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Inside the system

The Psychosocial Impact of
Seeking Asylum in the Netherlands

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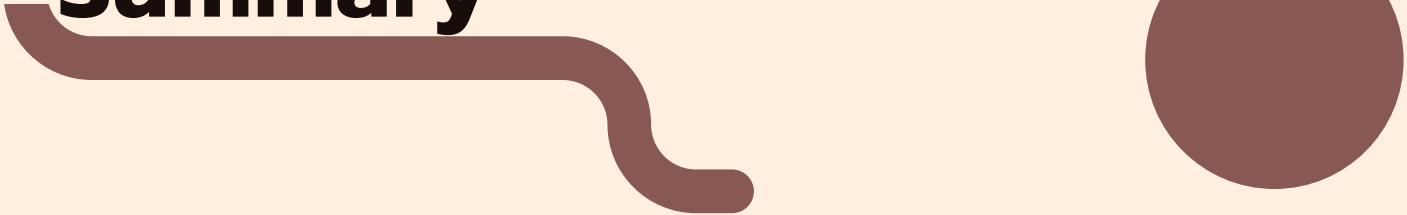
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Summary



This report reflects our unwavering commitment to refugees, asylum seekers, and illegalized people—individuals and families who have been forced to flee their homes, or choose to leave their homes, in search of a better future. Through storytelling, this report aims to provide a comprehensive overview of our efforts in providing essential services, advocating for policy changes, and fostering inclusive communities. We hope this report inspires action and encourages greater support for refugees in the Netherlands and worldwide.

The biggest injustice one can do to a human story is to take it out of its context. And who is facing this marginalization more than refugees and asylum seekers, particularly racialized groups? Victim, hero, survivor, intruder – the categorization of asylum seekers and refugees as their presence is more and more politicized is just a reflection of deeply rooted continuities of racial hierarchies and prejudices. As Sheringham and Taylor (2022) argue:

“Individuals who have been forced to migrate are neither an un-storied human mass lacking agency, nor purely noble individual exiles whose lives follow a heroic narrative, but people with lives as contradictory and complex as those who have not been displaced. There is a balance to be achieved between creating safe spaces within which stories can be told and falling into the trap of soliciting traumatic narratives.”

Following this approach, this report is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted by the author with asylum seekers and refugees in the Netherlands spanning the period of October 2023 to April 2025, while volunteering with SAWA collective. Often psychological outcomes in refugee populations are studied in pathological outcomes, the percentage of anxiety, depression, psychosis or PTSD. While we acknowledge the urgency and importance of treatment for these symptoms, we equally point to the importance of understanding psychosocial well being and the multitude of way it can be impacted, while not amounting to diagnosable psychopathologies.

While several testimonies in this report relate to people in the Dublin procedure, their experiences point to more systemic patterns of insecurity, disbelief, and unequal treatment within the Dutch asylum process overall.

Crime and Punishment – A Fantasy by Mahmoud Fayez (translated)

To set the scene for this report, the following is a poem written by a member of SAWA, while he was awaiting his decision on his Dublin transfer:

Forgive me, Your Honor,

If I stand before you — hollow, empty.
My chest is a storehouse of sorrow,
Gnawed by the fangs of the past.
My country is far,
My homeland unwell,
And — by my own reckoning — I've been
exiled.
No house will shelter me.
No woman can hold me.
And no effort on my part can bridge the
gap.
As for my heart...
I threw it away with used-up things.
Abandoned my thrill,
And jeweled goblets,
And laid down to sleep upon my protest.
Your Honor...
I come to you, dust-covered and worn,
A desert man with tales of Antar in my
pocket,
My neighbor's gossip,
And a perfumed cup of tea.
Look — here.
Look right here.
There's nothing left to see in my eyes.
My face doesn't recognize me.
My tongue has turned to stone.

Your Honor...

These are all my possessions:
My pen,
My despair,
A canvas with my lover's image—
A silver mouth,
A lapis-blue breast,
The wheat of our season,
A pomegranate from our garden,
And the medals of my rage and rebellion.

Your Honor...

This is all I have.
Here—my hands, bound.
Even my letters lack an alphabet.
They pass through your ears — so listen.
Take my son.
Take my words.
Or leave me swinging
From the failures I call my own.



RECOMMENDATIONS

PSYCHOLOGISTS AND MENTAL HEALTH WORKERS

Community-Based Psychosocial Support (CB-PSS)

- Low-threshold, non-clinical interventions NGOs can facilitate:
- Peer storytelling groups
- Arts-based expression (drawing, music, drama)
- Guided group discussions around transitions and loss
- Emphasize the ADAPT model domains (Silove, 2013): safety, bonds, identity, justice, meaning.

