Wisdom is like a baobab tree: no individual can embrace it
Working and learning together towards empowerment of
female refugees.

A case history of the first year of an EU funded Life Long Learning Partnership

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Abstract
This article describes the case of an EU funded Life Long Learning Partnership between 5 organizations in The Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark and the UK. The organizations have a common goal to support refugees, and most of the participants in this program are henceforth refugees seeking employment. We describe the relation between EU policy, and the role of national policies and institutions in these countries. The approach for change starts with individual narratives and the patterns we can discern in these narratives. This methodology developed by Dr. Ghorashi (2005, 2006, and 2010) is the framework wherein we work together and are carrying out research. According to Ghorashi refugees have to go through 3 stages in order to regain control over their lives and in so doing profit from the possibilities that for instance entrepreneurship can offer. The first stage is that of survival, the second that of recognition and the third phase that of feeling at home in the new host country. Parallel to these stages she distinguishes 3 phases in the process of empowerment: reliving the pain through storytelling and developing another perspective, contextualizing the experiences through the identification of patterns and lastly abstraction and acting. Refugees form a large and growing group in Europe, hence an understanding how they can be activated is of great importance. This forms the justification for this article which seeks to open up new ways of approaching this large group of people with hidden talents and a huge economic potential. This article especially focuses on the learning and activation of fifty female refugees of at least 40 different countries, in order to become participants in the labor market and society in general.

1. Introduction
Under the growing pressure of an ageing population in advanced economies, coupled to a growing share of young people in emerging and developing countries, entrepreneurship has become a priority to counter the effects of economic slowdown and spiraling unemployment. Refugees take a special position in this context. As a consequence of political instability, a growing polarization in the world and war, more and more people have no other choice but to leave their country and seek a safe place to live and work elsewhere. The UNCHR estimates that globally there are 8.8 million people that fit the description of a refugee laid down in the Geneva Convention in the 1970’s. As such they form a great economic potential. Often these refugees and migrants have good qualifications in their country of origin, which are however not accepted in their new host country. Estimations are that the number of refugees applying for asylum in the industrialized countries is growing (UNCHR, 2011). In 2011 there were 441,300 applications for asylum – 20% more than in
2010. The 27 member states of the EU registered 277,400 asylum claims just to give an indication of these numbers.

This forms a social and economic challenge for these countries where very often refugees are the first to become and remain unemployed for a long period of time. Lack of proper qualifications, discrimination and often traumatic experiences keep this group in a marginalized position from which it is often difficult to escape. Institutions like the EU try to tackle this problem by promoting Life Long Learning (LLL) and develop programs geared at education. In this article we describe and evaluate a Partnership that has been set up among 5 organizations in 4 different countries – The Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark and the UK. All the organizations of the Partnership support refugees and migrants in order to increase their participation in society and the labor market. Within the framework of the LLL Program a trajectory was designed geared at empowering women refugees in order to stimulate entrepreneurship and labor participation. Entrepreneurship is seen as a means to regain control over their lives and become self-supporting. Our description and evaluation of the Partnership is offset against the primary goal of the project: to empower the female participants, create awareness for this marginalized group and create opportunities to work as an employee or as an entrepreneur.

The article is set up as follows. In the next paragraph we give a brief description of the societal and organizational context wherein refugees have to find their way. In this section we also describe the main problem and the main objectives of our program. We then go to paragraph 3 in which we give an overview of our working methodology and some important assumptions which define our framework. In paragraph 4 and 5 the outcomes of the storytelling are discussed. In paragraph 6 we outline the emerging path for the future and suggest new paths for research.

