asylum was discussed. This system is characterized by highly complex regulatory mechanisms, different entangled schemes that involve contacting many people to obtain different pieces of information. And the expectation of everyone interacting in it towards female refugees not only being able to remember the instructions received but also to find most of them on their own. This is perceived as significantly different from the previous experiences of refugee women with this type of system and is identified as an obstacle for them by the informants.

In other words, there was a shared understanding from the informants of these women as not having previously encountered a similar institutional system back in their home country. Moreover, it is perceived that women lack trust, positive experiences or direct interaction with authorities, increasing the challenges of doing everything by themselves after arriving in Norway. 'Clara' describes the main challenges refugee women face when interacting with institutions:

"The system in Norway is similar to most Western countries: It is really different from the origin countries, Africa and Eastern European countries, you need to understand information and remember it, if you can't go to the shelters or those centers, you have to find out things on your own. It has complicated routes, it requires asking about many things and understanding the rules, exceptions, etc. It is a system that even for Norwegians is difficult."

Besides, the informants perceived that for asylum seekers or refugees, it is also difficult to make choices or to be fully autonomous, given that they must follow specific regulations as part of their asylum claim or integration process. For instance, as described by 'Rose' there is little space for women to decide where to live if they are dependent on the government's economic support:

"If you come to Norway and get a place to stay in an asylum place if you are accepted if you have gotten a yes they find you a place for you to stay or if you don't want to accept that, then, of course, you can find your own place which can be difficult, but it happens, and especially many would like to go to Oslo, then you are part of the integration program, it is related to regular work that you are supposed to come to work but of course it is school program."

These findings suggest that female refugees are immersed in a rigid structure, with complicated internal dynamics that are unfamiliar, unknown and difficult to maneuver, creating a context in which agency is difficult to exercise and constantly tests the ability of women to fulfill the expectations of the system. Charrad (2010) who argues that agency is not only about individual choice, but also about the system. Therefore, female refugees' agency faces high levels of constraints and struggle to cope with the forces that oppose them.

The fact that the asylum system is designed to protect and that aims for people's self-sufficiency in extraordinary circumstances, as recognized in the integration plan. Opposes to its regulatory framework that inhibits women's agency and autonomy, which contributes to create conditions for their higher vulnerability. Notwithstanding, female refugees in some cases find ways to act on their benefit and identify spaces, people and situations they can use to get help, information, guidance, and support to achieve their goals. 'Amy' describes the interaction between the refugees and institutional officers to identify the helper:

"Relationship with a helper to be put on the right road. People working in social services have a personality type and refugee women cling into someone that they think will listen, give tips, give information on what to say, who to see, and the cultural nuances. Get help with strategies, women can perceive right away if a person wants or not to help other people."

3.2.6 Collective Agency of Female Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Immigrants

The main trend identified regarding the categories discussed within this topic, is the informant's perception that women's groups are a relevant space to get support through multiple difficult situations during the asylum and integration process. This finding is similar to Bayley (2012), who argues that immigrant women's grass-roots organizations act as a channel for them to make themselves visible and that fosters the emergence of solidarity.

'Donna' who works at a capacity building program for refugees, presents an example of the potential benefits for women of being part of a group:

"Issues in daily life like parenting in a different culture are concerns to be discussed in these groups and get support. Having laws that tell you how to behave with your children when you don't have the same framework is difficult for example. Going together you can get common information that targets your needs and help you understand why the laws are the way they are, and cope to it. It is also important in regards violence, groups or organizations provide tools to reach out to other migrant women which makes it easier."

The general perception of the informants is there are not clear obstacles for female asylum seekers to create groups, however, many of the informants do not know any women's organizations or groups with immigrant background in Norway. Nevertheless, in the case of victims of human trafficking, an informant recognized that women's concerns for their security, particularly the risks associated to be identified by former handlers, who could target the victim's family or themselves for retaliation it is the main factor preventing the women from organizing themselves.

Likewise, 'Clara' mentioned the difficulties for trusting others, experienced by women victims of human trafficking due to past interaction dynamics between them:

"They are a fragmented group, most of them do not want to be associated with other victims of trafficking, it is a dangerous and treacherous industry, many victims try to climb the ladder in their system because no one wants to be at the bottom and become oppressors of other women."