LAWYERS AND LEGAL COUNSELORS

- Considering legal illiteracy in interaction with applicants
-
-

RESEARCHERS

- Integrating impact into research design
- avoiding extracting Research/NGO/Grassroot collaborations to academic benefit without benefit to research population
-
-

NGOS AND GRASSROOTS

- activities that foster activities psychosocial wellbeing
-

STATE AGENCIES AND GOVERNMENT

- activities that foster activities psychosocial wellbeing
-

MEDIA REPRESENTATIVES AND JOURNALISTS

- Dehumanizing
-

Understanding the Dutch asylum system

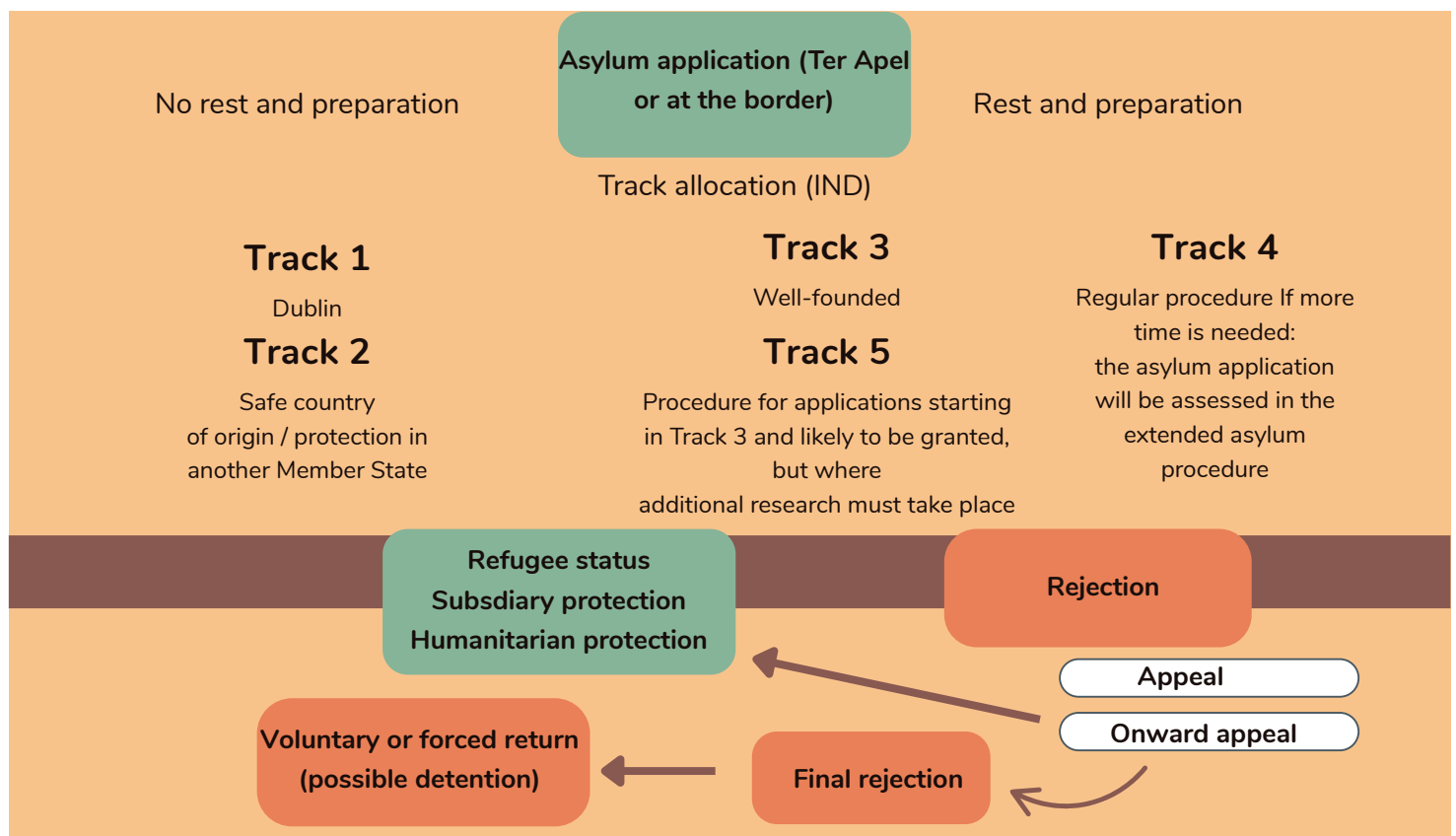
The asylum procedure

The Netherlands is a signatory of the 1951 Refugee convention and instruments of international refugee law which oblige states to provide protection to those fleeing persecution and to prevent refoulment.¹

To claim asylum in the Netherlands, individuals must register with the immigration and naturalization office (IND) either at the border or at the national reception centre in Ter Apel. After a brief rest and preparation period, most applicants are assigned to one of several procedural tracks depending on factors such as whether they passed through another EU country, come from a so-called “safe” country, or present a complex protection claim.²

During this early phase, applicants meet with an employee of the Dutch refugee council (VVD), and are assigned a lawyer. Prior to the IND interview, the applicants are given a voluntary medical examination that aims at assessing any physical or mental health concern that might influence the interview with the IND.

The procedure typically includes two interviews: one focused on identity and journey, and another on the reasons for seeking protection. After each interview, applicants may review and correct the transcripts. The IND generally issues a decision within days, but procedural delays are common⁵. If rejected, they may be placed in restrictive return facilities.



