

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/31247916>

# Agents of Change or Passive Victims: The Impact of Welfare States (the Case of the Netherlands) on Refugees

Article in *Journal of Refugee Studies* · June 2005

DOI: 10.1093/refuge/fei020 · Source: OAI

CITATIONS

139

READS

382

1 author:



[Halleh Ghorashi](#)

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

98 PUBLICATIONS 1,805 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



ELITES: Pathways to Success project [View project](#)



PhD project: Developing inclusive spaces for refugees through engaged scholarship [View project](#)

## **Agents of Change or Passive Victims: The Impact of Welfare States (the Case of the Netherlands) on Refugees**

---

HALLEH GHORASHI

*Department of Culture, Organization and Management, Vrije Universiteit,  
Amsterdam*  
h.ghorashi@fsw.vu.nl

This paper explores the impact of a regulated society such as the Netherlands on the lives of refugees in general and on those of Iranian women refugees in particular. Two periods are distinguished in regard to Dutch asylum policies: the 1980s and post-1990. For the 1980s when refugee reception was less restricted, I use empirical material collected between 1995 and 2000. The women I interviewed during this period were leftist activists involved in the Iranian revolution of 1979 and had to leave Iran because of their political backgrounds. The material used for the post-1990 or more restricted period, is mainly from secondary sources, supplemented by occasional, informal visits to asylum seeker centres. The paper argues that a strict refugee policy—especially the policy that was put in place during the 1990s—has a direct effect on the affected refugees by making them dependents of the state. These restricted policies reinforce the image of refugees as problems in society and have an effect, albeit less direct, on the lives of the refugees who arrived prior to the 1990s and who are now Dutch citizens.

It was at the time of the Iranian revolution of 1979 that I, then a 17-year-old high school student, became a political activist. As a young activist I was ready to give my life for democracy and freedom in Iran. This conviction gave me an enormous amount of power and hope because I believed that the actions and sacrifices of people like me would bring about change. In that period, I never dreamed of being forced to leave my country and become a refugee, still less to lose my agency as an individual. Nevertheless in 1988, nine years after the revolution, I entered the Netherlands as an asylum seeker. Among the many difficulties I faced were: becoming a dependant of the state by not having a work permit, waiting endlessly for refugee status, being considered potentially dangerous because I came from an Islamic country, and being accused of laziness because I could not earn my own living.

It is from this background that I became interested in the impact of the new country on the life of political refugees. The point of departure for many welfare states such as the Netherlands has been to help the weak, the poor, and the

helpless. As noble as this premise may sound, it often has the (un)intended consequence of creating a category of people who become dependants of the state. By focusing on Dutch asylum policy in the last two decades I intend to show how refugees are influenced directly and indirectly by these policies. The main focus of this paper is on the reception of refugees, which is related to the general entry policy of the government. This reception has gradually become more restricted. At the beginning of the 1980s there were no asylum seeker centres (*Asielzoekercentra*) in the Netherlands, so refugees could become part of the society as soon as they entered the country. This situation changed from 1987 when the concept of asylum seeker centres was introduced. Asylum seekers had to stay within the centres for a set period, initially limited to a few months but after 1990 increased to several years. The main reason for the introduction of asylum seeker centres was the growing negative public perception of asylum seekers as 'bogus' and a threat to the asylum system. At the same time, people feared that a less restrictive policy would encourage more asylum seekers to come to the Netherlands. In this framework, a restrictive entry policy, the so-called 'direct measure', together with a more restricted reception policy, the 'indirect measure', was expected to help limit the numbers of asylum seekers entering the country, especially the 'bogus' ones. While the increasingly restrictive entry policy in the Netherlands is comparable to other European countries, I argue that the Dutch restricted reception policy after 1990 is closely linked to the way in which the Dutch welfare state is constructed. I will come back to this change of policy later in the paper.

The purpose of this paper is to show how restrictive policies regarding asylum seekers have negatively affected their lives. The empirical material which is used to show the effect of current Dutch restrictive policies on new entrants is mainly from secondary sources and based on the literature. In this sense this part of the paper is marginal in an empirical sense, however essential to the point I intend to make. This point is that the first years for refugees in exile are potentially the most essential for future success. In order to show this point I present empirical evidence collected between 1995 and 2000. In this study I interviewed Iranian women refugees who had been political leftist activists in Iran during the revolution of 1979 and entered the Netherlands before the 1990s. This group of refugees was not subject to restrictive policies, and as I argue below, this was one of the main contributors to the ways in which they adapted to the new country. However, I show that restrictive policies since the 1990s—combined with other factors—also indirectly influenced the lives of these women in the later phase of their stay. I use identity as a concept in order to introduce the experiences of the women I interviewed.

Identity is a crucial concept when it comes to exploring the lives of refugees. Questions such as 'who am I', 'where do I belong', and 'what will become of me' are especially relevant when one finds oneself in an insecure situation, cut off from the past, unsettled in the present, and unsure of the future. Identity here is defined as a narrative of the self: a dynamic process, a changing view of the self and the other that constantly acquires new meanings and forms through

interactions with social contexts and within historical moments (see also Giddens 1991). In other words, the process of identity formation includes different settings from the past and the present. As Hall puts it: 'identity emerges as a kind of unsettled space . . . between a number of intersecting discourses' (1991: 10). Therefore, identity, as a process of becoming, occurs through an intersection of various past and present discourses, which involve both elements of change and continuity (see also Ghorashi 2003). These intersecting discourses include a certain amount of tension between, in Wekker's (1998) words, the images we have of ourselves and the images of us which are presented by the dominant culture. In other words the tension is between the self-image and the attributed image. Let me then start with the self-image of the women of this study, beginning with their experiences as political activists.

