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'Let's talk about gender': gender perspectives on a refugee support charity in the North of England

Final dissertation

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

GEMMA – Erasmus Mundus Master's Degree in Women's and Gender Studies

August 2015

Main supervisor at the University of Hull – Dr. Mick Wilkinson

Support supervisor at Utrecht Universiteit – Prof. Dr. Berteke Waaldijk

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To Cerbère

Abstract

Following the important work of women's rights and feminist groups since the 1980s, actors of refugee protection are now aware that the international refugee protection framework is not gender neutral. Refugees who did not fit the heterosexual male mould installed by the 1951 Refugee Convention had difficulties not only accessing refugee status, but also support services when in exile. Today, both at the international level and in the UK, non-state actors use the concept of gender to highlight the differences in access to support for different groups of refugees, such as women and more recently, LGBTI people. Despite the ubiquity of the concept of gender in the refugee support field, its meaning today remains unclear.

In this research project, I looked at the place of gender in refugee support services in the UK through the work of a local organisation that supports asylum seekers and refugees in the North of England. I sought to address the following questions: is gender taken into account in the charity's services (and how)? Does gender have an impact on the clients' access to support and the quality of the services given? Inspired by feminist and postcolonial thought, I focused the thesis on the experiences and views of the clients who receive services and the staff and volunteers who provide them. I analysed data from semi-structured interviews with twenty-one participants and from participant observation. The project revealed that in a context where equality is an obligation for charities, talking about (in)equality, identity and difference seems to have become more difficult. However, the analysis of participants' accounts and discourses showed that a conversation about those themes – 'about gender' – remains important and necessary.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1. 1. A long (intellectual) journey

In this thesis, I intend to bridge the personal and the political, the practical and the theoretical. To combine my experience as a legal adviser for migrants, asylum seekers and refugees with knowledge acquired throughout my two years of gender studies; to bring together on-the-ground human rights activism concerns with theoretical insights from feminist theory. It reflects my commitment to contribute to knowledge production about asylum seekers and refugees. It is also in line with my political engagement for their integration in their host countries such as the UK and my involvement with a refugee support organisation. Such strong opening statements are the product of a long intellectual journey. I have stopped trying to reconcile what seemed to be irreconcilable dichotomies. Instead, I tried to put them at the heart of a dialogue, in line with feminist views about knowledge production: non-absolute, situated, collective.

This intellectual journey started a long time ago. I worked as a legal adviser for migrants, asylum seekers and refugees for a few years before I started my postgraduate degree in gender studies. Frequently, I felt my lack of gender training and the lack of gender sensitivity of the institutions or people I would work with. These issues became more important as I started volunteering, in parallel to my Masters in gender studies, with NRC-ARKH (Northern Refugee Centre - Asylum Seekers and Refugees of Kingston-Upon-Hull), a charity that supports asylum seekers and refugees in the North of England. I was conducting the work I had done in the past as well as developing tools to critically analyse the place and importance of a gender perspective on refugee support work. During my time as a volunteer with NRC-ARKH, key members of staff identified the need for more inclusive services, especially towards LGBTI[1] individuals. A LGBT group[2], in which I took part, was created. The goal of this group was to think of ways to render the charity 'LGBT inclusive'. I conducted research for the charity and accessed an array of recent literature highlighting how LGBTI individuals are a particularly vulnerable group of asylum seekers and refugees (Bell and Hansen, 2009; Cowen et al., 2011). Based on such observations, research has highlighted the necessity for changes both within the asylum system (Miles, 2010) and within charities and organisations that support asylum seekers in the UK (MBARC, 2013).

[1] LGBTI stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex. However, there is no general agreement on this acronym or what it entails exactly. I develop the reasons why I chose this acronym and the consequences of that choice in Chapter 3, section 3.1.3.

[2] LGBT was the acronym chosen by the charity management.

LGBTI asylum seekers and refugees are one example of the false neutrality of the refugee protection system. The drafters of the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees created a supposedly neutral model for the protection of refugees, which turned out to be – like most legal instruments – based on the needs of male refugees (Spijkerboer, 2000). Feminist activists and thinkers have advocated since the mid-1980s for the recognition of the male bias of the 1951 Convention and the taking into consideration of the needs of refugee women (Edwards, 2010). States recognised that women could seek asylum on their own right and for reasons related to their gender (sexual violence, for instance). Key actors in refugee protection, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR), created support services dedicated to women. UNHCR also developed a body of research and guidelines on refugee women (Hajdukowski-Ahmed et al., 2008: 9). With time, the focus moved from women to gender, both at the international and national levels. Gender has been used by researchers and practitioners as a tool to analyse inequalities between people. However, gender today is often used to refer to women. The meaning of gender in the field of refugee protection, despite the ubiquity of the concept, is unclear.

While the initial goal of this research project was to look at the place of LGBTI refugees in the work of NRC-ARKH, I expanded its focus to look at inequalities in the field of refugee protection from a gender perspective. This enabled me to fit my research into the broader literature on gender in the field of refugee protection. I wanted to offer a local perspective on the meaning of gender in provision and access to refugee support services. Furthermore, this focus had practical positives in relation to my collaboration with NRC-ARKH. Opening up the research project was also a way to make sure I was not already restraining the field of inquiry and preventing people from expressing their ideas. It also allowed me to adopt a more participatory approach and start a conversation in the charity, through which stakeholders such as staff, volunteers and clients, would be consulted on their experiences and views on the subject of a perceived lack of ‘inclusivity’. This would benefit the charity’s work, as its intention was to become ‘inclusive’. It would also avoid changes being implemented through a top-down approach. This dissertation therefore constitutes a critical account of this process and my role and experiences within it.

1. 2. The project: gender perspectives on a refugee support organisation in the North of England

Talking about refugees in the UK in the midst of a political, social and economic context that is more and more hostile against them[3] is a political act. Focusing my thesis on a charity that works against this hostility, by assisting them and fostering their integration in their host country, is even more. In this dissertation, the term 'refugee' is used as an umbrella term to designate individuals who escape persecution in their country of origin and seek refuge in another country. It encompasses asylum seekers whose claims are being assessed, rejected asylum seekers, recognised refugees, and people who have fled persecution but are not in the asylum system, unless otherwise specified[4]. This is also a political choice: I actively refuse to use the same vocabulary as states, political figures and media who discriminate between asylum seekers (unworthy non-citizens) and refugees (worthy non-citizens) because such vocabulary contributes to the hostile climate against refugees. This important political stance will be developed further in Chapter 2.

I align with feminist goals and principles regarding research, which place the lives of marginalised people at the centre of intellectual and scientific enquiries with a view to contribute to social change (Hesse-Biber, 2012). My research framework was planned in accordance with certain key principles, such as attention to questions of power, hierarchy and authority in all stages of the research (including its framing). I have remained aware that I am part of the system I wish to criticise; hence, I have used reflexivity extensively throughout the thesis. While this is a gender studies dissertation, I approach this subject with an interdisciplinary lens. The theme being, broadly speaking, refugees in the UK from a gender perspective, I believe it calls for insights from law and human rights law, postcolonial studies and gender studies. My background and intellectual interests also influenced my choice for an interdisciplinary lens.

This thesis is an account of a research project that I facilitated within the charity. Its purpose was to determine the place and meaning of gender in the refugee support field, from the perspective of a local refugee support charity. It also sought to explore the potential to talk about gender within a refugee support organisation. I understood gender in an intersectional way, i.e. as referring to the ways people identify themselves (in terms of gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, (dis)ability or whatever is relevant to them) or are identified by others. Intersectionality was a crucial tool in this research, in that it left space to recognise when people are unfairly categorised by external forces, but also when they self-categorise: it recognised individuals'

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[3] I develop this hostile climate in more detail in Chapter 2.

[4] For more explanation on these distinctions, see Chapter 2, section 2.1.1.

agency. Therefore, I focused on collecting the views and experiences of the clients of NRC-ARKH, as well as also those of volunteers and staff. I asked them whether they thought gender was taken into account in the services provided by the charity and whether gender had an impact on access to services. Rather than taking the concept of gender for granted, or defining it myself in a specific way, I wanted to leave space for participants to share how they defined it and conceived its place in the work of the charity. Therefore, this thesis not only analyses the place of gender in the refugee support field, from the perspective of a local support organisation, but also explores the interest in starting a conversation about gender in such a setting.

My role in this project was the one of an insider/outsider, as both a volunteer who takes part in the provision of services and a researcher observing the charity. I considered myself primarily as the facilitator of a conversation between the stakeholders of the charity about its services, what was missing and what could be improved from a gender perspective. The data gathered for this project arises from participant observation collected during my time as a volunteer within the organisation and from semi-structured interviews with clients, volunteers and staff members.

1. 3. Outline of the thesis

This thesis is divided in six chapters. This first chapter introduces the thesis. I move on to my theoretical framework in Chapter 2, situating the project within the field of refugee protection by addressing three questions: why the thesis focuses on refugees, why my inquiry is located within the United Kingdom and why the research project seeks to 'talk about gender'. I explore literature on refugee protection at the international level and at the level of the UK, and trace the evolution of the field from the perspective of gender, in order to position my own research and what it intends to do.

Addressing these questions allows me, in Chapter 3, to give more details about the research project and my research framework: a qualitative research project within a community of individuals, informed by generations of feminist thinking. I explain the details of my qualitative research and the ways I collected data: through semi-structured interviews with five staff members, seven volunteers, and nine clients of the charity, and through participant observation as a volunteer adviser for their advice drop-in sessions.

In Chapter 4, I give a detailed description of NRC-ARKH, the charity in which I conducted fieldwork. The story of NRC-ARKH is a reflection of the evolution of the UK asylum system. Changes in NRC-ARKH, from the local charity ARKH to the local office of the regional organisation Northern Refugee Centre, provided an entry point for my interviews and gave insightful information on the state of the refugee protection field in the UK today. Describing

these changes allows me to demonstrate the important support that this charity provides to asylum seekers, refugees and migrants in Hull, but also the difficult political and financial context in which it operates. This context has a direct influence on the ways equality is talked about within the charity. One of the difficulties I faced was how to start a conversation about gender and inequality in access to services, because most of the participants affirmed that "everyone was equal".

In Chapter 5, I reach the core of my study, as I seek to find out what is the place of gender in NRC-ARKH's services. I address two interrelated questions: is gender taken into account in the charity's services (and how)? Does gender have an impact on clients' access to support and the quality of the services given? I found out that gender has a place in NRC-ARKH's services in the form of an eligibility criterion. Recognising the special needs of refugee women, NRC-ARKH was offering three services for women only at the time of my study. However, participants' views on the impact of gender in access to services were contradictory, with some asserting that gender had no role in access to services, and others believing that some groups of clients (such as women) could face specific difficulties.

I explore these contradictions in Chapter 6, by paying closer attention to the way the charity's stakeholders talk about certain groups of clients. Indeed, even though charity workers and volunteers in the field of refugee support are meant to be open and sensitive to a variety of backgrounds, they should be aware that they might hold stereotypical views of clients. These are not only personal views, but also, I argue, ways of conceiving the agency of certain clients. Given the power relations at play in the field, it is important to be aware of the way volunteers and staff talk about gender, identity and difference. I paid attention to the way they talked about certain groups of clients, such as women, men and LGBTI people – the three groups that participants identified themselves. I realised that organisational change towards more inclusivity relied on the visibility of the groups who should be 'included' and I explain why it is problematic in this field.

Finally, I use Chapter 7 to conclude this thesis. Based on the findings of this research project, I offer recommendations for practitioners, funders and researchers.

Chapter 2 The place of gender in refugee protection

2. 1. Why talk about refugees?

2. 1. 1. Refugees as a human rights issue: the right to asylum

Refugees have long been a concern for the international community. Yet, it was mainly after the Second World War that the protection of refugees was given a clear framework. States gathered in the forum of the United Nations (UN) to find strategies to prevent the repetition of the horrors of the war. Millions of people were forced to leave their homes, creating a major refugee crisis that had to be managed. Refugee protection was framed as a human rights issue and states were designated as responsible for its implementation. This led in 1948 to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which, in article 14, stipulated: "[e]veryone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution". The 1951 Refugee Convention developed in more detail the obligations of states that arise from their responsibility to protect refugees. According to article 1A, a refugee is an individual who is facing or risking persecution because of their "race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion" and who is unable or unwilling, because of their fear of persecution, to return to their country of origin[5]. Refugees who are recognised as such by their host countries were afforded legal protection against *refoulement* (being sent back to the country where persecution is feared) and violation of their human rights.

Refugees remain a concern for contemporary policy worldwide. 2013 and 2014 were significant years in the history of forced displacement. In 2013, there were 51.2 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, which included 16.7 million refugees (UNHCR, 2013: 2). This was the highest number of displaced people observed since the beginning of the 1990s, when systematic statistics about forced displacement were first put in place (UNHCR, 2013). 2014 saw 13.9 million individuals "newly displaced due to conflict or persecution", including 2.9 million new refugees (UNHCR, 2014: 2). The number of forcibly displaced people worldwide reached 59.5 million, of which 19.5 million were refugees and 1.8 million asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2014: 2), "a level not previously seen in the post-World War II era" (UNHCR, 2014: 5). This means, quite simply, that millions of people have fled their country of origin and sought refuge in another to save their lives, often with the bare minimum to survive the trip: refugees rarely conceive their exile as permanent. However, the average duration of "refugee situations" in

[5] The application of Refugee Convention was initially restricted to events happening before 1951. Article I of the 1967 Protocol to the Convention opened its application to events happening after that date. References to the Refugee Convention in this thesis therefore include the 1967 Protocol.

developing countries doubled between 1993 and 2003, from 9 to 17 years (UNHCR, 2004: XVI-1). If people spend on average 17 years on displacement, there is a need to provide them with legal protection in their host country against deportation, but also "durable solutions" in their displacement: return to their country when the situation allows it, settlement in their host country or resettlement in a third country (UNHCR, 2015). This means the protection of refugees is not only a human rights issue, but also a development issue that should no longer be overlooked (Brolan et al., 2012).

2. 1. 2. The actors of refugee protection

Given the number of refugees worldwide, it is legitimate to ask ourselves: who is responsible for making sure that "refugees thrive, not just survive" (Fleming, 2014)? Nation states, which form the membership of the UN, were thus the political entities that negotiated the 1951 Refugee Convention, an international legal text. The basic priority of nation states is the protection and immutability of their sovereignty: namely, that what happens within the borders of a nation state is its own business. No external intervention is permitted (in the form of physical invasion or application of another legal rule) unless the state allows such intervention to happen. International law follows that principle: it is the creation of states, who agree to abide by rules other than their own in specific situations. The concept of refugee protection "arose with the rise of nationalism (and statelessness) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and then in the aftermath of World War I" (Gibney, 2010: 6). States are therefore the first entities responsible for the implementation of the Refugee Convention. This means that refugee protection standards are likely to differ from one place to another: it depends on which states have signed and ratified it, whether they secured individual exemptions to the rules at the moment of signature, how international texts and regulations fit into their own hierarchy of rules, and so on.

The concept of asylum, as with any international legal rule, is therefore bound to the concept of the nation state. Human rights issues become the responsibility of the host country when it concerns individuals within its borders, such as refugees. Asylum systems[6] are meant to help states determine who should be recognised as refugees and who should be allowed to stay in their host country and therefore benefit from adequate protection. Some terms should be clarified at this point. Individuals who enter their host country and declare they want to seek asylum are called asylum seekers. They remain asylum seekers until their asylum claim is

[6] In this dissertation, the term 'asylum system' designates not only legal rules which are meant to help competent authorities determines whether an individual can qualify for refugee status or not, but also rules and regulations that concern rights attached to a specific legal status (such as the right to work, access to social benefits, etc – or absence thereof).

accepted – and they become recognised refugees – or rejected – and they are called rejected or 'failed' asylum seekers[7]. As UNHCR clearly explains:

> *"Recognition of refugee status is declaratory, that is, it states the fact that the person is a refugee. A person does not become a refugee because of recognition, but is recognized because he/she is a refugee." (UNHCR, 2001).*

As already explained in Chapter 1, by default the term 'refugee' in this dissertation is used as an umbrella term: it designates individuals who escape persecution in their country of origin and seek refuge in another country. The term encompasses asylum seekers whose claim is being assessed, those who have been rejected, recognised refugees, and any other people who have fled persecution but are not in the asylum system, unless otherwise specified.

If states are the main actors of refugee protection, other non-governmental actors are also crucial. UNHCR, for example, is the principal non-governmental actor in the protection of refugees worldwide. Its mandate consists in "bridging the "protection gap" which exists in situations where UNHCR seeks to protect persons with respect to whom concerned states do not recognise that they have a responsibility under any of the refugee instruments" (UNHCR, 2001). Many elements of civil society, such as NGOs, associations and charities, are also key to assisting refugees, either from a legal point of view (by providing legal advice) or from a practical point of view (humanitarian aid in refugee camps – or in urban settings).

2. 2. Why talk about the UK?

2. 2. 1. A hazardous path to citizenship

The critical role played by non-governmental actors does not overweight the centrality of the nation state in the protection of refugees. The 1951 Refugee Convention stipulates, in article 34, that "[t]he Contracting States shall as far as possible facilitate the assimilation and naturalization of refugees". Obtaining citizenship from one's country is seen as the ultimate step to offer full protection against persecution by the country of origin. As a member of the 1951 Convention, the UK has continuously welcomed refugees on its territory and constructed its own 'path to citizenship'[8] for refugees: from the asylum seeking phase, leading to refugee status, permanent residence rights and eventually citizenship, the last step – when it can be reached.

The different steps that lead to citizenship have become more and more difficult to reach with the UK's progressive tightening of its immigration, asylum and citizenship rules. Indeed,

[7] The term 'failed asylum seeker' will not be used in this dissertation because of its pejorative connotation.

[8] The concept of "path to citizenship" is used by UK authorities themselves, as demonstrate the Green Paper "Path to Citizenship" (Home Office, 2008).

these complications operate not only within the asylum system but already before individuals enter the UK in the form of immigration controls. Britain, for a long time, remained open to – even sometimes encouraged – immigration and "long enjoyed a reputation as a liberal provider of refuge and political asylum" (Brown, 1995). Migrant workers, largely welcomed during the economic booms of the 20th century, were traditionally the target of immigration restrictions during periods of recession, in a public attempt to find a 'scapegoat' for the economic crisis. Thatcher's Tory government, which came to power in 1979, widened these restrictions by introducing the first controls and restrictions particularly targeted at irregular migrants, such as the "introduction of stiff fines in 1987 against airlines and shipping companies which carried passengers without proper documentation or visas" (Brown, 1995). Asylum seekers and refugees were framed as a policy issue that called for specific legislation and further restrictions and controls (Solomos, 2003: 64), which continue to be taken further by other governments, regardless of their political side, until today. For example, in October 2014 the UK government refused to take part in rescue operations of migrants in the Mediterranean Sea because such operations allegedly encourage more people to try to make their way to Europe and the UK (Travis, 2014)[9]. The issue with strengthening immigration controls is that they overlook the fact that the distinction between forced and voluntary migration is not clear-cut. Refugees often travel in "mixed-migration flows"; there is a "continuum" between forced and voluntary migration (Van Hear, 2011). Concretely, this means that refugees might be barred from accessing UK territory before they get a chance to have their asylum claim heard and cannot start their 'path to citizenship'.