Understanding the Dutch asylum system

Reception conditions

Asylum seekers in the Netherlands are accommodated in government-run reception centres (AZCs) while their claims are being processed. They are required to report weekly to the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA). Due to persistent backlogs in assigning recognized refugees to municipal housing, many remain in AZCs for extended periods after receiving a positive decision. In 2024, around 25% of people in reception were already recognised as beneficiaries of international protection⁴. At the same time, only around 47% of people entitled to reception are in regular AZCs. The rest is hosted in emergency and crisis facilities often unsuitable for long-term stay⁸. Many reception centres are temporary e.g. cruise ships and sport halls with poor infrastructure and lack of privacy. The 2024 Spredingswet sought to fairly distribute reception across municipalities. But its possible repeal under the new cabinet has created confusion and implementation delays⁶. Reception conditions remain a critical issue. In 2024, courts ruled against overcrowding in Ter Apel and found that some restrictions on movement lacked legal basis⁵.

Support and access to care

Mental health care is limited, and applicants with severe needs often go untreated. Psychosocial services within formal reception structures remain limited and fragmented. Mental health care is highly medicalised, poorly coordinated with legal and social services, and often inaccessible during early stages. NGOs like SAWA offer critical support, providing relational care, legal orientation, and community-building that fills gaps in the wellbeing ecosystem.

Deteriorating Political Climate

In recent years, the Dutch asylum system has faced major political and operational changes. A proposed “Asylum Emergency Measures Act” aimed to make procedures stricter, including shorter permits, more forced returns, and reduced support for family reunification. Although not yet law, these proposals have already shaped public debate and institutional priorities. In early 2025, the new Dutch government under Migration Minister Marjolein Faber (PVV) intensified its focus on return. This included a flyer campaign in asylum centres targeting Syrian nationals, with messaging such as “Celebrate Eid at home again?” and invitations to contact the Repatriation and Departure Service (DT&V) for permanent return.* Though framed as voluntary, the campaign takes place in a broader context of legal uncertainty, capacity pressure, and proposed emergency legislation, reinforcing the perception among many residents that their presence is temporary and unwanted.

The political climate deteriorated further in mid-2025 when the Dutch parliament passed two controversial bills that may criminalise individuals and organisations providing assistance to undocumented migrants. A last-minute amendment introduced by the Freedom Party (PVV) proposed penalising support to people without legal residence. Although the governing coalition collapsed shortly after, migration remains a central fault line in Dutch politics, shaping both policy and public discourse. The cumulative effect of these developments is a narrowing of legal pathways and support structures, an intensification of surveillance and return efforts, and the growing criminalisation of solidarity. This context deepens the psychosocial strain experienced by asylum seekers and undocumented individuals, who must navigate daily life amid legal precarity and growing hostility.

7. European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), Country Report: Netherlands – Types of Accommodation, Asylum Information Database, updated 4 June 2025. Available at: <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/netherlands/reception-conditions/housing/types-accommodation> (accessed July 8, 2025)

5. Ibid, pp. 8–9 and 23–24.

6.

Psychosocial wellbeing - Why does it matter?



Psychosocial wellbeing refers to a holistic state of wellbeing which is shaped by internal and external factors, including the person's emotional, psychological, environmental, sociopolitical and collective situation.

Asylum seekers and refugees face significantly higher risks of mental health challenges than the greater population. They are more likely to experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety disorder, and suicidal ideation⁵. But psychosocial wellbeing means more than just the absence of mental illness. This report focuses on the psychosocial wellbeing of asylum seekers, defined as their mental and emotional health in connection to their legal situation, living conditions, social environment, and sense of meaning and belonging.

While war and persecution are often seen as the main causes of distress, research shows that what happens after arrival, such as legal uncertainty, family separation, poor housing, and discrimination in the country of settlement, can be just as harmful to a person's well being and mental health¹⁰. It is important to highlight that every applicant has a different experience of the procedure depending on a multitude of factors: access to and quality of the legal counselor, social support, individual motivation, knowledgeability of the system, the asylum track, the country of origin, and eventually the merits of protection.

At the same time, some people are able to cope or recover over time. Others remain stuck in a state of prolonged stress and anxiety, especially when their status is unclear or their lives are constantly being disrupted. Poor psychosocial wellbeing impairs people's ability to participate in society, care for their children, and rebuild their lives¹¹.

To understand these impacts, this report uses the ADAPT model, developed by psychiatrist Derrick Silove¹². The model proposes that displacement can disrupt five core psychosocial domains that are essential for individuals and communities to function and adapt.

