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A new life in Norway: The adaptation experiences of unaccompanied refugee minor girls

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A B S T R A C T

Introduction: In recent times, record numbers of unaccompanied refugee minors (URMs) have settled in Norway. Many researchers have investigated the myriad challenges URMs face when settling in the countries of refuge, but fewer have focused on the strategies they use and resources they draw upon. Moreover, the dominant focus is on unaccompanied minor boys' experiences because they are overrepresented in this group. Unaccompanied minor girls are therefore less visible within URM research. The aim of our study was to explore the experiences of URM girls' adaptation to life in Norway focusing on their strengths, and to examine the social and structural factors that influence settlement.

Method: This was a qualitative study and data was collected by conducting narrative interviews with six girls/young women aged between 15 and 20, who came to Norway as unaccompanied refugee minors. We applied a resource-based approach by using resilience and acculturation as our analytical framework.

Findings: Participants in our study had adapted well to their new lives in Norway, based on academic, social and linguistic success. They exhibited strengths through actively gaining skills and building networks to help them to adapt to a new life in Norway. However, some of them experienced tension between the need to belong, which meant adopting an assimilation acculturation strategy and the need to hold onto their own cultural identity, an integration strategy.

Conclusion: URM girls/ young women may have a greater need for emotional connection and support from female caregivers during the settlement. It is important that more research is done that highlights the gender dimension of URMs' girls/ young women's experiences during settlement to make sure that their needs are adequately catered for.

1. Introduction

Settlement in a new country can be a challenging process for refugees in general, and for unaccompanied minors in particular. Minors face new laws, customs, education systems, cultural codes, etc., all without the support of parents or extended family (Kohli, 2011; Skårdalsmo & Harnischfeger, 2017). Having fled their home countries and endured challenging and traumatic experiences, on reaching safe havens, their relief may be short lived as they begin to grapple with the realities of settling in unfamiliar environments. Many researchers have investigated the myriad challenges that unaccompanied refugee minors (URMs) face when settling in host countries, but fewer have focused on the strategies they use and resources they draw upon (Wernesjö, 2012). Moreover, the dominant focus is on unaccompanied minor boys' experiences because they are overrepresented in this group (Herz & Lalander, 2017). Unaccompanied minor girls are less visible within URM research and it is important to ascertain whether there are any gender differences that influence settlement in order to provide appropriate support and services. The aim of our research is to explore the experiences of URM girls' adaptation to life in Norway focusing on their strengths, and to examine the social and structural factors that influence settlement. Thus we address the following research question: What

strengths and resources do URM girls draw upon during adaptation to life in Norway and how does the socio-structural environment facilitate or hinder adaptation?

1.1. Unaccompanied refugee minors in Norway

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2016), 98 400 children and young people applied for asylum as unaccompanied refugee minors worldwide in 2015. This was the highest number ever-recorded (Dalgard, 2017). The majority were from conflict ridden countries such as Afghanistan, Eritrea, Syria and Somalia (UNICEF, 2016). In Norway, record numbers of URMs were settled between 1996 and 2017: 25 percent of these between 2015 and 2017 (Dalgard, 2017; Norwegian Directorate for Children, Family and Youth Affairs, 2017).

The term unaccompanied asylum seeking minors (UAMs) is used to describe children and adolescents who apply for asylum on their own, and are under 18 years of age. When they are granted asylum, they are referred to as unaccompanied refugee minors (URMs) (Norwegian Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 2011). In this article, we will use the term unaccompanied refugee minors (URMs) as our focus is on those with the right to remain.

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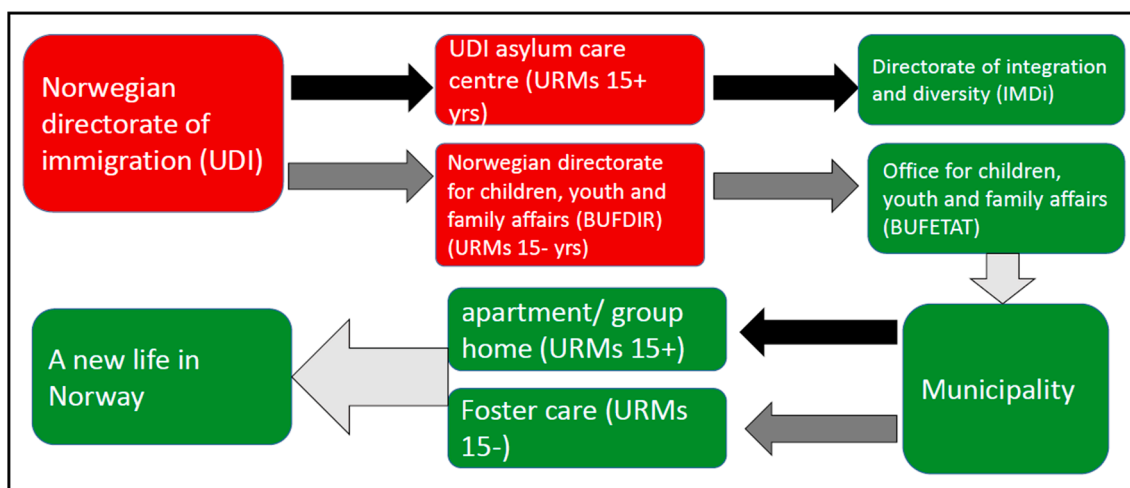


Fig. 1. Settlement pathways for URMs according to age group.