2. Refugees in their new home country: societal and organizational context

2.1 Changing societal discourse

According to ten Holder (2012) a number of developments in society and politics have cast their shadow on the approach of refugees. She mentions three: 1) the influence of the welfare state, 2) The growing emphasis on individual responsibility and 3) the changing tone of voice in the debate on the role of newcomers in society. The downside of the welfare state according to her is that in the quest to create equality among people, space has been given to feelings of discomfort among a group of people towards those that are seen as different (see also Lucassen in Ghorashi 2006:13). She describes a transition to more neo-liberal politics and a re-definition of the welfare state, in which individual responsibility and self-reliance are emphasized. As a consequence migrants and refugees are not addressed as a group but on an individual basis. This has given room to what Prins calls the emergence of “the new realism” (Prins, 2002), which forms the foundation of a negative discourse and negative feelings about migrants and refugees. According to Ghorashi this fuels a paradox in society which she calls the diversity paradox: there is an unfolding paradox in the attitude of the Western European states in regard to non-Western immigrants in which resistance to multiculturalism that is embodied in culturalist discourses is paired with the growing demand for cultural sensitivity, tolerance, and recognition which are fundamental features of a democratic culture (Ghorashi, 2010). According to Ghorashi (2006) in the present political climate in most
Northern-European countries we see a dominant negative approach of migration and diversity. This negative attitude according to her has two sides: 1) The culture of immigrants and refugees is seen as totally different and sometimes of a lesser value than the European culture, 2) There is a blind spot concerning the competencies and qualities of immigrants and refugees. The focus primarily lies on the shortcomings (they don’t speak the language well enough; their cultural and educational background does not comply with the context where they live). These prejudices are even mirrored in the 2nd and 3rd generation of people who have degrees from higher education. Ghorashi argues that many academic researches show, how this negative dominance influences the way in which immigrants and refugees position themselves in their new home country. They are seen for what they lack instead of focusing on their qualities. Due to the fact that there are no structural conditions for individual development, people lose their motivation and self-respect and in time they forget what their qualities are. Furthermore no differentiation is made between the differences in ethnicity.

In summary: dealing with diversity in a positive way is not something which one can take for granted and occurs by itself. This forms the setting in which the women that participate in the Partnership have to find their way in society. The aim is threefold. On an individual level we want to empower them and support them to enter the labor market. On an organizational level we want to create awareness for the position of refugees and change the mindset of people. And lastly we want to create awareness in society for this marginalized group and make them agents of change by giving them the opportunity to speak up and give voice to their own story.

2.2 Phases on the path towards work
Refugees often have to deal with many losses in their life, the most important being the loss of a safe space to live in and where they are rooted. Arriving in their host countries they find themselves in a so-called liminal position. Liminal means being in between the old and known and the new and unknown. Turner (1967) describes this phase as a transition phase in which a person is not yet anchored in his or her host country and separated from the home-country. Refugees often feel that they belong “nowhere “: they are not part of their home country anymore, but they are neither part of the new country. Ghorashi argues (2003, p.125) that understanding exile as liminal seems attractive but adds that the liminal position is not transitional but a permanent part of exilic life. Feeling “nowhere” can foster negativity, disorientation and feelings of depression. The upside is that because the social pressure of the structures one has belonged to dissipates, space is created for creativity, reflection and dreams. When you are not fully emerged in something you can look at it from another angle and one is inclined to question the situation.

Being in the phase of liminality one renegotiates the identity. Identity is never fixed. According to us, identity involves elements of continuity and change. People carry multiple identities not always based on entirely free choices. The process of creation and recreation of identities takes place within various available contexts. Telling your story can give food and inspiration to new perspectives on dominant behavioral patterns and mental models. It is a way to redefine yourself, your identity. The element of identity is in this respect important and turns out to be different depending on the context, according to Ghorashi (2010). Three phases can be discerned: the first stage is that of survival which takes at least 5 years, the second stage is that of recognition and the third phase of feeling at home in the new host country. These phases influence the process of empowerment which takes place in parallel. Empowerment is the process of gaining control and becoming active participants in efforts to influence the environment. During the process an individual has to identify his or her problems, find solutions and act to solve problems. According to Ghorashi refugee women
go through the earlier mentioned stages – struggle, recognition and belonging - in this process of empowerment which depends on the psychological state of the women, the sense of belonging and the context of the host country.