- Safety and Security
- Justice
- Bonds and Networks
- Roles and Identities
- Existential meaning

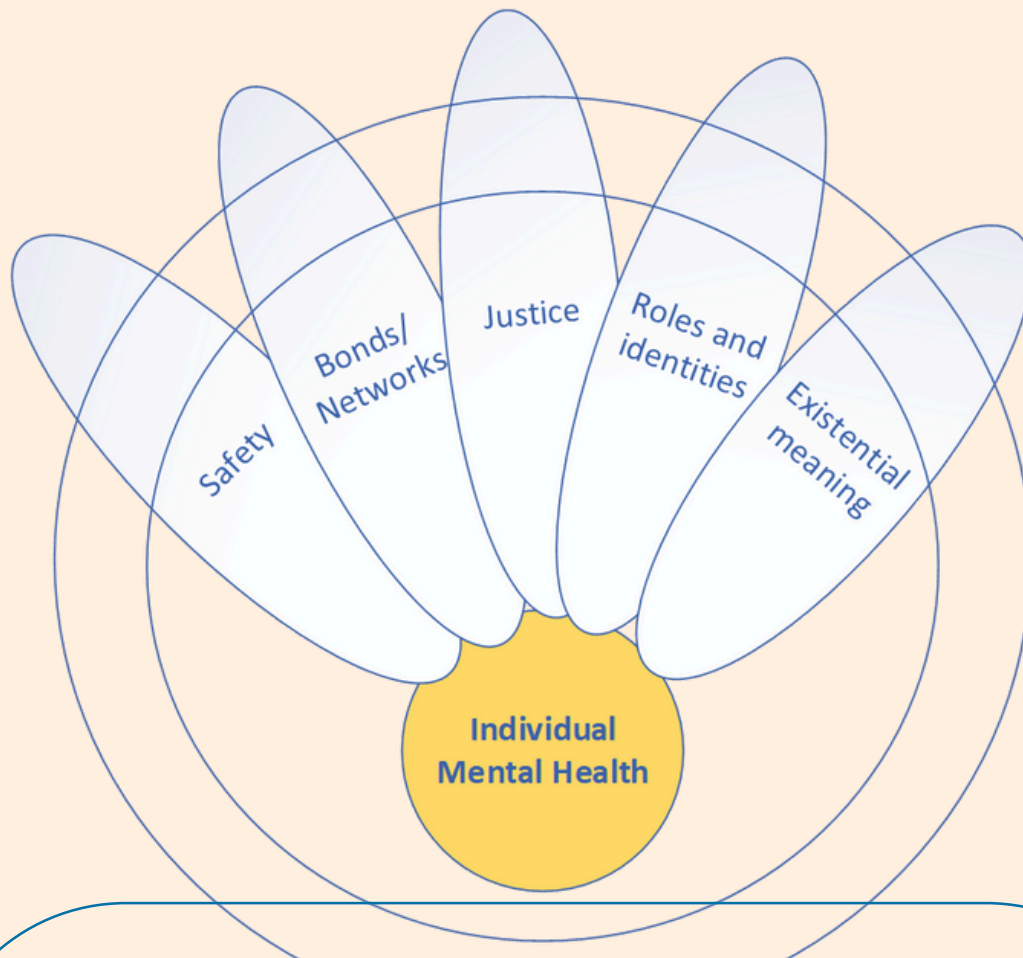
Although originally designed to understand the impact of war and conflict, the ADAPT model also helps us see how the asylum procedure itself can affect people's wellbeing. In the Netherlands, asylum seekers often spend years waiting in uncertainty. Many live with fear of deportation, struggle to access legal protection, or are separated from family members. These experiences harm not only their mental health but also their ability to feel safe, to trust institutions, to build relationships, and to imagine a future. We use the ADAPT model to highlight how these systems—not just individual events—can damage wellbeing. Understanding these patterns can help professionals, volunteers, and policymakers respond in ways that are more just, humane, and grounded in the lived reality of those seeking protection.

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The Adaptation and Development after Persecution and Trauma (ADAPT) model



Safety and Security

Refers to the need for physical and emotional safety. Displacement can undermine this pillar through exposure to danger, instability, or prolonged uncertainty.

Justice

Concerns a person's experience of fairness, accountability, and recognition. In the aftermath of trauma or systemic violence, a lack of justice can generate feelings of anger, betrayal, or marginalisation.

Bonds and Networks

Encompasses social connections, relationships, and a sense of belonging. Displacement often leads to separation from loved ones and community structures, which can weaken this domain.

Roles and Identities

Involves the ability to enact meaningful roles (e.g. worker, parent, student) that contribute to one's identity and sense of purpose. Loss or disruption of these roles can affect how individuals see themselves and their place in society.

Existential Meaning

Refers to belief systems, values, and cultural or spiritual frameworks that help people make sense of their experiences. This pillar may be challenged when previous understandings no longer align with one's reality after displacement.

Methododology

This report is based on immersive, community-embedded fieldwork carried out over three years (2023-2025) with asylum seekers in the Netherlands, particularly those affected by the Dublin procedure. The research was made possible through the close collaboration with **SAWA**, a community-based NGO in Amsterdam, that provides psychosocial, legal, and peer support to people in and outside the asylum procedure.

As a long-term volunteer with SAWA, I participated weekly in their workshops, social events, and outreach activities in various asylum camps across the Netherlands, but primarily in Amsterdam. This position fascilitated sustained relationships of trust, infomral conversations, and a deeper understanding of the everyday challenges asylum seekers face. The research emerged from and fed back into SAWA's work, with staff and volunteers contributing knowledge, access, and critical reflection throughout the process.

The report is based on:

- 6 in-depth narrative interviews with asylum seekers
- 1 focus group discussion with 11 participants
- Dozena of informal conversations during shared activities.
- 3 interviews with asylum lawyers, 5 with mental health professionals, 2 with SAWA staff, and 1 with NGO staff involved in psychosocial or legal support.