One of the informants mentioned that if women wished to create a group for themselves to discuss any topic, the organization would provide the support for that and would be willing to be part of the discussions if asked. Additionally, already within the organization, it is promoted that women participate in group activities like knitting, and others traditionally deem feminine.

‘John’ explains the approach of the organization towards female participation in groups as follows:

“Inside the reception center women form women’s groups for doing different activities like knitting, sewing, redecoration, share pastries...we encourage women to form women’s groups and give them some tools, more on activities not discussing this issues...most people are able so they just need a little push to create a group to discuss women issues.”

Consequently, these aspects suggest contradictions in what the organization aims for concerning promoting agency of female asylum seekers, as well as the spaces made available exclusively for their participation. The expression of support for the creation of women’s groups might represent a commitment to improve female asylum seekers’ wellbeing, promote their agency, and facilitate their participation in diverse activities, nevertheless there are at least three aspects worth it of further analysis.

To begin with, it is not clear if the type of group activities available for women it is influenced by their interests, or the ones of the organization. Given that it is up to women to ask about the creation of other types of groups, for instance, to get support in connection with SGBV experiences. Women’s feelings of shame and fear to disclose their experiences, as well as the need to focus on the asylum claim could prevent them to organize themselves.

In other words, women had been experiencing multiple changes in their lives that could make it difficult for them to identify certain opportunities and they lack understanding of the internal regulations of the organization. Furthermore, for some women, the experiences of SGBV might also bring difficult emotions along with the concerns of the asylum process. Dealing with these emotions becomes a priority even though it can be a challenge for women, therefore, to organize themselves is not urgent for them.

3.3 The role of the organizations at improving the system

The informants mentioned different elements to open the discussion about the measures required to improve the institutional framework of the asylum system. To begin with, the informants criticized the increasingly challenging demands from the governmental authorities to victimized women to provide physical evidence of their SGBV experiences. The emphasis on proof of the system has created the conditions for the increased vulnerability of women, for instance under the family reunification system. These women cannot access the protection of the provision that grants them the

right to have a residence permit of their own based on their experiences of violence due to lack of material support.

“There is need to go back to the beginning of the fight for this right, this provision, so the text of the provision emphasizes that the women’s version of what has happened to her should be the basis for her case, their own story should be the main source of information for the immigration institutions, now they are adding more criteria, all things that you have to prove so it is no longer enough.”

The results show that on one hand, some organizations not only have focused their work to provide attention, assistance, advice and make services available for women victims of SGBV, but also to express criticism towards certain practices of the asylum system. Also, the informants have highlighted their efforts to take to the political arena recommendations for improvement of the system.

On the other hand, the organizations whose work is focused on the attention of asylum seekers at the beginning of their process. Consequently, the representatives of these NGOs do not have enough time to identify SGBV victims and do not perceive that aspects of the institutional system enhance women’s vulnerability to further victimization.

‘John’ illustrates that lack of awareness regarding SGBV violence in female asylum seekers, “I don’t think that women feel harassed or threatened on the premises”. Similarly, ‘River’, the head of a program that guides asylum seekers, also mentioned a recent situation regarding women’s feelings of insecurity and fear, however, the perception of the informant is that women do not have strong grounds to feel insecure.

“In the past, the women have difficulties with the perception of safety, recently authorities conducted interviews with asylum seekers to hear their impression of the process in that reception center, most women reported to be uncomfortable because the toilets and shower are outside the building it is temporary due to renovations. Women have concerns with that and express fear, I don’t think is the case, because there is surveillance. It could be the same in other facilities women may feel more insecure when they are alone.”

Both these informants come from NGOs that meet asylum seekers early in the process and do not have prolonged contact with them. In the case of ‘John’ his position is administrative, and in the case of ‘River’, she only has a brief meeting that lasts between 60 and 90 minutes with the asylum seekers to give them practical information. Consequently, what the NGOs realize, and judge is influenced both by their roles and the stage in which they meet the women.