For those who manage to enter the asylum system, further difficulties will be encountered. The UK government has substantively reduced the rights attached to the status of asylum seeker, making more and more difficult to seek asylum and sustain oneself in the system. Since 2000, asylum seekers depend on a different social security system from the rest of the UK population, the National Asylum Support Service (NASS), which provides asylum seekers with significantly lower amounts of benefits than the general population receive. For example, asylum seekers over 18 years old are provided only £36.62 per week (Home Office, 2015a) and not more, since they are prohibited from working since 2001[10]. The Asylum and Immigration

[9] Since then, the role of the UK in Mediteranean rescue operations has fluctuated. The Ministry of Defence deployed HMS Bulwark, a Royal Navy vessel, which enabled to save 2,900 lives in the Mediteranean until its announced withdrawal in June 2015 (Travis & Mason, 2015). However, the government affirmed that it would continue to take part in rescue operations (Travis, 2015).

[10] Asylum seekers may ask for permission to work when they have been waiting for a decision on their application for more than a year. Such permission remains granted on a discretionary basis (Home Office, 2014). Furthermore, the list of authorised professions is very limited and only includes high-qualification jobs.

Act (1999a) aimed at "spreading the burden" (Robinson et al., 2003) that asylum seekers are thought to present for the country by dispersing them throughout the country. Not only are asylum seekers denied the choice of where to live, but also they are placed in low cost housing, in deprived areas with little access to support networks. While dispersal was originally organised "to areas with a pre-existing multicultural presence", some asylum seekers were sent to "monocultural cities" (Hynes, 2011: 21) where they were not always welcome and eventually at further risk of violence. It is therefore not surprising that a group of people who are prohibited from working, living with benefits that are substantially less than the income support provided to the rest of the population and who are torn away from networks of support, but who still need to survive in their host country, find themselves extremely vulnerable to exploitative and forced labour (Lewis et al., 2013).

The UK has been highly criticised over the years for its treatment of asylum seekers, especially for detaining asylum seekers whose claims were 'fast-tracked'. The 'fast-track' system, whereby asylum seekers who came from deemed 'safe countries' were detained while their claim was assessed, was suspended in 2015. On 29 June 2015, the High Court of Justice upheld an earlier Court of Appeal decision, which declared that the detained fast-track appeals process was "systematically unfair and unjust" ([2015] EWHC 1689). This decision followed several campaigns led by NGOs and charities, such as the "Set Her Free" campaign by Women for Refugee Women. It revealed that in the Yarl's Wood immigration detention centre, not only were female detainees watched and guarded by male staff, but many suffered from sexual harassment, abuse and sexual abuse (Women for Refugee Women, 2015). This is particularly problematic as Women for Refugee Women also revealed that the great majority of female detainees had already experienced rape, sexual violence and abuse, or torture in their home countries (Women for Refugee Women, 2015: 2).

Those who go through the asylum system and obtain refugee status will face further obstacles. Since 2005, recognised refugees are no longer given unlimited leave to remain in the UK. Instead, they are first granted a temporary five-year leave to remain at the end of which they are entitled to ask for unlimited leave to remain. However, after a review by the Home Office, should the country of origin's situation have changed, they might be asked to leave the UK (Home Office, 2005)[11]. Obtaining 'permanent resident' status requires that a person should

[11] Refugee Action has underlined the consequences of this new system: "The period of limited leave to remain constitutes what is effectively a five year 'limbo' for refugees, many of whom fear they will be removed after the five year period. Some clients report reluctance to integrate into their local communities as they are unsure about their future status, others suffer depression and anxiety as a result of this or the concern they will have to return to countries of origin. The effect is detrimental for both the wellbeing of the refugee and levels of community cohesion." (Refugee Action, 2011: 2).

in general have stayed in the UK for at least five years, including one year of indefinite leave to remain, before they can apply for citizenship (Gov.uk, 2015). Application for citizenship has also been made more complex in recent years, through the adoption of more restrictive regulations. An example of modification to the rules is the obligation of passing a language test or a "life in the UK" test which became compulsory in 2013 (Home Office UKBA, 2013a) - in order to be naturalized. This rule is particularly interesting because individuals born as British citizens who would take this test without preparation would be likely to fail it.[12] This, added to the fact that citizenship applications (including refugees) are also asked to prove their mastering of English, while the government stopped the provision of free English classes to asylum seekers in 2007 (Mulvey, 2010: 18), renders access to naturalisation very difficult for refugees.

2. 2. 2. From politics to policy, from policy to politics: the crucial role of non-governmental actors

The drastic changes applied to the asylum system in the UK over the past two decades are shocking from a human rights perspective because they prevent many individuals from seeking and obtaining the protection that international law human rights standards guarantees. However, whether in the UK or elsewhere, the protection of refugees is traditionally "very much hostage to larger political phenomena" (Gibney, 2010: 9). The 1951 Convention was initially constructed and negotiated as a response to the refugee crisis in Europe[13]. Western states (understood mostly as the main signatories of the Convention) "actively encouraged refugee flows, especially from communist states" (Gibney, 2010: 9). After the Cold War, refugees did not serve Western states' political goals as much. Hence, this period saw the parallel rise of humanitarian interventions abroad and of 'temporary' forms of protection, as tools to prevent refugee flows. The ongoing post 9/11 period has further changed the international protection of refugees by adding to states' priorities the identified necessity to prevent terrorism, resulting in a more difficult access to their territories, including via the asylum system.

In recent years, Europe has slowly turned into "Fortress Europe" and closed its doors to refugees (Geddes, 2000). Even though 86% of refugees are located in "developing countries" (UNHCR, n.d. a), the myth of a constant 'upsurge of asylum seekers' is filling newspapers' headlines across Europe. The UK is particularly infamous for some of its tabloid headlines which feature 'waves' of asylum seekers flooding the UK, depicted as abusing the benefits system, stealing people's jobs or simply as criminals (Greenslade, 2005: 21). These stories about

[12] *The Guardian* published an example of a quiz based on the Life in the UK test to demonstrate this (Walsh, 2011).

[13] See footnote 5.

the 'blight' that asylum seekers and refugees allegedly represent by far outnumber the stories about the *plight* of asylum seekers and refugees themselves (Greenslade, 2005: 6). UK politicians also routinely use derogatory and inflammatory language to talk about migrants, as exemplified in official reactions to the ongoing Calais migrant situation[14]. In July 2015, Prime Minister David Cameron was criticised for talking about a "swarm of people" trying to make their way to the UK through the British Channel (Elgot and Taylor, 2015). This discourse about refugees and asylum seekers is particularly interesting and unsettling when compared with numbers. The "swarm of people" David Cameron talked about represents a few hundred of migrants. In 2014 the UK had on its soil 36,383 asylum seekers (out of 1,796,310 worldwide, i.e. around 2.02%) and 117,161 recognised refugees (out of 13,685,607 worldwide, i.e. around 0.85%) (UNHCR, 2014: 47). Asylum seekers, refugees and stateless persons represent only 0.23% of the total UK population (UNHCR, n.d. b).

If false stories about criminal asylum seekers contribute to legitimising hostility, hatred and violence towards refugees in the UK, they represent only one side of this deleterious climate. Indeed, media representations of asylum seekers, public and political discourse, policy and law have responded to each other, co-influenced each other and often worked together to demonise and criminalise asylum seekers and refugees. The immigration debate, for instance, made its entry into law by pushing for stricter immigration rules to curb the entry of unworthy migrants into the UK (Stolcke, 1995): "[i]mmigration policy aided the development of a hostile politics that was then responded to by further immigration policy" (Gibney, 2010: 20). Those different domains of society have coincided in building a "scale of desirability of migrants", resulting in making asylum seekers and refugees "the least wanted migrants" (Gibney, 2010: 20-21). Whether in the media, immigration politics or immigration policy, the focus and insistence only on the threats that they represent to security, economic, welfare and community cohesion has led to "an institutionalization of hostility" against refugees and asylum seekers (Mulvey, 2010: 8-9).

In this increasingly hostile climate against refugees and asylum seekers, non-governmental organisations such as refugee support organisations, migrant and community support organisations and charities provide key support to asylum seekers and refugees. Their objective is to foster the integration of refugees in the UK and remind the government of its obligations towards them. They seek to 'fill the gap' in protection and support dug deeper by the

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[14] The city of Calais, in France, is a major point of passage from the European continent to the UK. Thousands of migrants, which include people fleeing from war and persecution, wait there to be able to cross the British Channel. In 2014 and 2015, Calais has welcomed an ever growing number of migrants, who live in camps in deleterious conditions. In June and July 2015, at least eight people died, and many more were injured, trying to make their way to the UK (Taylor, 2015).

government's restrictions and cuts targeted at asylum seekers and refugees. For instance, many of them provide free ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classes for asylum seekers, an important entry point to further participation in the British society, since their withdrawal by the state in 2007. Significant work also has to be done to counter the false and misleading statements about asylum seekers and refugees, which permeate the UK media. The #tellitlikeitis campaign, for example, was launched in 2012 by the Refugee Council to "tell the truth about asylum" and separate "the facts from the fiction" (Refugee Council, 2013), because these facts are often lost in the heated debates in the media and politics. The Refugee Council also conducts significant research in order to influence decision-making in the asylum system and policy-making, relying not on 'myths' but on actual lived reality of asylum seekers and refugees. The Women for Refugee Women "Set Her Free" campaign against the inhumane detention conditions in the Yarl's Wood immigration detention centre, mentioned earlier, is another example of the importance of charities' work in denouncing the government's shortcomings and human rights violations.

The political and economic context makes it difficult for charities to continue carrying their work. Constant attention must be paid to the political debates that will soon turn into legal changes. This represents much time-consuming and expensive work. It is challenging to provide quality legal advice when rules are changing every six months. Yet, legal advice of good quality is particularly important for refugees and asylum seekers: any mistake might have disastrous consequences for the individual's ability to remain in the UK where they seek refuge from persecution. As the UK government restricts access to legal aid for refugees and asylum seekers[15], the burden of legal advice falls back on the voluntary sector (Thomas, 2013). This becomes even more problematic in a difficult economic context where funding for charities, including those who support refugees, becomes scarcer and scarcer. In view of the political and economic context, their work remains nonetheless indispensable: non-governmental actors are more than ever a key avenue to safety and protection for refugees.

2. 3. Why talk about gender?

2. 3. 1. From (male) refugees to refugee women

Given that approximately half of the world population is female, it seems logical that there would be refugee women, too. However, it took some time for states to acknowledge this fact. From a legal perspective, the initial 1951 framework of protection was "drafted in the male

[15] Since April 2013, for example, refugees cannot benefit from legal aid for family reunion cases (Thomas, 2013).

form, as with most legal rules and despite their apparent neutrality" (Spijkerboer, 2000: 1). From article 1A(2) of the Convention, it is "clear that the male refugee was in the mind of the drafters": a refugee is defined as "a person who, 'owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion', is outside the country of *his* nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail *himself* of the protection of that country" (Johnsson, 1989: 222, original emphasis). In fact, the drafters (who all happened to be men) modelled the figure of the refugee, supposed to be universal, on a White, European, heterosexual male and a political refugee. The Conference of Plenipotentiaries raised the issue of gender only once: its inclusion in the refugee definition was dismissed because sexual inequality was considered "a matter of national legislation" and "doubts were raised whether there would be any cases of persecution on account of sex" (Edwards, 2010: 23). This omission of women in the text of the 1951 Convention had an impact both in the legal recognition of women as refugees and in their access to rights, services and support (Edwards, 2010: 23).

Academics and NGOs began to criticise the gender blindness of refugee law in the 1980s. The progressive acknowledgment that women may suffer from persecution as much as men and seek asylum in their own right can also be understood within a broader international context, as women "remained for long the 'forgotten majority' on the international agenda" (Hajdukowski-Ahmed et al., 2008: 2). The institution of the UN Decade for Women (1976-1985) and of the World Women Conferences illustrated the international community's will to discuss violence against women. The issue was framed as a human rights concern and violation in need of international response with the slogan: 'women's rights are human rights' (Engle Merry, 2001; Reilly, 2009). In the meantime, "[t]he sexual violence perpetrated against refugee women in flight and asylum was revealed" (Hajdukowski-Ahmed et al., 2008: 2) and the use of sexual violence in conflict situations was more widely recognised. These international fora, which created space for feminist thought to be applied at the international level, had an influence on the evolution of refugee law. It led to the recognition of sexual violence as a form of persecution that may lead to valid refugee status, for example. It was also recognised that "flight motives […] specific to women were marginalised in legal practice" (Spijkerboer, 2000: 3). While women were not explicitly integrated in the text of the 1951 Convention, they were increasingly recognised as a particular social group in jurisdictions across the world, which granted refugee status on this basis[16]. The neglect of women in the 1951 Convention also had an impact on the

[16] Even though space lacks in this thesis to develop this further, it should be noted that while the recognition of women as a particular social group (PSG) has enabled many women to obtain refugee status, it has also had

way refugee women were assisted and supported in the field. The UNHCR played a key role in raising awareness on the needs of refugee women and the need for "special efforts" to attend their needs, as mentioned in their first Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women (UNHCR, 1991: para.4). Some governments also issued some specific guidelines on asylum claims by women (Spijkerboer, 2000: 3). In the UK, "the introduction of gender guidelines was the result of pressure by civil society organisations" (Allwood and Wadia, 2010: 34).

2. 3. 2. From women to gender

According to Edwards (2010), there are five stages in the engagement of feminists in refugee protection. First, the recognition of the "complete exclusion of women from the drafting of the main refugee instruments" led to their inclusion within them (1950–1985) (Edwards, 2010: 22). Second, activists focused on refugee women as a specific group with special needs, which led to the creation of dedicated support services (1985–present) (ibid). Then came the phase of "gender mainstreaming" (1997–mid-2004) and a later variation of it, known as "age, gender and diversity mainstreaming" (AGDM) (2004–present)" (ibid). The fifth and last phase "refocuse[d] attention on refugee men and boys and communities, as victims of gender stereotypes, constraints, and violence (2009–present), rather than only as perpetrators of violence" (ibid). While these periods are not completely distinct, and there is considerable overlap between them, they remain useful in helping us to understand "the transition in the meaning and the place of "gender" within IRLP[17] that has occurred over the 60 years of the modern refugee regime" (ibid). The use of the concept of gender in the refugee protection field, in particular in the context of gender mainstreaming, has been widely criticised. For Freedman, UNHCR's gender mainstreaming has been integrative rather than transformative, because it has simply integrated women in pre-existing development and protection policies rather than addressed the structural inequalities present in the system (Freedman, 2010: 593).

For Edwards, an insolvable dilemma remains for feminists involved in refugee protection. On one hand, the emphasis on women's vulnerability also denies them of agency, which is problematic from a feminist perspective. It overlooks the dire situation in which other groups of refugees might find themselves. On the other hand, "[i]t is far too early though to be dismantling women-specific policy guidance when, as the statistics and the reality show, women on the ground have hardly benefited from being in the international spotlight"

negative consequences. The definition of women as a PSG remains contrasted, and at times contested. It also links refugee status to claimants' identity as women, rather than to their own political actions for instance (see Edwards, 2010).

[17] International refugee law and policy.

(Edwards, 2010: 45). If gender is definitely present in the refugee protection field, the meaning of gender remains unclear. Gender has recently been used to talk about other groups of refugees than women, for example LGBTI[18] refugees. While refugee protection actors, such as the UNHCR, have highlighted (albeit sporadically) how men could also suffer from gender-based violence and persecution, the first UNHCR guidelines related to gender did not include any insight on sexuality or sexual orientation. Gender identity and sexual orientation were not explicitly left out of the refugee definition but they were never clearly included either. NGOs such as the Organisation for Refuge, Asylum and Migration (ORAM) had advocated "on behalf of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) refugees fleeing persecution due to sexual orientation or gender identity" for nearly ten years (ORAM, 2006) before the first guidelines by UNHCR on the treatment of claims relating to sexual orientation and gender identity were issued (UNHCR, 2008). Sexual orientation and gender identity is now recognised as a valid ground for seeking asylum in many jurisdictions, including in the UK, even though "many legal problems remain to be addressed" (Jansen, 2013: 1)[19]. Similarly to refugee women, the decades of silence on LGBTI refugees and asylum seekers has had an impact, not only on their legal recognition but also on their ability to seek support in displacement.

2. 4. Refugees, gender and the UK: towards my own research project

2. 4. 1. Becoming inclusive: feminist dilemmas

The focus on refugee women and the growing understanding of their specific needs can also be observed in the UK. Non-governmental organisations have highlighted the failure of the national authorities to take into account refugee women's specific protection needs. In 2008, Asylum Aid published the Charter for the Rights of Women Seeking Asylum, signifying the necessity to pay specific attention to the needs of women asylum seekers in order for the UK to respect its duty to treat all asylum seekers fairly and equally (Asylum Aid, 2008). In 2010, Why Refugee Women published a similar Charter for organisations that support refugees in the Yorkshire and Humber regions (Why Refugee Women, 2015). Asylum Aid has a specific women's project which publishes a bimonthly "Women's Asylum News" (Asylum Aid, n.d.). The Refugee Council too has produced a body of research on the experience of refugee women

[18] LGBTI stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex. However, there is no general agreement on this acronym or the exact concepts it entails. I develop the reasons why I chose this acronym and the consequences of that choice in the Methodology section.

[19] Space lacks in this thesis to develop the legal issue that persist in the treatment of asylum claims based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The excelent book *Fleeing Homophobia* (Spjikerboer, 2013) develops these issues in the European context.

in the UK, calling for sensitivity on both the side of national authorities and support organisations in the way they treat and support asylum claims (Refugee Council, 2012). Many refugee support organisations have adapted their services in the form of women specific services – often focusing on women victims of (sexual) violence. Therefore, women have been integrated in the existing refugee protection framework and are now clearly the object of specific attention, especially for non-governmental refugee protection actors.