1.2. Immigration pathways for unaccompanied minors in the Norwegian system

Pathways to settlement impact how well and how quickly URMs settle and adapt to life in their host country. Delays in, and quality of care during the asylum process can lead to poorer outcomes in health and wellbeing. URMs are a diverse group of children and young people from a variety of backgrounds with different experiences and needs and this should be taken into consideration during their settlement (Horgan & Ni Raghallaigh, 2017; Kauhanen & Kaukko, 2020). In Norway once URMs are granted permission to remain, settlement pathways are differentiated according to age (see Fig. 1). Most URMs under the age of 15 get their asylum applications approved. However, due to the EU agreement with Turkey, stricter border controls in European countries and the current government's increasingly restrictive asylum policy, in recent years, the number of approved applications for UAMs over 15 years of age in Norway has declined (Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (BUFDIR), 2017; Lidén, Gording-Stand & Eide, 2017).

The Immigration Directorate (UDI) processes all asylum applications in Norway. Originally all UAMs went through the same asylum seeking system as adults. However, Norway revised this practice in 2008 in accordance with the specification in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) article 22 that refugee children have the same human rights and protection needs as other vulnerable children (Lidén et al., 2017: 7). The care of UAMs younger than 15 years was transferred to the Child Welfare System and to special care centers run by BUFDIR. The centers provide care and support similar to other institutions under the Norwegian child welfare system with regard to quality standards, staff qualifications, the rights of the children, use of coercive measures and regular supervision by the county governor (Lidén et al., 2017: 7). However, minors aged 15–18 years are, like adults, placed under the care of UDI but housed in specialized UAM reception centres or in separate units in ordinary reception centres for adults and families. The quality of care and living conditions in these centres has been found inadequate compared to that provided by the Child welfare system (Lidén et al., 2017).

Once granted asylum the care of younger minors continues under the jurisdiction of BUFDIR but the responsibility of placement in municipalities is with the Office for Children Youth and Family Affairs (Bufetat) (see Fig. 1). Older minors (again similar to adults) are transferred to the Directorate of Integration and Diversity (IMDi). All URMs are supposed to be settled within three months, although this is not always the case. Care during settlement is also differentiated; in accordance with the child welfare rules all URMs are assessed and

depending on their needs, younger URMs are placed in well-supported group homes with 24-hour care, municipal foster care homes, foster care with relatives or in institutional care (Myhrer & Stenerud, 2011; Skårdalsmo & Harnischfeger, 2017). Older URMs are allocated to municipalities and housed in bedsits, shared private or municipal housing, with a host family or if necessary, in institutional care (IMDi, 2018). Research has shown that, unlike children under the care of the Child Welfare system, most young people in this age group live in group homes and there are few guidelines on how these are run (Svendsen & Berg, 2020). This results in a broad variation regarding size of accommodation, location, number of professional caregivers providing support and the frequency of this support, the caregivers' professional qualifications, and the quality of care and support. Most of these group homes have staff that work 24 h shifts, (Svendsen & Berg, 2020) but this is dependent on the municipality and the perceived needs of the URMs. It is important to note that URMs in this age group (15+) are the only group of looked after children in Norway not under the care of the Child Welfare system (Lidén et al., 2017). In contrast to the Norwegian situation where the two tier situation still exists for URMs, Horgan and Ni Raghallaigh (2019) describe how the situation for the care of URMs in Ireland changed. Previously the majority of URMs were treated differently from Irish children in care, and housed in hostels as an emergency solution without an allocated social worker or a care plan. After criticism and the highlighting of how this type of the care was continuing to put the children at risk, the hostels were closed and the UAMs were provided with the same range of care options as Irish children. Similar to Norway, younger URMs (under 12 years) are placed in foster care, and older URMs in supported lodging with 24 h care or residential care. In Ireland however the situation for older URMs is a short term solution as the intention is for all children and young people to be placed with families (Horgan & Ni Raghallaigh, 2019).

The experiences of URMs settled in Norway are similar to those of URMs settled in Nordic countries, such as Finland and Sweden with well organised systems providing secure housing and professional care. Although aspects of the care and services provided to older URMs in Norway have come under criticism, their situation is far more stable than the experience of URMs in countries such as the United Kingdom (Gilbert, Parton and Skivenes, 2011); Here there is similar differentiation of treatment where younger URMs can be put into foster or institutional care, and older URMs often end up in inadequate housing arrangements such as hotels, homeless hostels and bed and breakfasts (Hopkins & Hill, 2010). In countries like Greece, Romania, Czech Republic, Austria, France, Germany and Italy, structured care for URMs is either very limited or fragmented (Horgan & Ni Raghallaigh, 2019). In contrast, URMs settled in Norway have secure accommodation, their

basic needs for safety, shelter, education, health and nutrition are met. However, [Kauhanen & Kaukko \(2020:1\)](#) have highlighted that it is not enough to only meet the practical basic needs of URMs, but that other essential needs such as the need for stability, the need for caring and family like relationships and the need to be heard and seen as unique persons are also important. In Norway and other host countries, these needs may not be consistently met, especially with regard to older URMs, and the quality of care may be more dependent on professional caregivers' personalities and individual traits than on system or institutional guidelines and policies ([Skårdalsmo & Harnischfeger, 2017](#)).