For other organizations, the constraints that female asylum seekers victims of SGBV face to access protection and support are clearer. ‘Martha’ describes the critical situation that many face and how the organization tries to help:

“They come to us and say they have to go, they cannot hold on any longer, situation is horrible we present the women with two options, you are the mother of a Norwegian child, so you have the right to apply for apply for family reunion with your own Norwegian child, the easiest choice or apply to be granted residence permit based on the basis of the violence they have experience which is difficult and long process.”

Some of the informants highlighted the relevance of the government's contribution to the availability of services for victims of SGBV through the facilitation of the required financial resources.

"Situation at the shelters are getting worse due to financial difficulties, financial resources are getting lower, it is difficult to help women if we don't have access to shelters it is not possible to help them if we cannot give the alternative of a place in a shelter has part of the help, not only provide practical information...if we can communicate with shelters, find them a place fast that is a good work...the municipalities have the responsibility for running the shelters so they have to provide enough financial resources to keep doing their work."

Besides, the informants that work with human trafficking victims and asylum seekers or immigrant women also emphasized the importance of improving the mechanisms and procedures to determine the vulnerability during the asylum claiming process.

"Having a system that identifies you and gets you in a system in which is applying all the knowledge gathered to have a streamlined process, knowledge on how to work with people that have experienced extreme trauma. So it is not fragmented, make sure the stages the person as to go through have people working there experienced working with severe trauma, this is a need for all asylum seekers, but it is acute with victims of trafficking."

Another aspect discussed in connection with improving services and support for women victims of SGBV is to offer safe spaces to disclose their experiences along with alternatives to find a sense of belonging in other communities. This is particularly relevant for immigrant women that often lack networks in Norway, or that perceive their support network as restricted to fellow immigrants from their country of origin. 'Rose' explains further this:

"They recognize that experiencing SGVB means that attachment damage as occurred, in migrant communities and churches it can be very important to have a place to belong in which can be difficult. When relationships are fuck up people need also other place where they can have a relationship with peers and get support, that's the benefit from the center to connect with people with similar experiences, understand the importance of not only having the migrant community but also another supporting community in addition not as threat to the church community, which is an issue in which they are working."

Concerning, the improvement of asylum seekers' agency, the informants mentioned briefly its incompatibility with the strict regulations of Norway which exclude it. This suggests that informants perceived their ability to produce significant changes in their organizations regarding women's agency promotion as small given that the requirement to comply with the UDI guidelines. However, it is relevant that most of the informants are critical towards the structures of the asylum system that reduce women's agency possibilities. Additionally, the informants recognize with optimism the opportunity to establish close and open dialogue with them, therefore they are committed to make the authorities at the national level aware of the challenges.

Generally, the NGOs assist female asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants in different stages of their process after arrival to Norway and work in advocacy towards the improvement of the procedures, mechanisms, and regulations that directly impact the cases of women. The organizations do this through the criticism of the governmental practices and by making recommendations that promote the improvement of the system. This is perceived by the informants as an essential part of the work they do on behalf of the women they assist.

4. Discussion

4.1 Summary of the Results

This study aimed to determine the perceptions of NGOs' representatives that work with female asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants regarding possibilities and obstacles for individual, collective agency and access to support concerning SGBV within the Norwegian asylum process. The results indicate that the core problem of the Norwegian asylum system perceived by the NGOs' representatives is the difficulty to assess the vulnerability of these women victims of SGBV creating the conditions to enhance their vulnerability. The asylum system's emphasis on visible weaknesses emerges in the context of increasingly strict migration policies that further revictimize women and inhibit their capabilities for agency and resilience.

Through the study, three trends were identified regarding the NGOs representatives' perceptions of the interaction of women with the Norwegian asylum institutions in terms of agency and access to support. Firstly, regarding women's interaction with institutions to access support related to SGBV victimization, several constraints were found. These restrictions are associated with the structural characteristics of the asylum system, for instance, the lack of an effective procedure to determine vulnerabilities that are not visible. This impacts women's possibilities to discuss their experiences of victimization and the institutional capabilities to identify the victim's needs, make services available for them, and prevent their revictimization.