2.2.1 The stage of Struggle
The first phase of the process is the phase of Struggle (0-5 year).

The women do their best, they adjust and learn. There is the desire to be part of the host land. Among all the hardships the belief is that the host country is a country with possibilities, a land of freedom. The thinking mode is “if I do my best, I will succeed “

2.2.2 The stage of Recognition
The second phase is the phase of struggle for recognition (5-10 year). After years of learning, adapting, waiting for your permit to stay and investing in the host country, the women find out that they are lagging behind. Their work experiences and education of the country of origin is not equally valued. They are excluded from jobs because of lack of language skills. More often they find themselves in jobs that do not match with their education or intellectual ability. The women think they have done their share; they wanted to be seen and recognized. They do not feel successful; success is a match between investment and recognition of this investment. Here the disillusion starts.

2.2.3 The stage of Belonging
The phase of feeling at home and Belonging (after 10 years). This is the phase of recreation of themselves. The women want to dance their dance. It is about shaping their own future and starting to do things your own way. Central questions in their lives are: “Where do I belong? and “Where do my children belong? “

2.3 Context, identity, empowerment and social inclusion

2.3.1. The societal context
The context of the country influences the way the women perceive their past, present and future. In the first meeting of the partnership the general hardships that women face when they arrive in a new country were discussed, but this time was also referred to a as an opportunity and “a chance to have a new perspective towards the future”. Refugee women may undergo different phases throughout their transition from adaptation to belonging. In the context of the Netherlands, a refugee woman may for example, commence her transition upon arrival, by putting a lot of energy into starting her new life and see new possibilities in the democratic system, coupled with a desire to contribute to society and be accepted. Nonetheless, this may then be followed by feelings of disappointment and rejection when they realize they are not being seen as an equal. In the Netherlands, Ghorashi argues, the welfare state “sees diversity management as a mortal duty”, which in general refers to the idea that the state should help the weak. However, she argues, “when focusing on helping the weak, you create a weaker group”. In Europe and the USA there are subtle differences in the way refugees and migrants are approached. In her book “Ways to survive, Battles to Win” Ghorashi (2003) describes her comparative research between women exiles living in the
Netherlands and in LA California, United States. It highlights the differences and elucidates their impact. A summary of her findings is described in the textbox.

The country where the women were presently living seemed to have a decisive impact on how they view the past, the present and the future. The first phase, the phase of struggle was more or less the same in both countries: working hard and try to find a place in society. But after some years the exilic experiences in these two contexts start to vary (2003, p.186).

The women in Los Angeles were living in a migrant-oriented context; the Iranian women were not seen as others because of the diversity of the ethnic communities in Los Angeles. The Iranian community in Los Angeles is in many ways a recreation of the life in Iran. The same rules seem to apply: if you work hard, you survive and there is always a better future. In the Netherlands the positive attitude towards Dutch society was after some years replaced by frustration. They wanted to be accepted but were treated as strangers. This has to do with the fact that in the Netherlands migration is historically viewed as temporary and not as a kind of settlement. The fact that the stay of exiles is often seen as temporary, reinforced feelings of not belonging.

The United States is on the other hand known as a country of immigrants that attracted many people. Immigrants had to accept and adopt the standards of the host country in return for opportunities. The women living in California talked about the past, future and present in the same emotional way, rather positive and had also hope for progress in their lives. When they expressed criticism of American society, they saw themselves as part of this society. The Iranian women in the Netherlands did not want to think about the future; it is too scary. They feel they are perceived as others and excluded from Dutch society although they are successful. But this process works two ways. The limited interactions between Iranian and Dutch deepen their sense of belonging to a static positive imaginary of their homeland, and stereotyping the Dutch. It is we and they. The Iranian women in Los Angeles encounter as much stereotyping as the Dutch but they could make more differentiation. This helps to feel at home despite racist acts. After all they are all Americans!

Expectations of the future are connected to a sense of security and belonging. When the sense of belonging is strong (2003, p.208) Ghorashi argues the future becomes visible and manageable. When the sense of not belonging is strong the future becomes unimaginable.