### **From Agency to Suppression: The Past Experiences**

After the Iranian revolution of 1979, scenes in the streets changed drastically, especially in front of the University of Teheran. Bookshops were filled with previously illegal books. In front, stands displayed newly printed books, tapes of revolutionary music, and a multitude of newspapers from diverse political groups. In front of almost every stand a group of people discussed political issues and plans for the future of the country. Men and woman of all ages and classes took part in passionate debate. Interest in politics at that time dominated all other differences; the only difference that mattered was political. Sara,<sup>1</sup> who was 17 years old during the revolution, called those years really special:

I think that I learned a lot then. I was thirsty for knowledge and I learned many things. It was as if I ate the books; I did not just read them, believe me. Most of the things I studied were in that period. I still make use of my stockpile of knowledge from that period. The knowledge of those years was so intense that I can still use it now. I think to myself, how can two or three years affect people so much, especially our generation?

Minoo, a 20-year-old during the revolution, related her feelings:

The most wonderful thing, which I will never forget, and to which I always long to return, was the possibility for discussion between people. [. . .] I had never seen so many people, so much discussion, everybody debating different issues. Lots of new books and films came on to the market then. [. . .] Politics became a part of the life of all levels of society. Everybody had the right to express herself or himself, even traditional people. . . . I witnessed the most wonderful, historical changes. Nobody—the organizations, the Shah, and even the West—expected that people would go so far. All of them were shocked, including us. [. . .] The discussions continued day and night, one quoting Lenin, another quoting [religious leaders such as] Ali. [. . .] I never had seen so many people, so many discussions, everybody debated about different issues. [. . .] I was proud of that, I felt respect towards me, and this respect was also because of some improvements for women in that period.

The fact that these changes were limited afterwards is a different story. I had a very special feeling because of this respect, and it also shaped my character at that time. I think that lots of people had that. It caused a very strong self-confidence especially in that age of being a young adult. I was thinking that I had found my way of life so clearly, and I could see that women are able to do things.

Sima, who was 17 during the revolution, began her political activities around the time of the revolution.

I had a lot of contact with known political activists. I found it really interesting; I was so young. When I look back, I can see why Anne Frank's book is so striking. She was someone who had the same kind of political and 'underground' experiences, and most importantly, at the same age as I did. I think that if Anne Frank had been 30 years old when she wrote her diary, the story would not have been so influential. Do you understand? I think now that if I had been 30 years old then, living that sort of life, this whole situation might seem very normal. But I was very young then and had so many opportunities to become involved in political activities, it was really exciting for me. I remember that when I was 17 years old, I went to a strike to interview the workers about their wishes. Together with some other people, I later published a report about it. That was a good thing, because someone of such a young age could become involved in those kinds of political activities. Do you understand? To do big things, this is what I mean.

For Samira, then 19 years old, the most important aspect of those years was that her political activism after the revolution gave her a strong sense of self-confidence.

I felt for the first time that I was someone. I was always studying but when I became a member of a political organization, I was satisfied with the fact that I was someone. I was then 19 years old. Before that I was not responsible for anything, but all of a sudden I became a person who was in charge of some people and there was a person who was in charge of me. Life became different; it was really satisfying for me. I really enjoyed it when I went to demonstrations. This feeling of joy is maybe what I feel now, but at that time I felt that I was doing something. I did not have to stay at home and wait until someone entered the door. It was really like that, before I became politically active.

Those years of freedom were beautiful, but they did not last. Those years full of hope and optimism changed to years full of fear and emptiness: a period called 'the years of suppression'. Various political groups began clashing during the first months after the revolution. Although people were free to demonstrate and discuss in the streets, disagreements gradually took on more virulent forms. Occasional violent confrontations led to a decisive change of power in June 1981, and from that time on, the streets of Iran, especially Tehran, were dominated by brutal and bloody scenes. Those who opposed the Islamists in power remember those days and the years that followed as hell. Those years were associated with hell as much as the first years of the revolution were associated

with paradise. The symbolic use of paradise and hell to explain those events may seem somewhat exaggerated; yet this is the way many activists remember that time.

In spite of the years of suppression which followed 1981, the participation in the revolution and the space created afterwards gave these women enormous agency. They became aware of their rights as women and as citizens. It was no longer taken for granted that women should stay at home as housewives and mothers and not take part in public decision-making. Women obtained a taste of freedom to decide about political, social, and cultural aspects of their lives. These women realized for the first time that they had a voice and that their voice counted. The period of suppression did not undermine their agency. The fact that they were suppressed had to do with the fact that they had become agents of change. Thus, even when the years of suppression became their worst nightmares, it did not turn these women into helpless victims. In their self-image, these women remained activists, fighters who had to leave their country because of their agency. Yet, this self-image came to clash with the dominant discourse on refugees in the Netherlands.

### **Victimized Refugees: The Outcome of Welfare States**

The twentieth century has witnessed massive movements of people from their countries of origin because of war, natural disasters, economic inequities, and political conflicts. Interest in questions regarding refugees is increasing both in the media and among scholars. This interest, however, goes together with increasingly negative connotations attached to the word 'refugee' (Summerfield 1999: 126). Prevailing negative images picture refugees as helpless victims. Harrell-Bond's study of aid organizations describes some of the images related to refugees. 'The documents I obtained from agencies emphasized images of helpless, starving masses who depend on agents of compassion to keep them alive' (Harrell-Bond 1999: 147). The main impact of these negative images leads to 'the premise that refugees are necessarily a problem' (Malkki 1992: 33). Refugees in this sense become a category of people who are dependent on governments and organizations, and who are thus a burden on their host societies.

