

**RESEARCH**

# Re-Inventing Everyday Life in the Asylum Centre: Everyday Tactics Among Women Seeking Asylum in Norway

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Seeking asylum is characterised by long waits and great uncertainty, often categorised as an exercise of power. Recently, most European countries have made their asylum systems stricter and, in this way, less attractive to potential asylum seekers. With this context as a starting point, this article explores the everyday life of women seeking asylum and living in asylum centres in Norway. It examines the agentic tactics they employ to deal with the challenges and the elements that empower and constrain the development of these tactics. It draws on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with asylum-seeking women and uses the narratives of two women for a more in-depth study of their experiences and practices. By drawing on de Certeau, it suggests that although asylum seekers find themselves in situations of serious repression, there are still sparks of agency in the form of *everyday tactics* with which they seek survival and possibly also resistance.

**Keywords:** Female asylum seekers; Everyday tactics; Resilience; Asylum system; Norway

## 1 Introduction

In 2016 and 2017, less than 3,000 people sought asylum in Norway (Utlendingsdirektoratet 2017), a significant decrease from the 31,141 asylum applications received in 2015 (Utlendingsdirektoratet 2015). While they wait, asylum seekers usually live in asylum centres, with humble living conditions, which are often situated in the countryside or in the outskirts of cities or towns. This geographical and social isolation, together with the few meaningful activities available to them to pass their time, makes their everyday life particularly challenging (Hauge, Støa & Denizou 2017). This, coupled with the uncertainty of their situation and previous traumatic experiences, is argued to potentially lead to poor mental health (Robjant, Hassan & Katona 2009). Additionally, for the asylum seekers, not knowing how long they will have to wait and the uncertainty that comes with it has been experienced by many as disempowering (Seeberg, Bagge & Enger 2009; Vitus 2010). This has led several scholars to criticise particular asylum systems, for partially stripping applicants of their agency and, thus, creating dependency and passivity (Korac 2003; Lamba & Krahn 2003). Furthermore, 37% of first

time asylum applicants in the EU in 2018 were female (Eurostat 2018). Similarly, in Norway, around 42% of asylum seekers in 2019 were female (UDI 2019). Nevertheless, only a few studies that has discussed life in asylum centres has paid enough attention to the experiences of female residents or to gender differences in experiences (Ghorashi, de Boer & ten Holder 2018; Valenta & Berg 2010; van der Horst 2004).

In the last few years, Norway, like other European countries, has started to take “measures to tighten its asylum system to make it less attractive to seek asylum” (Justis-og beredskapsdepartementet 2015, my translation<sup>1</sup>). In light of this asylum context, this article explores and analyses the everyday life of women seeking asylum and living in asylum centres in Norway. It does so by answering the following questions: *What are the particular everyday agentic tactics that they employ to deal with the challenges, and what empowers or constrains the development of these tactics?* The article answers these questions by drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with asylum-seeking women (2017–2018). For this article, I use the narratives of two women for a more in-depth study of their experiences and practices. My analysis suggests that although asylum seekers find themselves in situations of serious repression, there are still sparks of agency in the form of *everyday tactics* (de Certeau [1984] 2011) with which they seek survival and possibly also resistance. However, these creative actions are very much dictated by the field of power they find themselves in. Furthermore, I argue that the elements that shape the kinds of tactics that these women draw on are related to their individual background and circumstances. In particular, the most influential ones are their family circumstances, their educational level, the structure of the asylum centre and opportunities for bridging and bonding as well as their religious background and religiosity.