1.3. Research on unaccompanied minor girls

The care of unaccompanied refugee minors is a theme that engenders debate and engagement both politically and socially. Much research has been conducted on the experiences and situation of unaccompanied minors, but the gender dimension is little discussed and there is limited research on the situation of URM girls. The majority of UAMs are boys and this may be due to the social construction of gender in some cultures where boys are viewed as better able to survive the risky journey alone and adapt quicker to the new environment ([Bhabha & Crook, 2007](#); [Øien, 2010](#)). Girls may be perceived as more vulnerable to abuse and needing protection. Moreover, boys are more often directly involved in conflict situations related to migration-triggering conditions at the macro level; for example, military service and participation in armed conflicts ([Øien, 2010](#)). Whereas girls often flee due to migration-triggering conditions at the micro level, such as fear of child marriage, and/or sexual abuse ([Øien, 2010](#)). Thus URM research either has a general focus without examining any gender related dimensions or only includes boys; if girls are included they are typically few. In the limited number of studies from a variety of countries (Norway, USA, Ireland, Sweden, Netherlands, UK) we found that explored URMs' lived experiences in light of positive adaptation, boys were over-represented. In research by [Oppedal et al. \(2011\)](#), [Rana et al. \(2011\)](#), [Seglem et al. \(2014\)](#), [Oppedal and Idsoe \(2015\)](#), [Quin et al. \(2015\)](#) and [Skårdalsmo and Harnischfeger \(2017\)](#), [Daniel, Ottemöller, Katsi, Hollekim & Tesfazghi \(2020\)](#) over 80% of their participants were boys. [Thomessen, Corcoran and Todd \(2015\)](#)'s study only included boys, but [Sleijpen et al. \(2017\)](#) included 50% girls, [Ni Raghallaigh \(2011\)](#) included 18 girls and 14 boys, [Førde \(2017\)](#) included three girls and two boys, while [Wernesjö \(2020\)](#) in Sweden included 14 boys and 3 girls. In [Hopkins and Hill \(2010\)](#)'s study on the needs and strengths of UAMs two thirds of the participants were boys. Although the studies asserted that URMs/UAMS are not a homogenous group, none specifically highlighted the gender aspect; an indication that research with unaccompanied minors is often conducted in a gender-neutral way. Lack of attention to the gender aspect of URMs' experiences means we may fail to identify whether girls' needs are indeed different from boys' and the care and services provided may not meet their needs.

We found few studies which focus only on girls ([Kaukko, 2016](#); [Kaukko & Wernesjö, 2017](#); [Kohli & Kaukko, 2017](#); [Bjernelid, Ismail & Puthoopparambil, 2018](#)). [Kaukko's \(2016\)](#) work focused on a group of UAM girls in Finland waiting for their asylum applications to be processed. Although it sheds light on the experiences of girls during the asylum period, it does not provide information on how they fared after settlement. In [Kaukko and Wernesjö's](#) article, they focus on [Kaukko's](#) UAM sample of girls in Finland and [Wernesjö's](#) URM sample in Sweden, however in [Wernesjö's](#) sample there were only three girls ([Kaukko & Wernesjö, 2017](#)). [Kaukko \(2016\)](#) conducted participatory action research (PAR) with a group of 12 UAM girls from three African countries. Although in Finland the UAMs were provided with a variety of activities, the girls complained that they had nothing to do in their free time and that the hobbies offered (e.g. football) attracted many boys and some girls did not want to take part in activities together with boys. The authors concluded that this reluctance could be based on their experiences of gender-based violence and because they came from societies

where interaction between men and women was restricted. The girls appreciated the good practical support provided by adult professionals to help them in their everyday lives but found it more difficult to reach out for emotional support to deal with feelings of sadness ([Kohli & Kaukko, 2017](#)). [Bjernelid et al. \(2018\)](#) conducted a follow up study and the only one we found that focuses on URM girls only, and their transition into Swedish society after two decades, providing important information on the settlement process. Their sample is a group of Somali women who came to Sweden as URMs. This study gives us some insights into the experiences of girls/women by highlighting two gender specific themes: 'lack of understanding of girls/women's previous lives' and 'being female'. The authors report how the girls/women in this study had close relationships with their mothers and missed them and how they felt they had no one to trust or talk to in their early years in Sweden. They mention how meeting people in Sweden – group home staff, teachers, foster parents etc. - who supported them and believed in them helped them to integrate into Swedish society ([Bjernelid et al., 2018](#)). The URM girls/women talked about culture clashes due to the differences between how boys and girls are supposed to behave in Somalia versus Sweden, for example how it is not acceptable for a girl to live alone in Somali society and how this made it difficult for the young women to move out of group homes into apartments as expected. Although these insights into the female URM experience show the importance of considering the situation of girls/women differently to that of boys/men, we cannot assume that the experiences of Somali girls are transferable to all URM girls.