Ethical considerations

All participants gave informed consent. Identifying have been removed or changed to ensure anonymity and protect participants' safety. The wellbeing and privacy were prioritized at every stage of the research.



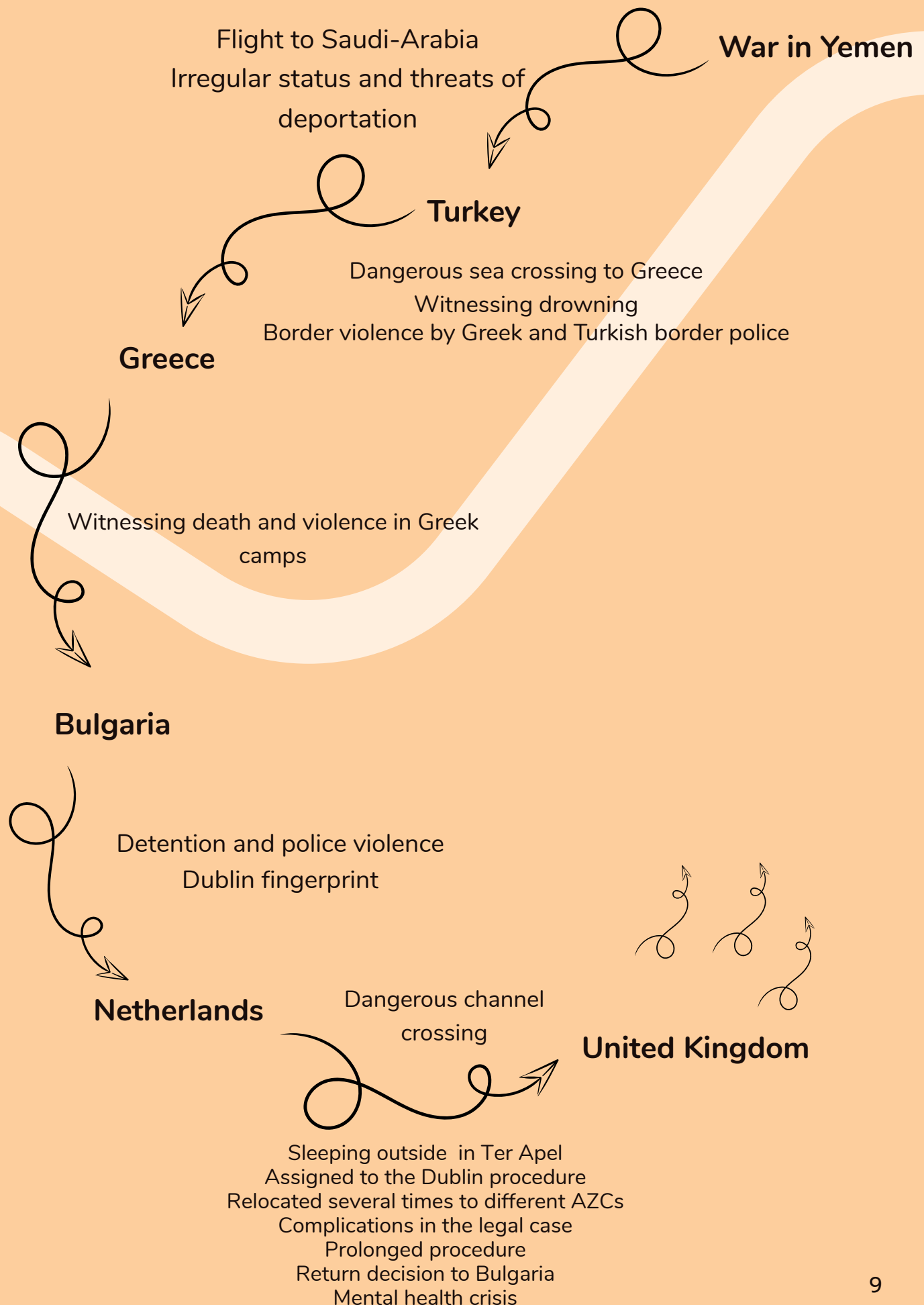
Analytical approach

The findings are interpreted using the ADAPT model of psychosocial wellbeing. While grounded in academic research, this report prioritises experiential insights and lived narratives. As a migrant researcher with an Arabic background and shared language and cultural reference points, I was often entrusted with deeply personal reflections. This report reflects not only what I observed, but what I was allowed to witness: moments of waiting, fear, care, resistance, and quiet endurance. It is also a testament to the everyday, relational work carried out by SAWA, often unnoticed, but essential to sustaining hope and community.

Limitations

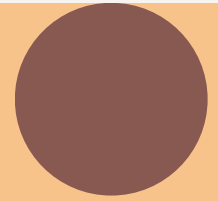
This report does not claim to represent all asylum seekers. Most participants were Arabic-speaking men connected to SAWA's network. As such perspectives of women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people in isolated or closed camps are underrepresented. The findings reflect a particular slice of experience: those who were able to speak, reflect, and be reached. Additionally, while the report draws on thematic analysis, it does not provide statistical claims or prevalence data.