This article draws on the growing literature on waiting in asylum contexts and, in particular, on waiting as an exercise of power (Haas 2017; Turnbull 2016). It contributes to previous work that has explored the forms of agency among refugees and asylum seekers (Ghorashi, de Boer & ten Holder 2018; Grønseth 2013; Horst 2007). Additionally, it builds on research on the way migrants navigate spaces in the form of “tactics” that are regulated by sovereign power, such as government policies and other technologies of control (Allsopp, Chase & Mitchell 2015; Bendixsen 2018; Gill et al. 2018). Furthermore, with the particular focus on women in asylum contexts, this research seeks to add to the international body of literature on the experiences, practices and strategies of female asylum seekers and refugees (Bosworth, Fili & Pickering 2018; Ghorashi and van Tilburg 2006; Goodman et al. 2017; Hunt 2008; Lenette, Brough & Cox 2013). Additionally, it aims to contribute to a rather under-researched issue and group—in Norway and other Nordic countries in particular—and, in this way, it highlights the need for further research focussing on women in asylum contexts.

## 2 The Norwegian Reception System

Generally, asylum seekers in Norway live in asylum centres and receive a bimonthly sum with which to pay for their basic needs<sup>2</sup> while their application is being processed. Living in asylum centres is voluntary, yet, if they decide not to, they are not eligible to receive state support (Brekke & Vevstad 2007). In Norway, as of May 2019, there are 39 asylum centres with 3,200 residents (Utlendingsdirektoratet 2019).

Most reception facilities in Norway are in the form of one or several buildings, formerly hospitals, military barracks, factories, hotels, prisons, etc., which have been rehabilitated. Usually, reception facilities are somewhat distanced from urban and population centres, often situated in the outskirts of cities or towns. This geographic isolation makes it challenging for residents to have activities to engage in or to have much contact with the local inhabitants (Hauge, Stoa & Denizou 2017). Asylum seekers are allowed to apply for a work permit as long as they have had their asylum interview and have ID or a passport from their country

of origin. Previously, the Norwegian system allowed them to choose to attend 175 hours of Norwegian language classes and 50 hours of Norwegian culture classes. However, from 1 September 2018, this has now become mandatory (IMDi 2018). Depending on the reception centre, residents are offered few activities, usually in the area of sports, language practice and seasonal festivities (Weiss et al. 2017).

Asylum seekers stay in the asylum centres until their case has been processed. In 2017, those who received asylum (a residence permit) waited an average of 321 days (UDI statistics, e-mail to author, 2018). If they are granted a residence permit, the process of resettlement (*bosetting*) begins. Nevertheless, it can take around seven months, on average, for a municipality to accept them and for them to move out of the asylum centre. Once settled, refugees receive a monthly salary, from which they pay for housing and other expenses. In exchange, they are obliged to attend the full-time introduction programme, which usually lasts for two years (Weiss et al. 2017). Its purpose is for migrants to acquire basic skills in Norwegian and a “fundamental insight into Norwegian social conditions” to help them become ready to enter the labour market or the education system with the goal of “increasing their financial independence” (Regjeringen 2016).

### 3 Everyday Tactics and Resilience

Seeking asylum is characterised by an undetermined wait. Bourdieu (2000) has argued that waiting can often be seen as an exercise of power as the one that is made to wait has limited control. Hence, it can be experienced as a halt in action and a diminished or lack of agency due to an impossibility of taking control of one’s current and future situation (Hage 2003).

Feminist researchers have for several decades written about the negotiation of different systems of power and the various modes of resistance that can be found within them. Such is the case of Kandiyoti (1988: 274) who proposed both “active and passive resistance in the face of oppression”. Similarly, Mahmood (2001: 203) argued for a different understanding of agency “not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create”.

