

**A Multi-Stakeholder Approach to Refugee Labour Participation in the Netherlands:
A Comparison between Syrian and Ukrainian refugees**

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Annemijn Gommers LLM, MSc



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PREFACE

Social issues fascinate me because of their multifaceted nature- both in terms of causes and solutions. Labour market issues have particularly grabbed my attention, probably as a result of my upbringing in a household where my parents ran a family-owned retail shop attached to our home, positioning work as a central element of our everyday life. From a young age, I observed how labour participation not only brings economic benefits to people but also contributes to their personal well-being and social interaction. As my personal and academic development progressed, I began to analyse these issues on a more societal level, which led to a specific focus on groups with a so-called 'distance to the labour market' - ranging from people with physical or mental disabilities to young people without entry-level qualifications and, later in particular, refugees. The intriguing aspect of the issues affecting these groups is the potential for mutual benefit: both society and the individual can benefit from higher levels of labour participation. In order to deepen my understanding of this field, I decided to extend my studies in social sciences with a focus on education and the labour market, by pursuing a Master's degree in Labour Law and Employment Relations, as law provides the concrete framework in which these issues take place.

Concurrent with the start of this law study in February 2022, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine began to escalate. The Russian invasion resulted in a massive influx of refugees from Ukraine to Europe, thereby creating an urgent need for the European Union and host countries to quickly establish a wide range of policy measures. This led to an exceptional political and societal situation that I followed with keen interest. After a few months, at the same time as the start of my graduation period, the first figures were published on the employment rate of Ukrainians who had sought refuge in the Netherlands. The remarkably high participation rate elicited many positive reactions within society. However, there were also, understandably, responses of surprise and criticism when comparing these figures with those of other refugee groups. The question arose: how did Ukrainians manage to integrate into the Dutch labour market so quickly, whereas the labour participation of other refugee groups in the Netherlands remains significantly low? Recognizing that valuable lessons can be derived from this situation for future refugee groups – as forced migration is a timeless phenomenon - it became evident what topic my master's thesis would address.

The research that followed, and was completed in mid-2023, turned out to be a profoundly enriching process. As a young woman of Dutch descent raised

in a predominantly culturally uniform village in eastern Netherlands, I was initially barely aware of the complexities surrounding legislation, policy-making and social processes affecting refugees and their participation in the labour market. This initial lack of awareness turned out to be a valuable source of curiosity, encouraging me to delve deeply into all aspects of the available literature. I also took every opportunity to converse with refugees about their experiences, although these personal conversations were primarily served as orientation and verification (as their selectivity precluded them from being deemed scientifically representative sources of information). The research, which is essentially a literature review with a legal focus, should therefore be considered in that framework; I am aware that refugees reading my work may have different experiences of the application of laws and regulations, as well as of social dynamics. In the end, a literature review is a matter of weighing trade-offs while acknowledging the limitations of the available data.

The realisation of this research, and its later publication as a book, would not have been possible without the support of a number of people. In particular, I would like to thank André van Rijs. As someone at the beginning of her professional life, it was of great value to meet a supervisor who expressed confidence in my abilities from the very first moment. His guidance extended beyond this research and has strengthened me for the future. In addition, I am grateful to Peter Frissen for giving me the opportunity to publish my thesis as a book. It is encouraging that my efforts will not be lost in the university archives, but will be accessible to a wider audience. His patience and understanding during the book's publication process was particularly valuable as my initial focus was on completing my other degree. Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends for their unconditional support: their love has sustained me throughout this entire process. With the support of those to whom I am grateful, I hope that this book will contribute to reducing the distance between refugees and the labour market, enabling them to gain better opportunities to participate as valued members of society.