Fleeing war is often the beginning of a journey full of harms - the case of Younes (24)



Safety and Security

Living in Fear: Impact of deportation threats



The Dublin procedure: safety while waiting for unsafety?

Many participants had previously endured detention, violence, or mistreatment in the countries to which they now faced return under the Dublin regulation. The prospect of being sent back reactivated trauma responses: many reported panic attacks, insomnia, and suicidal ideation. Some described self-harm or deliberately injuring themselves to avoid deportation. One woman fearing return to Hungary with her children, where they had experienced homelessness and discrimination, said:

“I’d rather die than go back. If I could die and save my kids, I would.”

Psychologists and NGO staff emphasized that the uncertainty caused by the Dublin procedure often made mental health support nearly impossible. Without legal certainty or a safe and stable environment, recovery could not begin. As one psychologist put it:

“You need to have a secure place, not a Dublin claim on your neck.”

Interviewed psychologists shared the view, that the asylum procedure destabilizes their clients’ nervous systems, not necessary because of new trauma, but because the system often replicates the conditions of past trauma. The possibility of being transferred or deported, or detained at any time keeps people in a state of constant vigilance. As one participant who received a letter informing him about his transfer date, described:

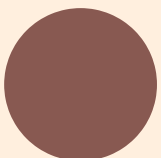
“I had to see the doctor to get sleeping pills... You can’t sleep, you’re always thinking, thinking. Will they send me back?”

A safer place?

Despite these threats, many asylum seekers described feeling safer in Dutch society compared to the countries they had passed through. Yet this safety was often precarious. Some described being housed with individuals with histories of violence or being sent to overcrowded camps with poor conditions. Relocation in the Dutch asylum system is often a decision made behind closed doors with little room to contest or interfere with the decision. The threat of being uprooted again meant that any sense of safety felt fragile and temporary.

Safety and Security

Detention



Several participants reported being detained during the asylum procedure, particularly under Dublin procedures or when facing deportation for rejected applicants. Detention was widely experienced as a source of fear and dehumanization

"I never see somebody getting out of detention more healthy than they get inside. It's really bad and for some people really traumatizing. You just hang all the day, being, thinking about your problems and in distress."

"What they experience here doesn't always look traumatic from the outside, but it feels traumatic to the body. It activates old fear patterns."

Justice

We were not believed: Disbelief and Injustice

Many asylum seekers in the Netherlands describe a deep sense of injustice, less from the violence of persecution alone than from how they are treated upon arrival. Instead of protection, their first contact with the asylum system is often a legal bureaucratic process harboring delay, disbelief, and perceived arbitrariness. In this study I observed that perceived injustice affected people's psychosocial wellbeing profoundly, transforming into shame, anger, helplessness, or chronic stress.

Disbelief

Telling their stories to authorities and not being believed was experienced as deeply humiliating. One participant was asked why he has not filed formal complaints against his jailers:

“How could I? I couldn’t even breathe or drink water.”

Such disbelief amplified a sense of mistrust towards state agents.

Injustice
home

Injustice
on the
journey

Injustice
on arrival

Mounir's Story

Mounir, a refugee from Syria, arrived in the Netherlands after fleeing the ongoing conflict in Syria. Arriving in Greece, where he remained Turkey, he joined a boat to Italy. The 6 day journey and close to drowning. A young mother gave birth during a storm that hit them midway. Once in Italy, he faced detention in military like conditions. Aspiring for better treatment, he moved forward to the Netherlands, where he realized that he was handled under the Dublin procedure. From the day he left his country til the day he got his status, 4.5 years has passed.

Justice

Legal access and perceived unfairness



System inequality and moral injury

The sense of injustice is not only legal but moral. Participants often compared their experiences to those of Ukrainian refugees, who received faster access to support, housing, and services. One participant asked:

“We are all fleeing war. Why do they treat us so differently?”

Such comparisons intensified a perception of being treated as less deserving, especially among people from countries like Syria or Yemen. Asylum seekers also spoke of arbitrariness: people arriving later were sometimes processed faster, while others remained stuck for years without explanation. This unpredictability left people feeling powerless and distrustful of the system

Roles and Identity

Loss of purpose of role

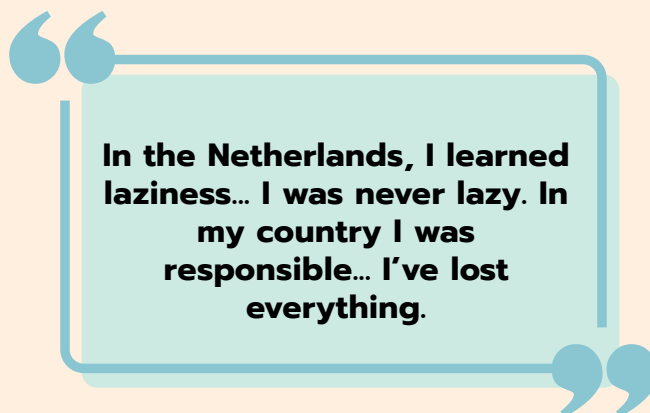


For many people in the Dublin procedure, the inability to work, study, or build a life led to a deep sense of stagnation and loss of self. Participants described how the roles they once held such as provider, worker, or student, were replaced by a passive state of waiting. Especially among men, the loss of the provider role led to shame and demoralisation.