Further, much URM research focuses primarily on mental health problems, trauma, and psychosocial stressors in the host society ([Wernesjö, 2012](#)). [Wernesjö \(2012\)](#) claims that URMs' agency and resources are not adequately weighted and instead, there is more focus on vulnerability and mental health problems ([Eide & Broch, 2010](#); [Jensen, Skårdalsmo & Fjermestad, 2014](#); [Ni Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010](#); [Seglem, Oppedal & Raeder, 2011](#); [Vervliet, Lammertyn, Broekaert & Derluyn, 2014](#)). This increases the risk of pathologizing URMs and constructing them only as victims of their circumstances ([Wernesjö, 2012](#)). Although there is a high prevalence of mental health problems within this group, this is not universal. They should not be defined by their mental health problems and there should be greater acknowledgement that alongside their challenges, they also possess strengths and resources. Several have studies shown that URMs have good psychological function and adaptation ([Hessle, 2009](#); [Oppedal & Idsoe, 2015](#); [Oppedal, Jensen, Seglem & Haukeland, 2011](#); [Seglem, Oppedal & Roysamb, 2014](#)).

While many URMs are exposed to serious risk factors, it is also important to note that they constitute a heterogeneous group with different experiences and individual resources ([Bengtson & Ruud, 2012](#); [Kaukko & Wernesjö, 2017](#)). By focusing solely on them as vulnerable, we risk overlooking that the group also includes highly resourceful young people who have managed on their own in extremely challenging circumstances ([Eide, 2012](#)). Researchers have therefore recognized a need for studies that utilize a resource perspective ([Bronstein, Montgomery & Dobrowolski, 2012](#); [Bronstein, Montgomery & Ott, 2013](#); [Hodes, Jagdev, Chandra & Cunniff, 2008](#); [Hopkins & Hill, 2010](#); [Sleijpen, Mooren, Kleber & Boeije, 2017](#); [Thommessen, Laghi, Cerrone, Baicco & Todd, 2013](#)). Such a perspective can give a better understanding of what promotes positive adaptation - which is useful to improve understanding of how best to support URMs.

2. Theory

Our study applies a resource-based approach by using resilience and acculturation as our theoretical framework. Combining resilience and acculturation, helps us to understand our findings from individual, social and structural perspectives.

2.1. Resilience

Resilience is defined as a tolerance for environmentally created risk (Rutter, 2000). Despite the risks that URM are exposed to, many of them show good psychological functioning and adaptation. Resilience research attempts to identify what contributes to such outcomes, by identifying protective factors in the individual and in their environment (Borge, 2010; Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick, & Yehuda, 2014; Ungar, 2012). Psychological resilience is often considered as an individual trait. Ungar (2008, 2011, 2012) is critical of such an approach, claiming that simplification of such a complex phenomenon, may result in resilience being understood as unchanging and stable. He argues that resilience is the result of a set of ecological factors that together constitute positive human adaptation. Therefore, one must understand resilience within a socio-ecological framework, where both individual and contextual factors are taken into account (Ungar, 2008, 2012). Socio-ecological frameworks are not culturally neutral; humans are part of a global social ecology, with a dominant culture that embodies values, belief systems, and practices. This affects our understanding of the nature of resilience, and the 'gateways' to resilience are therefore different in different cultures (Førde, 2014; Theron, Lieberg & Ungar, 2015). Nevertheless, research that deals with resilience is largely conducted in the global North, and there is less research that examines what resilience means for individuals from the global South (Ungar, 2008). This is problematic, as experiences from one culture cannot automatically be transferred to another (Borge, 2007, 2010; Luthar & Zelazo, 2003; von Tetzchner, 2012). Førde (2014) argues that an individual's own subjective experience should guide our understanding of what resilience means to that individual (Førde, 2014).

Further, Olsen and Traavik (2010) argue that risk and resilience are inextricably linked: development of resilience requires exposure to stress or extreme risk (Rutter, 1985). The extent to which risk leads to problems depends on the individual's perception (Borge, 2010). For example, a child's status as a refugee may be understood as an excellent opportunity to have a better life, or it may be understood as a loss of relationships and connections to their home environment. It is important to understand how the individual interprets their situation (Borge, 2010).

Early resilience research focused on mapping resilience related risk factors. Current research focuses on understanding the resilience processes through which individuals benefit from various protective factors (Borge, 2010; Rutter, 1990). Fergus and Zimmerman (2005) distinguish between strengths and resources, where strengths are seen as positive factors associated with individual traits, such as diverse coping strategies, good communication skills, problem-solving skills, as well as the ability to seek out supportive caregivers. Resources, on the other hand, refer to factors outside the individual, such as supportive networks and educational opportunities (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000). Such factors can moderate the effect of risk exposure so that individuals master the situation more successfully than if the protective factors were not present (Borge, 2010; Rutter, 1990).

2.2. Acculturation

The cultural distance between the Nordic welfare States and the refugees' countries of origin is vast (Yijälä & Luoma, 2019). This means that URM have to absorb a great deal of information in order to navigate a new culture. Acculturation is a complex phenomenon that involves contact between different cultural groups and their individual members. This contact leads to cultural and psychological changes, which eventually lead to different forms of adaptation (Berry & Sam, 2016). Berry (1997) developed four acculturation strategies based on two factors in intercultural contact: The extent to which individuals wish to maintain their original culture and the extent to which they wish to engage with the new culture. Different combinations of these factors result in the following acculturation strategies: Integration,

assimilation, separation and marginalization (Berry, 1997).