As a tool for analysing the creative yet simultaneously mundane forms of action, while acknowledging the power structure that constricts their capacity, I employed de Certeau’s ([1984] 2011) concept of *everyday tactics*. According to him, although there is an imposed system that controls everyday life, this does not mean that the individuals within it have no autonomy. He argued that the individual “invents” everyday life through subtle everyday tactics where objects and codes are diverted and space is re-appropriated and used in its own way. Following this theorisation, de Certeau ([1984] 2011) made a distinction between strategies and tactics. He argued that strategies, on the one hand, are the methods of powerful actors. On the other hand, tactics are the domain that the non-powerful seeks to use to survive, diminish the effects of the methods of control of the powerful or even trick the system (see also Almala 2014). Asylum seekers and other migrants are often in the “non-powerful” strata of society, given that they are “systematically excluded from accessing the strategic possibilities of official systems” (Williams 2006: 867). Although initially, tactics do not have the power to significantly challenge dominant frames, these practices that are often hidden within the mundane may, to a certain extent, be aiming towards independence (Almala 2014; de Certeau [1984] 2011). As James C. Scott has argued, the non-powerful may use “hidden, disguised everyday practices [...] by which [...] [they] can threaten the power without publicly challenging it” (Almala 2014: 130).

Furthermore, I argue that everyday tactics can contribute to enhancing one’s capacity for resilience. I draw on Ungar’s (2008: 225) ecological and contextual definition of resilience:

In the context of exposure to significant adversity [...] (resilience is) both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to health-sustaining resources, including opportunities to experience feelings of well-being, and a condition of the individual's family, community and culture to provide these health resources and experiences in culturally meaningful ways.

Experiencing personal security and social support and a sense of hope are some of the prerequisites for resilience to be heightened (Earnest et al. 2015). Thus, I argue that the women's everyday tactics can be seen as small mundane ways in which they seek feelings of stability, security and hope to prevent complete despair. However, as we see in the definition above, this capacity does not rely on the individual herself but predominantly on the opportunities her context and circumstances provide (Ungar 2008). In particular, it is a person's emotional links with significant others, their educational background and their family circumstances, among others, that contribute to their resilience (Rousseau et al. 1998). Thus, by observing the different everyday tactics that each woman employs to contribute to her resilience, we may also be able to discern which opportunities and limitations each encounters in enhancing it.

#### **4 Methodology and data**

This article draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between November 2017 and October 2018, during which I followed nine women while they lived in an asylum centre. The women were aged between 23 and 45 years and had various national, ethnic and religious backgrounds as well as different educational levels and family circumstances. Most had arrived in Norway in 2016, and some had received a temporary residence permit, while others had not received them yet. The only criteria when recruiting participants was that they had high probabilities of receiving a residence permit, which was determined by their nationality (e.g. almost all Syrians received asylum).

I conducted one initial in-depth semi-structured interview per participant, which lasted up to two hours, where we discussed their experiences in Norway and their aspirations of their future. This was then followed by participant observation during visits, which took place approximately once a month and lasted for three hours or longer. Throughout the almost one year of fieldwork, I had continuous contact with the women, if not face-to-face, then by phone.

In this article, I focus on two participants. This allowed me the space to share and discuss more details about their stories with the aim of understanding more about the particular everyday practices and the tactics they employed and, in this way, connect these to their previous experiences and circumstances, as narrated by themselves. As Mair (1989, cited in Etherington 2008) argued, this approach is important because such singular, in-depth stories provide us with "intimate knowledge", which can "teach us more than distant knowledge". I chose to present the stories of Maryam and Pinar<sup>3</sup> because they provided more detailed narratives compared with the other women, yet there are several aspects of their experiences that many of the other women also shared. I purposely chose two women who lived in the same asylum centre to be able to explore whether there were differences in how they experienced a similar environment. At the same time, I decided to focus on women with different family circumstances, namely to see whether this also had any effect on their experiences and behaviour. Finally, I present the stories of women with a high level of education to challenge the often-found stereotype of refugee and asylum-seeking women as being poorly educated.

There were several ethical issues to be considered during this research. Because the women are in vulnerable situations in relation to their legal status in the country, further efforts have been put in place to ensure their anonymity. I have been particularly careful not to give too many personal details that would make them identifiable when writing up their stories

and narratives.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, because several of the participants were still waiting for their asylum application to be processed and did not have a residence permit yet, I made sure that they understood that their participation in the study would not have any influence on their asylum case. For this, participant information sheets were given out to each participant in their own native language, and any questions they had were discussed before they agreed to participate.