From the perspective of the informants and the vulnerability approach, the Norwegian asylum system is creating societal conditions in which the universal, inescapable and common vulnerabilities of the migrant women are created and exacerbated. For example, women coming under the family reunification system whose legal residence depends on their partners endure different forms of SGBV for fear of being forced to leave the country after losing their papers. The structures of the family reunification system create spaces for an increase in women's vulnerability towards violence and revictimization, even in the cases of those who have already experienced trauma during their migration journey. Therefore, the higher risk of these women to violence it is not on account of their particular characteristics but due to the conditions created by the institutions.

Likewise, female human trafficking victims experience revictimization due to the regulations of the asylum system that requires them to identify their handlers to access protection through a special residence permit. Even though the vulnerability of this group is recognized by the authorities and the legislation has special regulations to protect them, these regulations also contribute to enhance their vulnerability. Given the lack of an effective procedure to determine the vulnerabilities that go beyond what is evident, the needs for support of victims go unnoticed.

According to Canning (2019), the impossibility to disclose experiences of sexual violence due to either inner or structural restrictions is a key issue that could impact the asylum case of the women. The impact can vary greatly, on one hand having their cases dismissed due to lack of credibility, evidence or strong grounds, and on the other hand, to receive a lower level of protection for example humanitarian leave that would not grant women the right to family reunification as the study of Bloch et al. (2000) indicates.

Furthermore, the absence of a systematic procedure to identify women's vulnerability harms their wellbeing and their abilities for agency. The present findings also suggest that the informants perceived that the government's authorities' efforts are focused on women finalizing the required stages, regardless of their underlying needs and interests. This is an example of the specific ways in which societal structures are behind the failure to provide equal access to the necessary resources for women to be resilient and to manage vulnerability. Additionally, the findings evidence that institutions create the conditions that heighten the vulnerability of these women, likewise Bloch et al. (2000), who stated that even though female asylum seekers are considered vulnerable in the Nordic countries, the asylum policies and practices in these countries reinforce the vulnerability risk of women towards violence.

Secondly, regarding the perception of opportunities and constraints for individual and collective agencies of female asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants. The informants recognized, the relevance of women speaking for themselves and creating or participating in women's groups as a means to get peer support. Additionally, the informants identified aspects of the regulatory asylum system that restrict women's agency to a certain degree. Particularly, the societal structures and the institutional designs represented in the asylum system actively reduce the opportunities of women to access resources of quality. These assets are essential for women to be resilient in the face of vulnerability and to be able to make choices in their lives.

The findings demonstrate specific ways in which this occurs, for instance through the invisibilization of strengths, the lack of strategies to identify and use women's inner resources, the unawareness of the obstacles for their collective agency, and the small opportunities to decide on their future and to pursue their own goals. Consequently, this impacts the performance of women to complete the imposed milestones of the asylum process, their wellbeing, and finally cause their failure

in dealing with their vulnerabilities. Furthermore, the inhibition of women's agency prevents them to be at the same level that the rest of the citizens in terms of self-determination, autonomy, and control of resources for resilience.

As Fineman (2017) argues, it is the structures of society that have to account for the differentiated capabilities for resilience of people to deal with vulnerability. Consequently, either individuals are privileged in their access to resources relevant to their resilience or excluded. For instance, in the case of female asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants within the Norwegian asylum system, they have been systematically excluded by its operation conditions. Moreover, Sen (1985) highlights that agency is the possibility for an individual to freely pursue the goals that considers relevant, the findings of the study indicate that in the Norwegian case it is highly unlikely to do so due to the characteristics of the system. Charrad (2010) as well mentions the impact of the social context in the opportunities for individual action, this suggests also that the current structure of the asylum process lessens the agency of women by reducing the openings for free action oriented towards the achievement of their personal goals.

Additionally, the strict regulations and the emphasis on assessing the credibility of the claims of women through physical evidence within the asylum system inhibits women's agency and resilience. Moreover, the institutions that aim to render individuals autonomous and self-sufficient create the conditions that exacerbate the vulnerability of women through the prioritization of the visibility of weaknesses. Consequently, there is no agreement regarding the definition of vulnerability and the informant's perceptions of it is highly influenced by the specific traits of the people they attend, this leaves unattended multiple psychological affections of victimized women.