The imperative for refugee support charities to become 'inclusive' has been raised with the growing awareness of the issues LGBTI asylum seekers and refugees face in the UK asylum system (Bell and Hansen, 2009; Cowen et al., 2011). Indeed, non-governmental actors have exposed their specific situation in the 2010s through reports such as *No Going Back*, which pointed out that individuals who claim asylum on the basis of their gender identity or sexual orientation are more likely to see their claims rejected (Miles, 2010). This can be explained by the absence of clear guidelines on how to assess such claims, and the lack of gender training and sensitivity of UKBA[20] officers or judges (ibid). Other reports have shown how LGBTI asylum seekers are more vulnerable to destitution and exploitation because the asylum system does not accommodate their needs and specific situations from the first steps of asylum (Bell and Hansen, 2009; Stuart, 2012; Micro Rainbow International, 2013). A report by ORAM (2012) argued that non-governmental refugee protection actors such as NGOs and charities should be aware of the needs of LGBTI refugees. The report pointed out the limits of official gender blindness, the practice whereby everyone is welcome to seek help but little attention is paid to the specific needs of particular groups such as LGBTI refugees (ORAM, 2012: 3). Indeed, when issues related to LGBTI refugees are not raised, the personal attitudes and prejudices of front-line staff (such as homophobia, for example) could influence the quality of the service offered and at times deter refugees from seeking help (ibid). In the same line, the *Double Jeopardy* project in the UK gathered organisations who support migrants, asylum seekers and refugees to understand and tackle the lack of strategic support of such type of organisation to LGBTI asylum seekers and refugees (Stuart, 2013). The goal was to produce guidance for organisations that seek to become "more welcoming and more supportive to LGBTI asylum seekers, refugees and migrants" (MBARC, 2013). The resulting guide offers a clear plan in three stages and promises to facilitate "inclusivity" after 2 years on average (ibid).

While the goal of becoming 'inclusive'[21] is attractive for charities, as it offers to solve issues of unacknowledged discrimination and to become more welcoming places, it also poses

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[20] United Kingdom Border Agency.

[21] I put this term in inverted commas to signify that it is a debated and criticised term and concept.

some problems. Firstly, one may learn from the earlier attempts to include women in the refugee protection framework as they have "thrown up as many new challenges as it has settled old ones" (Edwards, 2010: 22). There is a tension between the will to recognise women's specific experiences in displacement, and the refusal to deny women agency by representing them as helpless victims. Secondly, the idea of paying attention to the special needs of specific groups of refugees also reinforces the centrality of the heterosexual male refugee, which remains unquestioned. Furthermore, not all men who identify as heterosexual fit the same mould, and some may need specific support too. Thirdly, discourses of 'inclusivity', similarly to discourses of 'diversity', run the risk of "bypass[ing] power as well as history to suggest a harmonious, empty pluralism" (Mohanty, 2003: 193). They do not question who has the power to name those who can suddenly be brought out of the dark and be 'included', whether in the society or the charity.

2. 4. 2. Re-invoking feminist thought to talk about gender

In the UK, as in the international sphere, gender definitely has its place in the refugee protection field. Women and gender have been used together in arguing for a better protection of refugee women. Refugee Action argued in its report on refugee women that there is a need for gender-sensitive policies and support mechanisms because women's "gender brings certain experiences that are often overlooked by policy makers" (Dumper, 2002: 20). In 2003, Asylum Aid made a clearer correlation between women and gender with the report *Women asylum seekers in the UK. A gender perspective* (Asylum Aid, 2003). Their more recent report, *'I feel like as a woman I'm not welcome': A gender analysis of UK asylum law, policy and practice*, defines gender as:

> *"The social construction of power relations between women and men, and the implications of these relations for women and men's identity, status and roles. It is not the same as 'sex' which is biologically defined." (Querton, 2012: 3)*

Even though Asylum Aid defines gender from a social constructivist approach, the report remains focused on the situation of women. It seems that gender in the field of refugee protection serves as a tool to explain how women's situations are different from men's and how a gender-blind approach to refugee protection is not suitable. Gender as an analytical tool in the field remains for the use of women, since gender is used to talk about women. For Edwards, "[t]he real issue for feminist scholars is whether this reorientation from sex to gender damages or advances equality goals […]" (Edwards, 2010: 41). Indeed, depending on how it is used, gender risks becoming a rhetorical tool, a false guarantee for equality than an actual useful concept. However, for Edwards, feminists can promote "gender" as a useful tool for analysis while not losing the goal of achieving equality.

My research project is a critical intervention in times where the meaning of gender in the refugee protection field is unclear. It seeks to consider, through qualitative research within a local refugee support organisation, what is the place of gender in the field. In order to do so, it places the voices of those primarily concerned at the heart of the conversation: those who receive services, and those who provide them. Rather than directly seeking to become 'inclusive', this project signified the refusal to use simple methods that claim to create equality in a few steps. Such methods run the risk of concealing the history and source of discriminations and power relations that not only create them, but also continue to sustain them. Rather, a gender perspective offers to look at how equality, difference and gender are conceived in the field, and start a conversation about it. These concerns have influenced the way I conceive my epistemological and methodological framework but also the methods I plan to use to gather data. The next chapter develops in detail my conceptual, theoretical, epistemological framework.

Chapter 3 Cooking my own methodology: epistemological, methodological, ethical and political concerns

3. 1. The location of my research within feminist thought

3. 1. 1. On 'making' feminist thought

Feminist thought, in various forms, clearly informed the construction of my research project: epistemology and methodology are intertwined with politics and ethics. If feminism "is not a unified project" (Letherby, 2003: 4), I still share with many feminist thinkers the commitment to contribute to social change by addressing unfair systems of power and domination, discrimination and oppression. I also share the refusal to see the researcher as a neutral and universal observer, and the critique of "androcentric bias" in research (Hesse-Biber, 2012: 5). Therefore, by feminism or feminist thought, I refer to generations of feminist thinkers who have agreed and disagreed on the ways and avenues to reach their goals in accordance with their principles. When framing my research, I adopted Stanley's metaphor of cooking:

> *"[…] Read the recipes; try out those you like but modifying, as good cooks always do, the ingredients and their proportions; jettison those you don't like; pass on those you do. […] Do not treat these discussions of feminist research processes prescriptively and/or proscriptively, but rather as accounts for readers to relate to variously and discriminatingly." (Stanley, 1990: 13)*

A 'cooking approach' to methodology is a way to keep in mind the diversity within feminism, preserve its richness and "prevent[…] epistemological (and thus political) hegemony within feminism" (Stanley and Wise, 1990). The multiple lenses of feminism have been and remain necessary to "wake us up to layers of sexist, racist, homophobic, and colonialist points of view" (Hesse-Biber, 2012: 4). Therefore with my research, I intend to address "the question, not of what feminist theory *will* be, but of the much less depressing subject of what it *could,* perhaps *ought* to be" (Grosz, 2011: 75): feminist theory is what we, feminist thinkers, make of it, and here I make (it) my own too.

3. 1. 2. For knowledge(s) that include(s): my research manifesto

Putting together the words 'research' and 'manifesto' is a way to signify the political dimension of this dissertation. The fact that it focuses on a charity that helps asylum seekers, refugees and migrants in the UK, in a political and social context that is hostile to them, confirms its political nature. Although the research takes place within a specific charity and will examine the views of its clients, staff and volunteers on the services provided from a gender perspective,

it is also part of a broader conversation within the field of refugee protection about the taking into account of gender. The goal is to make sure the charity continues to fulfil its role to foster the integration of refugees in the North of England, a shared goal with many other organisations. By focusing on refugees in the UK, I align with feminist thinkers who believe placing the lives of women and other marginalised groups at the centre of social inquiry is one key aspect of feminist research (Hesse-Biber, 2012: 3).

This dissertation also seeks to contribute to knowledge production in a way that includes, rather than excludes, or only seems to include (Hesse-Biber, 2012: 3). In order to stay aligned with that goal, I intend to challenge arbitrary and fixed binaries, dichotomies and boundaries, which contribute to discrimination, exclusion and oppression. Critical of the traditional object/subject, researched/researcher divide, which is socially constructed (Harding, 1993: 65), I also refuse the traditional epistemological requirements of neutrality, invisibility and therefore absence of responsibility in research. I am part of the system I intend to criticise, which therefore calls for accountability for my choices at all stages of the research, and a strong reflexivity concerning my position and its influence throughout the project. This makes me visible in this research, not only because I use the I-pronoun (which I have done several times so far) but rather and mostly because I acknowledge my role as a researcher and its possible influence and effects on the subject matter, the data and the results of this project.

The goal is not to make this thesis about me or my life but rather to acknowledge that there is no such thing as a neutral and detached observer who can speak about the natural and social order without acknowledging their position. Knowledge is always situated and "only partial perspective promises objective vision" (Haraway, 1988: 583). In that regard, "positioning implies responsibility for our enabling practices" (Haraway, 1988: 587). It is by practicing strong reflexivity throughout the research process and "[b]y disclosing their values, attitudes, and biases in their approaches to particular research questions" that "feminist researchers can actually improve the objectivity of research" (Hesse-Biber, 2012: 10).

3. 1. 3. The politics of naming and the power of the researcher

The principles contained in my research manifesto informed the way I framed this research project. It also pushed me to reflect on what happens before one builds the research: when one names the subject of research. The "politics of naming" (Spender, 1990) is a useful tool to look at who researchers include or exclude in their research projects, and what they take for granted (such as vocabulary, language, acronyms). For example, I use the word refugee as an umbrella term, which covers all individuals who escaped persecution in their country of origin and sought refuge in another one, regardless of their legal status. Talking about refugees

is important, but focussing on those having secured refugee status per-se excludes thousands of people who leave their countries each year in order to save their lives, except their motives are not considered legitimate (individuals who are dying from hunger or "environmental refugees"[22], for instance). Within the category of refugees, I have also talked about LGBTI refugees to refer to individuals who do not fit heteronormative models of identity (and for some, who seek asylum based on their sexual orientation or gender identity). I remain aware that the LGBT acronym has a multiplicity of variations depending on what one wishes to in/exclude. It is also an umbrella term drawing together individuals with different experiences[23].

Choosing vocabulary is not consequence-free: "All naming is of necessity biased and the process of naming is one of encoding that bias, of making a selection of what to emphasize and what to overlook" (Spender, 1990: 164). Researchers have to be aware of the power dynamics involved in this process: "[…] those who have the power to name the world are in a position to influence reality" (Spender, 1990: 165)[24]. By using "the oppressor's language" (Rich, 1980: 16), I find myself using language that categorises and excludes those labelled as others, used to reinforce the privilege at those on top of the social pyramid. However, the "oppressor's language" can also be used consciously and strategically. I chose to talk about LGBTI refugees to push for a better understanding that not all refugees fit the model of the heterosexual male refugee. Using the term refugees signifies my refusal to adopt the same vocabulary as states, such as the UK, which serves to discriminate between asylum seekers (unworthy non-citizens) and refugees (worthy non-citizens) and participate in the hostile climate against refugees.

[22] The term "environmental refugee", for instance, is strongly debated. While the use of the term can be traced back to the 1970s, El-Hinnawi (1985) is considered to be the first one to have developed the term and brought it to the attention of the international community (Jacobson, 1988). El-Hinnawi defined environmental refugees as "those people who have been forced to leave their traditional habitat, temporarily or permanently, because of a marked environmental disruption (natural and/or triggered by people) that jeopardized their existence and/or seriously affected the quality of their life." (1985: 4). There is no agreement, in the international community and in research circles, as to the definition of environmental refugees, whether they should be considered as refugees or whether their situation calls for international action or policy (Morissey, 2012). This is despite the fact that an environmental refugee might have escaped a situation as dangerous for their life as someone who might have escaped from "persecution" that falls within the realm of the 1951 Convention.

[23] The LGBT umbrella term has different declinations, depending on what one wishes to include or emphasise: exclusion and oppression based on sexual orientation does not necessarily follow the same dynamics as when based on gender identity. Some may speak only about LGB, or LGBTI (I for intersex), LGBTQ (Q for queer or questioning), LGBT+ (to reflect the multiple options that one has in terms of sexual orientation and gender), LGBTQQIP2AA (for queer, questioning, intersex, pansexual, two-spirited, asexual and allies). I have chosen to use the LGBTI acronym because it is the most commonly used acronym in the UK refugee protection field.

[24] Spender's views on language are rather dichotomous: she talks about male/female, men/women, and by "those who have the power to name", she refers to men in a male-dominated world which oppresses women. Her insights on the power of language are nonetheless precious.

Even though my research focuses on refugees in the UK, and took place in a charity that supports refugees, I could not completely keep other types of migrants out of my focus. NRC-ARKH[25] was created at a time when most migrants who were coming to the city of Hull were refugees. With time, however, migration patterns at the local level changed and Hull welcomed an increasing number of European migrants. Even though the initial purpose of NRC-ARKH was to support asylum seekers and refugees, they have never turned someone away who needed support based on their legal status. Therefore, in my field research, I was directly faced with the porosity of these distinctions.

3. 2. How does one go about and talks about gender? The place of postcolonial and transnational perspectives in my research

3. 2. 1. What is gender? The difficulty to talk about gender

The purpose of my research project was to talk about gender within a charity that supports refugees. However, before I explain how I framed my project in order to facilitate that conversation, it is important to know what we, in this research project, are talking about – and the notion of gender brings complications. Indeed, while the idea that organisations, as much as governments, including in the UK, should be more 'gender-sensitive' and 'inclusive' is widely accepted, the notion of gender tends to be used systematically without reflection on what it means or what it entails. Whether within academia or activist spheres, concepts may lose their potency and potential when used indiscriminately and without reflection: they may soon turn into "rhetorical devices" (Lykke, 2011: 210). The project that led to this dissertation intended to create a conversation about gender, in part to signify the refusal to adopt these ideas and make 'inclusivity' happen with a top-bottom approach. For this to happen, a reflection on what gender means was fundamental.

The concept of gender is intrinsically linked with the history of feminism and feminist thought. Simone de Beauvoir's famous sentence "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (de Beauvoir, 2011 [original 1949]: 293) is often used to summarise her argument against biological determinism. She describes "the enormous extent of social discrimination that seems insignificant from the outside and whose moral and intellectual repercussions are so deep in woman that they appear to spring from original nature" (de Beauvoir, 2011 [original 1949]: 15). De Beauvoir paved the way for later feminist thinkers to elaborate the distinction between sex and gender. Gayle Rubin, for instance, defines what she calls the "sex/gender system" as "a set

[25] NRC-ARKH stands for Northern Refugee Centre-Asylum Seekers and Refugees of Kingston-upon-Hull. I develop the history of the charity in Chapter 4.

of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention" (Rubin, 1975: 159). For feminists relying on social constructivism, discrimination against women was neither acceptable nor inevitable, since based on socially constructed characteristics. With time, however, generations of feminists developed, discussed and debated the concept. The "enthusiasm for the notion of gender" was heavily criticised, not only for its political implications (Gatens, 1983) but also for its very theoretical basis (Butler, 1990). Within feminist theory, there is no agreement on the existence of the sex/gender distinction, or what it exactly encompasses. When Haraway was asked to write an entry for a Marxist dictionary on sex and gender, acknowledging that "the women do not appear where they should", she soon realised that five pages would never be enough to summarise in an accessible and intelligible way "the sex/gender system" (Haraway, 1991: 127). In that perspective, it may be particularly difficult to introduce the research if a summary of the history of the sex/gender distinction is needed.

Furthermore, while gender is undoubtedly a valuable category of analysis and lens to adopt, it is not enough to grasp the complex ways in which people identify themselves and are identified by others. The concept of intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), finds its roots in the work of Black feminists in the 1960s who intended to show that different markers of identity, or systems of oppressions, such as gender and race, were intersecting to produce exclusion and discrimination[26]. With time, other strands of feminism highlighted how the intersection of not only race and gender, but also class, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, age and so on had to be taken into account. Intersectionality is a useful tool for this project: it is in fact an intersectional act to highlight that not all refugees fit the initial and invisible model of the heterosexual male refugee.

Intersectionality also has its flaws. While it enables us to account for the many complex ways in which some categories of identity may affect people's lives, it is not enough to simply "throw[…] more and more new categories to the table" (Lykke, 2011: 210) without defining them. In the meantime, just as gender is difficult to explain and describe, because its history is rich and complex, other categories of analysis are as difficult to define. Leaving the categories empty also runs the risk of reifying people's identities in a different way. Therefore, while intersectionality calls for action in the refugee sector, in order to counter the exclusion of refugees

[26] The Combahee River Collective, for instance, was one of the first groups to argue for the necessity of Black feminism. They developed the intersection of gender, race and class, so far ignored by (White) mainstream feminism: "we have in many ways gone beyond white women's revelations because we are dealing with the implications of race and class as well as sex." (Combahee River Collective, 1975).

who do not fit the initial mould and attend to their needs, the concept should also be used with care and tailored appropriately.

3. 2. 2. A transnational conversation

Where we speak from: from talking about people to talking to and with people

How does one go about and talk about gender within the charity, then? Issues arise from the difficulties that I faced, as a researcher, in starting a conversation about notions that are complex. It is not unreasonable to say that these notions, which come from the academic realm, may not make sense or have primary importance in the everyday lives of many individuals. Furthermore, "a place on the map is also a place in history within which […] I am created and trying to create." (Rich, 1987: 210). This place on the map, the place from which I speak, needs scrutiny. In the history of knowledge and research, though, some places have remained unquestioned. For instance, it is more and more common for asylum systems in Europe to be used as filtering tools, to distinguish between who deserves to stay in the host country and who does not. By determining what it means to escape persecution and what it means to need international protection, they also apply criteria to people's lives and experiences, something very often arbitrary and based on Western conceptions. This is disturbing when one keeps in mind that a significant number of refugees come to the UK because of previous colonial links with their country of origin (Crawley, 2010: 17). The use of gender in the field of refugee protection is powerful, because it enables us to highlight the variety of situations and experiences of refugees. However, the concept of gender also comes from a specific linguistic and cultural background.

Black, postcolonial and third world feminists, despite their very different stances and viewpoints, have in common their refusal of "hegemonic feminism" (Sandoval, 2000). They criticised second-wave white Western feminists who, by talking about the importance of gender in women's lives and its problematic effects, did not realise they were reinstating, if not the centrality of men, the centrality of White, Western, Anglo-European spheres in the production of knowledge (Kim, 2007). Gender is pretty much an Anglophone notion: it does not necessarily have a direct or accurate translation in other languages. As a person born and raised in France, I have personal experience of the difficulty in grasping a notion that has no translation but also has little meaning in the French cultural context. Therefore, speaking English is not necessarily enough to understand the concept of gender.

Transnational intersectionality: situating agency in a transnational context

Transnational intersectionality has a central place in my research, whether in its framing, the methodology or in relation to the participants. The concept of transnational intersectionality, as I define it, highlights how the process of categorisation of identities, whether by external forces imposed on individuals or by individuals themselves, can lead to exclusion and discrimination. At the same time, these categorisations may also hold potential, when used strategically, to alleviate such exclusion. It acts as a reminder of the importance of remembering that while some individuals have been and are still being denied agency, research practices can also counter that. According to Purkayastha, it is indispensable to look at "intersectionality in a Transnational World" to "better capture contemporary forms of power, privilege and marginalization" (Purkayastha, 2012: 56). Indeed, "social lives are constructed, not only in single countries, but in transnational spaces" which are "tangible geographic spaces that exist across multiple nation-states *and* virtual spaces" where experiences take place, "far beyond the boundaries of single nation-states" (ibid). Several studies show how migrants' identifications and sense of belonging are much more complex than leading simply towards the host country or the country of origin (ibid). So-called 'second generation migrants' might identify with the country of origin of their parents (even though they were not born there), migrants might join web-based communities which fit their community of origin, or on the contrary seek alternative identifications "and dilute the consequences of gendering, racialization, class and other social hierarchies to which they are subjected to in their tangible lives" (ibid). Overall, an increasing number of individuals' experiences "combine intersecting local, regional, national, and transnational spaces" (ibid).