## 5 Everyday Life in the Asylum Centre: Using Tactics

During the conversations with the two women and the time I spent with them, I was able to identify some everyday tactics through which they tried to make their everyday life in the asylum centre more bearable. In the following pages, I explore the various tactics each woman employs and seek to highlight the elements that constrain or empower the development of such tactics.

### 5.1 Finding distractions and routines

Maryam was one of the first women I met during my fieldwork at the end of 2017. At this time, she was still waiting for an answer about her asylum application. She was in her mid-thirties, was neither married nor had children and had fled to Norway alone in the first half of 2016. She was originally from a country in the Horn of Africa but had lived most of her life in the Middle East, with her family, where she also gained a university degree and worked to support her family. She identified herself as a religious person and a practising Muslim and wore the hijab. She had spent the first nine months in a transit centre (*transitmottak*)<sup>5</sup> until she was called for her asylum interview; after that she moved to the asylum centre where I met her. Here, she shared a room with another woman, and they had become good friends.

When asked what she did on a day-to-day basis in the centre, she said “not much”. She would go to Norwegian lessons for four hours twice a week, although sometimes she skipped them because she had to walk 30 minutes in the rain and cold as she did not have enough money to take the bus. The days that she did not have class she would sleep late and wake up late. Sometimes she joined swimming lessons that the asylum centre offered but these did not take place often. So, most of the days she spent in her room looking at Facebook, watching movies, eating, sleeping, praying, reading the Qur’an and little more. The uncertainty about her future, together with the inability to do much to change her situation, was expressed by Maryam as the greatest challenge of being an asylum seeker.

She expressed that one of her biggest distractions was attending Norwegian lessons as it also provided her with a certain routine. She told me that it not only gave her something to do but also gave her a reason to get up in the morning. When I first met her, she was soon to have finished her 175 hours of lessons, and when I saw her a few weeks later, she told me that because she had friendship with the teacher, she had been allowed to stay on a few months more. It was the first time that I had heard of someone being allowed to continue taking Norwegian lessons after the completion of the hours allowed.

The circumstances in which Pinar were in were rather different from Maryam. She was in her late thirties, and had fled her country in the Middle East with her two children and her husband in the summer of 2016 due to political persecution. She identified herself as a very religious Muslim and also wore the hijab. Before leaving for Norway, she had obtained a master’s degree and had just started a PhD. Additionally, she had worked full-time for many years as a school teacher. She and her family had led a comfortable middle-class lifestyle; they had two cars, went for holidays abroad and could afford to send their children to private schools.

I met Pinar four months into my fieldwork in early 2018, when she and her family were still waiting for an answer about their asylum application. Similar to Maryam, one of the

issues she struggled the most with was having already waited for more than a year for an answer about their asylum application and still not knowing how much longer she and her family would have to wait. As a result, she expressed feeling depressed and anxious. This was particularly enhanced by seeing how some of her friends, who had the same nationality and circumstances and had arrived after them, had already received a residence permit and left the asylum centre to start their lives in Norway.

When I met her, she had already finished her 175 hours of Norwegian lessons, so her daily routine consisted of preparing her children for school and kindergarten, and afterwards, she “filled” the rest of the time with cooking and reading books. Pinar had studied literature in university, and she loved to read; thus, reading served at first as a pastime and, then, when she got increasingly anxious, as a way to relax.

There is nothing to do here, and I started to get lots of books from the libraries in my language. I have read around 60 books, both in the camp where I was before and now. There aren't so many books. I read everything I could find (*laughs*), a friend of mine sent some books to me through a programme, classics from my country and from the world. Now I am reading to calm down a bit and come back to life a little bit.