Separation occurs when individuals choose not to adapt to the host society but only to maintain their own culture and traditions (Sam & Berry, 2016). Assimilation is when individuals adopt the host culture and reject their own culture. Marginalization means that individuals want neither to maintain their own culture, nor to engage with the host culture (or have no opportunities to do so). Integration involves developing a cross-cultural identity by adapting to the majority culture while maintaining one's own cultural identity (Sam & Berry, 2016).

The formulation of the acculturation strategies imply that individuals have a choice in their interaction with their host societies. However, there are often power differentials between majority and minority groups, and minority groups may not necessarily be able to freely choose how they acculturate. The minority group's choice of acculturation strategy is influenced by the attitudes and integration policies of the host society (Berry & Sam, 2016; Berry & Ward, 2016).

The extent to which the host society accepts that immigrants should retain their cultural heritage, and adapt to the majority culture has a significant influence on the acculturation process (Berry & Sam, 2016; Bourhis, Moise, Perreault & Senécal, 1997; Sam & Berry 2010). The majority may implicitly or explicitly set certain societal preconditions for acculturation. Berry and Sam (2016) describe societies that expect minority groups to assimilate as 'melting pots'; and multiculturalism as a precondition that enables minority groups to adopt integration strategies (Berry & Sam, 2016).

Berry and Ward (2016) refer to the complexity of defining multiculturalism; it can be understood as demographic, ideological or political, although these are not mutually exclusive. For example, many societies today are diverse (demographic), but to be a multicultural society, there is also a need for the majority population to accept cultural pluralism (ideology), as well as implement policies that support and promote diversity (politics) (Berry and Ward, 2016).

The theory is not without its critics. Bhatia and Ram (2009) claim that this presentation of acculturation and adaptation is too universal and linear. They argue that such a view does not take into account environmental change. They illustrate their argument with the experience of well integrated Indian migrants in the United States who after the 9/11 attacks became targets of discrimination because of their physical appearance. The socio-cultural dimensions of adaptation are therefore central and more complex than reflected by linear models of acculturation that focus on individual psychological factors (Bhatia & Ram, 2009). Despite the criticisms, acculturation provides a useful theoretical framework within which to examine socio-cultural dimensions of URM girls' adaptation to Norway.

3. Method

This study employs qualitative research methodology because it deals with an under-researched topic, and there is a need for flexibility and openness (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Thagaard, 2013). Qualitative research seeks an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon, and is thus compatible with the aim of our research.

3.1. Recruitment and sampling

We used strategic sampling by selecting participants who would be able to address our research question (Thagaard, 2013). Hence, the inclusion criteria were girls/young women who had come to Norway as URM and had residence permits. To recruit the participants we first sent information letters to various agencies that we thought could help in the recruitment process. Among these were multiple municipalities in Norway, reception centers for URM, BUFDIR, introduction centers for refugees, as well as coordinators for refugee settlement. We then followed up the letters with emails and phone calls. The majority of the agencies expressed initial willingness to assist us with recruitment but only a few managed to help. Several agencies had difficulty recruiting

participants, and many of the URMs who initially expressed interest in participating changed their minds before the interview. Those who eventually took part in the study were recruited through child welfare services in two municipalities in western and eastern Norway, and from a URM reception center in a municipality in western Norway. We also used a snowball sampling method where we asked participants to refer us to other URM girls/young women who could be interested in the study. Due to problems with recruitment data collection took six months. We eventually recruited six URMs who had come to Norway from countries in eastern and central Africa when they were aged between 13 and 15 years. The young women were between 15 and 20 years of age when the interviews took place.

3.2. Data collection

We conducted six narrative interviews. Narrative interviews enable participants tell their stories freely rather than answering a structured set of questions (Horsdal, 1999). Too much structure can cause researchers not to capture, or to misinterpret, a phenomenon that is important to the participant (Ryen, 2010). We wanted to hear the participants' stories from their perspectives.

The interviews were conducted by the first author (MB) at various cafes and institutions chosen by the young women. MB ensured access to private or sheltered spaces in the venues to guarantee privacy. The narrative interviews were divided into three phases. The first phase was an introductory phase, where MB informed the participants about the research project and they got acquainted. The second phase was the primary phase, where the participants were encouraged to freely tell their stories about their journey to Norway and their experiences during settlement without interruption. Although the interviews were narrative, we had developed a short interview guide to help facilitate the conversation, if required. The interview guide covered topics such as how the young women perceived their current situations, struggles, achievement, and hope for the future. The questions were open-ended to enable the young women to speak as freely as possible, for example: "Please tell me about your life here in Norway?". The third phase was a questioning phase. In this phase, MB asked the participants to elaborate on different aspects of their story, for example: "You mention that life in Norway is very different compared to life in your home country. Can you please tell me more about this?".

MB conducted all the interviews in Norwegian; all the participants except one, who had only been in Norway for six months, spoke the language well. The young woman who was not fluent used an interpreter. With permission from the participants, MB recorded all the interviews, transcribed them verbatim shortly after each interview and assigned the participants fictitious names. She transcribed the interviews into Norwegian, and we have translated select quotations into English for the purpose of this article. The interviews lasted between 42 and 75 min.