Refugees, for example, are in the middle of two dynamics: because they are migrants (in the sense of moving from one country to another), they embody the movement between places that present different possibilities for identification; in the meantime, they also are influenced by the nation state's systems of categorisation. Transnational intersectionality is therefore about bridging the 'here' and 'there". It also signifies the refusal of the dominant picture of refugees as objects under the full control of states[27] and the refusal to picture refugees as malleable and fully subjected to the power of the state that receives them. Instead, it presents refugees as subjects who have also a role in the making of their own identity. However more than identities, I prefer to talk about "social locations" and their intersections, which can create inequality as much as "open up, potentially, ways in which they can be transformed", because "one might be in a position of dominance and subordination simultaneously" (Anthias, 2012: 108). This last

[27] Discourses around immigration control, imaginary 'massive' invading flows of asylum seekers and the need to protect Europe against them are an illustration of this mainstream image.

statement is as true for refugees as for other individuals: some might refuse some categorisations and use others to their advantage, in different times and places, depending on what enables them to navigate the society at large.

Transnational intersectionality opens up space for the way all participants categorise themselves, conceive the intersection(s) of their social locations (which can differ depending on time and context) and make strategic use of certain categorisations. In the context of the charity where I did my fieldwork, transnational intersectionality incited me to look at the way not only clients, but also staff and volunteers, use these categorisations for themselves or others.

3. 3. Approach to research and methodological choices

3. 3. 1. Playing with the figure of the researcher/volunteer - insider/outsider

My final approach to research, as detailed in this section, is the product of reflexions and discussions with my supervisors but also myself. One of the most important issues was how to deal with my multiple positions. Indeed, as the researcher and the person primarily in control of the project, I am the one who framed it, collected the data and analysed it, and wrote up the findings. In the meantime, I was not an outsider "entering the field" (Wolf, 1996: 8) for my research: I was somehow already there. I had a more complex and hybrid role, as I participated in the work of the charity as a volunteer; I observed it and I researched it. I participated in the conversation as much as I facilitated it. I had an 'insider' knowledge on the way the charity works, on the services it provides and on the politics that govern its work, as much as an 'outsider' vision brought by my studies and my position as a researcher.

My multiple hats and positions were sources of contradictions and difficulties: in this thesis, I analyse and at times criticise some aspects of the charity's work. In the meantime, as I wrote this thesis, I was still working in this organisation and participating in its work. While these multiple positions were difficult to negotiate, I also soon realised that my position as an insider/outsider was a mirror of the contradictions at play in the asylum advocacy field. As Bhabha (2002) explains, asylum advocates are distinct from other types of human rights advocates, because as they lobby for the protection of asylum seekers and refugees, they also contribute to the unfair distinction between worthy and unworthy migrants (Bhabha, 2002: 160). As an asylum advocate myself, I have often felt this tension in my work. There is an insoluble dilemma in the field, between the will to lobby for the protection of human rights and the difficult of contributing to an unfair system.

There is however, in light of feminist contributions, an interest in the insider/outsider position. For Trinh, feminist research actually incites to "becom[e] "both/and"—insider and

outsider—taking on a multitude of different standpoints and negotiating these identities simultaneously" (Trinh in Hesse-Biber, 2012: 3). My multiple hats and positions were sources of contradictions and difficulties, but also provided an incredible richness. I made a constant effort to remain aware of power relations coming from my position as a volunteer in relation to clients but also colleagues, whether fellow volunteers or staff who have hierarchical authority over me in my work.

3. 3. 2. Making the conversation happen: methods used & approach to ethics

For this qualitative study, I collected data through one-to-one interviews with clients, volunteers and staff. A call for participation to the research project was circulated in April 2015 to invite staff, volunteers and clients to take part in the project on a voluntary basis. In total, I interviewed twenty-one participants: five staff members, seven volunteers, and nine clients. All participants were guaranteed full anonymity. I used different methods of recruitment for clients and for volunteers and staff. I sent a collective email to staff and volunteers, informing them of my research project and inviting them to participate. Following this email, three volunteers offered to take part. I directly approached the other four volunteers and asked them if they would like to participate. I approached all staff participants directly; all agreed to do an interview with me.

Recruiting clients for the study was more challenging. I displayed posters in the charity building, describing the project and offering clients to participate. The posters were translated in French and Arabic, acknowledging the fact that not all clients speak English well enough to share their experience in an interview. After one month, no client had come to me to contribute to the project[28]. I decided to adopt a different strategy and approached clients individually to ask them to participate. Eventually, I interviewed four were clients I personally helped in my role as a volunteer and three were ESOL class students who I had never met before the study.

All interviews were conducted in English, except for one interview with a participant that was conducted in an African language[29] with the help of an interpreter. The interpreter was recruited through another refugee support agency. I asked the interpreter to sign a confidentiality agreement and briefed them about the content of the interview beforehand. All interviews findings were anonymised by giving pseudonyms to participants instead of their real names. Participants were assured of their anonymity several times. A consent form explained the research, potential risks, benefits and confidentiality to participants. Each of them signed a

[28] In fact, I left the posters for 3 months in total and no client came to me to take part in the project.

[29] I chose not to mention the exact language, as it could jeopardise the anonymity of the participant.

confidentiality agreement. I was the only one with access to raw data from interviews. Only interpreted and anonymised results were used to inform organisational changes within the charity.

I also collected data through participant-involvement observation. I reflected on my experience as a volunteer in the different services offered by the charity. I was directly involved in the provision of legal and employment advice, and to a lesser extent in a women-only project. I also observed ESOL classes. I took field notes and used some insights as data for my analysis.

The following chapters build on the data I collected to analyse the place of gender in the work of the charity where I conducted my fieldwork. All participants have been anonymised and their names have been changed.

Chapter 4 Talking about gender in the UK refugee support field

4. 1. Introduction

This first analysis chapter develops in more detail the context in which I undertook my fieldwork. It describes NRC-ARKH, the charity in which I volunteered, did participant observation and recruited my participants. The story of the charity is an interesting starting point because it provides crucial information on the environment in which it was created and evolved. It also explains the specific context in which conversations about equality in the charity take place: the age of diversity and equality.

4. 2. A conversation in context

4. 2. 1. An evolving charity: the starting point

From the "dispersal of xenophobia" (Institute of Race Relations, 2000) to the hostility against EU migrants

The story of Asylum Seekers and Refugees of Kingston-Upon-Hull (ARKH), where my research took place, is the story of the multiple changes in the UK asylum and migration system. Back in 2000, there was no organisation in Hull providing specific support for asylum seekers and refugees. A few individuals, both from local and migrant communities, created NRC-ARKH to fill that gap. Indeed, in 1999, the Immigration and Asylum Act (IAA) installed a dispersal system in order to alleviate the 'burden' that asylum seekers were understood to present for the capital London and those areas around major receiving ports. Asylum seekers were then spread in areas of the country with "the potential to construct a sound base for the support of asylum seekers." (IAA Explanatory Notes, 1999b, section 101). In reality, asylum seekers were sent to places "relatively economically depressed and `monocultural', without a significant recent history of immigration" (Dawson, 2002: 10). The IAA explicitly refused asylum seekers the right to choose where to settle. NGOs and refugee organisations warned against the dispersal system, which was clearly "a recipe for disaster": asylum seekers, who were presented as a burden for the country were sent to "overwhelmingly white, conservative and monocultural" cities and without any consultation with the local population beforehand, putting them at risk of racist attacks (Institute of Race Relations, 2000). The UK government carried its dispersal plan anyway. Asylum seekers were sent to economically deprived areas or cities, such as Hull, which created further tension with the local population who saw themselves already "competing for resources such as decent council housing" and found in newly coming asylum seekers scapegoats (Craig et al., 2005: 8). In some areas in the UK, the racial tension and violence

triggered by the dispersal was so important that the police requested the suspension of several dispersal locations in December 2002 and the end of seven others in November 2004 (Hynes, 2006: 4). In Hull, a 2005 study revealed that while racism existed prior to the dispersal system, its "disastrous" "(non-)management" worsened race relations (Craig et al., 2005: 9). However, the city continued to receive considerable amounts of asylum seekers[30].

ARKH was created in this context, in order to alleviate some of the difficulties that asylum seekers and refugees faced in Hull. In 2001, they started their activity by offering volunteer-run drop-in advice sessions to refugees and asylum seekers. The charity was initially solely constituted of volunteers, mainly from the Kurdish community, the main migrant population in Hull at the time. More than a charity who helped asylum seekers and refugees, ARKH was a community of people, with a strong identity and sense of solidarity. As Charlie (staff) described it:

> *"It was a volunteer led organisation which can be really successful, run completely by the volunteers, run by local people, no-one gets paid. And the building was actually identified as being one of the things to be a leisure space for refugee and asylum-seeking communities at the time, mainly Kurdish people. That was the main group that was coming to Hull […] about 15 years ago."*

ARKH developed its services with time. With funding, the organisation was able to move to its own building, run its own projects and support more people. In 2013, it merged with a regional organisation, the Northern Refugee Centre (NRC) and became NRC-ARKH. At that time, NRC, based in Sheffield, encompassed several local refugee support organisations in Yorkshire. In 2014, NRC-ARKH moved to a bigger building in Hull, where other charities and support organisations are located, including some of NRC-ARKH's partner projects.

Today, NRC-ARKH's core service remains legal advice. It offers advice in two drop-in sessions per week for asylum seekers, refugees and migrants, regarding immigration, housing, benefits, and other administrative matters. One day a week, it also offers employment, training and education advice (or 'job club'). Volunteers run these drop-in sessions, supervised by one member of staff. NRC-ARKH also provides weekly ESOL classes run by volunteer teachers: two classes open to all on Monday and one class for women-only on Friday. Finally, when I conducted field research, two women-specific projects were available. The *Active Integration* Project offered ESOL classes, training and fun activities to third-country national women

[30] In the first quarter of 2004 for instance, Hull had 933 'supported' asylum seekers (Home Office, 2015b). 'Supported' asylum seekers are those who are benefiting from accommodation and/or financial support, also called 'section 95 support'. This number excludes asylum seekers who support themselves financially, or who stay with friends or relatives, as well as refused asylum seekers and unaccompanied minors.

recently arrived in the UK. The *Safe Spaces* Project, a partnership between NRC-ARKH and the Haven Project, provided a "structured and integrated support package of psychotherapy, immigration advice and therapeutic casework to refugee and asylum seeking women in Hull" (NRC-ARKH, n.d. a)[31].

Throughout time, NRC-ARKH has also adapted to the asylum and migration system, as well as the migration patterns in the city. If the number of asylum seekers dispersed to Hull has decreased over the years[32], this does not mean that its work has decreased. NRC-ARKH also supports refused asylum seekers, recognised refugees as well as naturalised British citizens. Over the course of fifteen years, NRC-ARKH has helped asylum seekers all the way to their naturalisation as British citizens. Furthermore, even though ARKH was initially created to support asylum seekers and refugees, it has never turned away people because of their legal status:

> *"We've never turned anyone away. […] We've always kept the door open. [...] Rather than said, "you're not a refugee, you're not an asylum seeker, I can't help you." (Kim, staff)*

Some staff noted that while the charity had always supported migrants in general, the charity tended to see more EU citizens asking for their support. They explained it by the growing hostility against EU citizens coming to the UK, in particular against those coming from countries who accessed the EU since 2004[33]. For example, before 2015, EU nationals who wanted to settle in the UK had to complete one form, for themselves and their family, which was a few dozen pages in length. Since May 2015, each family member should complete one form, which is around 100 pages. This means the process is more time consuming, more costly, and the likelihood of making mistakes in the form (which can lead the Home Office to refuse the application) is higher. Another example is the UK government intention to cut EU migrants access to benefits in the UK (Wintour and Travis, 2014).

In this context, whether for asylum seekers, refugees or migrants (including EU migrants), the role of NRC-ARKH has remained fundamental to many people. All client participants insisted on how important and unique NRC-ARKH was, because of the crucial support it offered to them in terms of housing, benefits and immigration advice. As Billy (volunteer) explained well:

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[31] I talk about the women-only services in more detail in Chapter 5, section 5.2.1

[32] In the first quarter of 2015, there were 281 supported asylum seekers in Hull, as opposed to 933 in the first quarter of 2004 (Home Office, 2015b).

[33] This includes the 'A8 countries' (Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia), the 'A2 countries' (Bulgaria and Romania) and Croatia.

> *"For [our clients], they need time… time and preparation. They need the government to spend a bit of extra care for these people. […] Unfortunately it's not."*

So NRC-ARKH has to do it.

From the old ARKH to the new NRC-ARKH

The starting point of all my interviews was the recent changes NRC-ARKH underwent in the last year and a half, following the merging with NRC and the move to a new building. This conversation initiator served a double purpose. On the one hand, it enabled me to ground this project in the reality of the charity. This was useful as I conducted this research project with and for NRC-ARKH and I intend to use some of the findings to make recommendations to the charity. On the other hand, it also provided me with a topic about which all participants were likely to have something to say. Furthermore, I started volunteering with ARKH in 2013, when it was a local charity mostly constituted of volunteers and only a small number of staff members. I have personally witnessed some of the changes it has gone through and the transition from a local charity to the local office of a regional one. Having direct insights on the subject myself, I could concretely activate and use my position of insider/outsider.

While the subject might seem context-specific, participants' views on these recent changes turned out to be eye opening. Indeed, as the history of NRC-ARKH shows, the evolution of the charity was always linked to the broader context of the asylum system in the UK. The move to a new building in 2014 also said a lot about the actual state of the charity and the refugee support field at large. During the interviews, the change of building appeared to serve as a symbol of the organisational changes as a whole. Participants of the three groups mentioned that a new, more spacious building, with parking facilities, a receptionist, and a clear waiting area gave a more professional image of the charity. For example, Rory (staff) talked about how the new building was more "conducive to work" and supported a more professional mode of operating. The professionalization of the charity was a key theme, in particular for members of staff, for whom having a clear structure (in terms of the building and the internal organisation) and being professional went together. Looking and acting professional was said to be very important. The members of staff interviewed believed that merging with NRC brought more structure to the charity, especially through standardisation: all member organisations of NRC have to adopt similar internal procedures, for example regarding the managing of personal information and confidentiality.

Such changes seemed to represent a change of era: from the old ARKH, a community of individuals helping each other, now had come the new NRC-ARKH, professional and structured:

> *"[…] of course there are differences, so those changes that we are no longer ARKH, now we are the Refugee Centre, we can keep the name but this is the way we do things." (Sam, staff)*

These changes, for some members of staff, were difficult to explain to some volunteers; especially for long-standing volunteers who had started with the 'old ARKH':

> *"Some of the things may seem restrictive and they only seem restrictive because ARKH has had a history to be informal." (Charlie, staff)*

While for staff members, these changes were positive for the charity, some volunteers did not feel the same. Merging with a regional organisation, getting more structured and more professional was equated with the loss of a community:

> *"We used to go to picnics together, to the cinema, to the swimming pool, to the restaurant twice a month. All of this stopped two years ago." (Dylan, volunteer)*

Max, another volunteer, also noticed how NRC-ARKH was becoming more structured. However, she was originally attached to ARKH as a community, which she thought, was getting lost in the new structures in place. Max also believed that some volunteers had left ARKH when it became NRC-ARKH because of the loss of a community feeling.

4. 2. 2. The refugee support sector: a mutating field

A "very difficult climate"

Charlie (staff) could understand the frustration of certain volunteers with the changes within the charity, which she endeavoured to place in perspective:

> *"I think what's quite difficult to get across is that we want to secure this charity's future in this very difficult climate."*

The "very difficult climate" that Charlie referred to here is constituted of political, economic and financial changes, which intersect and make the work of refugee support organisations more difficult to carry out. For Charlie, some volunteers ended up leaving NRC-ARKH because they felt overwhelmed with the changing nature of the job. This was also Billy's experience, who decided to volunteer as an employment adviser only, because of the uncertainty of immigration advice:

> *"I work only Wednesday [at the 'job club'], I haven't got interest in immigration, really. I couldn't understand, 'cause all the time, the law is always changing." (Billy, volunteer)*

While major changes in immigration regulations are passed by law, many minor changes are little discussed, or even unannounced, and can happen overnight.

> *"Things are changing every day." (Sam, staff)*

From one day to another, the Home Office may have modified some application forms. The use of the wrong form, or a mistake on the form, can lead to the rejection of someone's application. In my field notes, I describe the stress involved in completing a naturalisation form for a client:

> *"Filling forms is so stressful. I never felt so anxious filling forms before. I know one tiny mistake and the client will have their application rejected, and they will lose more than 1000£. It is crazy how you can really ruin someone's life by simply making a mistake on a form." (Field notes, 13 April 2015)*

One client participant recognised the pressure on volunteers and appreciated the support offered to them by their supervisors:

> *"I'm like happy to see your supervisors are being helpful. Because it's a massive pressure for people like yourself. So you need some backup." (Jaz, client)*

It is also in that regard that staff members believed a more structured organisation was safer for clients, because it provided them with a solid base in face of those constant external changes, which had a direct impact on their work.

The need to professionalise, expressed by staff members, is also a requirement of the UK government. The 1999 IAA put in place the Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner (OISC), an executive non-departmental public body[34] in charge of regulating the provision of immigration advice in the UK. Since that date, any organisation that provides regulated immigration advice has to register and pay a fee every year. Individual advisers need to obtain a qualification depending on the level of immigration advice they provide. The OISC also put in place a prosecution mechanism for those who provide advice without a qualification, a complaint mechanism for clients and rules for data protection. These rules are meant to protect the best interests of those who receive immigration advice. However, in small organisations, it also has a negative impact on the amount of advice they can provide to their clients. The test is quite difficult and costly in terms of money and preparation time. When the OISC regulations were put in place, NRC-ARKH had to ask volunteers who were previously giving out immigration advice to refrain from doing so, as it could endanger the charity's registration with the OISC. This created tension and frustration among some volunteers, who were disappointed not being able to do as much as they used to. It also had an impact for clients: regulated advisers can only complete a certain amount of work in a day. This means that if there are a limited number of them in a given advice drop-in session, not everyone who requires immigration advice can be helped. During my fieldwork, I met a client who had to come four times to the charity

[34] Executive non-departmental public bodies (NDPB) are "public bodies that operate at arm's length from Ministers but for which Ministers are ultimately accountable." (Cabinet Office, 2012).

before they could get help with completing an immigration related form, because of the lack of regulated advisers. One staff member and one volunteer shared that this situation worried them, because they feared that clients would feel they were not welcome in the charity.