For Pinar, immersing herself in books would allow her to forget for a while about her current circumstances—a sort of meditation. Thus, it could be considered as a tactic for distracting her from her anxiety. Furthermore, books have often been claimed to transport the reader to another place and time; thus, for Pinar, reading books from her home country may have allowed her to mentally travel there and, in doing so, provided her with feelings of comfort.

At the weekends, there were few activities to engage in, given the limited money and the location of the centre. Thus, she and her husband tried to find distractions for the whole family by playing with the children, going for walks or going to the public library. Furthermore, back in her country, she and her husband had worked full-time, and the children had had nannies that cooked for them; now, she had started to learn what her children liked to eat and what they did not. She found certain distraction and purpose in cooking the food that her family would enjoy eating. It was the small routinised activities of cooking, doing grocery shopping, preparing the children for school, etc. that seemed to help Pinar maintain a certain stability and purpose.

## **5.2 Maintaining stability and familiarity**

Not only is life as an asylum seeker lacking much certainty in regard to whether they will be able to stay in the host country, but it is also missing familiarity, given that their surroundings are completely new and unknown. Additionally, as we have seen above, asylum seekers in Norway are often moved from one centre to another (the transit centre to the normal asylum centre) when their asylum interview has been conducted. This means that they can often spend several months in each centre. Further, in 2016, the number of asylum seekers arriving in Norway plummeted, and many of the asylum centres were closed down; this led to the relocation of many asylum seekers to the centres that were still functioning.

When I first met Pinar, she and her family had been living in that asylum centre for about six months; yet, before that, they had lived in another centre that had closed down due to the low number of asylum seekers arriving in Norway; thus, they were made to move. She had made some friends in that first centre, attended Norwegian classes and got used to the environment and the routine. As Pinar put it: “(moving centres) is the worst thing you can do to asylum seekers. It's already hard enough to get used to one place and they will tell you ‘oh you will go away from here too’”.

One day I visited Pinar in the asylum centre, when the children were in school. She served me strong black tea and pancakes. She told me that she had made them the day before for breakfast. Every Sunday, they would have pancakes and a big breakfast, just like they did “back home” before moving to Norway. Thus, following the same family customs, such as this one, while in exile, can be seen as a tactic through which Pinar seeks to maintain normality and familiarity for her family in such unstable and foreign circumstances.

Like Pinar, Maryam had been much more active in the previous centre where she had lived for nine months. There, they had organised many activities, and she had had a group of friends with whom she was always having fun. She described this time as “the best time in Norway”. In the new centre, she mentioned that the atmosphere was different; people seemed, in general, much more depressed because many had received a rejection of their asylum application, and once in a while, she witnessed the police forcibly deporting residents. She had slowly become more and more depressed as well. This was also partly due to having less friends and activities to undertake with them. The structure of the centre has been argued to have a particular effect on the possibilities for social interaction among its residents (Hauge, Støa & Denizou 2017). In the one where she had lived before, residents shared many facilities, ate together in the canteen and were offered many activities. In the new centre, she shared an apartment with one more woman and, otherwise, had few opportunities for interaction with other residents, making it difficult to make friends.

After a while, Maryam had become good friends with her housemate, and some of the friends she had made in the previous centre had also moved there, making her feel a little less lonely. However, some months after moving, she started to avoid seeing some of her friends because they had become very depressed after receiving a rejection of their asylum application. Maryam had now been waiting for more than one year without an answer and had told me that she could not handle being around them out of fear of becoming even more depressed herself. The decision not to see some of her friends can be seen as a tactic through which Maryam sought to maintain mental stability.

For Pinar, apart from her husband, who was an invaluable source of support and distraction, she did not have many more people to talk to or spend time with. Only one of the friends she had made in the previous asylum centre had also been relocated to the same one. Thus, for Pinar, just knowing that she had a friend whom she could write to when she needed it and meet for a coffee once in a while was essential. Arguably, it seems to be a tactic through which she maintained some stability and could alleviate her feelings of anxiety. However, as we observe in the cases of Maryam and Pinar, the effects of social networks may be different for diverse individuals in various circumstances. For Maryam, meeting with her friends, especially some of them, had a negative effect on her well-being, and, thus, distancing herself from them was her way of preserving her tactical capacity and stability. Contrarily, for Pinar, having some friends to meet and talk to occasionally was essential for her well-being and capacity for resilience.