A lack of routine and structure affected everyone in this study. Language courses, vocational training, or volunteering, key tools for recovery and integration—were often unavailable. As one participant put it:

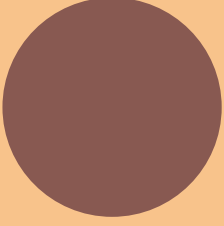
“We just sleep, eat, and think. Nothing else.”

Yet amidst this, many demonstrated resilience and quiet resistance. Some refused to give up: they challenged deportation orders, switched lawyers, and supported each other. Others shared survival strategies—how to delay removal or find legal help. One called it a **“psychological war,”** and insisted those who survive it deserve recognition and care. These acts of resistance were often the only way participants could reclaim a sense of agency, but they often came at a high emotional cost.



Networks and Bonds

Dispersed, united, and dispersed



Many asylum seekers in the Dublin procedure come to the Netherlands to reunite with family. But instead of finding safety, they face the threat of deportation to another EU country—often one where they have no support network and where they may have experienced trauma. The regulation claims to protect family unity, but in practice, it only recognises narrow definitions of family, excluding siblings, uncles, or extended kin. This leaves many separated, despite the obvious emotional and practical bonds between them. In one case from our fieldwork, a young Syrian man was deported back to Romania even though his uncle—who had the same Dublin history—was allowed to stay. These seemingly arbitrary decisions shattered trust and deepened feelings of injustice among other residents in the camp.

Beyond legal separation, asylum seekers also build new relationships during their wait—through workshops, peer groups, and shared daily life. But these fragile social ties are often cut short by transfers, deportation threats, or prolonged uncertainty. One young Yemeni man who had become a respected community organizer in a local group began to withdraw as his case dragged on. When his deportation was finally cancelled, NGO staff noticed a dramatic emotional shift:

“He smiled again. He joked. We hadn’t seen that for months.”

The Dublin system doesn’t only separate people from their families; it also prevents them from forming new support networks—networks that are vital for mental health and long-term integration.

Existential meaning

Why start anything: Loosing meaning

●● They came for me with my photo,
like I was a criminal. Younes, 26 ●●

Being in the Dublin procedure was not just about waiting; it often meant being treated as a problem rather than a person. Participants repeatedly described feeling criminalised—marked by their Dublin status, tracked in camps, denied services. Several said they felt like they had a “stamp” on their forehead.

The uncertainty created by the procedure caused what one psychologist called “a constant state of alert.” Any day, a decision could come, a lawyer could call, or a deportation could be scheduled. Asylum seekers described this as paralysing. Many gave up on learning the language, joining activities, or planning their futures.

Some reported developing insomnia, anxiety, or emotional numbness. Others described depression that worsened over time. “I had energy at first,” one man said, “but I lost it. I had no feelings left.”

One powerful theme was disappointment: people expected Europe to offer safety and a chance to rebuild. But their first experience was a legal system that left them in limbo. As one participant said, “We risked our lives to get here—and for what?”

The role of community and NGO support: Bringing the focus to human flourishing

The limits of institutional care

- State services (e.g. COA, GGZ) often adapt a clinical or bureaucratic approach to asylum seeker and refugee wellbeing, leaving several gaps particularly for those excluded from care such as Dublin asylum seekers or undocumented migrants.