Images of refugees as helpless people may come from the fact that they are often victims of violence. The implicit use of the concept of forced migration can lead to overlooking aspects of choice, especially limited choice. Disregarding the aspect of choice in exile carries the danger of ignoring the agency of refugees (Agha 1997). Because they are so often the victims of violence and forced migration, many assume that refugees also have no agency. In addition, I argue that in the context of highly regulated states, this image of helplessness is stronger. In these countries the strictly defined roles of refugees can have disastrous effects. For example, the Finnish approach to refugees has been described as treating them like

other weak groups such as children, disabled people and alcoholics. . . . [they are] often understood as persons who must undergo a kind of re-socialisation into

Finnish society . . . treated in the same way as small children. . . . there is a risk that the welfare system transforms active adult refugees into passive clients (Wahlbeck 1997: 101, cited in Harrell-Bond 1999: 151).

Considering refugees as helpless carries the danger of making them passive and dependent on governmental or non-governmental aid. Newly developed dependence can create new sets of expectations.

The image of helpless refugees, desperately in need, reinforces the view that outsiders are needed to help them. [. . .] The standard image of the helpless refugee also reinforces the view of their incapability, motivating people from all walks of life to offer their services (Harrell-Bond 1999: 150).

Such interaction creates a hierarchical relationship between the giver and the receiver. It also develops a strong sense that refugees should be 'grateful'. The ones who do not fall within this category are considered manipulators. In this context, these negative images of refugees become part and parcel of the dominant discourse of the society in a way that seems almost impossible to change. The images of refugees in the Netherlands are in line with the images mentioned above. However, what is striking in the case of the Netherlands is that the Dutch welfare system makes refugees dependants of the state and then blames them for their dependency on the state.

### **The Dutch Welfare System and the Reception of Refugees**

In the Netherlands, social security is highly structured. Since the 1950s Dutch citizens have enjoyed a high level of security in areas such as unemployment benefits, health care, and retirement pensions. Unemployment benefits are linked to the minimum wage. However, during the course of the 1980s policies changed, and people's own contribution to such things as health care and retirement pensions increased sharply (van Walsum 2000: 288). These changes meant a change in the structural protection of the government regarding social security. From the early 1990s, social security became a combination of government and private investment, in which the government contribution remained dominant. In September 2003, the new government proposed limiting the government's contribution even more. By 2004, this process of 'neo-liberalism' has gone as far as claiming to redefine the welfare system. This shift is not only connected to the economic regression in the country, but also to a backlash against the welfare policies of the 1990s. A good example of these policies is the reception policy for asylum seekers in which government intervention has increased over the years.

From the 1980s, the Netherlands has witnessed a significant increase in the number of asylum seekers. That said, this number 'seems to be stabilizing at around 40,000 per year' (Ascoly *et al.* 2001: 377). At the same time, Dutch asylum policy changed from being rather relaxed in the 1980s to becoming extremely strict by the end of the 1990s. Part of this change is the restrictive entry policy

aimed at lowering the numbers coming to the Netherlands by keeping the so-called 'bogus' asylum seekers out. Increasing public dissatisfaction about the growing number of asylum seekers, with the assumption that most of them are not 'real refugees', created the setting for the introduction of restricted reception policies since the end of 1980s. However it has been the highly regulated character of Dutch society that has determined the ways that asylum seekers centres have been set up.

In the early 1980s, mainly quota or 'invited' refugees entered the country. This group came to the Netherlands through a third country with the help of UNHCR. These refugees had residence permits and places to live as soon as they entered the Netherlands. Towards the end of the 1980s the number of quota refugees decreased and a larger number of asylum seekers came to the Netherlands. Before 1987, asylum seekers who entered the country had to find their own place to live after reporting to the police. They were entitled to unemployment benefits equal to the amount received by unemployed Dutch citizens. Yet, they were not allowed to work until they had legal status as refugees. The only sources for help at that time were the refugee aid organizations that provided information regarding language courses and accommodation. In 1987, the new regulation, *Regionale Opvang Asielzoekers* (regional reception of asylum seekers or ROA) was introduced. This meant that asylum seekers had to first stay in the asylum seeker centres for a period of time, after which they were distributed throughout the country (Böcker and Doornbos 1998: 210). They were then transferred to the so-called ROA houses that they had to share with other asylum seekers. Under ROA regulations, asylum seekers did not receive any unemployment benefits as they had earlier, but their rent and other costs were paid and they received some spending money. They had to stay in those circumstances until they obtained legal status and residence permits. In the first years of the ROA regulations, the asylum seeker centres served as a temporary base—for not more than a few months—before transfer to the ROA houses. This temporary stay at asylum seeker centres changed from being a matter of months at the end of the 1980s to a matter of years at the beginning of 1990s. In 1994, a new regulation was introduced which made the situation even more complicated. This new regulation required that all asylum seekers register their applications through three *aanmeldcentra* (centres for registration). Within 24 hours a distinction was to be made between the ones who did not seem to have a chance for asylum status and the ones who did. The second group was then sent to an *Onderzoeks- en Opvang Centrum* (investigation centre) for a short period before being transferred to *asielzoekercentra* (asylum seeker centres) where they would stay for longer periods of time until receiving legal status (Doornbos and Sellies 1997). From 1996, asylum seeker centres no longer served as a temporary base for transfer to ROA houses. Instead asylum seekers had to stay in the centres until their residence permits were issued, which could take even more years (Böcker and Doornbos 1998: 210). The stage of the asylum procedure at which an asylum seeker finds him- or herself governs the type of reception centre in which they must live. The length of the procedure also dictates the length of time for which the asylum



seeker will be resident in a centre and thus fully dependent on the state for all provisions of shelter, food, health services, education etc. While in a centre the asylum seeker has little or no opportunity for independent decision-making about basic elements in his or her own circumstances.