### ***5.3 Finding hope and motivation***

Apart from uncertainty, one of the feelings that predominated in the everyday life of Maryam and Pinar in the asylum centre was that of feeling stuck. They often felt unable to move forward with their lives as they had little choice but to wait for an answer to their asylum application if they wanted to stay in Norway. This feeling of being stuck was often followed by frustration, demotivation and passivity. However, once in a while during my conversations and visits to Maryam and Pinar, I observed how they each managed to foster hope and motivation in certain circumstances through certain practices, such as thinking and

visualising their future goals and aspirations. Maryam would sometimes daydream that when granted a residence permit in Norway, she would take a master's programme to advance her career and get a good position. Before moving to Norway, she had not had the opportunity to advance in her career because of various reasons related to her motive for fleeing,<sup>6</sup> and now in Norway, she hoped to finally be able to reach a higher position in her profession:

I wanna work, I wanna do something like what I did before, but I wasn't enjoying it before, but it will be enjoyable here, because you have so many rights, you can rise and ... be successful, if you start small as an accountant, then you will be the manager, you know, in the company. What is exciting here is that they give you the right to rise (in your career).

She would go online and show me the website that guided her through the steps she needed to take to apply for a master's programme once she received her residence permit. It was in these moments, when she talked about her aspirations, that she seemed to forget about the uncertainty of her situation and start to feel hopeful about her future in Norway. However, about six months after I first met her, she still had no information about her asylum application. She had now been waiting for more than one year since her asylum application and had started to become increasingly worried. I noticed her motivation decrease significantly as she talked less and less about her plans for the future, and she started to skip her Norwegian classes because she had no motivation to get up in the morning anymore.

When Pinar and I first talked about her aspirations for the future, she told me that she really missed working and wanted to study and work simultaneously if she received the residence permit. She told me: "Right across from my window there is a school, it's a middle school and a high school too (...) I look there, and I say 'one day certainly'". Sometimes, when she and her husband felt particularly low because they could not work while living in the asylum centre, they would go for a walk.

He sometimes holds my hand and says: "Let's go, let's see some other people's lives on the road, one day it will be like this, one day you will have a house like this, you will have a car like that". (*Starts crying*) "The kids will grow up, and you and me ...". (*Stops talking and weeps*) "... we will be like this, maybe not here but somewhere, we will build ourselves up again", and I really want to believe it.

Visualisation of one's future goals, or mental imagery as it is termed in cognitive psychology, has been linked to increasing people's motivation (Vasquez & Buehler 2007). Thus, by looking at the school, the houses and the lives of "normal" people, Pinar would imagine herself inside that school and those houses, leading a "normal" happy life and following her aspirations. This can be seen as a tactic that helped her find hope and the motivation to deal with the uncertainty of her everyday life in the asylum centre.

Furthermore, both Maryam and Pinar also explained that they often resorted to their religious beliefs and practices, in particular to prayer, to maintain hope whenever they felt depressed and disheartened. Pinar explained that praying had a therapeutic effect for her, as if she was talking with a psychologist. In particular, it was the Islamic practice of praying five times a day that gave her several opportunities a day to reflect on her situation. Similarly, consulting the Qur'an would often provide her with guidance on how to deal with her circumstances, and, in this way, she was able to regain hope and motivation through this particular religious practice (see also Willmann Robleda, 2020).