"Funding is always a problem"

Refugee support organisations, in light of the political context in which they operate, do not lack work as hostility against asylum seekers is "institutionalised" (Mulvey, 2010: 8-9). The UK, like many of its European counterparts, is habitually introducing stricter border controls and making it increasingly difficult for those already on its territory to stay[35]. However, the growing amount of work is not necessarily paralleled with a growing financial capacity to carry out the work. All members of staff, and a few volunteers, mentioned funding difficulties and the impact on the charity work. As summarised by Jamie (volunteer): "Funding is always a problem." It is more and more competitive, with funding streams more difficult to obtain. Still, NRC-ARKH, like many other organisations, relies on funding to operate. As Kim (staff) explained:

> *"You rely on funders, and you rely on when they put things out on tender, and if they don't, you see projects close. It's the nature of the game when it comes to funding. [..] A lot of the Senior Management team spend a lot of their time sorting funding, applying for funding, waiting for an answer for funding. Nine times out of ten, you find that you don't get the answer, which is quite sad…" (Kim, staff)*

NRC-ARKH, like many other charitable organisations in the UK, relies on funding for both already existing services and new services the organisation wishes to create. Since the 1980s, academic research on non-profit organisations becoming "business-like" has grown significantly (Maier et al., 2014)[36]. The competitive race for funding that many non-profit organisations now have to enter is one example of how they are required to become "business-like". It is also linked with the multiplication of paid positions, in parallel to volunteering, to carry out the work of the charity, and its professionalization. ARKH was initially a volunteer-led organisation, where no one was paid for the work they were providing. The tensions that seemed to have arisen in the charity, symbolised by the move of buildings, can also be understood in light of these broader changes within the non-profit world.

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[35] See Chapter 2, section 2.2.2.

[36] As Maier, Meyer and Steinbereithner explain in their article (2014), literature on this topic is prolific but fragmented, because of the variety of terms used to describe the phenomenon (such as corporatisation, marketization, professionalization, commercialisation…). Unfortunately, space lacks in this dissertation to explore in detail the literature on the phenomenon.

Funders have an impact on charities' activities, not only because they provide money for their realisation, but also because they have their own requirements. They generally monitor the services they fund, by asking the beneficiaries to prove that they are doing a good job. For new services, funders may require that the services they fund be restricted by eligibility criteria. As explained by Charlie (staff), who referred to "this very difficult climate":

> *"…we have to change, we have to branch out, we have to diversify, we have to show funders that we are professional, we're organised, we've got processes in place […] because they are going to put their trust in us to deliver different programs." (Charlie, staff)*

NRC-ARKH has to comply with these requirements, in order to secure its current funding. It also has an evidential basis for applying for future funding when it is able to show that NRC-ARKH runs successful projects and appropriately support their clients. In concrete terms, this also means that funders have a say on what can be done and how it can be done. It is in this context as well that the disappearance of 'the old ARKH' takes sense. This community of people that relied on volunteers and informal processes, much loved by several of the volunteers, was relinquished for the sake of longevity. In such a political, economic and financial context, NRC-ARKH has to be solid, structured and professional in order to adapt to the constant changes happening in the field.

It remains that in this "very difficult climate" as Charlie named it, the work carried out by NRC-ARKH is still crucial if not vital to its clients. Robin (staff) explained the importance of immigration advice:

> *"[…] immigration advice, I think, is so important, because it's obtaining status and give people the feelings of being safe in the country. And if you feel safe in the country, then you can think about other things and about your personal development."*

Immigration work, in particular asylum, is difficult also because the deadlines and time limits are particularly short. I described this in my field notes:

> *"Today I helped a client who got refused for section 95 support. He had three days to appeal. Unfortunately, he received the letter last week and by the time he reached NRC-ARKH, he was already one day late. We sent the fax with the appeal form at 16.45, only hoping that the Tribunal had not already turned off their fax for the night – otherwise it would be one more day late. It was a very stressful experience. Still, I am not even sure his appeal will be considered, and this just because he could not get free legal advice in time." (Field notes, 28 July 2015)*

It is in such a political and financial context that local refugee support charities, such as NRC-ARKH, operate.

4. 2. 3. Parallel conversations about organisational changes

The initial goal of this project was to inform organisational change from the bottom up, by privileging the voices of those at the centre of refugee support. Experiences of clients, the ones who are supported, and of volunteers and staff, the ones who are doing the work, are central to understanding the field as it really operates. However, the macro-structures around these encounters are also very informative and highlight the non-negligible role of funders in that field. Nevertheless, while funders have an important influence on what can be done in the charity, in the form of eligibility criteria or monitoring requirements, it does not mean that the needs of the ground are not listened to:

> *"We're always looking for new opportunities. And looking at the need as well. What's the need out there? What do we need to apply for? What should we be doing for people to access our service? And what is it that these people need." (Kim, staff)*

Kim shared that NRC-ARKH "goes with what goes to their attention", either through observation or through conversations with clients. Different conversation levels about changes can be identified: between staff and funders; between staff and volunteers; between clients and staff or volunteers.

From their perspective, staff believe that they were relaying the needs of the ground to funders as they use clients' experiences to apply for funding, as Kim (staff) shared. However, several clients told me expressly in interviews how they felt uncomfortable complaining about a service that was free, and carried out by devoted volunteers, or making suggestions for new services:

> *"[...] you cannot say "I want this specific thing, do that things" because it's not going to be something acceptable, I think." (Jules, client)*

This is directly linked with the fact that NRC-ARKH is a unique organisation in Hull, which provides crucial free support to marginalised populations, such as asylum seekers and migrants. The power relations at play in the field can make it difficult for clients to express their needs to the staff and volunteers, who, consequently, cannot express them to funders. This is particularly important to keep in mind, as there is no direct conversation between funders and clients, even though funders provide money for services meant to support individuals on the ground and ameliorate their lives. There are multiple levels of conversations, which sometimes intersect and sometimes do not. It is at the heart of these different communication dynamics that the conversations about gender discussed in this project took place. In the second section, I develop the more 'gender specific context', as one may call it, in which it is also situated.

4. 3. Talking about gender in the age of equality & diversity

4. 3. 1. One piece of legislation and a few boxes to tick: equality made easier?

The conversation about gender that this project represents did not take place in a vacuum: it was part of a broader, already existing conversation about equality in the charity. Indeed, treating people equally is an obligation for charities under law. In 2010, the Equality Act brought together 116 pieces of legislation concerning discrimination and unfair treatment[37]. While previously, different types of discrimination were treated separately and subject to different laws, the new law now addresses discrimination and unfair treatment based on eight "protected characteristics": age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion, sex and sexual orientation. According to the Equality and Human Rights Commission, this act "simplifies, strengthens and harmonises the current legislation to provide Britain with a new discrimination law which protects individuals from unfair treatment and promotes a fair and more equal society" (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2015). It is presented as making equality easier and simpler, for victims of discrimination as much as potential perpetrators. No organisation, structure or individual providing services to the public is allowed to discriminate against anyone based on one or several of these characteristics. This includes voluntary and community sector organisations, such as charities like NRC-ARKH. Indeed, posters with an Equality statement on several walls inside the charity remind clients, volunteers and staff of this charity's obligation.

Funders in their monitoring mechanisms also take up the obligation of non-discrimination. Indeed, obtaining funding is part of a contract, where the charity commits to realise a service according to a set of criteria in exchange of a sum of money. One of NRC-ARKH's funders asked that "diversity monitoring forms" be completed in the drop-in sessions. Every client receiving help in every session should complete these anonymous forms. They ask the following information from clients (see the full form in Appendice 1):

- Their gender
- Their ethnicity
- Their age
- Their religion

[37] The nine main pieces of legislation that were merged into the Equality Act (2010) are: the Equal Pay Act (1970), the Sex Discrimination Act (1975), the Race Relations Act (1976), the Disability Discrimination Act (1995), the Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations (2003), the Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations (2003), the Employment Equality (Age) Regulations (2006), the Equality Act (2006, Part 2), the Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations (2007).

- Whether they have a disability
- Their sexual orientation

These monitoring forms are meant to make sure NRC-ARKH welcomes and supports a wide array of people from a diversity of backgrounds. From my own perspective as a researcher, informed by feminist thought, these forms can be criticised. As I explained in Chapter 3, in processes of becoming 'inclusive', it is particularly important to pay attention to terminology and who has the power of naming. These forms seem to offer a quick and simple solution to equality and diversity monitoring, where clients only have to tick a few boxes. However, gender is presented in a binary and biological manner (male/female). The form asks for people's gender rather than the way they identify themselves. The form does not offer the possibility to choose another option, as only for ethnicity and religion can the signatory tick an "other" box. The last question about sexual orientation is also interesting because it offers three options: "heterosexual", "LGBT/other", or "prefer not to say", blurring the distinction between sexual orientation and gender identity. These forms actually tell more about the way funders conceive the diversity they want to measure. They assume that people will feel comfortable disclosing their gender identity, their ethnicity or whether they have a disability, but they could not feel comfortable disclosing their religion or their sexual orientation (as only for these two categories are people offered the option to tick the "prefer not to say" box). They also, despite their apparent simplicity, by this use of terms exclude a number of people who may not identify along the lines offered by the form.

Even though not necessarily for the same reasons as myself, participants also had conflicting views on these forms. For all staff, these forms had no direct relevance for the work of the charity:

> *"It isn't relevant. If we didn't have to do it, we probably wouldn't do it. They want the statistics. It's all about numbers with funders, you see. It's all about you know… how many people do you reach, what kind of people do you reach, you know their culture, their sexual orientation… so then they can say, we've ticked this box, they tick that box. But it doesn't make any difference to us." (Kim, staff)*

Some staff and volunteers had an issue with these forms, because they found them intrusive:

> *"[…] I felt it was really intrusive for me to sit there with a client, and go through people's sexuality, their religion, 'cause that can be quite a touchy one…" (Charlie, staff)*

Billy (volunteer) shared his strategy to minimise discomfort, and to avoid potentially offending some clients: he placed the categories in front of the client, explain them if necessary, and then signified to the client to tick the boxes themselves. In my role as a volunteer, I also had to ask clients to complete such forms. I did experience discomfort when I had to explain what ethnicity,

or sexual orientation meant, to clients who never heard such terms before. In addition, as a feminist, I felt uncomfortable when clients would answer they were "obviously" heterosexual or even "normal". However, I have found no solution to avoid this particular type of discomfort.

Interestingly, no client interviewed indicated that they had an issue with these forms in particular. Steph (client) explained that she had had to fill these forms on numerous occasions and therefore she got used to it. Diversity monitoring forms provide an example of the kind of conversations that happen already around the subject of equality, understood broadly, but also conversations that do not happen. Funders ask for information they consider fundamental but that the charity's staff do not always see as useful or relevant. Worse, at times, they make staff and volunteers, who collect the information, feel uncomfortable. On the clients' side, these forms do not pose any problem. Even though the clients I interviewed did not necessarily understand the purpose of these forms, they shared they were happy to help the charity by disclosing such information.

4. 3. 2. Equality & diversity in participants' accounts

Even though several staff and volunteers were critical of the diversity monitoring forms and had issues with the need to "identify[…] difference all the time" (Charlie, staff), the word "diversity" came up in several interviews. However, there was no common usage of the term. For Charlie, the fact that the team was constituted of diverse people was positive, because it sent the message to clients that "we're really diverse and we value diversity". Sam (staff) referred to "the West where there is a celebration of diversity". Clients also talked about diversity. Steph, for example, said how everyone was treated equally in the charity, "no matter their race, religion or diversity". Cameron was satisfied with how the charity respected clients' diversity and cultures. Diversity and equality sometimes were talked about together, sometimes not, but they were often connected in participants' accounts – even if in an unclear way.

When I asked the participants whether they thought the charity was accessible to clients, or whether they thought the service was of equal quality for all, I was surprised by the almost unanimous answers I obtained. Several participants, whether clients, volunteers or staff, clearly stated that everyone is treated the same in the charity:

> *"No matter their race, religion or diversity, everyone is treated equally." (Steph, client)*

> *"We know that's what we're here for. We don't discriminate against anybody, because of anything." (Kim, staff)*

As Kim said, this is what NRC-ARKH is for: to offer advice to communities and groups of people who are traditionally marginalised in society. NRC-ARKH is a charitable organisation, whose goal is to do good. Other participants, however, had a more balanced view:

> *"Based on the clients, everyone should be treated equal. I think that's happening." (Jamie, volunteer)*

Jamie's quote is interesting because he said both that everyone *should* and *were* treated equally. He recognised the obligation to do so, and insisted that he believed this obligation was met in NRC-ARKH. Other participants believed that everyone *should* be treated equally:

> *"[…] we want to offer an equal service." (Sam, staff)*

> *"We just need to be objective and all so everyone gets the same service, that all clients are treated the same." (Charlie, staff)*

> *"We need to treat people everybody the same, it's very important to have that kind of relation between us and the clients." (Billy, volunteer)*

These statements reveal that for some participants, equality was happening while for others, equality had to be realised actively.

4. 3. 3. Towards a conversation about gender

In this age where equality is clearly talked about, integrated in organisations' mission statements and even a legal obligation, talking about equality and difference still seems to be difficult. During my interviews, I found it particularly challenging to engage participants in a conversation about the issues around accessibility and service provision, when all the participants strongly believed that everyone was, or should be, treated equally in the charity. While my intent was not to question the good intentions of the charity, the strength and unanimity of these statements almost made my questions appear as accusations:

> *"The ones who think the service may not be equal are the people who do not treat all clients the same." (Max, volunteer)*

Kim (staff) summarised well my difficulties in understanding why it was so difficult to talk about accessibility and inequality within the charity:

> *"Equality & Diversity policies will change from year to year, but you know, will it make a real difference? Probably not. People will just be aware that they can't say anything. […] Which is probably worse than saying something." (Kim, staff)*

The ubiquity of the concept of diversity makes it particularly difficult to define. Diversity is not just observed, it is increasingly promoted. There is a wide range of critical literature on the increasing use of the "language of diversity", as Ahmed (2007) calls it. Even though this

literature focuses mainly on diversity in the workplace, where diversity promises financial benefits (Herring and Henderson, 2014), in higher education (Ahmed, 2012) or in organisations, and not specifically on refugee support organisations, it remains useful here. It provides interesting insights on the effect of the ubiquity of diversity in organisations of different natures. In the workplace, "[…] diversity is a concept that undermines policies for racial equality by covering white employers with a gloss of inclusiveness." (Collins, 2011: 4). For Collins, "the concept and practice of diversity does not necessarily translate into racial and gender equality" (Collins, 2011: 3). For Ahmed, diversity, as the concept is deployed, is linked to "equity fatigue" and the "failure of equality", and its success is partly due to the fact that it can be "'detached' from histories of struggle for equality" (Ahmed, 2007: 240). The fact that equality systems "can thus conceal the inequalities that make such systems necessary in the first place" (Ahmed, 2012: 100) is also an issue. Equality systems and obligations become particularly problematic when organisations and institutions believe equality is achieved in the statement that they are equal and that no further effort is needed in that regard (Ahmed, 2012: 11).

In the context of the charity, the merging of the terms equality and diversity is problematic, because the "celebration of diversity" casts shadows on the still existing social inequalities that influence access to the services provided. For funders, ticking boxes and counting numbers provide formal guarantees that NRC-ARKH provides an equal service. However, statistics pertaining to equal access (as facilitated through completing forms) do not equate to equal service. Quantification of diversity does not equate quantification of equality (Hirschman et al., 2012) and does not provide an accurate view of the inequalities that are at play in a given organisation. In that perspective, this thesis' project is an attempt to take into account these dominant discourses on equality and diversity, and see through them: to see not what the issues officially *are*, but what are *described as* issues by clients, volunteers and staff.

The next chapters analyse participants' accounts of their experiences in providing or receiving services, from a gender perspective, bridging the micro and the macro level. They place in parallel the dominant discourses around equality and the individual's visions of equality, keeping in mind the power dynamics specific to the field of refugee protection and the specific research setting.

Chapter 5 The place of gender in NRC-ARKH's services

5. 1. Introduction

As developed in Chapter 2, the field of refugee protection has evolved a lot since the signature of the 1951 Convention, especially from a gender perspective. Indeed, those in charge of their protection routinely ignored the situation and needs of refugee women. Today, however, refugee women are the object of growing international attention and gender is now part of refugee protection frameworks at the international and national levels. This chapter is interested in the place of gender in refugee support services in the UK today, through the work of NRC-ARKH. In Chapter 4, I developed the context in which the conversation about gender, initiated by my research project, took place. The present chapter develops what I found in this conversation.

I therefore reach the core of my research project: analysing NRC-ARKH's services from a gender perspective. Here, I address the following questions: are there differences in access to services for the clients of the charity? Can these differences be analysed from a gender perspective? What can be learned about refugee support organisations and the services they provide by adopting an intersectional gender perspective? When interviewing participants, I sought to explore two interrelated themes: whether gender is taken into account in the charity's services (and how), and whether gender has an impact on people's access to support and the quality of the services given. Many of the participants' views cross and intersect, leaving several ways to address these questions. Here, I have chosen to present my analysis in two parts. The first section looks at how gender is taken into account in the organisation of services. The second section pays attention to what participants said mattered to them in access to services – and whether they thought gender played a role in that respect.

5. 2. Gender as an eligibility criterion: women-only services

5. 2. 1. Women needing specific support: the rationale for women-only services

As a refugee support charity, NRC-ARKH has one general eligibility criterion for its services: only asylum seekers, refugees or migrants can have access to the advice drop-in, the employment advice drop-in (or 'job club') and the ESOL classes. However, at the time of my field research, there was one additional criterion for three of the services: gender. The *Active Integration* project and the *Safe Spaces* project were open to women only, and the ESOL classes had a women-only version.

The development of women-only support services in the field of refugee protection is related to the progressive realisation since the 1980s that not all refugees were the same nor treated the same way. The allegedly one-size-fits-all definition of a refugee, established by the 1951 Refugee Convention, was primarily based on the figure of a male refugee (Spijkerboer, 2000). In the mid-1980s, non-governmental actors in the field of refugee protection demonstrated that refugee women had specific needs that those in charge of their protection should take into account, i.e. states but also non-governmental actors such as NGOs and charities (see Chapter 2, section 2.2.1). Support services for refugee women are one illustration of the integration of gender, understood broadly, in the field of refugee protection. Once they shed light on the male bias in the existing refugee protection framework, activists sought to rectify this absence by integrating women into this framework (Edwards, 2010). This materialised at the legal level by the recognition of gender-based asylum claims. In the field of refugee protection, refugee women were identified as a specific group with specific needs. This translated into support services dedicated to women, emphasising women's vulnerability and need for special care.