### **Iranian Women: ‘Working Hard, that was my Painkiller’**

There are up to 30,000 Iranians living in the Netherlands, less than half of whom are women.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to other European countries such as France, Germany, and England, the existence of the Iranian community in the Netherlands is recent and is a direct result of the Iranian revolution of 1979. From the beginning of the 1980s Iranians came to the Netherlands as political refugees, the majority in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The political, cultural, and social activities of Iranians are limited in the Netherlands. Iranian gatherings are incidental; one cannot speak of a strong Iranian community in the Netherlands. The organized gatherings are mainly related to Iranian national festivities or political events. The lack of a strong community does not mean that Iranians are invisible in the Netherlands. In fact, the opposite is true: Iranians have been visible in various fields, such as politics, literature and science. Good examples of this are Farah Karimi (Green Party member of the Dutch Parliament since 1998), Kader Abdolah (writer and columnist) and Afshin Ellian (scholar and columnist).

The women I interviewed were lucky enough to enter the Netherlands before the 1990s. For that reason these post-1990 regulations did not have a direct impact on their lives in the first years of their stay. One-third of these women were part of the category of ‘invited refugees’. As mentioned earlier, this group could start a new life in the Netherlands almost without delay. The other two-thirds of the women were asylum seekers and had to wait for an average of three years for their residence permit. Of this group, the women who entered the country after 1987 were subjected to ROA regulations and had to stay in the asylum seeker centres for several months before they were transferred to ROA houses. Those houses were located in the middle of the cities. Thus, for these women, ROA regulations did not mean isolation because they were in the middle of Dutch society after a few months. Most of them did not have work or residence permits for years but were able to achieve a lot by moving between the lines. For example, even though they were not allowed to study because they did not have residence permits, most of the women began a course of study at colleges and universities. They were helped to enter university by organizations such as the University Assistance Fund (UAF). My own experience follows as an example.

When I came to the Netherlands in 1988, I wanted to start learning Dutch right away. I had heard from others that the special language courses for refugees were not fast and intensive enough, so I decided to follow an intensive course at one of the universities. The price for the course was 200 Guilders—almost €100—every two months. As a ‘ROA-refugee’ receiving around 400 Guilders per month, I could not afford the course by myself, so called one of the refugee aid organizations to ask for a loan. To my shock the person on the other end of the

line told me that the level of language courses at the universities was too high for refugees, and insisted that I follow the courses that were meant for refugees. These courses were given once a week and had a waiting list of months. Her point was clear to me: refugees were too dumb to start a course at the university. However, I was not so easily discouraged and paid for the course at the university with the help of friends. I later recovered the whole amount from the municipality. Once I was able to show that I could speak fairly good Dutch in quite a short period of time, all doors were opened. I became a client of the UAF, which supported me in my university education. When I was a third year student of anthropology, I received the first negative decision on my refugee application. In response, I gave my lawyer a ten-page reaction to the decision. When I finally got my refugee status shortly after that, I was able to find a job immediately. I did not lose a second in the Netherlands, and this was only possible because I could move between the official lines. And this was my salvation.

Most of the women participating in this study had the same kind of opportunity to move between the lines and enjoyed higher education in the period that they were not allowed to do so. Like me, most of them easily found jobs as soon as they received residence permits. These women shared the feeling that they did not waste any time in their new country. Being active from the beginning helped them to forget the past for a little while. In addition, being active helped them deal with the guilt feelings they had regarding people they had left behind. Saba, a 43-year-old woman, narrated her view in the following way:

In the beginning I had a really difficult time because I came with memories from Iran. The political activists I knew were either dead or in prison, and I was the only person who could leave. During the first years of my life here I felt really guilty. The idea that my life was saved and so many other lives were lost was really painful to me. I felt an emptiness inside. To fill this emptiness and to escape from these thoughts, I began learning the language and soon after I followed a short course at the university. I also worked for several years in the office against racism in Amsterdam. For one year I became unemployed and in that year I noticed the importance of work and how difficult it is not to have a job. Some may disagree with me but I got this view from this society. I always fight against becoming a burden. I hate being dependant on the society and other people. I love to work and to study because that has been the painkiller in my life. It really eased the pain of my past.

Saba's narrative shows that it is essential for the majority of refugees to be active during the first years of their stay in a new country. This importance of being active during the first years is not only because it helps them to temporarily distance themselves from the past, but also because by building a new life they can feel useful and appreciated. In other words, being active in the first years of stay in exile is an essential condition for thriving. Yet, this does not have to be the case for all the refugees. Some have to cope with their past directly after their arrival and are not able to be active. However, for the women who participated in this study, the fact that they could be active helped them to achieve much in a short period of time. This is the most remarkable difference between

these women and others who entered the Netherlands after 1990. The less restrictive policies in place prior to the 1990s made it possible for these women to start a new life with or without residence permits. The strict policies put in effect after 1990 made this almost impossible: asylum seekers had to stay for years in secluded asylum seeker centres waiting for a decision on their application. In this period they could not learn the language, study, or work. This made these post-1990 refugees entirely dependent on the state. I briefly focus on this point before I elaborate on the influence of the discourses on the women of this study.

### **Post-1990: 'I Feel Trapped between the Walls'**

In the early 1990s, asylum seekers had to wait in asylum seeker centres for one or two years before they were transferred to ROA houses. Later in the 1990s, they had to stay even longer (an average of four years) within these centres while waiting for a decision on their residence permits. During this time they were not allowed to work or learn the language or to become socially involved within Dutch society. This condition has had disastrous consequences for this group for various reasons.