#### **5.4 Regaining control over identity**

For both Maryam and Pinar, one of the most difficult aspects of seeking asylum in Norway was not being able to work and provide for themselves and, thus, having to receive money from the state. This is strongly influenced by the fact that both of them used to work full-time and earned their own money and provided for their families before moving to Norway. They recounted that being dependent on the state both legally and financially made them feel infantilised and like a burden. In addition to this, having their social status change to that of “refugee” or “asylum seeker” made them feel even more abnormal and stigmatised, especially because they felt that people pitied them, as Maryam explains:

When I start working, I will be a normal person, not the poor refugee girl. I will be a normal person. You don't want someone to pity you, this is not a good feeling you know? (...) I say this is a phase, this country they do it for everyone, not only for me. (...) You are in a situation where people will pity you; I know that, I accept that, afterwards it will not be good. I will not accept it. I will be like everyone else and better also. I think like that, I tell myself (that) I will be like everyone else and better!

Thus, Maryam aimed to stay mindful about her current situation, thinking that being dependent on the state was temporary and that hopefully soon she would be independent and self-reliant. She also tried to remind herself that she was not the only one relying on the state's money. Hence, we can argue that what Maryam was doing was trying to “normalise” her situation, so as to feel less stigmatised for receiving help from the state. In addition, although it may seem that she resigned herself to the “poor refugee girl” label and the constraints it came with, Maryam was not merely succumbing to it; she was rather embracing it in a way that empowered her. She decided to own the label so as to be able to discard it later and rise above it. Similar tactics to these have been termed tactics of compliance, which have great agentic components (Wahlström Smith 2017).

Moreover, as seen above, Maryam would tell herself that not only would she be “normal” after receiving the residence permit and starting her new life but also she would be even “better”, which she previously referred to as having a good status at work and leading a professionally successful life. We can argue that having high hopes for her future would give her the motivation to accept the temporary “poor refugee girl” label. Moreover, by asserting her aspirations to become professionally successful, we could argue that she was also trying to regain a sense of dignity that may have been harmed by the imposition of the label. Having aspirations that may seem rather difficult to achieve can be argued to be a way to assert a “virtuous identity” given that this may be seen to be linked with “unwavering ambition” (Frye 2012: 1591).

Pinar's reaction to being labelled a “refugee” or “asylum seeker” was rather different from that of Maryam. The first time I met Pinar, it struck me that when she was introducing herself and her story, one of the first things that she mentioned was that she and her husband had degrees from prestigious universities in her country of origin. Later on, during our conversation, she highlighted feeling ashamed due to receiving financial help and clothes from the Norwegian authorities. She explained that, despite going through challenging times in the reception centre, “we were trying to be as human as possible and smiling at people ... I always have this feeling that I am an asylum seeker”. This sentence seems to show that Pinar sees “the refugee/asylum seeker”<sup>7</sup> as someone who does not smile due to being traumatised and someone who has suffered and is not able to show kindness. Therefore, I suggest that smiling and looking “normal” could be seen as a particular tactic for rejecting “the refugee/asylum seeker” label. Furthermore, by presenting themselves as highly educated and as having degrees from

prestigious universities, she seemed to want to reject being seen as the stereotype of “the refugee”: uneducated and poor.

One could argue that the goal of these tactics related to their labelling was to take control of their identification and preserve their dignity. Furthermore, these tactics could also be seen as “counterstories of dignity and self-preservation (which) may well form the basis for future mobilization” (Villenas 2001: 22).

## 6 Discussion and Conclusion

Asylum seekers experience significant challenges in their daily lives, which limit their agency significantly. Among these challenges is the extreme uncertainty about their future linked to their undetermined legal status in the host country. This, together with the unknown length of the wait for an answer to their asylum application, often leads to them feeling stuck and results in demotivation and passivity. In addition, they have to deal with a new and foreign environment, which is often subject to change due to alterations in immigration policies. This is topped by the stigmatising effects of being labelled a “refugee” or “asylum seeker”, given the negative associations that come with such labels.