Thirdly, concerning NGOs representatives perception of possibilities and constraints for collective agency from female asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants as an alternative for them to access services, to support victims of SGBV, and to express their agency. It was identified as general the unawareness of the informants about women's collective actions and efforts to create groups. Besides, the participants perceived a lack of explicit obstacles for female asylum seekers to create organizations, aside from specific cases, for instance, women victims of human trafficking. These women have difficulties to trust other people and have concerns for their security which explains the difficulty of organizing themselves.

This result presents a disparity to the broad recognition by the informants of the characteristics of the system that overtly reduce the space for agency of female asylum seekers. Furthermore, it is relevant to stress in this finding the interplay between relational and societal aspects embedded in the analysis of vulnerability, particularly concerning the creation of conditions that heighten it through the disadvantaged access to assets (Fineman, 2010). The Norwegian case highlights the negative impact of the constraints imposed by the system on the perceptions of those working under its

regulations. The limits created by the system difficult for some representatives, particularly those who do not have prolonged contact with the women, to identify the specific forms in which the regulations limit the agency of the women they aim to support.

Finally, the findings highlight the valuable work of the NGOs in advocacy towards the improvement of the procedures, mechanisms, and regulations that impact female asylum seekers. This is perceived by the informants as an essential part of their work to ensure the improvement of the support to victims of SGBV, reduce the conditions that exacerbate women's vulnerability and promote their agency.

4.2 Limitations of the Study

Relating to the limitations of this study the sample was only seven interviews. It included representatives from organizations that provide services to asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants at different stages of their process, as well as work in advocacy. However, it did not include representatives from the governmental side nor NGOs with immigrant and refugee backgrounds. Despite contacting and inviting to participate representatives from these types of organizations, it was not possible to have their participation in the study.

4.3 Implications of the Study

The current findings add substantially to the understanding of how the capabilities for agency of female asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants in Norway are perceived by the people working with the organizations that provide services to them. This contributes to the identification of specific individual and structural factors that can either act as facilitators or inhibitors of these women's agency. Therefore, to consider these findings in the design and implementation of policies, plans, and programs for these populations will impact positively the possibilities to increase women's agency.

This research also provides insight into the problematics caused by the current asylum system in Norway, particularly concerning the lack of a systematic, gender-sensitive and effective procedure to identify vulnerabilities in the female asylum seekers, that do not depend on a short assessment focus on visible weaknesses. The identification of the aspects to improve, along with a critical evaluation of the gaps of the system that enhance women's vulnerability, constrain their agency and access to support. These highlights of the study can have a significant impact in nourishing with evidence the efforts from the public and third sector to make positive changes in current regulations to benefit these women.

4.4 Suggestions for Future Research

Further work needs to be done to establish first, whether female asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants perceptions on these topics are similar or present differentiating components, including the perspectives of NGOs with immigrant or refugee background. Second, to determine the perception from immigration authorities involved in the integration of this population regarding agency and access to support after SGBV victimization. Third, to examine beyond the situation of victims of human trafficking, honor related violence and domestic violence regarding agency within different oppressive structures and their perspective of the strengths and values that allowed them to overcome diverse obstacles. Fourth, to understand the role of immigrant churches to open spaces for women's agency, and to provide support for SGBV victims from a theological perspective, which was identified in the present study as a gap. More broadly, research is also needed to determine the similarities and differences between the Norwegian case and other Scandinavian countries.

Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank my thesis supervisors, Research professor Margunn Bjørnholt of the Nasjonalt kunnskapssenter om vold og traumatisk stress and dr. Karin Österman of the Developmental Psychology Department in the Faculty of Education and Welfare Studies at Åbo Akademi University. Both of them were always eager to answer my questions, to provide me support as well as guidance through the research and writing process. They consistently encouraged me to make this document my work but steered me in the right direction whenever they thought I needed it. And I am gratefully indebted to them for their valuable comments.

I would also like to thank the informants interviewed who were vital for this research project, without their participation and input, this study could not have been successfully conducted. Their contribution would also be significant for larger research efforts, given that this master project is part of the Norwegian part of the project “Violence against women migrants and refugees: analyzing causes and effective policy response” led by Research professor Margunn Bjørnholt, NKVTS.