Annemijn Gommers
Nijmegen – 2024

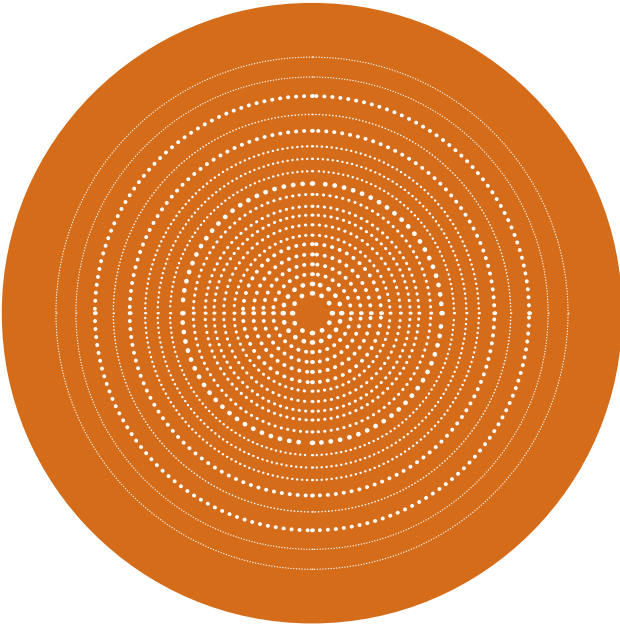
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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

BRP	Basisregistratie Personen
BSN	Burgerservicenummer
BuWav	Besluit uitvoering Wet arbeid vreemdelingen
CEAS	Common European Asylum System
CFR	Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union
CJEU	Court of Justice of the European Union
COA	Centraal Orgaan opvang asielzoekers
ECHR	European Convention on Human Rights
ECtHR	European Court of Human Rights
EP-Nuffic	European Platform- Netherlands universities foundation for international cooperation
EU	European Union
IND	Immigratie- en Naturalisatiedienst
ONA	Oriëntatie op de Nederlandse Arbeidsmarkt
PVT	Participatieverklaringstraject
Reba	Regeling eigen bijdrage asielzoekers met inkomen en vermogen
ROOO	Regeling opvang ontheemden Oekraïne
RuWav	Regeling uitvoering Wet arbeid vreemdelingen
Rva	Regeling verstrekkingen asielzoekers en andere categorieën vreemdelingen
SBB	Samenwerkingsorganisatie Beroepsonderwijs Bedrijfsleven
SIT	Social Identity Theory
TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UWV	Uitvoeringsinstituut Werknemersverzekeringen
Wav	Wet arbeid vreemdelingen
Wet SUWI	Wet structuur uitvoeringsorganisatie werk en inkomen



1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Problem Statement

The last decade is marked by a substantial increase in the number of refugees seeking refuge in Europe.¹ This increase raises all kinds of policy issues in host countries. The first issue of concern to address as a host country is the housing of the large numbers of refugees. This is closely followed by the refugees' integration and participation in the country.² Labour participation is crucial for successful integration in the host country, because besides providing a source of income, it improves psychological wellbeing, social capital and social inclusion.³ Refugee labour participation is a longstanding policy issue for many European governments,⁴ but due to the continuing upward trend in the number of refugees heading towards Europe over the past decade and the notable differences between refugee groups in labour participation, this topic is highly relevant in social and political discussions today.

One of the countries where the debate regarding labour participation of refugees has been intensified is in the Netherlands.⁵ The reason for this intensification is the arrival of a stream of refugees from Ukraine in the country. Many Ukrainians fled their country after Russia's invasion led by Putin in February 2022. It created the largest refugee influx in Europe since the Second World War.⁶ Although most of them sought refuge in neighbouring countries, Western European countries, including the Netherlands, also received a significant number of Ukrainian refugees.⁷ The Netherlands