Firstly, it is essential for refugees with traumas from the past not to be limited in their space of movement. During my visits to the asylum seeker centres it was common to hear: 'I feel trapped between the walls'. Living in a room for years without the possibility of having meaningful activities means that one is left alone with one's memories.

Secondly, not having a chance to build a new life makes it impossible to gain distance from the past by becoming active participants in the new society. Asylum seekers do not have the chance to deal with their feelings of guilt, and as a result this feeling grows day by day. They feel powerless. 'All we do is eat and sleep; we live like animals' [ . . . ] 'Each day is the same, every day I know what will happen, it's killing me' (experiences of asylum seekers in Geuijen 2000: 108).

Thirdly, years of insecurity within the asylum seeker centres makes the past dangers and fears of their homelands more vivid than necessary. In this way, when asylum seekers are physically living in a new country, they are still forced to live in the past emotionally and psychologically. 'The situation here is worse than being in prison. At least there you know when you will be released' (*ibid.*: 109). 'The psychological effects or traumatic experiences from the homeland are less serious than the ones here. We are stuck here for three or four years without any prospects' (*ibid.*: 108).

A recent study in the Netherlands of the various coping styles of asylum seekers in the centres has shown that in spite of the limitations within these centres, some are able to stay or become active (Kramer *et al.* 2003). However the majority lose motivation and passion for a new start after years of frustration. Research on the experiences of asylum seekers in different asylum seeker centres has shown the impact of these centres on the lives of refugees later on (Geuijen 1998, 2000, 2003; Shahbazy Feshtaly 2003; van den Tillaart *et al.* 2000). Seclusion and forced passivity combine to waste away the first and most important years of

their lives in exile. In most cases, the experiences of the asylum seeker centres overshadow the lives of refugees, even years after they have left the centres. In addition, dependency builds dependency. People who have spent years living as dependents of the state find it difficult to live independently later. This is not just because they have lost their motivation after years of insecurity, but also because the society itself blames them for those years of waste that end up limiting their possibilities. In most cases, the way these refugees are treated within the asylum seeker centres results in a loss of self-image as independent and active people. 'I feel worthless, like a disposable object' (experiences of asylum seekers in Geuijen 2003: 326). This feeling of worthlessness, combined with painful experiences in the early years, makes them feel unwelcome in the new society. They feel that they are not given the chance to show what they are capable of.

My life is slipping by. For years I have done nothing but wait. I used to work very hard. Now the time just passes. I could do a lot for this country. Why won't they let me work? (*Ibid.*: 326).

The women in this study did not face similar difficult situations in asylum seeker centres. A rather loose asylum policy prior to the 1990s allowed them the possibility of being active. This became an important condition for them to thrive in the Netherlands. Thus, they were not directly affected by the post-1990 policies. However, the post-1990 policies have had an indirect effect on the lives of these women. The image of refugees as helpless victims who are alive by the grace of Dutch taxpayers became stronger because of the restrictive policies of the 1990s and affected the lives of these women who were by then active participants in the society as Dutch citizens.

### **Legal Inclusion and Discursive Exclusion**

All of the women of this study found their new life an enormous challenge; yet all of them were actively busy becoming part of their new society. They were extremely hopeful in their first years in exile and eager to grasp available chances. In spite of some slight differences, the first contacts of Iranian women with Dutch people were positive. Most of these women even told me that the situation in the Netherlands was better than they had expected from a European society. They did get frustrated for other reasons. In the first years many were shocked by the way they were treated by government officials. 'They took my fingerprints, I could not believe that. These kinds of things were really painful for me. We came here for a safe place, and they treated us like criminals'. Some told me that their encounters with the police were often painful. They had to go to a police station in order to stamp their temporary resident card twice a month, had to wait in long queues, and were treated discourteously.

Often when it was my turn to stamp my card, I gave my card and said hello. The policeman behind the window did not even respond, just took the card, stamped it,

and threw it back to me. Every time I needed to go for the stamp I had a stomach ache for days before, and I felt terrible days after. I had to go there twice a month and felt bad about two weeks in a month.

In addition, the social position of most of the women I interviewed changed drastically after entering the Netherlands. Some who belonged to upper middle-class families had to cope with a lowered economic standard of living for some years. Others, who had for some time enjoyed a prestigious place as intellectuals in Iran because of their political activism, felt they were treated as if they were stupid. But despite these social and economic aspects, the common impression of the Netherlands remained positive in the first years. In those years the hope of beginning a new life and being accepted within the new society was still there. This positive feeling toward Dutch society was eventually replaced with frustration. Despite their attempts to become a part of this society and to learn the language quickly, the women felt a kind of uprootedness in the later phase of their stay. The disappointment began when they wanted to be accepted and treated as equals but continued to be treated as strangers. This experience of being excluded, of being made 'the other' was in many ways similar to those of other migrant women in the Netherlands (Essed 1995; Lutz and Moors 1989). In the following part I elaborate on the factors that have contributed to this feeling of otherness.