Finally, I must express my profound gratitude to my parents Martha H. Sarmiento and Ricardo Buendia, and my beloved husband Eduardo A. Gómez for their unconditional love, support, and encouragement throughout my years of study and through the process of researching and writing this thesis. This work is dedicated to them for making this dream come true.

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List of Abbreviations

ECHR - European Convention of Human Rights

EU - European Union

FGM - Female Genital Mutilation

IOM - International Organization for Migration

NGO - Non-Governmental Organization

PTSD - Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

ROSA - Reestablishment, Organizing safe places to stay Safety and Assistance

SGBV - Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

UDI - Norwegian Directorate of Immigration

UN - United Nations

UNHCR - United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Appendix B

List of Interview Questions

Section A: Are female refugees and asylum seekers treated as fully capable of being in charge of their own lives and integrated into the asylum process?

Could you please describe your views on the following?

1. What is your perception of the capabilities of refugee women to be in charge of their lives and their asylum process?
2. What are the expectations on women's participation during the asylum process?
3. How are women's needs, interests, and wishes considered in the asylum process?
4. Which are the major obstacles that refugee women face during the asylum process and how do they cope with them?
5. What characteristics of refugee women do you associate with vulnerability, and which ones with agency?
6. What changes are needed on different levels (community, family, societal, national, international) in order to promote refugee women's own agency?
7. What are your perceptions of the participation capabilities of refugee women victims of SGBV during the asylum process?

Section B: Are women granted the support they need after being victimized from Sexual and Gender-Based Violence?

1. In your experience, what types of sexual or gender-based violence are an issue for the women that you work with?
2. Are you involved in any services regarding sexual or gender-based violence?
3. Do women get the support they need after being victimized from sexual and/or gender-based violence?
4. How could national, regional, and international policy-makers better support migrant and refugee women in order to prevent sexual and gender-based violence?
5. In your view, what are the impediments to the women you are working with when searching for the support they need in order to deal with victimization?
6. Are there trends you have observed in recent years that we need to be attentive to in order to improve conditions for the communities/groups/individuals regarding victimization?

Section C: Would collective actions of refugee women be an alternative for them to access services, to support victims of Sexual violence and/or Gender-Based Violence, and to express their agency?

1. Can you give some examples of positive resources or services or enabling factors that you have observed on the community levels that have worked?
2. How could female refugees and asylum seekers organize themselves in order to create opportunities to a) improve their lives, b) prevent SGVB, c) support victims of SGVB?
3. Which strategies regarding prevention and support have you identified in the groups that you work with?
4. How can refugee women's participation during the asylum process enhance their empowerment in other scenarios of their life?
5. What are the obstacles that refugee women face to organize themselves to improve their lives and support each other?
6. Which strategies refugee women use to improve their access to opportunities, services, and support during the asylum process?

Appendix C

List of Indicators for Analysis

Agency:

References to perceptions of the ability of female asylum seekers, refugees or immigrants to:

- determine their lives and be autonomous
- exercise individual choice/inner resources
- having goals
- actively choosing to participate

References to the interactions between female asylum seekers, refugees or immigrants with institutions regarding possibilities of individual action:

- access to activities for self-improvement
- access to spaces for participation
- accessing guidance/help/services
- aspects associated with vulnerability
- aspects that facilitate interaction
- aspects that hinder interaction
- availability of information on procedures
- believing in their capabilities
- characteristics of the asylum system
- credibility assessment of asylum claim
- having gender-sensitive information/practices
- improving knowledge/practices at organizations
- tell their own stories for asylum claim
- weaknesses of the asylum system
- wellbeing

References to perceptions of female asylum seekers, refugees or immigrant collective actions:

- connecting with communities through groups
- obstacles for creating groups
- organizing themselves

- providing support to other women

SGBV:

References to female asylum seekers, refugees or immigrants to account for experiences of SGBV.

References to the interactions of female asylum seekers, refugees or immigrants with the institutions regarding support:

- credibility assessment of experiences of SGBV
- disclosing experiences of SGBV
- identifying needs of SGBV victims
- making services available for SGBV victims
- obstacles for accessing medical and psychological care
- police assistance in connection to SGBV
- possibilities of accessing medical and psychological care
- prevention of SGBV
- protecting SGBV victims
- SGBV victims spirituality