Asylum seekers do not find themselves in their usual everyday life but in a completely new situation. Drawing on de Certeau ([1984] 2011), I have shown that the women in this study “re-invent” the new everyday life through finding novel as well as familiar tactics to deal with the new and uncertain day-to-day life in the asylum centre. Furthermore, I argue that the women’s mundane practices can be understood as more than just forms of everyday survival. In fact, they can be seen as forms of agency and, thus, resistance to the repressive circumstances shaped by the Norwegian asylum system; therefore, I call them *tactics of everyday survival/resistance*.

Additionally, I claim that their circumstances also determine the practices that they can draw on for their everyday survival/resistance. Further elements that empower or constrain the development of these tactics and ultimately foster resilience are related to the particular individual background and circumstances of each woman. Among these, I have identified the family circumstances as one with a significant influence. This was visible in the tactics of Pinar, who unlike Maryam, had her family with her in Norway and thus provided her with distractions and emotional support as well as a certain stability and “normality”. Maryam, contrarily, had no family around and instead had to rely much more on herself and occasionally on some friends and acquaintances. Previous research has shown that for asylum seekers who come together with their family, the responsibilities they have towards them and the company that it provides often serve as distractions from the long wait and uncertainty (Weiss et al. 2017).

Further elements that had a significant influence on the kinds of tactics that the women employed to deal with the asylum system were related to their educational levels and their particular educational backgrounds. The religious background and degree of religiosity of the women were also seen to provide them with resources to draw on to enhance their resilience and, thus, their resistance to the vagaries of the asylum system.

The structure of the asylum centre and the possibilities it offered for interaction among residents and with the local population was an issue that played a major role in the development of tactics. Further opportunities that the women had for both “bonding”, which is the social capital found in relationships with those within the same group or community, family, etc., and “bridging”, which refers to the social capital found when expanding one’s social network to others groups from a different social class or with different characteristics (Putnam 2000) in their day-to-day life, also had a particular effect on the tactics they employed. Some of these were related to the activities that they could engage in: for example, the Norwegian

lessons for Maryam and other activities offered for asylum seekers. As we have seen, for both Maryam and Pinar, their relocation from one asylum centre to another had a particularly negative effect on their well-being. Both of them had had more activities that they took part in as well as more friends and acquaintances in the previous centre. Thus, moving to a new centre where they did not know anyone and had few activities to partake in played a role in their enhanced feelings of loneliness and depression. In line with this, Hauge, Støa & Denizou (2017) have argued that the particular ways that asylum seekers are accommodated and, in particular, the structure of the housing, play a significant role in their well-being, empowerment and positive social interaction with others, both with fellow residents and the local community.

In her study on irregular migrant tactics to access health care in Norway, Bendixsen (2018: 172) distinguished between the tactics that “comply with the disciplinary power” and those that “have the potential to refute sovereign power”. Instead, I argue that the tactics that the women in my study develop have both characteristics. They are dictated by the disciplinary power, given that they do experience certain limitations to which tactics they can adopt. At the same time, they have the potential to resist that power, because they seek to survive and by doing so contest the “bare life”, that is a life reduced to biology (Agamben 1998), that the system is aiming to impose on the residents of such centres.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Original: “tiltak for å stramme inn og gjøre det mindre attraktivt å søke asyl i Norge”.
- <sup>2</sup> The amount depends on whether they receive meals at the centre or have to buy food themselves. In the second case, the amount is around 1500 NOK (approximately 150 €) every two weeks.
- <sup>3</sup> Fictitious names.
- <sup>4</sup> Hence, the omission of their country of origin, further details about their reason for fleeing, etc.
- <sup>5</sup> These are centres where asylum seekers stay temporarily until they are called to do their asylum interview. Afterwards, they are moved to an asylum centre (*asylmottak*) where they wait to hear about their case.
- <sup>6</sup> I have left out several aspects of her story so as to make her less identifiable due to the sensitive circumstances she finds herself in.
- <sup>7</sup> Here, I use refugee and asylum seeker as synonyms because this is how Maryam and Pinar use them.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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