The first factor is that migration in the Netherlands is generally perceived as temporary rather than permanent. The discourse on migration in the Netherlands is dominated by the arrival of 'guest workers' in the late 1950s. Postwar economic growth and the need for unskilled labour forced the Dutch government to look beyond its borders, fostering labour contracts first with Italy and Spain and later with Turkey and Morocco (Wilterdink 1998: 58). In the 1980s the Dutch government shifted its policy regarding guest workers when it realized that this 'temporary' migration had gained a more permanent character (Entzinger 1998: 68). The status of this group changed to '(im)migrant' (Lutz 1997: 99). In spite of this legal shift, the general image of temporary migration related to these ex-'guest workers' did not change. Efforts were made to stimulate the repatriation of first- and second-generation immigrants to their countries in 2000 (van het Loo *et al.* 2001: 59). Minister Nawijn (Minister of immigration policy and integration at the time of the statement) went even one step further by suggesting that Moroccan criminals with Dutch nationality should be sent back to Morocco (*De Telegraaf* 23 August 2002). This close link of migration with return creates an image of migrants as temporary guests who do not belong in society. The construction of otherness is embedded in the ideology of certain images and practices of 'who belongs' and 'who does not belong' and with the construction of certain images of nation that exclude migrants. The migrant as 'other' is 'constructed as not belonging to the nation and yet living inside it' (Räthzel 1995: 165).

The second factor in this process of exclusion is the manifestation of ethnicity in physical appearance that shapes the perception of migrants as 'others'. There is a clear-cut division in Dutch society between the white self and the black

other. This division goes further than just physical appearance and has strong normative connotations (Wekker 1998: 59). When whiteness is the norm, a dark-looking person is a deviance from the norm. The Dutch word *allochtoon*, which refers to ethnic minorities in the Netherlands, is a good example of this division based on colour.

The notion of *allochtoon* is not used for just any 'non-native', such as US, British, or German immigrants, but explicitly for 'non-natives of colour' and for immigrants with real or attributed Muslim identity. The term *allochtoon* is functional in setting apart people from the South, both the newly arriving refugees and the established black and ethnic minority groups, from a constructed image in which 'genuine' Dutch or European identity is a white identity (Essed 1995: 53).

The racial aspect of otherness is strongly expressed by women I interviewed in the use of the term *kale-siyah* (blackheads) to express the way Europeans perceive Iranians. Iranians also use this word in some other European countries:

We are always blackheads (*svartskallar*) in the eyes of Swedes. We can never make a career and are isolated all the time (from an interview quoted in Graham and Khosravi 1997, 120).

*Kale-siyah*, an expression used by some Iranians living in Europe to express how they are perceived by Europeans in general, connotes being stupid, uncivilized, and dangerous. The use of this kind of labelling shows that Iranians within Dutch society feel perceived as an unwelcome other.

The third factor in the construction of 'the other' is the mixed and often contradictory images of refugees in general. On the one side, refugees are seen as helpless victims, and on the other as potential dangers for the society based on the possibility that they are not 'real refugees'. Restricted entry and reception policies are introduced to protect the society from the 'bogus' asylum seekers. The effect of these policies is that refugees in general are seen as untrustworthy, until otherwise proven. However the time required to prove otherwise in the Dutch case, leads to isolating this group and reinforcing the image of dependant victims. Strict isolation of asylum seekers from society, forcing them into years of insecurity and suspense, yet providing them a minimum base to survive and not allowing them to provide for themselves, are examples of the ways in which the Dutch asylum reception policy is strongly linked to the Dutch welfare system. This makes the Dutch context quite similar to the Finnish context in which 'the welfare system transforms active adult refugees into passive clients' (Wahlbeck in Harrell-Bond 1999: 151). In the case of refugee women, the combination of gender and ethnicity makes the aspect of passivity and victimization even stronger. Dominant images of femininity in Dutch society shape the perception of migrant women as 'the victimized other'. According to these images, Dutch women are modern and emancipated, while Iranian women—as women from the Middle East—are seen as oppressed and traditional. Such stereotypical perceptions not only disregard that in every society some women are 'modern' or

'progressive' while others are 'traditional' and 'conservative', but also ignores the struggle of these Iranian women activists against traditional ideas in Iran. In this way, these women face a new burden they did not expect, namely the dominant stereotypes of Middle Eastern women, in which they are seen as dependent and passive victims (van Baalen 1997; Lutz and Moors 1989; Spijkerboer 1994). This construction of an 'imagined other' can be seen as part of a process of othering of the Orient, which Edward Said (1978) named 'Orientalism' (see also Jansen 1996; Lutz 1991; Spijkerboer 1999). Not surprisingly the women of my research were frustrated by this. Soraya, 49 years old, expressed it as follows:

They think of us as backward women, being continually beaten by men. They think that they have to emancipate us. I tell them, the way I was dressed before the time of Khomeini was much better than the way I am dressed now. We had beautiful clothes, and in Iran we were very well dressed; here people do not care much about their appearance, and I dress worse than I used to in Iran.

Another reaction is from Laleh, a 48-year-old woman who has lived in the Netherlands for about eleven years:

It is like this, you have to explain constantly. They think that in Iran we always had to wear scarves and veils. They say: 'Do you like it now here, are you more comfortable here?' My God, the obligation to wear a scarf only began a few years ago, before that we didn't have to. They ask: 'Did your parents arrange your marriage?' For God's sake, we didn't have that. Maybe it happened in villages and among some sections of society, but not with all Iranians. You see? These are the false impressions of our society.

The images of Middle Eastern women as passive and dependant victims combined with the general perception of refugees as helpless people makes Iranian women the ultimate victim by definition. 'Institutions involved with refugee care tend to patronize refugee women, whom they consider pitiful, traditional and backward' (Essed 1995: 49). In spite of all they have achieved in the Netherlands, these women are constantly faced with an image of themselves as victims. Many women used the Dutch word *ziefelig*, which means pitiful, several times in their narrative. Leila, a 43-year-old woman expressed her view:

In the eyes of the Dutch people I am a burden; I am living with their tax money. They often say: 'why should my taxes be spent on foreigners?' You see this in their eyes. There are of course different kinds of Dutch, for example intellectuals, who are different. But it is generally like that. As a foreigner, I could easily be blamed for all the problems.