The women in California could distance themselves more from the past; the context gives them a sense of belonging. The feeling of being at home and the existence of an Iran outside Iran in Los Angeles makes it easier the live in the present (2003, p.186). The focus on the present makes painful memories of the past less prominent and enables these women to concentrate on the future. Feeling at home has nothing to do with the soil, feeling at home has to do with being able to position yourself, being heard, seen and recognition by who you are and what you have to give.

2.3.2 The organizational context
Organizations also follow different types of approaches. For example, the deficit approach, widely used in organizations, describes a situation where the migrants or refugees themselves are held
responsible when an organization is not diverse enough. It can be described as a “it is them and not us” – an exclusionary discourse where the blame is put on the refugees and minorities, instead of the organization itself.

It is obvious that societies and organizations that form the context where refugee women want to become active participants influence their mindset, behavior and chances to realize their dreams. In our program this became visible. In the next paragraph we explain our working and research methodology.

3. Working methodology in the Life Long Learning Program
The Partnership encompasses 2 years in which the 5 organizations work together towards a common goal and parallel to that process research is done in order to capture knowledge and define lessons and best practices. In this paragraph we describe our working methodology.

In broad lines our aim in the first year is to set the context for the empowerment of women and definition of individual goals. In this first year, the five organizations of the four different countries came together 4 times. Each country was the host of a three days conference. The gatherings took place in Utrecht, Antwerp, Copenhagen and Cardiff. Approximately 45 women were participating in each one of the conferences. The first meeting in Utrecht, The Netherlands, was oriented towards getting to know each other, bonding, exchange of expertise and developing a learning path together. The second program in Antwerp, Belgium, was centered on the Master class of Dr. Ghorashi, where the scientific basis of her approach was explained, laid down and experienced. We started with storytelling. The third conference in Copenhagen, Denmark elaborated further on the work of Dr. Ghorashi and exchange of knowledge of resourceful speakers with expertise in the field of the labor market. We continued with individual stories. The fourth conference in Cardiff, The United Kingdom, focused on learning about helpful tools to equip participants to become more entrepreneurial and enter the labor market and exchange knowledge with local and national politicians. Where in the 2nd and 3rd meeting the focus was on the individual, in Cardiff we started with the next step: that of contextualizing and defining individual goals through personal development plans.

How was knowledge captured? Mainly by making literal transcripts of the meetings – the stories, the discussions, the outcomes. Our research is exploratory, in an appreciative way we are searching for patterns, best practices and lessons.

In this first year the narratives of women played a central role. A number of assumptions form the framework wherein we work.

Assumption 1: Learning in an all-women’s group

In the Life Long Learning partnership we work with an all-women’s group. This choice is based on the following assumptions:

- Women know best what the problems are in their entrance to the labor market
- The paths toward work for women (refugees) differ from the path of men.
- It is important to learn together and from each other. Female role models are scarce. The conferences provide a network of these inspiring role models.
• The learning environment must be safe; a mixed training group brings in other dynamics and can affect the opportunity to open up.

Assumption 2: Sharing of narratives

Our approach in this partnership is a bottom-up. We choose to work with the narrative methodology of Dr. Ghorashi (2005, 2006, and 2010). This methodology has its roots in social constructivism. It assumes that people construct and seek meaning by creating and sharing narratives about their lives. The narrative —or story— is a way to define oneself and put experiences in a perspective by revealing patterns. Every person’s social or interpersonal reality has been constructed through interaction with other human beings and human institutions. This approach seeks to be respectful, non-blaming and connecting. For sharing one needs a safe space and listeners that can suspend their voice of judgment. The method differs from debating or discussing which pushes people more easily in a reactive mode and therefore a closed mindset or exclusion.

In our approach all participants are seen as resourceful and as lifelong learners. It centers them as experts in their own lives and enables them to separate themselves from their problems. This approach assumes that people have many skills, competencies, beliefs, values, commitments and abilities that will assist them to reduce the influence of problems in their lives (Parry 1994). By sharing stories women feel that they are not alone, that others have similar experiences. The stories connect: in the process they are weaving a fabric with unique patterns as well as collective patterns.