3.3. Analysis

We analysed the interviews using thematic analysis, a descriptive approach, in which the analysis depicts the main features of the data material (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We used a combination of inductive and deductive approaches: we based our analysis mainly on findings from the data material but we were also guided by the research question and our pre-understanding of the topic. We used Attride-Stirling's (2001) step-by-step thematic network analysis method. After completing transcription, we spent time reading over the data material. Once we were sufficiently familiar with the material, we began the process of reducing and coding the material. After dividing the various text segments into general codes, we began to identify themes. Fig. 2 illustrates extracts from the interviews, showing the process of the analysis from codes to categories.

Basic themes are the simplest level of the network and close to the original data (Attride-Stirling, 2001). After all the codes were divided into basic themes, we focused on how the basic themes could be combined to

form the organizing themes. Organizing themes are a higher, more abstract level in the thematic network. We developed two organizing themes, but only one (post-migration) will be discussed in this article. The organizing themes, in turn, shaped a global theme. Global themes are the highest level of the network and reflect a higher level of abstraction and are linked to theory or societal issues (Attride-Stirling, 2001). To ensure quality we worked together with other members of our research group and discussed emerging codes and categories until we reached consensus. Fig. 3 illustrates the process of designing the various themes.

3.4. Ethical considerations

We received permission from the Norwegian data protection services (NSD) to conduct this research. All the participants received information about the study and how their data would be used, and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. They were all informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point with no repercussions and that the information they had provided up to that point would be erased and not included in the study. They all agreed to take part and signed consent forms. Processing sensitive information is generally more demanding when dealing with small samples, and the presentation of ethnicity can make it easier to trace anonymous material back to groups or individuals (Ingjerd & Fossheim, 2015). Therefore, we have been particularly careful to anonymize and generalize certain details about the participants, such as; geographical information and living arrangements. To ensure confidentiality, we have focused on phenomena in the data material that is common to the participants. It is however important to stress that we are aware that this is not a homogenous group and that they have different preferences, personalities, and experiences.

4. Findings – "A new life in Norway"

In this section we present the five basic themes that reflect the issues that were common to all the participants: Language, social networks, relationship with caregiver, bicultural identity and transforming adversity into strength. We present the findings in accordance with the narrative tradition using direct quotations, with little analysis, in order to present the participants' voices. We begin this section by describing the young women, and then to provide more background on them, we present a short section on pre-migration to explain their reasons for leaving their home countries; this is not the focus of this article and will not be developed further.

4.1. The participants

The young women came from various countries in East and Central Africa, and had fled from their home countries when they were between 13 and 15 years of age. They fled due to war, political repression, lack of healthcare and the threat of forced marriages. With the exception of Aida, all participants had lived in Norway for more than three years when the interviews took place. Aaida, Damisi, Ebere and Fadwa lived in municipalities in western Norway, while Baako and Cryah lived in a municipality in Eastern Norway. Aida lived at a reception center awaiting permanent settlement in a municipality. Baako, Cryah and Damisi had moved into their own apartments, while Ebere and Fadwa lived with foster families.¹

¹ When presenting the findings we have chosen to discuss the young women in general terms. We write "all" if the finding applies to all the participants, or all except one. We write "most" if the finding applies to more than half of the young women. We write "some" if the finding applies to less than half of the participants, but more than one. This is consistent with the consensus for frequency labeling in qualitative research as assessed by Hill et al. (2005).

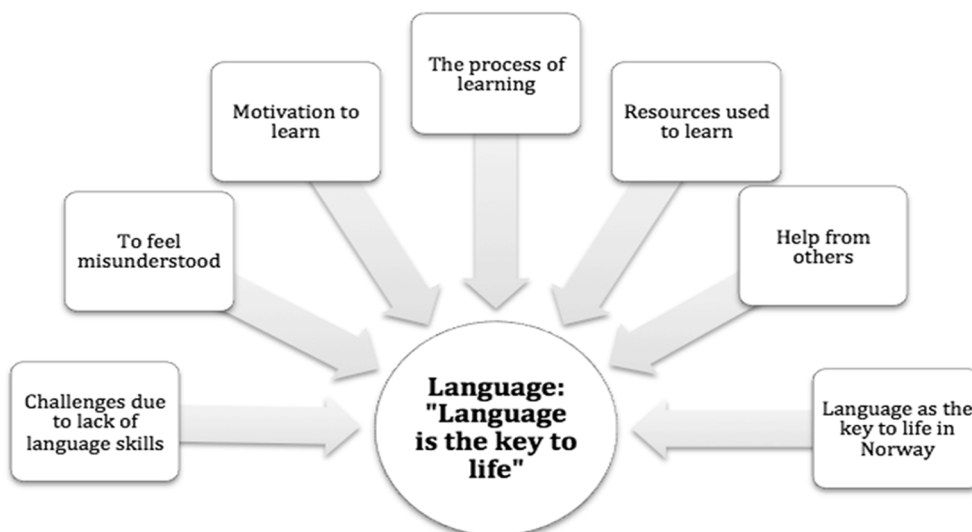


Fig. 2. Example of codes that form an basic theme.