This can also be observed at the level of the UK. In a 2002 report, Refugee Action pointed out that "[t]he needs of refugee women are often marginalised and their voices not heard" (Dumper, 2002: 2). In this report, they recommend the Home Office to implement a gender sensitive asylum policy; they also recommended refugee agencies, local authorities, the NHS[38], and statutory and voluntary sector community organisations to acknowledge and integrate the needs of refugee women in local action plans (Dumper, 2002: 3). Non-governmental organisations that support refugees, such as charities, adapted their approach to supporting refugees and refugee women in particular, in their generic services or in the form of services dedicated to women. This commitment to refugee women can also be observed within NRC-ARKH: it is a signatory of the 2008 Asylum Aid Charter on refugee women. It also signed the 2010 Why Refugee Women Charter and therefore committed to:

– Create an open and safe environment and treat all refugee women with dignity and respect

– Ensure all workers are aware of the need for gender sensitivity and implement appropriate practices for achieving this

– Understand gender based issues and act appropriately to take account of these

– Offer the choice of female workers / interpreters to refugee women wherever possible

[38] National Health Service.

– Ensure refugee women are routinely supported with childcare during asylum interviews so that they feel able to speak about confidential and sensitive issues

– Ensure refugee women are aware of their rights and independence from their partners

– Support others in understanding Why Refugee Women?

This specific commitment to refugee women is also visible in the organisations of the charity's services.

5. 2. 2. Women refugees and asylum seekers and NRC-ARKH

NRC-ARKH's women-only services: Safe Spaces, Active Integration and women-only ESOL classes

At the time of my field research, three women-only services were available. In a period when many free advice centres were closing down and the Home Office was speeding up asylum procedures, NRC-ARKH created the *Safe Spaces* project, offering multi-agency holistic support to vulnerable women. One caseworker from NRC-ARKH was in charge of legal, administrative and daily life matters, while a therapist in the partner project was in charge of psychological and emotional support (NRC-ARKH, n.d. a). This new service was also created at a time when UK refugee support organisations created services directed especially at women to address the complex and specific situation of women within the asylum system. Indeed, they acknowledged that while the asylum system was difficult for everyone, it was likely to be even more difficult for women. From a legal point of view for instance, for a long time gender-based asylum claims were not recognised. Even though it was long known that sexual violence against women was a weapon of war, the fact that women could flee their country for that reason remained long unacknowledged, and the UK refused asylum claims on that basis.

However, the recognition of gender-based asylum claims in theory was not enough to protect refugee women. Women who were victims of sexual violence may find it difficult to talk about it, even when their asylum claim is based on or closely related to the experience of such violence. A Refugee Council research report from 2009 put to the forefront that women may not disclose such information "until a containing helping relationship has been established and until the woman's most immediate needs have been met" (Keefe and Hage, 2009: 5). The *Safe Spaces* project was conceived to answer to these needs.

The *Active Integration* project was the second women-only service available in NRC-ARKH at the time of my field research. The goal of the project was the following:

> *"Working with local organisations, we aim to enable Third Country National* women to integrate more effectively and feel more at home, involved and independent in the UK, by providing a programme of active citizenship events, learning, language and individual support." (Active Integration, 2014)*

The European Integration Fund, part of the European Union Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) aimed at supporting initiatives at the European and national levels for the integration of third country nationals in European societies from 2014 to 2020 (European Commission, 2014). It funded the *Active Integration* project until May 2015. This explains why the project could only benefit third country national women, who, as the asterisk indicates, are a restricted category. It includes women coming from countries outside of the European Union, coming to the UK to settle (which excludes students) on their own (with the exception of refugees and asylum seekers) or to join their partners.

In 2015, the European Integration Fund also funded research on women who came to the UK on spousal visas and their experiences of settlement. Even though this research was published after the project was run, it can still give some insight into the rationale behind this type of project. Eaves' report pointed out that if integration is supposed to be a two-way process, "in the UK the onus is on the migrants to be self-sufficient, independent, extroverted, proactive and confident." (Eaves, 2015: 101). While the women in the project were eager to integrate, it could also be particularly difficult for some women because of the interaction of structural barriers, the women's lack of self-confidence and the prevalent prejudices against them.

Women-only ESOL classes, the last women-only service, are slightly different from women-only services in that they are a version of an existing service. At the time of my research, NRC-ARKH provided free ESOL classes to all based on a drop-in system: everyone who wanted to learn English could attend them without any obligation of attendance and regardless of their legal status. There were three classes a week, one being open to women-only.

NRC-ARKH's website indicates that even though childcare facilities are not available, women are welcome to bring their children as NRC-ARKH is "committed to removing barriers to women learning English" (NRC-ARKH, n.d. b). This can be linked with research on refugee women in the UK: in their 2002 research, Refugee Action found that 50% of the women interviewed in the project could not access ESOL classes because of the lack of childcare facilities, and therefore recommended ESOL provision to "take into account the needs of refugee mothers" (Refugee Action, 2002: 3). NRC-ARKH does not provide childcare for female ESOL students but still provides a women-only class.

The meaning of women in NRC-ARKH's women-only services: a gender perspective

When looking at the organisation of NRC-ARKH's services, two categories of services appear: those open to all, and those open to women. Even though those three services use the term women, 'women' here is not a uniform category. Each of the mentioned services welcomes a specific category of women: all women for ESOL class (with a particular sensitivity to mothers), vulnerable women for *Safe Spaces*, and third-country national women for *Active Integration*. At first look, the category 'woman' is not defined in itself, but rather in correspondence with other criteria: motherhood, vulnerability or legal status in the UK.

When I talked to the people involved in these projects, I found out that regardless of other criteria, each project defined women differently. For the *Safe Spaces* project and the women-only ESOL classes, women were understood as self-defining women. In those projects, gender was understood as a social construction; one who may not have been born woman may still define themselves as woman and therefore access the said services. The *Active Integration* project welcomed women whose passports said they were women. The category of women was more restricted, as it did not allow people outside the gender binary to access the service.

So far, this breakdown of services seemed to indicate that while the category of women was prevalent in NRC-ARKH's work, it was not a uniform one. For the *Safe Spaces* project and the ESOL classes, gender was understood more broadly to encompass non-binary identities. The discrepancy between those two services and the *Active Integration* project can be explained by the eligibility criteria imposed by the funder of the NRC-ARKH project. Indeed, members of staff shared that they were aware of the limitations imposed by the eligibility criteria, and that they wished they could open up the project to more individuals. With this in mind, I had a conversation with participants about whether they thought gender played a role in access to services offered by NRC-ARKH.

5. 3. Gender as unclear: generic services

5. 3. 1. Does gender play a role in access to services?

In light of the divide between generic services and women-only services, it may seem obvious that gender is present in NRC-ARKH's work. Gender as an eligibility criteria enabled a group of clients, i.e. women (defined in various ways) to have access to specific support services based on the idea that without them, women would have difficulties finding the support they need to navigate the UK immigration system. However, it turned out that the participants

interviewed on generic services had very different, and sometimes contradictory, opinions on the role of gender in access to services.

Accessibility or equality: an ambiguity

One of the difficulties in analysing data from interviews was the ambiguous meaning of access and accessibility. When I asked if they believed the service was accessible, many participants, whether clients, staff or volunteers, answered that the services were equal. Accessibility, in most interviews, was an ambiguous term, which covered different concepts. This was problematic because in fact whether a service is accessible does not mean that a service is equal. The organisation of the drop-in sessions provides an example of this difference. A 'screening volunteer' was in charge of welcoming the clients to the drop-in. They took clients' details and a brief explanation of what they needed help with. Then, the clients sat down until an adviser was available to see them. In that perspective, a client who would have physically come to the charity could be considered as, concretely, having had access to it. This does not however mean that such a client would not necessarily be treated less fairly than others once seen by an adviser.

The fact that many participants answered the question "is the service accessible to all?" with "everyone is equal" or "everyone should be equal" is another demonstration of the obstacles that diversity and equality discourses present in the field. On one hand, equating equal access with equal service, or focusing on equal access is criticisable. It may be possible to count the number of people who come to a given service and sort them out according to a variety of categories (such as the diversity monitoring categories used by funders), but measuring whether everyone gets an equal service is more difficult because it is less quantifiable. On the other hand, in participants' accounts, there was considerable overlap between factors that had an influence on the access to services, and those that affected the quality of the service delivered. Faced with the irreconcilability of these contradictions, I decided to use the word 'access' in a broad sense to be as close as possible to what participants said despite the limitations of the terms.

The role of gender: multiple definitions and multiple opinions

Participants were all asked whether they believed gender played a role in access to services in the charity. All clients answered that they believed there were no particular issues in that respect, and that everyone was treated fairly and equally in the charity. To this particular question, no client expressly said that they felt their gender influenced their access to services or access to services in general.

Among volunteers and staff, there were two types of responses. The majority answered that they believed that gender had no role whatsoever in access to services:

> *"I don't think there is anybody who can't access our services, who need more support accessing our services, based on their gender" (Sam, staff)*

> *"Whoever comes through the door, no matter who they are, or what gender they are, it makes no difference." (Kim, staff)*

For Billy, it was difficult to say:

> *"When people come to our services, we don't go in depth; we don't go in detail with them about any other things. The only thing we know is what is the client's problem." (Billy, volunteer)*

Three volunteers and one member of staff answered yes to the question "do you think gender plays a role in the way people access NRC-ARKH's services?" For all of them, the impact of gender on access to services concerned women. Morgan shared her experience with some clients:

> *"Sometimes we see that a male client would not allow their wife to sign a form. Or where a male client has actually refused [a female volunteer's] services" (Morgan, volunteer)*

Eddie also mentioned similar ideas:

> *"[…] some of the couples may find it awkward to access the service, because of the religion belief, some things like that. […] Because you know what… how treated are women in Muslim marriages and things like that. […] They may find it difficult, more awkward for them, because they may not be used to it in their home countries. In that way." (Eddie, volunteer)*

However, when I asked Eddie if this was something that he saw personally, or that some clients shared with him, he said that it was rather something he was able to "sense" when he welcomed some couples in the charity.

These contradictory answers should be read in light of participants' own definitions of the concept of gender. No participant defined gender the same way. Interestingly, all clients defined gender as a binary, either man/woman or male/female. Among staff and volunteers, the definitions were more varied. One member of staff and one volunteer's definitions added sexual orientation to the gender binary. Two volunteers and two members of staff included "transgender" in the binary man/woman. Two volunteers defined gender in terms of "different sexualities" only. One staff member talked about "man, woman, child". I kept this in mind when I analysed participants' views on gender and access to services.

5. 3. 2. What matters in access to services? The non-explicit role of gender and identity

As explained above, if there is a clear conceptual difference between the obstacles to access to service and the obstacles to the delivery of an equal service, it remains difficult to identify in practice. Access to services here is understood broadly because it sticks as closely as possible to participants' accounts that often mixed the two. While I intended to talk about access to the charity services in general, access in broad terms was also likely to differ depending on which service was at stake. However, it was difficult to distinguish between the different services because of the variety of the participants interviewed and their experiences. Some volunteers were legal advisers, employment advisers, or teaching ESOL. Some clients had attended both the advice drop-in and the ESOL classes; others had only experience in one type of service. Staff were more likely to have knowledge on more than the service they worked for, because they were required to know other services in order to signpost clients when necessary. However, this does not mean they had experience in other services as a provider. Therefore, I decided to take a crosscutting perspective on what participants said they believed mattered in accessing the charity, from a provider or a recipient perspective. What came out of their accounts is that even though gender was not always explicitly named, it remained present. When asked about how accessible the charity was to clients, participants generally broached on two ranges of issues: practical obstacles to access, and more intangible issues to access.

Practical obstacles to access: geographical location, opening times, childcare and language

There were two commonly mentioned practical obstacles to access: the geographical location of the charity and the opening times. For clients as much as staff and volunteers, the fact that the charity was located in a central area in the city, easily accessible, was very important and was seen as facilitating access. Clients all mentioned that the charity should offer extensive opening times in order to welcome more people. All staff members and volunteers were also aware of this issue. Staff members however stressed that the fact that the advice drop-in was open two days a week, for example, was due to lack of funding and resources. While all believed in general that the charity should be open more often to accommodate more people, some participants raised the fact that wider opening times would allow specific groups of people to access the charity more easily. Sam, for instance, was aware that women would find it difficult to find support if they had children who go to school. Indeed, the window between the time they would drop them off at school (around 9 or 10 in the morning) and the time they would pick

them up (around 3 in the afternoon) was short, especially if they needed help for something that was time consuming:

> *"Clearly, you can see that a single mum, with a child, or children, going to school, and she has a letter for example where she needs some support, and she has no childcare. If the child finishes at 3, there is no way she would be able to come here, be comfortable, stay in the queue and be seen and leave and pick up her children." (Sam, staff)*

Jaz also shared her experience in that respect:

> *"[…] you know, if you don't have children, basically it's much easier. You arrange everything around yourself. You're not determined with day, time, whatever, it's much easier. But when you've got children, you are so restricted in so many ways." (Jaz, client)*

Jules, a client and an ESOL student, shared she would like to attend more ESOL classes. So far, she could only go to the women-only classes on Friday, because they were taking place while the children were at school. As the mixed-gender classes took place in the early evening, she was unable to attend them. During my fieldwork, I also helped a client who wanted to attend ESOL classes. Unfortunately, she could not attend classes, because she had young children going to school and she lived too far to reach NRC-ARKH and go back home on time to pick them up.

Two staff members mentioned the impact of the lack of childcare facilities on the attendance of women in the various projects of NRC-ARKH. It also had an impact on the advice sessions because they sometimes had to advice women clients with children around:

> *"So that limits up, from about 10 to 3 because before, they're settling down and 3, they have to go and pick them up. So I just have that window in which to put in mums with children who have to pick them up. If they have little kids, we've tried, we've tried… we have toys outside… but inevitably, the interview doesn't go well simply because mum cannot concentrate." (Rory, staff)*

Rory also gave the example of ESOL classes:

> *"When we had childcare facilities provided, our English classes were thriving. But ever since we haven't been able to afford the childcare, our numbers have dropped. Because mums who have children and they can't leave them with the crèche, bring their children." (Rory, staff)*

Rory here highlighted the fact that without childcare, some clients – mostly women with children – stopped coming to the charity or attending ESOL classes.

This is particularly worrying in light of the almost unanimous opinions on the importance of language in providing services. Cameron summarised well what all clients shared in their interviews, i.e. the importance of speaking English:

> *"Because it's an English country, I have to be perfect in English, I have to communicate about any problem, any limitations." (Cameron, client)*

For Cameron and the other clients interviewed, being able to access free ESOL classes was extremely important. This is correlated by research: according to UNHCR, language is one of the key facilitators to integration of refugees in the host country (Crisp, 2004: 6). Several participants, both service providers and clients, stressed the importance of English in the delivery of the service. For Sam (staff), language was the most important factor in accessing the charity. Some volunteers noticed how the lack of interpreters in a certain language could rapidly have an impact on the attendance of certain groups of clients:

> *"[…] we lost most of the clients who used to come from Poland, because we haven't got interpreters to suit the clients' needs." (Billy, volunteer)*

For Jules, the only reason why people could not be treated the same way in NRC-ARKH was whether they could speak English or get help from an interpreter in their mother language:

> *"I think and the reason for that is other people have the language, and I don't have the language. So it's easy for them to communicate, and it's hard for me to communicate. But it's not because they support some people and they don't support some people." (Jules, client)*

Jules also explained that she tried to get help at the advice drop-in but she was turned away because there was no interpreter in her mother language.

Rory, Billy and Jules, from their positions as staff, volunteer and client, talked about the same issue: some practical factors, such as interpreters or childcare, played an important role in access to services. Interestingly, participants were reluctant to expressly tie these factors to the gender or the identity of clients at large. In the meantime, they clearly were doing so, since several of them talked about childcare as being a 'mother's issue', or mentioned how the withdrawal of childcare had a direct impact on female clients' attendance to the ESOL classes.

More intangible obstacles to access: identity and diversity

When asked if the service was accessible, Charlie (staff) was the only participant who immediately linked accessibility to diversity:

> *"I think our volunteer group makes it very easy to be accessible because I think, you know, […] we have a very good group of volunteers who are professional. And also the fact that […] they might have been asylum seekers in the past or refugees, speak the same language, share the same culture, that shows clients that you know, that we're really diverse and we value diversity… that they're not hopefully going to experience any kind of discrimination when they come here because we are a really inclusive staff force and volunteer force […]" (Charlie, staff)*

Charlie added that NRC-ARKH had had a tradition, since its beginning, to have at least 50% of staff and volunteers who come from the refugee community or have similar backgrounds.

Charlie thought it was a positive thing as they brought "expertise and experience". Sam also believed it was positive as it also provided some kind of stability, a sense of security and satisfaction for clients. However, for staff, the diversity of volunteers, and the possible identification between clients and volunteers, could also bring some issues:

> *"[…] I think that you actually want people to keep their compassion and keep their empathy. But you want them to be like that with everybody. And we are like that with everybody. But we'll have to be careful that we're not particularly just biased or favouritism based on maybe their gender, religion, their culture, especially if it's the same or similar to ours." (Charlie, staff)*

This identification, which was encouraged by the 50% recruitment policy and the emphasis on diversity, was also seen as a challenge at times as it could complicate the drawing of boundaries between service provider and client.

For other participants, it was when I asked for their views on the approachability and sensitivity of staff and volunteers, as well as their ability to help all clients, that the role of gender and identity at large became clearer. With these types of questions, I got access to an array of different perspectives on the delivery and reception of services. One volunteer shared that it could be an issue at times to help clients from their own background:

> *"Sometimes I prefer to deal with clients from other nationalities because I don't know them [outside of NRC-ARKH]" (Dylan, volunteer)*

This can be put in parallel with two client participants' statements. Among the nine clients I interviewed, seven had nothing negative to say about volunteers and staff, or the way they worked with clients. They believed staff and volunteers were helpful with everyone without exception. Two clients however shared that they felt that some volunteers were more helpful to certain clients than to others. One client participant shared they experienced that with one volunteer in particular; she said she noticed that their behaviour was different towards people of their "own background". The other client shared that the "culture" of some volunteers could influence access to services, resulting in favouring some clients over others. These two participants did not further detail their experiences, as they felt uncomfortable complaining about some volunteers to me, another volunteer.

For staff, the phenomenon of identification was both helpful at times and dangerous at others. They did not believe that identification between clients and volunteers (or staff) should be encouraged:

> *"The identification is not something I would promote […]" (Sam, staff)*

Rather, for Sam, it was something that had to be "managed". Charlie also had an ambivalent position on the question: they were wary of the difficulties it could present. At the same time, they also believed that recruiting more women volunteers could incite more women to come to the job club.

Even though participants were reluctant to tie obstacles to access to gender, or identity at large, their statements show that in fact they did make such connections. I intend to explore this contradiction in the next chapter.

Chapter 6 How does one talk about gender in a refugee support organisation?

6. 1. Introduction

As developed in Chapter 5, the data I collected revealed that the role and place of gender within NRC-ARKH was multiple and unclear. On one hand, many participants, whether clients, staff or volunteers, believed that everyone was treated equally in the charity – and more than half of the participants believed gender played no role in access to services. On the other hand, a more in-depth discussion with the participants revealed that all could identify obstacles to access to services, and that some of these obstacles could be seen from a gender perspective. Furthermore, gender was used as an eligibility criterion for certain services, which were created to recognise and correct the fact that refugee women have specific difficulties in accessing services.