The sharing of narratives in the program serves several purposes:

• to create a sense of connection and belonging
• to re-establish a belief in relationships
• to create a safe learning environment
• to think about oneself in terms of (inner) strengths,
• to understand choices made in life
• to revalidate old coping strategies and add new ones by modeling
• to tap into creativity
• to refuel and energize
• to heal and express
• to create a network
• to learn from each other, strengthen and help each other
• to contextualize experiences and to see collective patterns in the narratives.

Assumption 3: Contextualization of experiences

Sharing of stories is the first step in our approach; the next step is contextualizing the experiences. By contextualization experiences one is more able to distance oneself from experiences. The participants are more able to distinguish what belongs to them as a person, their personality, and what belongs to the context. Analyzing experiences and listening to experiences of others helps to recognize patterns. Contextualizing is a way to free oneself from a burden you thought was yours, however it needs the ability to analyze the own mindset and the mindset of others. By observing and
suspending your judgment about others and yourself you create a mindset that is more understanding and open. It also helps you understand the collective mindset of people in the host country. This is about understanding the refugee position in the mindset of the people in the host country: their point of view, their fears. Analyzing gives understanding. It helps to stop blaming others or feeling guilty, it helps to act and knowing what you can influence or not. It is about becoming an observer of your problems, without re-living those experiences. It is here that the process of empowerment starts.

Assumption 4: Learning from the past and learning from the future

In the Life Long learning Program we make use of two sources of learning. Learning from reflecting on the experiences of the past and learning from the future as it emerges (Scharmer, 2007).

An important part of the program is learning by reflecting on the experiences of the past and on the basis of that reflection planning and acting for the future. This learning starts by becoming aware of what helped one on their path so far to overcome obstacles and problems and thus reaffirming strengths.

An important assumption behind this methodology is that in every human system there are positive and negative events that keep the system in equilibrium. It works like a thermostat. When people have to endure a lot, there is an inner mechanism that protects them to retain their balance and composure. Reflecting on the past and actually acknowledging that problems have been overcome however hard these have been, gives confidence and comfort to move to an unknown future. For adult learners, as in our program, it is important to (re)discover these capacities and re-awaken qualities and talents that were dormant during the hardships they have suffered and distress they experienced. In addition the writing of their own personal development plan and plans of action gives direction and creates commitment to act and to change.

Learning from the past however may not be sufficient. When new problems of existence arise, as a result of for instance the economic situation in the West-European countries, it is not always possible to tap from old experiences. New ways of coping with problems have to be added to the repertoire to be able to face new problems of existence. Therefore a more process oriented, discovering approach of change is needed to open up for new steps in the process. Not merely recurring to old ways of doing things, but also paying attention to the way a new path emerges is important.

Keeping this in mind the conference contents are not rigidly structured or directed in a fixed way to reach the project goals. We believe that wisdom is like a baobab tree and no individual can embrace it. It needs collective work, creativity and wisdom to take steps in the right direction. It starts by sharing the collective knowledge from the narratives.

4. Storytelling as a means to empowerment

4.1 The narratives of the women

As mentioned earlier we chose for the narrative approach as a means to empower women and create space to redefine oneself, develop new perspectives and define ways to deal with problems and obstacles. The narrative approach we saw assumes that people construct and seek meaning by
creating and sharing narratives about their lives. The story one tells in this case to a group of women with similar experiences, is a way to define oneself and put experiences in a perspective by revealing patterns. Refugee women were asked to prepare for the next meeting in Antwerp. What we did not count on was that initially this raised a lot of resistance among the women. In first instance they declined and said they did not want to talk in public about what they had gone through. Their way of coping with the past, was to remain silent instead of speaking up. Henceforth we decided to focus the narratives on the experiences of women in relation to work – it was then up to them to decide the extent to which they wanted to tell about what they had gone through prior to leaving their home country.