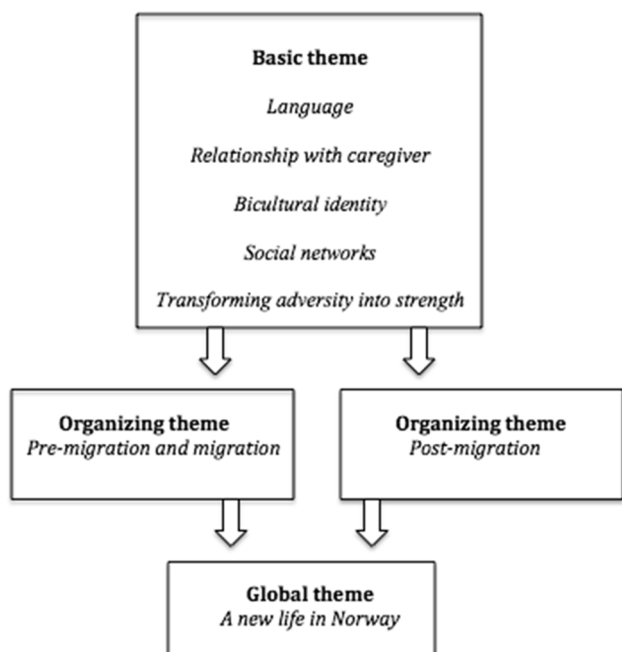


Fig. 3. The process of designing various themes.

4.2. Pre- migration and migration

The young women presented different reasons for leaving their home countries: Aaida and Damisi were being forced to marry older men, and fled to avoid the arranged marriages.

I left home because of a problem. My family arranged a forced marriage. I was to be married to an older man. I was too young to get married, right? I also didn't want to get married. When I said no, my family started threatening me, and they threatened to kill me (Aida, 15).

Baako, Ebere and Cyrah fled due to war and political repression.

My home was a quiet place, but suddenly there was war. We had to move. I lost my brother when he was really young. He was only 13 years old when he died. He was forced to join an extremist group, but refused. That's why they killed him, you see. My mother didn't want the same thing to happen to me. So she sold our house to pay a human trafficker to help me escape (Baako, 20).

Fadwa grew up in a prosperous family with good living conditions, but after a family tragedy, she unexpectedly ended up as sole provider to a younger, very ill sister. The sisters fled in order to seek emergency health care.

My father was a politician and my mother was still in school. My grandmother was a doctor and my grandfather was the principal of a school. I had a pretty good life, right? I had everything I needed! But suddenly I had to become a mother to my sister. My mother was no longer there. It's a sad story, really. My sister got very ill and the doctors said she only had three months left to live if she did not get proper health care. We had to find a country that could give us this (Fadwa, 18).

Most of the young women told of important “key people” who organized and helped them escape. These were in most cases parents who arranged their journeys with the help of human traffickers. The duration of the journeys to Norway varied from days to years.

My mother was my support. She was the one who talked to me and told me to go. She said I would be killed if I didn't leave. I had to go (Aida, 15).

The young women expressed that they were motivated and had a positive attitude that they would master the journey, despite experiences of adversity. The idea of a better future was the driving force for all the participants.

I could no longer stay there, I had to go to another place, a better place! You couldn't do anything in my home country. I wanted to go to Europe, because somehow, they have everything! They can hear me, the politicians and democracy (Damisi, 18).

4.3. Post- migration

In this section, we present the young women's experiences describing both the individual and socio-structural aspects that influence their adaptation to life Norway.

4.3.1. Language

All participants considered language as the most important ‘key’ to Norwegian society, both in terms of school, work, networks, and integration in general.

Languages, language is important. If you do not speak the language, you cannot do anything here ... the language is the key to life and to survival here (Aida, 15).

Most of the young women talked about the challenges of being in Norway before mastering the Norwegian language. Several of them described the challenges they had, both at school and at work, due to not understanding or speaking the language.

If you don't speak Norwegian, nobody bothers to talk to you. I'm young, and the other kids are very rude to me, very rude, and bad ... Yes, teachers too. We had a teacher and if he knew that you did not speak the Norwegian language well, he would not even explain the tasks. He would not come over to help me. So language is very, very important here ... for example, when I came to Norway I wanted to work, but it was very difficult for me to find a job. I started with a youth job, but the people there were not nice to me. This was hopeless for me, so I had to learn the Norwegian language quickly (Cryah, 20).

They perceived that Norwegians treated them differently after they had learned the language.

... My sister and I felt excluded. We were excluded from the other people ... but gradually, when you have learned the language, it becomes easier ... you feel normal when you learn the language, and people behave differently towards you. Like, people are more open and kind to me when I speak Norwegian (Baako, 20).

The participants were very motivated to learn the language, and several indicated the desire to make friends as motivation.

You must have friends. I must have friends, and I had no friends here. I had to meet people and make new friends. So yes, I had to learn the language ... when I had mastered the language I got friends. Then others wanted to be friends with me (Cryah, 20).

At the time of the interviews, all except one of the young women had learnt Norwegian and mastered the language well. Most of them regarded the acquisition of language skills as an important indicator of success and positive adaptation to life in Norway.

Yes, and it was first when I learned the Norwegian language that I became really Norwegian, right? That was when I finally succeeded in becoming Norwegian, you know? And people treated me like other Norwegian people (Damisi, 18).

4.3.2. Social networks

Apart from language, the creation of social networks was something that all the young women emphasized as important to succeed in adapting to Norwegian society. Friends were also mentioned by all the young women as important for well-being in Norway.