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- 1 The World Bank, 'World Development Indicators' (*World Bank Group*) <<https://databank.worldbank.org/reports.aspx?source=2&series=SM.POP.REFG&country=WLD>> accessed 8 February 2023.
 - 2 Linda Bakker, Jaco Dagevos and Godfried Engbersen, 'Explaining the Refugee Gap: A Longitudinal Study on Labour Market Participation of Refugees in the Netherlands' (2017) 43(11) *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 1775.
 - 3 Hélio Manhica and others, 'Labour Market Participation among Young Refugees in Sweden and the Potential of Education: A National Cohort Study' (2019) 22(4) *Journal of Youth Studies* 533.
 - 4 Regina Konle-Seidl and Georg Bolits, *Labour Market Integration of Refugees: Strategies and Good Practices* (European Parliament 2016).
 - 5 See for example Parliamentary Papers II 2020/21, 32824, no. 343; See also Jaco Dagevos, 'Opinie: Ook Niet-Oekraïense Vluchteling Wil aan de Slag, Dus Verlaag de Arbeidsdrempel' *de Volkskrant* (Amsterdam, 12 May 2022) <www.volkskrant.nl/columns-opinie/opinie-ook-niet-oekraïense-vluchteling-wil-aan-de-slag-dus-verlaag-de-arbeidsdrempel~b7d95f09/> accessed 20 January 2023.
 - 6 Osnat Lubrani, "'The War has Caused the Fastest and Largest Displacement of People in Europe since World War II'" (*United Nations Ukraine*, 24 March 2022) <<https://ukraine.un.org/en/175836-war-has-caused-fastest-and-largest-displacement-people-europe-world-war-ii>> accessed 4 February 2023.
 - 7 UNHCR, 'Operational Data Portal: Ukraine Refugee Situation' <<https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>> accessed 2 February 2023.

counted 90,470 registered refugees from Ukraine at the end of February 2023, a year after the start of the Russian-Ukrainian war.⁸ Together with Syrian refugees, these Ukrainian refugees form the largest refugee group in the Netherlands in 2022.⁹ Most Syrian refugees entered the Netherlands seven years earlier (in 2015). They fled the civil war in Syria following the regime of Bashar al-Assad.¹⁰ As a result, more than 105,000 Syrians are living in the Netherlands by the end of 2022.¹¹

So given the motive for fleeing and the number of refugees, the two refugee groups seem considerably similar. However, notable are the significant differences in labour participation in the Netherlands between Syrian and Ukrainian refugees (see Figure 1). Of the Syrian refugees between 18 and 65 years old who received a permit in 2015 in the Netherlands, only 2 per cent were employed (both self-employed and salaried employed) after one year, 22 per cent after three years and 42 per cent after six years.¹² These figures contrast with the high employment rate of Ukrainian refugees in the Netherlands. Figures indicate that six months after Russia's invasion of Ukraine (so this is not measured from the moment the Ukrainian refugee arrived in the Netherlands), 60 per cent of Ukrainians between the ages of 18 and 65 had a job, this percentage increased to 83 per cent nine months after the invasion.¹³ In other words, after six years of having a permit in the Netherlands, the group of Syrian refugees does not yet reach the percentage of labour participation that Ukrainian refugees have reached after six months from the start of the war.

8 Rijksoverheid, 'Cijfers Opvang Vluchtelingen uit Oekraïne in Nederland' <www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/opvang-vluchtelingen-uit-oekraïne/cijfers-opvang-vluchtelingen-uit-oekraïne-in-nederland> accessed 14 March 2023.

9 Rijksoverheid, 'Kerncijfers Asiel en Migratie Juni 2022' (26 August 2022) <<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/rapporten/2022/08/26/kerncijfers-asiel-en-migratie-juni-2022>> accessed 10 February 2023; Rijksoverheid, 'Cijfers Opvang Vluchtelingen uit Oekraïne in Nederland' <www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/opvang-vluchtelingen-uit-oekraïne/cijfers-opvang-vluchtelingen-uit-oekraïne-in-nederland> accessed 14 March 2023; in both cases, the refugee flow does not consist only of people who held the nationality of the country from which they fled, but for the sake of simplicity of this study, the terms 'Syrian refugees' and 'Ukrainian refugees' are being used.