Community-Based practices of care: the case of SAWA

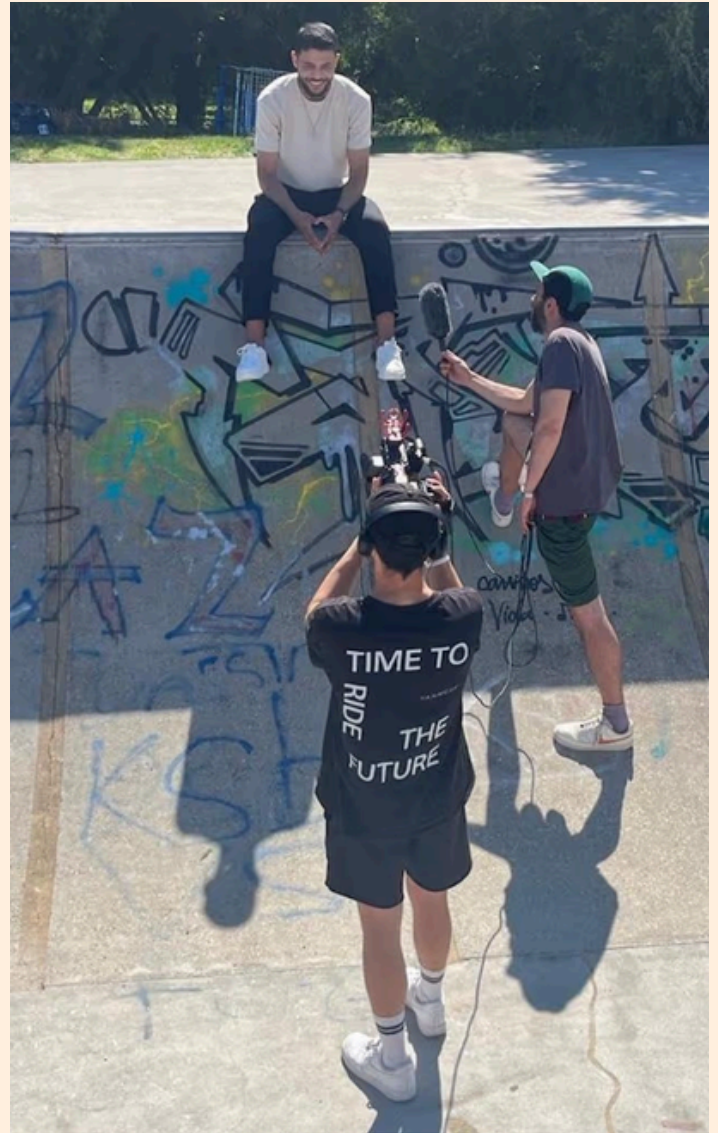
- The weekly gathering with SAWA were more than spaces of rest. SAWA did not aim to integrate or empower people in abstract terms, it offered continuity, presence, and mutual recognition in a context shaped by exclusion.
- Drawing on Alpes' (2025) notion of "critical and actionable" research, this report takes seriously the knowledge generated in such spaces—knowledge about what sustains people in prolonged states of uncertainty and exclusion. SAWA did not fix systemic harm, but it responded to it in ways that were grounded, relational, and durable.



NGOs and grassroots as sites of everyday resistance and belonging

The role of community and NGO support: Bringing the focus to human flourishing

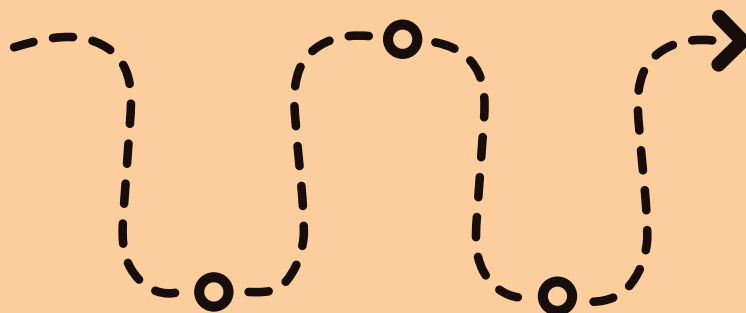
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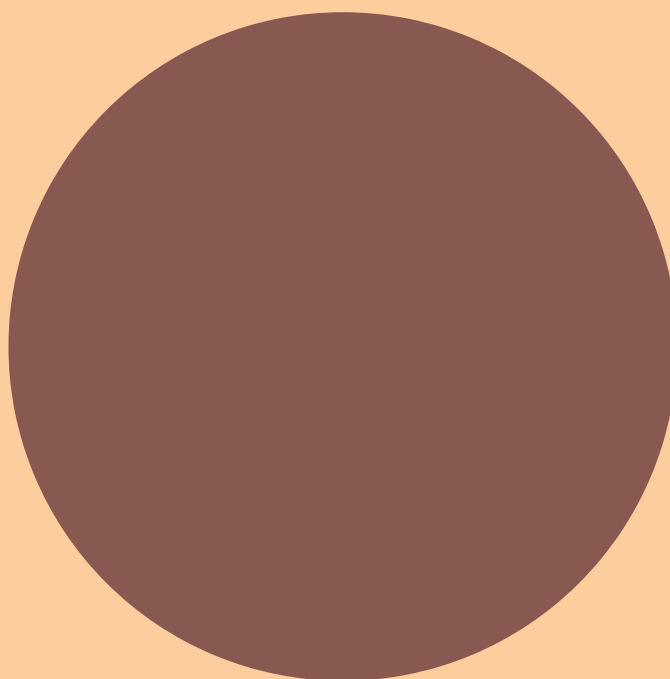


Implications for Practice

People facing persecution or striving for a safer and better life will continue to seek sanctuary in the Netherlands, just as much as the political debate and societal discourse around the asylum system and its future will continue. With this report, we hope to call for a return to a compassionate and humanitarian lens in the different domains surrounding and upholding this system.

Despite the Netherlands strong commitment to human rights treaties and conventions and its outstanding legal system that upholds these values, the political and societal debate and action seems to converge. Instead of improving arrival structures, political decisions are reinforcing "tough" measures designed to make the Netherlands less welcome and less attractive for people seeking sanctuary. Yet these debates and subsequent implementation of political decisions have real human consequences, targeting mostly people not only eventually becoming member of Dutch society (with protection rate currently standing at 67%) , but often people who are most vulnerable upon their arrival, having witnessed the hardships of making it into fortress Europe and with the multitude of biographies that preceded this endeavor in their home countries. People do not leave their homes if their needs are met. People do not choose this trajectory for social benefits.





SAWA COLLECTIVE

<https://www.sawacollective.nl/enht>

This report is a publication of the SAWA collective