Taraneh, 37 years old, was even more emotional on this point:

In the beginning I liked when people asked me where I came from. I thought to myself: 'how nice that they want to know more about us'. Then you explain about



your past and then they say: 'oh, how pitiful (*zielig*)'. Then I thought to myself 'how come pitiful?' My story is not pitiful at all. I did not want to be seen as a pitiful person. The things I did in Iran and the things I have done here are not important in their eyes at all, the only way they see me is as a pitiful person. [...] the Dutch look at you with pity. [...] To be honest, in the beginning I wanted to cry most of the time because of this patronizing attitude.

Fereshteh, a 40-year-old, goes one step further:

The Dutch are on your side when you are the most pitiful (*zielig*) person in front of them, and it goes back to their way of Calvinist thinking that tells them that God will praise them if they help 'the needy'. But if you want to stand at the same level as they are, and you say: 'I am working just like you, have the same qualities as you, and my rights are the same as yours'. They cannot accept it. They will hate you so bad that you cannot stand up. But Iranians do not accept being treated like victims. When they stand up against this, they are considered ungrateful.

In spite of their achievements in the new society such as speaking the language, participating in higher education, and securing good jobs, the Iranian women participating in this study came to realize that even though they were legally included as Dutch residents, they were discursively excluded from being part of society. In this way the post-1990 period in which the image of refugees as helpless victims is reinforced has an indirect effect on ex-refugees who have become Dutch citizens.

The institutionalization of the reception of asylum seekers in the Netherlands has contributed to an intense production of discourses in which 'the asylum seekers' are constructed as the problem of the society (Grifhorst and van Ewijk 1998: 23).

These negative discourses have resulted in a situation where the Iranian women—the new Dutch citizens—feel that they do not belong. The dominant image within Dutch society that sees them as helpless victims and burdens clashes with the self-image of these women as achievers and active subjects. This clash of images contributes to the situation in which the women of this study feel uprooted within Dutch society in spite of their efforts and achievements.

## **Conclusion**

The impact of welfare states, such as the Netherlands, on the lives of refugees is such that it transforms active participants into passive dependants of the state. It does this by creating an isolated form of reception and treating refugees as weak people who are not able to act independently. In this way, refugees waste potentially the most effective years of their lives in a new country in isolation and passivity. An active life in the early years of their exile could help them to distance themselves from the past and to put energy into building a new life in the new country. However, an isolated form of reception not only



destroys these years, it also contributes to the situation in which refugees can become prisoners of the past. As a result, people whose condition of survival is to be active and productive are reduced to people who are passive and so become burdens on society. The Dutch situation is yet another example of how the system can cause its own problems that it is then not able to solve. The case of pre-1990 refugees in the Netherlands, with the example of the Iranian women of this study, shows that refugees are people who know how to survive. A minimum and temporary form of assistance together with space for interaction within the new society made it possible for the women of this study to thrive in the Netherlands. However, strong negative images of refugees—reinforced by the post-1990 policies in the Netherlands—and the general perception of migrants as ‘unwanted guests’ create an exclusive discourse towards migrants and refugees in general and the Iranian women of this study in particular: women who are legally and socially included based on their investments in and their contributions to the new society. Dutch asylum policies that went into effect in the 1990s influenced newly arriving asylum seekers by preventing them from participating in society. They also affected ex-refugees by creating an image of the refugee as helpless and victimized. The new regulations, which isolate refugees and make them state dependents, provide those proponents of exclusive discourses with the justification they need to picture refugees as ‘the problems’ of the society. These images remind ex-refugees constantly that they are ‘unwelcome guests’ in Dutch society.

1. For safety reasons and to protect the anonymity of the women interviewed, names used in this piece are pseudonyms.
2. In January 1999, according to the Central Bureau of Statistics, 19,022 first-generation Iranians and 1,602 second-generation Iranians were registered in the Netherlands. The statistics do not differentiate by sex. Thus, the number of Iranian women in the Netherlands is a rough estimate based on my own observation. The number also excludes Iranians (both with and without refugee status) living in the asylum seeker centres or COA (*Central Opvang Asielzoekers*). In August 1999, according to COA, 4,053 Iranians were living in the asylum seeker centres. This number, however, does not include non-registered Iranians. For this reason the actual number is higher than the officially recorded numbers.

AGHA, T. (1997) ‘The Biographical Significance of Flight and Exile’. Unpublished paper translated as part of Ph.D. diss. *Lebensentwürfe im Exil: Biographische Verarbeitung der Fluchtmigration iranischer Frauen in Deutschland*, Campus Verlag, Frankfurt.

ASCOLY, N., van HALSEMA, I. and KEYSERS, L. (2001) ‘Refugee Women, Pregnancy, and Reproductive Health Care in the Netherlands’, *Journal of Refugee Studies* 14(4): 371–393.

van BAALEN, A. (1997) ‘Asiel in Wonderland: De partiarchalising van vluchtelingen’, *Tijdschrift voor vrouwenstudies* 18(4): 418–432.

BÖCKER, A. and DOORNBOOS, N. (1998) ‘Inleiding: Toelating en opvang van asielzoekers’, *Migrantenstudies* 4: 210–211.

DOORNBOOS, N. and SELLES, J. P. P. (1997) *Het overlegmodel in de asielprocedure*, Reeks Recht and Samenleving nr. 14, Instituut voor Rechtssociologie, Nijmegen.

ENTZINGER, H. (1998) ‘Het voorportaal van Nederland; inburgeringsbeleid in een multi-culturele samenleving’, Geuijen, C. H. M. (ed.), *Multiculturalism*, Lemma, Utrecht: 67–81.