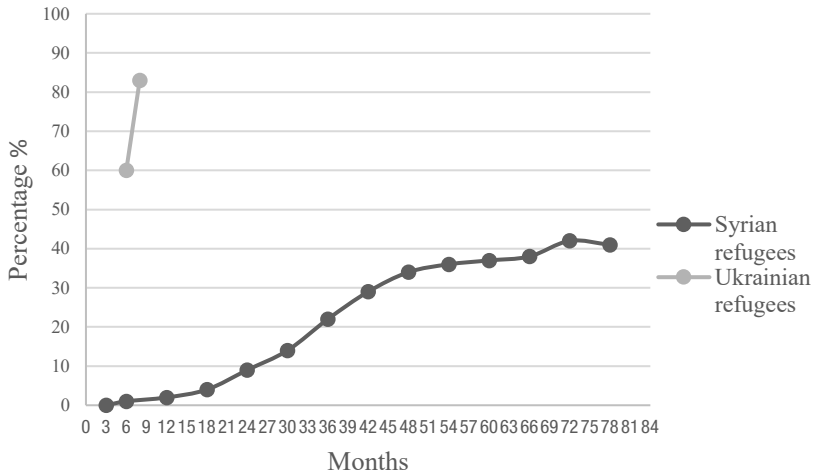
10 Jethro Mullen and Brian Walker, 'Syria's Bashar al-Assad: West is to Blame for Refugee Crisis' (*CNN*, 16 September 2015) <<https://edition.cnn.com/2015/09/16/middleeast/syria-al-assad-interview/index.html>> accessed 5 January 2023.

11 Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 'Asielverzoeken en Nareizigers: Nationaliteit, Geslacht en Leeftijd' (*StatLine*) <<https://opendata.cbs.nl/#/CBS/nl/dataset/83102NED/table>> accessed 10 February 2023.

12 Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 'Dashboard Cohortstudie Asiel' <<https://dashboards.cbs.nl/v4/asielenintegratie/>> accessed 8 February 2023.

13 NOS, 'Meeste Oekraïners Hier Hebben Werk: 'Was Bang dat Ik Mijn Ouders Niet Kon Steunen'' (2 November 2022) <<https://nos.nl/artikel/2450730-meeste-oekraïners-hier-hebben-werk-was-bang-dat-ik-mijn-ouders-niet-kon-steunen>> accessed 8 February 2023.

Figure 1. Comparison labour participation of Syrian and Ukrainian refugees in the Netherlands



Notes.

^a Syrian refugees refers to the share of employed (both self-employed and salaried employed) Syrian nationals among 18- to 65-year-olds who received an asylum residence permit in the Netherlands in 2015, number of months after receiving the permit.¹⁴

^b Ukrainian refugees refers to the number of reports from employers in the Netherlands to the UWV who have employed a refugee from Ukraine compared to the total number of refugees from Ukraine in the Netherlands between the ages of 18 and 65. The number of actually employed refugees from Ukraine may be slightly lower than the reports to the UWV, but according to the UWV, this margin of error is at most a few thousand. Moreover, these figures are not cohort figures, meaning that the months of refugees from Ukraine are measured from the moment war erupted and not from the moment they arrived in the Netherlands.¹⁵

The emerging question is what can explain these significant differences in labour participation between Syrian and Ukrainian refugees in the Netherlands. Research on explanations for differences in labour participation between different refugee groups is limited. Existing literature on labour participation of refugees can be distinguished into two categories: research focusing on explaining the low employment rate of all refugee groups as a whole¹⁶ and research explaining differences in labour participation within one

14 Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 'Dashboard Cohortstudie Asiel'

<<https://dashboards.cbs.nl/v4/asielenintegratie/>> accessed 8 February 2023.

15 NOS, 'Meeste Oekraïners Hier Hebben Werk: 'Was Bang dat Ik Mijn Ouders Niet Kon Steunen'' (2 November 2022) <<https://nos.nl/artikel/2450730-meeste-oekraïners-hier-hebben-werk-was-bang-dat-ik-mijn-ouders-niet-kon-steunen>> accessed 8 February 2023.

16 See for example Isabel Ruiz and Carlos Vargas-Silva, 'Differences in Labour Market outcomes between Natives, Refugees and other Migrants in the UK' (2018) 18(4) *Journal of Economic Geography* 855.