This chapter intends to explore these contradictions more deeply. Drawing on participants' statements on the intangible obstacles to access, which they linked to identity, I analyse the encounter of 'the other' in a refugee support context. In order to do so, I pay particular attention to the way volunteers and staff talked about their encounter with clients, and analysed the way they talked about the difference in the field.

6. 2. The encounter of the other in a refugee support context

6. 2. 1. Difference, stereotypes and prejudice

All participants agreed with the fact that the people working in NRC-ARKH were very diverse. Most of the participants believed that this diversity meant that volunteers and staff were sensitive to a variety of issues and able to work in a multicultural environment. Morgan shared that they started to work with NRC-ARKH for its multicultural environment:

> *"I wanted to do something with other cultures, things like that. Because in Hull, you don't really tend to mix." (Morgan, volunteer)*

For staff and volunteers, the ability to work with diverse people, and varied background and identities was necessary. For some, though, it was presented almost as natural, because of their own background:

> *"I think they are sensitive to cultural differences because the volunteers they are a very much mixed group of ethnic minorities or ethnic background, or have ancestors who are of ethnic minority." (Eddie, volunteer)*

> *"I grew up [...] among people of different colours, different religions, different races […]. I don't think I personally have an issue with any of the clients. That's maybe my background." (Rory, staff)*

> *"I've been around for a lot of years. I've seen difference." (Jamie, volunteer)*

There seemed to be an assumption that everyone had experienced difference. Volunteers and staff therefore believed that they did not differentiate between clients, or at least strove not to differentiate.

Despite a very aware environment with a volunteer and staff group committed to equality, some participants recognised that nobody could be free from stereotypes:

> *"…everyone comes from different backgrounds and we all have to just make ourselves aware of that, that we hold some discriminatory views maybe that we don't even know. Maybe even just some stereotypes…" (Charlie, staff)*

Another participant admitted that he used to hold discriminatory views against gay people because of the culture he was brought up in but he learned to become more tolerant with time. For Robin, though, stereotypes were not entirely negative: being aware of these stereotypes and seeing her own views evolve with time, especially through her work, gave her an opportunity to learn:

> *"I was sure I had no [prejudicial] thoughts in my head, but then I have been surprised, I have felt surprised. So if you're really aware of what's arising inside you, and you are carefully observing that, you can learn many things about yourself." (Robin, staff)*

NRC-ARKH, like many other refugee support organisations, is constituted of altruistic people who give their time and energy to help others. It makes sense that they would have a particular sensitivity to people with a diversity of backgrounds. In the meantime, the above quotes are interesting, because they highlight that even people with the best intentions have stereotypical views of others. This has to be borne in mind when analysing access to services, because there are undeniable power relations at play in the encounter between staff/volunteers and clients. The way staff and volunteers conceive and understand clients, especially in identity terms, can have an impact on the way people access the service. This is the subject of the next section.

6. 2. 2. The way people talk about gender: a language analysis

When I analysed the data from my interviews, I noticed that participants had told me about more than just the factors that have an impact on access to services. I realised that the vocabulary some of them used to implicitly designate some groups of people was also very

informative[39]. Participants mainly talked about three groups of clients: women, men, and LGBTI people. This section describes the way participants talked about these three groups.

Women

Many of the participants talked about women as a group of clients. Even though many did not believe gender had an impact on access to services, they still talked about the obstacles that women could face. Only one volunteer, Morgan, talked about women as a general category of clients: she said she believed women-only services existed because "as women we do like to come together and talk about our problems, and we need that".

All other participants talked about women in relation to their partners, or their culture. Several participants thought that women might find it difficult to access services because their (male) partners would be against it. However, only one volunteer said she witnessed it directly, when a female client refused to sign a form because she needed to have the authorisation of her husband first. When I asked another volunteer whether he believed the service was accessible to all, he answered that it could be difficult to access for couples. However, it turned out that by couples, this participant was in fact talking about "women in Muslim marriages":

> *"They may find it difficult, more awkward for them, because they may not be used to it in their home countries. In that way." (Eddie, volunteer)*

This quote is interesting because Eddie linked being in a relationship and coming from a particular country. He compared the UK, a land of equality, with other countries where to him, women were not accustomed to accessing services of various natures on their own (i.e. without a male relative).

In that vein, several participants mentioned that the "culture" of women could influence their access to the charity. For example, two participants talked about the job club, where the majority of attendees were men. They said they could imagine that as a woman, sitting in waiting room while surrounded by twenty or twenty-five men could be intimidating:

> *"We have only one, two women every week. Even when they are with their husbands, they feel very shy. They sit with 20 males. I can imagine they can feel uncomfortable." (Dylan, volunteer)*

Dylan also added that the ones who came on their own (one or two each week) were "strong women". Charlie also thought that coming to the job club could be complicated for women,

[39] Some of the things participants shared are particularly delicate. Therefore at times I decided to not name them or say what their position was.

especially in light of the "culture of some of these women". It is from the perspective of women and their "culture" that several participants saw the women-only services as necessary:

> *"Women, as well, you have to be careful in the way you talk to them, because some women, if they cover their faces, they don't like you to look at them. […] This is why here, they make lessons for women, ESOL, on Friday, women alone. Because if you tell them to come with man, they don't, you see." (Billy, volunteer)*

What participants referred to when talking about "culture" remained unclear. One participant clearly told me that she refused to pinpoint a certain country or geographical area, because she did not want to stigmatise a group of people. During the interviews, participants mostly designated Muslim people or people from Middle Eastern countries as the clients who could have an issue accessing the services in relation to gender.

Even though I did not interview enough clients to balance staff and volunteers' statements, what one ESOL female student shared with me puts these statements in perspective. I asked her why she attended the women-only and not the mixed gender ESOL class. She said it was because the class on Friday was in the morning, while her children were at school – which was not the case for the Monday classes. She also said the following about being in a women-only environment:

> *"For me, as a person, I don't have any problem to be sitting in the same class with another man, and learn. Because even in my religion [Islam], if we learn something, it's also to be mixed as well, because it is not just one person, there is more. […] I don't have any problem as well, I go to another service and there is a man there, because if I'm going there for papers or a reason, which is that I'm learning or else, there is no problem. […] I'm not going to think about I'm a woman, he is a man there, no I'm not thinking that way." (Jules, client)*

This quote is interesting because it shows the capacity of individuals to adapt to their new environment, as opposed to presenting women as imprisoned in their culture. Among participants who talked about women, only Kim (staff) believed that even though there was a need for women-only services, it did not mean that all women had an issue being around men.

Men

The way participants talked about women clearly contrasted with their discourses about men. Indeed, it appeared that while participants had many explanations as to why women would have issues accessing NRC-ARKH's services, they did not have as many for men. Many of the participants who talked about women did not talk about men. For those who talked about men, a majority believed that they had no issues whatsoever in accessing the services or finding adequate support:

> *"Men they can come, no problem" (Dylan, volunteer)*

In that perspective, there was no point in even looking at creating services dedicated to men. One volunteer actually believed that creating men-only services, in addition to women-only services, would be "creating obvious gender difference".

Some participants however did mention that men could have issues in accessing the services or finding support. Two participants mentioned how they saw young men losing their optimism and with time their potential after they went through the immigration system:

> *"I've seen strong, twenty year old lads coming in, full of life, by the time they've gone through the immigration system, the asylum system, the guys are broken." (Rory, staff)*

> *"It saddens me on the Wednesday to see a lot of young men with a lot of potential, kind of failing to improve their life prospects." (Charlie, staff)*

Morgan (volunteer), who said that women "do like to come together and talk about [their] problems", also said that these were stereotypes that could influence the way male clients' needs were assessed. She could imagine that support services for men, especially psychological support, could be useful and beneficial to them. During my interviews, three client participants who identified as men shared that either themselves or their friends were psychologically unwell and would need further help. However, when I asked them what kind of help they would need, the three of them immediately shut down and said they were fine. While I cannot be sure why they reacted like this, I did have a feeling that I was touching upon a difficult subject. They might have believed the subject was taboo, or felt uncomfortable sharing details with me as to why they need further help in their lives. It is also worth considering that the fact that I identify as a woman, and they identified as men, might have made them reticent to talk about these issues with me.

LGBTI people

As I explained in the introduction to this thesis, my thesis project started from the will of the charity to become more inclusive, especially to LGBTI clients. I later decided to expand the subject of my thesis to talk about gender. While participants easily talked about women and their difference, the topic of LGBTI clients made a late and not very natural appearance in interviews. Indeed, no participant talked about LGBTI clients' difficulties in accessing the services directly. Most of the time, the topic arose when I asked participants what they thought about access to services for people other than women. Even though this sub-section refers to LGBTI people, and therefore to more than issues related to sexuality or sexual orientation, participants talked about issues related to sexual orientation only.

When broaching on the topic of LGBTI clients and their access to support services, I was faced with two types of reactions. Roughly, half of the participants (which includes some staff

and volunteers, and all clients) were confident in saying that they had no problem working with, or being around, people with different sexual orientations. Their statements were part of the broader "everyone is equal" discourse. The other half (staff and volunteers only) mentioned that there could be some issues but felt uncomfortable talking about it. The discomfort for some came from the fact that they knew little about it. One volunteer clearly said that she had no awareness of the issues that LGBTI asylum seekers could face, or how NRC-ARKH could support them better. The participants who knew about the topic mostly mentioned the difficulties gay people in Middle Eastern countries faced. This demonstrates the extent to which participants knew little about LGBTI refugees: in reality, according to the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association, in 2015 "state-sponsored homophobia"[40] was more frequent in the African continent (34 states out of 75 states in total) than in the Asian continent which includes the Middle East (25 states) (Carroll & Itaborahy, 2015: 28).

Others felt uncomfortable talking about LGBTI asylum seekers and refugees because they were reticent to identify sexual orientation as a marker of difference. Sam (staff) believed that there was no reason to talk about sexual orientation unless a client would actively mention it because "whether gay or straight, it actually doesn't matter." This statement deserves scrutiny, because LGBTI asylum seekers and refugees do face particular difficulties in seeking asylum and support in the UK (Bell and Hansen, 2009; Cowen et al., 2011). It is true that ideally, sexual orientation *should not* matter in the way services are delivered in the charity. However, attesting that sexual orientation *does not* matter runs the risk of invisibilising this client group's specific situation in the UK asylum system. A couple of participants however did mention that NRC-ARKH should support LGBTI clients, they also shared that they found difficult to assess the need for such support:

> *"It's hard for us to create a service for people we don't know." (Kim, staff)*

Indeed, they knew theoretically that LGBTI refugees and asylum seekers may face specific difficulties in the UK asylum system, through research or the media, but on the ground, in their day-to-day work, they did not have experience working with LGBTI clients:

> *"I read a lot in media or in case studies… they are out there and we were expecting a lot more. […] Nothing in NRC has come up… in Hull, I don't know any." (Rory, staff)*

When I paid more attention to the vocabulary some staff and volunteers used when talking about not only LGBTI clients, but also LGBTI people in general, I realised that there was little awareness on the subject. In particular, the fact that all participants talked about issues related

[40] When same-sex sexual acts are made illegal.

to sexual orientation, and none about issues related to gender identity, is revealing. Sexual orientation was also not always well understood: one participant talked about people who cannot "practice being gay" in their country, while another said that there were no "gays" in the Middle East, but maybe "bisexuals", because "everyone there is married".

Despite the lack of knowledge of this client group, the management was clearly in favour of exploring ways to support LGBTI clients, including looking for funding opportunities in that respect. In the meantime, their intentions seemed to be fraught with dilemmas:

> *"If we were to set up […] a [support] group, you know, you're singling them out. You're creating a group that no one else can join. Because you know, unless you are gay or transgender, you can't attend, […] It is difficult. And I think it always will be, to be honest." (Kim, staff)*

Interestingly, one volunteer clearly stated that a support group for LGBTI asylum seekers and refugees was necessary. He saw a separate group not as a way to reinforce difference but rather as a way to recognise the specific struggles that LGBTI people, and in particular LGBTI asylum seekers and refugees, still face in the UK. While he was very motivated to create such group, he also shared that it was a long process, because of the lack of knowledge and resources for the project.

6. 3. The translation of equality discourses: equality for those who are visible?

6. 3. 1. Pushing for organisational change: the limits of the bottom-up approach

As explained in the beginning of this thesis, the goal of this research project was two-fold. On one hand, the goal was to explore how the stakeholders of a refugee support community, such as NRC-ARKH, understood gender and its role in the services provided. On the other hand, this research was meant to help organisational change and make the charity more inclusive. Hence, in my interviews, I asked participants where they thought the impulse for organisational change should come from. What I found is that all the clients who participated answered that the management were the ones who should push for such change, both in ameliorating existing services or creating new ones. As I developed earlier in Chapter 4, this could be explained by the fact that client participants felt uncomfortable complaining about a service that is vital to them and that they were getting for free. Still, several expressed their trust in the management's ability to respond to clients' needs:

> *"If there is something missing, they should… they know, if there is something that people need" (Andrea, client)*

A few volunteers also thought that it was the management's role to investigate and evaluate what was needed on the ground and find an adequate response to it. They believed that they were attentive to clients' suggestions and expressed needs. Only one volunteer expressly said that change should come from the clients and not from management if NRC-ARKH wanted to offer services that truly addressed the need on the ground.

This should be put in parallel with participants' views and discourses on gender described above. Indeed, these statements do not only reflect people's personal visions of certain groups of clients. When taken within a broader context, and analysed within the net of power relations they are voiced within, these sentences take another dimension. They may also inform us about how different people's agency is conceived by the people who help them. They tell us about who can express their need for support, who is there to hear them, and to what extent they can hear them. Stereotypes are powerful. While they should not govern the way refugee support charities work, this does not mean people in these organisations should not talk about them. To what extent can the charity help women access services if volunteers and staff conceive them as dependent on their partners' decisions, or imprisoned by their culture? How can one see men's need for psychological support when one believes that they are always vocal in expressing what they need? How can the charity help LGBTI people in the asylum system if staff and volunteers expect them to identify themselves and in the meantime are reluctant, indifferent or oblivious to the need to identify difference? The next section explores these questions.

6. 3. 2. Beyond refugee women? Equality, visibility, and feminist dilemmas

When I analysed the data coming from my interviews, I soon realised that participants had no difficulty talking about women and their particular needs. If a couple of participants evoked that men could also need support, all participants who talked about women reiterated the 'women as victims' or 'women have specific needs' tropes uncritically. Here, I do not intend to question the hard work that feminists have done in the past fifty years to make states, international organisations and non-governmental organisations aware that not all refugees were men. Nor do I want to question the fact that women do suffer specific harms in conflict and displacement and may need specific attention for those in charge of their protection. Rather, I am interested in the practices on the ground that lead to the identification of those who have particular needs, and those who do not. What is the difference between women and LGBTI refugees, for instance? Both groups face specific struggles in the asylum system. Both suffer from the heteronormativity of the refugee protection model, in different ways. However, today, in a

refugee support organisation, staff have no problem affirming that women need help but feel particularly reluctant to affirm that LGBTI refugees need help also.

So why do people working in NRC-ARKH feel confident in affirming refugee women's need for special care? Women are visible[41]. At least, from a feminist perspective, most people think they are visually identifiable. When I conducted fieldwork, I was in charge of the screening process for the advice drop-in. In order to sign people in, I had to ask them a few details in order for their adviser to find their file and retrieve their details. I realised that while I would ask clearly their name, address, nationality, language and what their problem was, I did not ask them what their gender was – nor would my colleagues. I would just write M for male or F for female (the only two options available) in the corresponding box. When I started to ask clients what their gender was, many were surprised, but no one reacted strongly to the question. This was interesting to me, as it clearly showed how one could get used to gender people simply by looking at them. It is also by looking at the people who attend the job club that two participants were able to tell me that the majority of attendees were men. For them, the absence of women was an issue and should be solved, by attending to the needs of female clients.

On the contrary to women, LGBTI people are not always readily visible. The difference between men and women is at the heart of many societies, including the UK. The difference and sometimes even the existence of LGBTI people in the UK remains questioned by a fraction of the UK population, despite progress in terms of civil rights, for example. If people in the charity were to identify LGBTI clients the way they identify female clients, they would probably rely on a series of stereotypes that not only can be hurtful, but also not apply to LGBTI people coming from other parts of the world. NRC-ARKH's management was aware of the situation of LGBTI refugees and asylum seekers in the UK, willing to support them but did not know where to start. They felt that creating a support group would be "singling them out" and reaffirming their difference. They were hoping that if there were LGBTI people who needed help in Hull, they would express their needs to NRC-ARKH and ask for more support. There was an expectation that LGBTI people would make themselves visible. From my interviews, I also realised that the needs of men were often assessed through their visibility. For several volunteers, the fact that men were visibly present in the charity and benefiting from support was

[41] It should be noted that the visibility does not stop at issues of gender. While the limited scope of this thesis did not allow me to explore other issues, I still want to underline the fact other characteristics that are supposed to be protected by the Equality Act were barely talked about by participants. Age, for instance, was never mentioned. Disability is an interesting case. A few participants mentioned that with the move to the new building, there was now a wheelchair access, which was seen as positive. In the meantime, only one participant talked about disability in a broader sense than people with physical (and therefore visible) disabilities. She explained how she realised how little awareness there was about mental health and how something should be done about it - something I could relate to as a volunteer.

enough to claim that they benefited from an equal service. There was also an assumption that, were men to need further support, they would make themselves heard.

Effectively there was, from volunteers and several staff, a general expectation that clients would complain if they needed to, or make suggestions if they wanted to. This notion is compromised by the fact that the clients I talked to said that they felt uncomfortable saying anything about the service, because it was important to them and they got it for free. This idea is also compromised by the fact that staff and volunteers did not conceive of each client group as having the same amount of agency: men, LGBTI people would come up, and say something if they needed to, while women were seen as unable to express their own needs directly. While the absence of women from the generic services rang a bell for staff, and led to the creation of services dedicated to them, the absence of LGBTI people from the services failed to generate the same response and simply created more dilemmas. It seems to me that in an era where everyone is meant to be equal, or supported equally, the burden of proving there is a need for specific services has shifted from the providers to the clients (except for women). This is problematic as it overlooks the fact that the said people, who clearly would benefit from extra support, do not chose to render themselves invisible, but are invisibilised by the asylum system, in some instances asylum support services – and arguably, by the way those who work in these services represent them.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

More than sixty years ago, faced with the refugee crisis induced by the Second World War, the international community made a commitment to protect those who escaped persecution. The 1951 Refugee Convention provided a legal framework for the protection of all refugees. It soon became clear, however, that the 1951 Convention was not adequate to protect all refugees: rather, it was based on the model of a heterosexual male political refugee. Since the 1980s, feminists and women's rights activists have relentlessly fought at the international level for states and non-governmental actors to take refugee women into consideration. Today, the needs of refugee women are better understood and they are considerably higher on the international agenda; women remain the object of specific attention and care. Beyond refugee women, key actors in the field have also integrated the concept of gender, understood mostly from a social constructivist perspective, to highlight issues of gender inequality in refugee protection. In the UK, the integration of gender in the field of refugee protection has also taken place in the last two decades.