- ESSED, P. (1995) 'Gender, Migration and Cross-Ethnic Coalition Building', Lutz, H., Phoenix, A. and Yuval-Davis, N. (eds), *Crossfires: Nationalism, Racism and Gender in Europe*, Pluto Press, London: 48–64.
- GEUIJEN, K. (1998) 'Wonen en werken in een asielzoekerscentrum' (Living and working in asylum seeker centres), *Migrantenstudies* 4: 261–273.
- GEUIJEN, K. (2000) 'Living and Working in an Asylum Seekers' Residence Centre', Gastelaars, M. (ed.), *On Location: The Relevance of the 'Here' and 'Now' in Organizations*, Shaker, Maastricht: 105–123.
- GEUIJEN, K. (2003) 'Constraints and Constructions of Meaning in an Asylum Seekers' Residence Centre', van Beek, W., Fumerton, M. and Pansters, W. (eds), *Meeting Culture: Essays in Honour of Arie de Ruijter*, Shaker, Maastricht: 323–337.
- GHORASHI, H. (2003) *Ways to Survive, Battles to Win: Iranian women Exiles in the Netherlands and the United States*, Nova Science Publishers, New York.
- GIDDENS, A. (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- GRAHAM, M. and KHOSRAVI, S. (1997) 'Home Is Where You Make It: Repatriation and Diaspora Culture Among Iranians in Sweden', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 10(2): 115–133.
- GRIFHORST, P. and van EWIJK, M. (1998) 'Voorbij "Ellis Island": het asielbeleid en de inzet van medische voorzieningen: Een verhaal over disciplineren en verzet in asielzoekerscentra in Nederland', *Migrantenstudies* 1: 22–42.
- HALL, S. (1991) 'Ethnicity: Identity and Difference', *Radical America* 23(4): 9–20.
- HARRELL-BOND, B. (1999) 'Refugees' Experiences as Aid Recipients', Ager, A. (ed.), *Refugees: Perspectives on the Experience of Forced Migration*, Pinter, London: 136–139.
- JANSEN, W. (1996) 'Dumb and Dull: The Disregard for the Intellectual Life of Middle Eastern Women', *Thamyris* 3(2): 237–260.
- KRAMER, S., BALA, J., van DIJK, R. and ORY, F. (2003) *Making Sense of Experience*, Utrechtse School voor Bestuurs- en Organisationswetenschap: Utrecht.
- van het LOO, M., de SPIEGELEIRE, S., LIHNDSTROM, G., KAHAN, J. P. and VERNEZ, G. (2001) *A Comparison of American and Dutch Immigration and Integration Experiences: What Lessons can be Learned?* WRR—Scientific Council for Government Policy—Working documents No. W120, The Hague.
- LUTZ, H. (1991) 'Migrant Women of "Islamic Background": Images and Self-Images', *MERA Occasional Paper* 11, Middle East Research Associates, Amsterdam.
- LUTZ, H. (1997) 'The Limits of European-ness: Immigrant Women in Fortress Europe', *Feminist Review* 57: 93–111.
- LUTZ, H. and MOORS, A. (1989) 'De mythe van de ander: Beeldvorming over Turkse migranten in Nederland', *Lover* 16(1): 4–7.
- MALKKI, L. (1992) 'National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity Among Scholars and Refugees', *Cultural Anthropology* 7(1): 24–44.
- RÄTHZEL, N. (1995) 'Nationalism and Gender in West Europe: the German Case', Lutz, H., Phoenix, A. and Yuval-Davis, N. (eds), *Crossfires: Nationalism, Racism and Gender in Europe*, Pluto Press, London: 161–190.
- SAID, E. W. (1978) *Orientalism*, Routledge, London.
- SHAHBAZY FESHTALY, P. (2003) *Mag ik uw bagage eens zien? Een onderzoek naar de positie van Afghaanse en Iraanse hoogopgeleide vrouwelijke vluchtelingen op de Nederlandse arbeidsmarkt*, Doctoraalscriptie Universiteit Utrecht.
- SPIJKERBOER, T. (1994) 'Sheherazade en haar zusters', *Nemesis* 4: 95–106.
- SPIJKERBOER, T. (1999) *Gender and Refugee Status*, Proefschrift Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen.
- SUMMERFIELD, D. (1999) 'Sociocultural Dimensions of War, Conflict and Displacement', Ager, A. (ed.), *Refugees: Perspectives on the Experience of Forced Migration*, Pinter, London: 111–136.

- van den TILAART, H., OLDE MONNIKHOF, M., van den BERG, S. and WARMERDAM, J.** (2000) *Nieuwe etnische groepen in Nederland: een onderzoek naar vluchtelingen en statushouders uit Afghanistan, Ethiopië, Eritrea, Iran, Somalië en Vietnam*, Tandem Felix, Ubbergen.
- van WALSUM, S.** (2000) *De schaduw van de grens: Het Nederlandse vreemdelingenrecht en de sociale zekerheid van Javaanse Surinamers*, Gouda Quint and Sanders Instituut, Rotterdam.
- WEKKER, G.** (1998) 'Gender, identiteitsvorming en multiculturalisme: Notities over de Nederlandse multiculturele samenleving', Geuijen, K. (ed.), *Multiculturalisme*, Lemma, Utrecht: 39–55.
- WILTERDINK, N.** (1998) 'Mondialisering, migratie en multiculturaliteit', Geuijen, K. (ed.), *Multiculturalisme*, Lemma, Utrecht: 55–67.

*MS received December 2003; revised MS received October 2004*