In the second conference in Antwerp and the third conference in Copenhagen the focus was on sharing stories on labor market experiences. The participants were asked to prepare themselves by writing down their story and to speak in front of an audience of women. They were asked to focus their sharing on the following question: What does labor mean to you? What have been your experiences so far in your host country? How does your background/past influence your experiences? How did you cope? And what would you advice labor organizations regarding practices? Each woman was given 10 minutes to tell her story. This was an important limitation because it forced women to highlight the most important aspects and focus on ways they dealt with their experiences. Some of the themes that were touched upon in this first session in Antwerp were:

- Misinformation
  "I did not know I could study, they told me it was impossible"
  Refugee women often do not know what their opportunities or possibilities are.
- Lagging behind
  "I am too old to study. Therefore I have started working, but I always feel I lag behind"
  Refugee women have to cope with a gap in their CV and miss out on crucial years in their life due to asylum procedures and the consequences of settling in a new country.
- Belonging
  "How can you belong if you are in a society that you should be thankful and you may not criticize?"
  Refugee women struggle to find their position within the new society.
- Victims of the situation
  Both people that discriminate and people that are discriminated are victims of the context. It is the context that governs the behavior of both persons.

In the textbox below an impression of the impact of the Masterclass and the stories on a participant of the meeting.
4.2 Collective patterns from the narratives

We had more than 40 narratives told by individual women from 4 countries. The stories learnt that the hardships that women have had to face are sometimes unspeakable, but the resilience to cope with these experiences is what has brought them where they are. Resilience refers to the capacity of people to adapt oneself to circumstances. Resilience according to Ungar (2007) is not a permanent state, but a process. This notion of resilience is important to understand the way in which women cope with what they have gone through. Social networks and connections, meaningful ways to spend one’s time and factors like religion have a positive influence on resilience.

An important second step in the process of empowerment is to distance oneself from the individual story and focus on the common themes and patterns that emerge in all the stories. This is a way of collective learning which creates distance to the individual story and places them in a larger context.

In the narratives there were many common themes, mostly barriers towards participating in the labor force. But also supporting factors and advice were mentioned. Helping factors towards their goals of entering the labor market were their determination, perseverance, surviving skills, creativity hope and resilience. But also meeting the right person at the right moment and the need of being properly informed about rights and legislation.

After the storytelling women were asked to work in small groups of 4 to 5 and together identify the themes from the stories. This is an important step because it creates ownership. It helps in changing awareness of oneself as a victim, to taking control over one’s life.

Common themes on Psychological/individual level were

- Sadness, psychological distress/or post-traumatic stress reaction
- Family breakdown
- Liminality, Acculturative stress and culture shock
- Lack of self-esteem, Feeling a 2nd class citizen
- Lagging behind, never catching up
- Perseverance, hard work, determination
- Trying to adjust
- Survivor skills, creativity, resilience
Hope for a better future
Pressure and duty as ambassador

Common themes on Relational/Networks/Family/ Interpersonal level were

- Cultural barrier
- Lack of support
- Family Pressure
- Other women as role model and source of inspiration

Societal/institutional aspects

- Language barriers
- Unemployment, Reliance on social benefits
- Difficulties in recognition of certificates
- Immigration policies
- Treated as 2nd class citizenship

What stands out is the fact that the patterns at a societal level are mostly negative, while the patterns at an individual and organizational level contain both positive and negative aspects. One of the most striking patterns was the lack of anger that women showed in telling their stories. This shows how victimized they have become. The sadness prevailed and was dominant next to a very deeply and strong felt sense of having to survive and cope. This is however something else than being in control and entrepreneurial. It shows how important it is to regain the sense of control and self-reliance that one needs to become successful and play an active role in society. In the next paragraph we describe our findings so far more in detail.

5. Learnings on the path so far: the first year

5.1 The process of empowerment and feeling at home
We saw that empowerment is the process of people, organizations and communities increasing or gaining control over their lives and becoming active participants in efforts to influence their environment. So there is a distinction between the goals of empowerment, which refers to gaining control over your life. And the process of empowerment – during the process an individual has to identify his or her problems, find solutions and act to solve problems. Empowerment is important in order to reach the 2nd step of recognition and 3rd step of belonging and feeling at home. To what extent have the narratives so far empowered women?

1. The approach of the partnership – bottom-up instead of choosing for an approach to adapt structures or procedures first - is felt as very supportive and highly meaningful when it comes to sharing stories and experiences. It is not the individual alone that takes responsibility, but the whole project group is involved. The effects may be a form of anxiety reduction and in time healing. It is here where the process of empowering starts.