It is in this context that I intended, with this thesis, to explore and analyse access to support services for refugees and asylum seekers in the UK from a gender perspective. I focused my study on a local refugee support organisation in the North of England, called NRC-ARKH (Northern Refugee Centre – Asylum Seekers and Refugees of Kingston-upon-Hull). In Chapter 3, I described my methodology, which mobilised insights from feminist and postcolonial thought, as well as qualitative research methods. I looked at the place of gender within the work of this charity. I interviewed staff, volunteers and clients in order to explore whether gender had an impact in the way services were provided or received. As a volunteer myself, I also had the opportunity to observe and reflect on the practices of the organisation, especially equality practices. In the present chapter, I come back on the key elements I have found and learned through this research project.

7. 1. Talking about gender: the main findings

When I decided to undertake fieldwork within a refugee support organisation in the UK, I was aware of the evolution of the refugee protection field from the perspective of gender. One thing I did not realise until I undertook this research, however, is the specificity of the UK context when it comes to talking about gender. All around Europe, countries are closing their borders and rejecting refugees more and more. The UK is an example of this growing European trend: a difficult political climate, with politicians who use derogatory terms to talk about refugees, tabloids who talk about them in even worse terms, and ever-stricter immigration and

asylum rules. The worse the political climate gets, the more non-governmental organisations such as NRC-ARKH have an essential purpose: their work is to ensure that asylum seekers, refugees and migrants' rights and dignity are respected and safeguarded. At the same time, these organisations also face a shortage of funding. Charitable organisations find themselves in competition for funding opportunities, and find it more and more difficult to carry on with their work without the appropriate resources. In the competition for resources, organisations also have to prove they are equitable service providers. Indeed, in the UK, equality is an obligation for charities: they are bound by the 2010 Equality Act, which prohibits discrimination. One of NRC-ARKH's funders required that volunteers and staff hand out 'diversity forms' to clients, which ask them about different aspects of their social identity: gender, age, ethnicity, disability, and sexual orientation. This was meant to assess whether they welcome a diverse group of people and evidence the provision of an equitable service.

During my interviews, I realised that many staff and volunteers believed that in a field where people help other people, nobody treats clients unfairly. I was surprised by the fact that many participants, including clients, told me "everyone was equal" in the charity. From the perspective of clients, I realised how difficult it was to get feedback from them. Many felt they had no legitimacy to complain or even comment on a service that was so important to them and which they could obtain for free. From the staff and volunteers' perspective, this could be explained by the fact that it is a field where people are here to do good – and my questions about whether everyone can have access to the charity at times appeared as an accusation.

It was in this complex context that I conducted my research. Gender definitely has its place in the refugee protection field but its meaning remains unclear: is talking about women talking about gender? Or is it talking about other people too? Is talking about gender useful when talking about difference and diversity? Or has it become a rhetorical tool that hides the systemic issues at the root of the inequalities in the field? My study offered a perspective on these questions by talking about gender with the people directly involved in refugee protection at a local level. It gave insights on what people think matters in access to services for them, but also on the impact of gender equality discourses on the way people provide services or receive services.

In Chapter 5, I explored the place of gender in NRC-ARKH's services. The charity was clearly committed to support refugee women: it is a signatory of two charters on the rights of refugee women. This commitment was also reflected in its services, as gender served as an eligibility criterion for three services dedicated to women. I also sought to go beyond this, not only by looking at how visible gender was in the organisation of services, but also what it meant. Women as a uniform category was used across the board, but it turned out it designated different situations. The meaning of gender was complex and multiple. In the meantime, when I asked

participants whether they believed gender played a role in access to services, they were almost unanimous: gender did not play a role in access to services, whatsoever. This was surprising to me, as the women-only services were created based on research that shows that women have difficulties having access to refugee status and support services in general. However, when I asked what participants thought had an impact on access, it turned out that gender was not absent: simply, it was not explicitly named. There was a reluctance to tie some issues to gender, even though it was seen as having an influence. Participants talked about two types of obstacles to access. On one hand, there were practical obstacles, such as geographical location, opening times, childcare and language. They were said to be particularly challenging for women, especially if they had children, as they had to organise their day in accordance with their children's schedule. The limited opening times and the lack of childcare were seen as making it more difficult for women to come to the charity. On the other hand, there were more intangible obstacles, which were related to the encounter of people in the charity. The people working or volunteering with NRC-ARKH come from different and diverse backgrounds, and are supposed to be open and sensitive to diverse people. The fact that many came from the same communities as clients was regarded as positive as they brought "experience and expertise." It was also challenging. The possible identification that could occur between staff and volunteers on one hand, and clients, on the other, could lead to potential bias and therefore had to be "managed." As participants told me about this phenomenon of identification and its challenges, I wanted to go further and analyse this encounter between the helpers and the helped.

In that perspective, I used Chapter 6 not, necessarily, to make sense of participants' contradictions, but rather to explore them. I sought to analyse the way people talked about and conceived difference. My argument is that in an age where everyone is supposed to be equal and equally treated, stereotypes and prejudice, which can be harmful, are not talked about anymore, and this is where a danger lies. Indeed, in the refugee support field, power relations between the helpers and the helped are strong. The way volunteers and staff conceive of those they help can have an impact on who can access services. In order to support my argument, I analysed the way participants talked about women, men and LGBTI people – the three groups of clients that they identified themselves. It showed that beyond personal views, volunteers and staff were framing each group's agency. Volunteers and staff were willing to recognise the issues that women face in accessing the services but were much more reluctant to recognise those faced by LGBTI people. This was despite the fact that there is now a solid base of evidences that LGBTI refugees and asylum seekers need particular forms of support and help. This led me to ask myself the following question: Why are women still an exception in the universal framework of support but not other groups of refugees? It appeared to me that in NRC-ARKH there was an expectation

that people who need help should be able to say so. In reality, this means that equality relies now on visibility. This is highly problematic for this field, as people are already marginalised and highly invisible.

7. 2. Limitations

While I learned much in the process of this research, it is also important to identify its limitations. The fact that I conducted this research project as my Master's thesis limited the amount of people I was able to talk to. Even though the participants sample was varied, I recognise it would have been useful to conduct more interviews, especially with clients. At the same time, it is worth stressing that my initial recruitment strategy – putting posters on the walls of the charity to incite people to give feedback on the service – failed completely. I eventually recruited all client participants by approaching them personally. In the end, I interviewed more clients than volunteers or staff, but quantitatively speaking I obtained more information from the latter than the former. This issue can be explained by the fact that there were power relations at play in the field where I conducted research. At the time of the field research, I was an adviser myself and I used this position to get access to the participants. This brought up issues when I interviewed clients that I had personally helped or advised in the context of my work: I was not sure whether they would feel comfortable raising issues about the service they received with me in my adviser role. Furthermore, I did notice that I obtained more information from participants with whom I had no prior working relationship before. The participants I recruited through the ESOL classes, in which I did not take part as a volunteer, shared much more with me in their interviews than the ones I had helped in my capacity as an adviser. The impact that my own social location and identity could have had on my data is difficult to grasp, but it is also worth considering. It is possible that the fact that I was a woman influenced how comfortable the three clients who identified as men, who I mentioned in Chapter 6, were to tell me more about the psychological difficulties they or their male friends were facing.

When I started this research project, I consciously decided to use my dual role as volunteer and researcher to carry this research. It both created difficulties and provided richness to my project. I realised the unavoidable limitations that arise from talking to marginalised people – in my case asylum seekers and refugees – within an organisation that helps and supports them. I had to reassure several client participants about their anonymity, as some were worried that talking to me could create problems for them in the charity or even with the Home Office. It is also important to stress that the limitations in talking about access to services with clients who could access the service. Throughout my interviews with staff and clients, it appeared that some people, or groups of people, seemed to stop coming to the charity. For example, Jules

explained to me how she stopped coming to the advice drop-in because her English was not good enough and none of the volunteers or staff spoke her language. This suggests that there are individuals who might need refugee support services but find themselves unable to access them. The issues raised by the absence of certain clients (either potential clients who did not come, or clients who stopped coming) are as significant as the issues raised by the clients who use the charity's services. The interview with Jules also highlighted the importance of interviewing clients who do not speak English – the fact that I could only interview one non-English-speaking client is also a limitation.

Beyond these limitations, it is worth stressing that the fact that I did not focus this study on clients only, but also talked to staff and volunteers, offered a different perspective on the service provided. I also realise now that had I not interviewed them, half of this thesis would not exist. While my dual role as a researcher-adviser was challenging when interviewing some clients, it seemed to facilitate my conversations with staff and volunteers, especially because we had a shared experience of providing services to clients. I remain however aware that this does not guarantee that what the staff and volunteers shared with me was more genuine than what the clients told me.

7. 3. Significance and recommendations

Let's talk about gender in refugee support organisations

This project emerged from the desire of NRC-ARKH to become more inclusive to LGBTI asylum seekers and refugees. When I framed this research project, I however decided to take a broader perspective on equality in the charity and see what subjects would present themselves. What stakeholders say matters in access to services? I was at first hesitant to reframe the research project in this way because I was afraid some particular issues would disappear in the conversation. Doing so confirmed my initial doubts: LGBTI asylum seekers and refugees were rarely talked about. Many participants broached on the subject when I asked them what they thought about access to services for clients other than women. This limitation shed light on other important issues. It revealed, for instance, the contradictory difficulty to talk about equality and difference in the age of equality and diversity. It shows how complicated it is to talk about these issues by mobilising generic discourses about equality. The findings of this study suggest that in order to find out about inequality and difference, people have to talk clearly about it. Discourses of equality and diversity may conceal differences and make it more difficult to talk about them.

As this research project was conducted within NRC-ARKH, I intend to draw on it to offer separate and specific recommendations to its management. However, some insights could

also be useful for other practitioners in the refugee support sector, whether statutory or voluntary, and especially in the UK. They are therefore worth developing in this conclusion. While it is assumed that people who provide support services to refugees and asylum seekers have good intentions and are generally aware of difference and inequality issues, this study also shows that they also hold their own prejudices. In a context where equality becomes an obligation, the risk is that people will affirm that they treat everyone equally – while in reality they might still use stereotypes to interact with clients.

In light of these findings, refugee support services providers might find fruitful to start conversations about difference and (in)equality, as well as train their personnel on specific issues. Gender training, in particular, would be useful. This research project also confirmed that despite the ubiquity of the concept of gender in literature about refugee protection, including the protection guidelines and recommendations from and for international and national actors, the meaning of gender in the refugee support field is unclear. In this study, every single participant defined gender in a different way. Many confused gender and sexual orientation, or talked about LGBTI people in stereotypical ways. Training service providers, whether volunteers or staff, on issues of gender and sexual orientation is necessary. Such training should focus on the needs of LGBTI asylum seekers and refugees, drawing on the recent reports published in the UK about their particular vulnerability in the asylum system (Bell and Hansen, 2009; Cowen et al., 2011). The fact that several staff and volunteers talked about female clients as having little if any agency, or defined them through their male counterparts, is problematic, especially in light of the power relations at play in the field. People who work in the refugee support sector act as gatekeepers to safety and protection (Bhabha, 2002); clients rely on the services provided to remain safe in the country. It highlights the need for gender training that includes the needs of refugee women but also insists on avoiding cultural relativism and essentialisation.

This research project raised other issues that can be useful to service providers. The fact that client participants felt uncomfortable complaining about the services provided by NRC-ARKH, despite the existence of a complaint mechanism, is of particular significance. Added to this issue is the fact that no client approached me to participate in the study after I put the call for participants on the walls of the charity. This suggests that charities might have to reconceive their feedback mechanisms. This is especially important for organisations who rely on clients' feedback to inspire and induce organisational change: in this study, several staff and volunteers relied on the fact that there were no complaints about the service to then state that there were no differences in accessing the services provided by the charity. Another thing to take into account, especially for voluntary organisations, is the importance of providing training and support to volunteers. Regular volunteer meetings are important to allow volunteers to share

their experiences and their difficulties in their work, especially in the changing political and financial context. Volunteers may feel a lot of pressure when working in a field that definitely needs volunteers but lacks resources and funding to support them fully. The advice sector in general, and in refugee protection in particular, relies on volunteers. Providing them with appropriate support is key to the survival of the organisations they volunteer with.

Diversity monitoring: recommendations for support organisations, funders and policy makers

While diversity monitoring can be seen as positive, as it illustrates the will of organisations to provide an equal service to a great variety of people, this study also suggests that it can create some issues as well. Diversity monitoring forms are inherently limited. In the specific case of NRC-ARKH, these forms served to count the number of people who came to the charity, according to certain characteristics, but did not tell anything about whether clients were served equally compared to others or if their problem was solved. It gave an idea of who was able to come to the charity, but not of who was not. The absence of certain groups of clients in the charity, though, is as important, because those who do not come might be the ones for whom an organisational change is necessary. Finally, the identity categories used in the forms can have an impact on the information collected. In NRC-ARKH, for instance, the answer to "what is your sexual orientation" could only be "heterosexual", "LGBT/other" (a reductive category) or "prefer not to say". The answer to "gender" could only be "male" or "female", which obstructs the possibility of people to identify outside the gender binary. In NRC-ARKH, these forms were also problematic for those who had to distribute them. Staff and volunteers did not think they were useful for their work in any way. They asked clients to fill them to please funders.

In that perspective, rather than imposing diversity monitoring forms, funders should write them in collaboration with those who will have to disseminate them to their clients. It would be useful, prior to putting diversity monitoring mechanisms in place, to discuss with stakeholders what kind of information they are trying to collect and what it is for. Finally, diversity monitoring forms should not be the only way in which issues of difference and (in)equality in access to services are discussed. As explained above, this study suggests that it remains necessary to talk about these issues with service providers and conduct gender training in order to ensure equal access and service provision. It should not be clients' responsibility to demonstrate or prove whether the service is equitable. Rather, it should be the service provider's responsibility to take the necessary action to make it equitable. These recommendations are also

relevant to policy makers. The necessity of non-discrimination imposed by law cannot be considered as sufficient to solve inequality issues.

Recommendations for future research

The findings of this research project might hold interest for academics concerned with gender perspectives on refugee protection and human rights protection at large. The ubiquity of the concept of gender in these fields, and its presence in literature and in protection guidelines (such as the UNHCR guidelines on refugee protection, for example), can also be observed at a UK level. In the meantime, this study suggests that the UK context, when it comes to talking about gender, difference and equality, is marked by a 'diversity and equality' age. Research on the specific contexts in which gender equality discourses are integrated in the refugee protection field in other countries would be of particular interest. Further study on the impact of equality and diversity discourses on the refugee protection field, looking at the local and the national level, would also be important. This study focused on refugee support services from an intersectional gender perspective. However, the limited scope of this Master's thesis did not allow looking in more detail at the way other differences, such as disability for instance, were conceived in the provision of services. This would also be a promising area of research.

The issues that I encountered in the process of framing the research project and conducting field research can also be of interest for other researchers. It can be informative for research projects centred on the lives and experiences of marginalised people, such as asylum seekers and refugees. The fact that many participants, including clients, said they believed everyone was equal or treated equally in the charity would not have made sense if I had not paid attention to the broader context in which our conversation took place, and to the power relations at play between them and myself – both as a researcher and a volunteer. I was able to understand these statements better when I looked at equality and diversity discourses that were taking place within the charity and the sector but also within the country at large. While talking to marginalised individuals remains important and insightful for social research, I believe researchers should remember to put in relation macro and micro levels in their study.

7. 4. Concluding remarks

Gender is a useful concept: it has enabled many positive changes in the refugee protection field. Women have been brought out of the dark and many of them have been able to benefit from adequate protection. It also created dilemmas and difficulties. As a gender studies student, I encountered many of these dilemmas myself. My involvement in the 'LGBT group', which sought to create a support group for LGBTI asylum seekers and refugees, raised many

questions. I felt conflicted about creating another group with particular needs and, in the meantime, I knew from the literature I read that there was something which needed to be done. From a feminist perspective, the use of the concept of gender in refugee protection is fraught with dilemmas: can we, as feminists, keep on focusing on refugee women in the field, and in the meantime recognise the need for specific protection of other groups of refugees, such as LGBTI people? Can we question the entire refugee protection framework, which is heteronormative, and still protect those who are facing particular difficulties, such as refugee women? As Edwards asserts, "[t]he real issue for feminist scholars is whether t[he] reorientation from sex to gender damages or advances equality goals […]" (Edwards, 2010: 41). Nevertheless, I also believe, together with Edwards, that if gender is not used as a rhetorical tool, but as an analytical tool, it can bring many things to light. In this project, a feminist perspective on the work of the charity highlighted the importance of talking to those in charge of implementing equality policies. If the refugee protection field wants to make sure every asylum seeker and refugee is assisted in an appropriate and equitable way, they also need to see how they are conceived by those who help them. Feminists have long known that there is no such thing as neutral frameworks because, more often than not, they both embody and disguise a male bias. In this research project, I realised that equality statements may not always help realising equality, but may rather, on the contrary, conceal the inequalities at play in the field.

If anything, this research shows not who has access to services and on which basis. It shows who is *seen* as having access to services. Who, among the group of refugees and asylum seekers, deserves special attention. Who is framed as able to ask for this specific help, were they to need it, and who is framed as not able to. It underlines the fact that feminism is still necessary, to keep questioning the way people conceive gender and construct difference. It highlights the constant need to find a balance between recognising difference and oppression and to not confine entire groups of people to one identity/needs box. It reminds us that the equality of those visible is fraught with privileges.

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Appendix - Diversity monitoring form[42]

Diversity monitoring information

Date:

The [illegible] project is committed to valuing diversity and promoting equality.

We encourage and welcome participation from people from all backgrounds regardless of age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion or belief, sex or sexual orientation.

In order to achieve these aims we need to know about the diversity of people who participate in this project. Please help us by providing the following information.

All information will be treated confidentially.

Gender			
Male		Female	

Age					
15 - 19 years		20 - 24 years		25 - 34 years	
35 - 44 years		45 - 54 years		55 - 64 years	
65 - 74 years		75 - 84years		85 + years	

Ethnic background					
White /White British		**Black /Black UK**		**Asian / Asian UK**	
UK		Black - African		Indian	
Irish		Black - Caribbean		Pakistani	
Gypsy/ Irish Traveller		Black - Other		Bangladeshi	
White - Other		Other ethnicity		Chinese	
Mixed ethnic background		Arab		Other Asian	

Disability: Do you consider yourself to be a disabled person?			
Not disabled		Disabled	

Religion or Belief					
No religion		Christian		Buddhist	
Hindu		Jewish		Muslim	
Sikh		Other religion		Prefer not to say	

Sexual orientation					
Heterosexual		LGBT / Other		Prefer not to say	

[42] The name of the funder was removed from the from as they did not allow me to use their name in this dissertation.