2. Whenever people live in an exile, identity becomes a crucial issue. Refugees in the host countries are a relatively small minority and have little or no power as a group. For most of
the women taking part in the LLL program helped them to achieve a degree of security and inner strength. It also brings the women back to the concept of community in their home countries. The Partnership is felt like family and it has no (or less) racial, religious national boundaries.

3. The chosen form promotes social inclusion by working together in a team towards each conference, gives a sense of belonging, direction, responsibility and opportunity to learn new skills. This affects empowerment in a positive way. It is also the place where achievements are celebrated.

4. The conference structure in the different countries made it possible to step out of the daily routine of caring and working. Making new friends and creating a new network reinforces the process of contextualizing and rethinking the future.

5. By sharing their experiences women recognized that their problems were not unique but shared by a larger group. From a theoretical perspective the women have learned that a part of their problems is produced by the context of the host country and not by their deficit. The women reported that this insight empowered them.

6. Some of the women could shift in their thinking frame from feeling a victim to becoming an actor. It was very helpful for them to listen to women they perceived as empowered and inspirational examples. They feel encouraged to do the same. Some women were warning others not to victimize themselves and also not to agree with the one and only identity as refugee, they told them to remember they have multiple identities and only one of them is the identity of being a refugee.

All in all the telling and sharing of stories appear to be powerful vehicles which support empowerment and form an important step in the process of becoming an active member of society. The conferences have turned out to be influential on the way that refugee women perceive themselves. By sharing their stories they recognize that the problems and difficulties they are dealing with are not unique, but shared by a larger group. From a theoretical perspective the women have learned that these problems are for a large part produced by the context, and not by their own deficit. This insight has empowered the women.

5.2 Participating in society and entrepreneurial development
The context of the country influence the way the women see their past, present and future. The sense of belonging, being recognized and having control are crucial issues for participating in society.

The more women feel they are recognized, their future becomes more visible and manageable. If not, the future is scary and unimaginable and the past stays more present.

1. The roadblocks that women have to overcome on their path to the labor market are on a personal level, interpersonal level and institutional level.

2. Women formulated their way out of their situation in the following ways: Educate yourself! By education you can free yourself, make yourself more independent, it helps you to integrate” Do Positive Self Talk “, “Be realistic in your choices” ask for Counseling” and “Network”! Also: “Do not victimize yourself”. Some of the women stressed the importance of religion to cope with all the hardships, but also suggested to keep it in their own safe/ private space.
3. Most women participating in the Partnership studied in their host countries on a lower educational level than in their countries of origin. Jobcentres tend to direct women to education which is an extension of their female role in childcare or social work. Women who studied science or physics in their home countries were also directed towards social studies and not geared towards their own interests or former education. Becoming an entrepreneur is not always a choice. The women take action upon negative life events as result of their forcefully migration, difficulties to get a job, lack of language skills, being tired of doing a job lower than their education, lack of career opportunities or being fired.

4. Most of the business starters participating in the partnership project are in catering, restaurants, hairdressing fashion and jewelry. The driving force for starting their own businesses is the need to acquire their own earnings and participating in society. In a sense it is a negative choice induced by the difficulties in getting a job in the field they have been educated.

5. Barriers towards setting up their own business are often a lack of knowledge on how to set up a business and finding financial support. Other barriers are the lack confidence of taking this step and the amount of energy it takes to set up your own business next to taking care of your (extended) family and coping with traumas. The other side of the coin is that being between structures can be a major basis of creativity. Refugees learned to live in unstable situations. They are survivors. They learned to create nothing into something. They learned to let go. This survivor’s mentality prepared them for the current socio-economic state of Europe. They might serve as examples and role models.

6. The emerging path: Planning for the second year

6.1 On individual level
The mindset of refugee women reflects how society perceives them. According to Ghorashi (Kruijk, 2012) the main contributor to the perceptions that prevail in a society can be traced back to the discursive structure. In The Netherlands the process of “othering” is very strong: you are foremost a category, not a human being and you are different from the norm. In the process of survival they have internalized this view and it has become part of them. Refugee women need to see how society sees them and tap into their own strength and power to bring about a conscious self-identity. They can start this process by creating a safe space where they can reconnect their story to the world and use their life stories as a tool. These safe spaces can be created by anyone and can take place anywhere. This could be described as a self-empowering process, in which refugee/minority women may recreate their history and thus also their future.

Another issue often mentioned is to reconnect to other identities than the identity of being a refugee which may narrow down your image. All of us have multiple identities: being a mother, an academic, an entrepreneur, a journalist etc. a Christian, Muslim etc. The multiple identities broaden your perspective and sense of connection and self-worth.

6.2 On organization level
On organizational level the women asked for tools / vehicles to empowerment and participation in the labor force. They asked for
• Counseling
• Job Interview preparation
• Learning about the organizational culture/values in the host country
• Job shadowing/traineeships
• Network

In the second year we intend to involve organizations and stakeholders from the outside world in our conferences. Women will be asked to share their experiences with them – their past experiences and the lessons they have picked up in the conferences. The aim is to create awareness for the situation of refugees and the role they could play in society. Through dialogues and interaction we aim to change the mindset of at least a selected number of influential people in each country. Women can thus experience how they can also influence the context in which they have to live and work. Giving them back this sense of control over themselves but also their environment is an important step on the road to becoming an active member in society.

6.3 On society level/the public sphere

Whether the refugee group will participate in society or fail depends on them and on the attitude of the host society. Agents of the host society can do a lot to facilitate the group of refugees. Ghorashi suggests that changing the perspective of how people and institutions of host countries perceive refugees is an important key to change: “it is them and not us” exclusionary discourse where the blame is put on the refugees and minorities, instead of the organization itself. In light of such thinking, it can be argued that it is the “organizational process that needs to change”. Thus the essential question remained: How do we go about doing this? How do we create a space for refugee women in organizations? In order to bring about this change, three processes need to be taking place:

1. Organizations need to rethink the process and change the organization mindset. This could be initiated by questioning the workings of the status quo and by sharing powerful stories of refugee women, within and outside of the organization.
2. Organizations should reach out, talk about the situation and engage with all different layers of society.
3. Organizations should change their ways of thinking and doing by asking themselves, “What happens if we see possibilities and not just what is lacking?”

To sum up: we think that diversity is part of today’s reality and cannot be denied. Therefore it is important to reach out to stakeholders by networking, attending conferences, round table meetings and engage politicians and decision-makers in the diversity dialogue to make diversity work. That is our goal for the second year of the program. Our underlying motto being that wisdom is like a baobab tree: no individual can embrace it. We see collective learning which underlies our program – through the stories and through the dialogues with stakeholders which we intend to organize – as a key element in the process of empowerment and transition that refugee women must undergo from being a victim to a becoming a confident and active participant in society.
About the authors

Saskia J.M. Harkema at present works as an independent consultant under the banner of her own company – INENDI, Innovation, Entrepreneurship and Diversity, which she has recently set up. She has written a dissertation on innovative ways to organize complex innovation projects. She has both academic and hands-on experience. Throughout her career she has acquired a large experience in international collaborations and partnerships geared at improvement of the innovative capacity of people and organizations. At present she is running together with Carin Beijer a 2 year European program on entrepreneurship, inclusion and diversity funded by the Life Long Learning Program geared at adult education. At the heart of her thinking and work is the belief in the innate capacity of people to create, innovate and change. Tapping into this often hidden potential is her expertise and what she is passionate about.

Catharina J. Beijer is an independent consultant with 20 years’ experience in management training and development both in the private and public sector. After her master degree in social and organizational behaviour she moved into management development. Most of her work focuses on change, leadership, intercultural awareness, stress management and empowerment. She is helping people all over the world to develop appropriate skills to cope with the rapid changing demands. She holds also a degree in Clinical Psychology and Medical Anthropology. At present she works for the LLL project for refugee women in the Netherlands.
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