What helped me a lot was the friends I got here in Norway. I got friends who were good at school and who also helped me to do well in school. This has been of great help to me. The adults and the contacts in the child welfare service also helped me a lot. They helped me to get along well and to succeed (Baako, 20).

All participants had or were in the process of establishing social networks. They had both Norwegian friends, and friends from other cultures.

When I came to Norway, I could hardly do anything. But eventually, I got many friends from different cultures. I wanted to understand them, which religion they believed in, what traditions they had and so on. I was very curious and excited. Maybe they had experienced the same things as me? I wanted to know everything about them (Baako, 20).

At the same time, the young women experienced that the Norwegian people were difficult to get acquainted with.

It's not easy to get to know people here. You don't even know your neighbours. I don't know my neighbour ... When we get to know you, Norwegians, you're very kind ... But there's only one issue, it's hard to get to know you (Cryah, 20).

Some of the young women felt misunderstood by Norwegians, and therefore thought that it was challenging to create relationships.

...The Norwegian friends that I have are very nice ... but you feel in a way that you have to adapt a little. There are things you cannot say, and you must behave in a certain way. You cannot be entirely yourself, even if you are very good friends (Fadwa, 18).

4.3.3. Relationship with caregiver

All the participants emphasized the importance of secure and dependable care. Although most of the young women expressed that they had close relationships to caregivers and good support, there was a difference between those placed in foster families and those living in group homes or alone. They referred to foster parents, social workers and guardians, as their caregivers.

The family I live with is very kind. They have children. They are very kind to me. I feel like I'm a part of the family (Ebere, 18).

Close relationships with caregivers seemed to create a sense of security and to enable positive adaptation.

What has been helpful to me are the adults, because they show me, they show me that everything will be fine. I think this has helped me very much, that they show that life will be fine ... (Baako, 20).

Loving and caring caregivers were particularly important to the young women.

... I have had three guardians. The first one was very nice and we had good chemistry. I realized she was someone I could talk to. The other guardian did not smile and she was cold. I do not know how to explain it ... It's not easy to talk to such a person. You feel like you are being interrogated ... And the facial expressions and everything showed that she looked at me in a strange way. You feel that you can't talk to this person and you don't trust her. You get scared. The personality of caregivers really has a lot to say, ... (Fadwa, 18).

Two of the older participants experienced that they had to move frequently between various housing arrangements, and were placed in apartments with little follow-up.

It was quite chaotic ... She, who was responsible for us, left for work early and came back late. We rarely saw her. It was difficult to get in touch with her, and the communication was difficult (Cryah, 20).

The young women who were placed in apartments with little follow-up felt that they received help with practical tasks such as transportation, payment of bills and food purchases, but lacked emotional support.

... They help if you want to shop for food, but they will not help if you have a real problem (Damisi, 18).

Some of the participants pointed out the need for more love and care from the caregivers.

I did not have a good life in my home country, that's why I had to go. I did not have family. I need a family here. But when you get a bad family here too, it does not help at all ... To have a future, you need a good family ... You need someone who supports you and takes away the darkness you live in (Cryah, 20).

4.3.4. Bicultural identity

The young women had high ambitions for their futures, and envisioned education as the way to achieve a better future. All the participants wanted to complete higher education in Norway. However, there was tension between feeling that in order to succeed in Norwegian society they had to adopt the local norms and values, and the need to maintain their own cultural identity.

I'm no one until I've been educated. When I am educated I have life under control, that is when I have succeeded and can call myself Norwegian (Cryah, 20).

They felt that good prospects for the future required an ability to adapt to Norwegian society and this produced some tension as it seemed to require giving up aspects of their identity in order to fit in.

You feel in a way that you have to adapt a little. You can't be yourself, not quite ... You have to adapt to the society here (Fadwa, 18).

At the same time, some of the young women also felt that it was important to preserve elements from their own original culture and that loss of one's original culture was detrimental.

You have a responsibility. It is my responsibility to become Norwegian. You must teach yourself how to behave here. There are many things you have to learn and such ... But what I realized is that it is important to also remember who you really are. You can quickly forget, and then you get sad and actually sick. You must think of God and people from home. Because they are like me and I must never forget that person (Damisi, 18).

Some emphasized the need for caregivers to help them focus on positive elements in their future, rather than on difficulties and traumas from the past.

I think caregivers should not ask so deeply about how we have experienced events from the past. The person who has fled is grieving, he just arrived. Instead of asking about the past, teach us about how society works. Instead of asking about the journey here and experiences in our home country, talk about something else. For example, our futures! (Baako, 20).

4.3.5. Transforming adversity into strength

All the participants described experiences of fear and trauma. However, coming to Norway seemed to represent a positive shift in perception:

I've always been scared. First and foremost, I was afraid of what I was going to experience and whether I was going to be killed. I wondered what I was going to experience in life. The fear that I had disappeared ... being in Norway makes me happy. I have hope for the future and many opportunities. It makes me happy (Aida, 15).

Most participants described themselves as 'being strong'. Several participants attributed their strengths to the adversity they had encountered, both in their home country and during their journeys to Norway. The young women described that they used those experiences to deal with challenges that arose in the process of adapting to the new life in Norway.

Where I come from you have to start helping when you are quite young. For example, when I was seven years old, I had to cook for a large family. I was responsible for cooking for my family ... We are quite mature for our age, you know? ... I also became like a mother figure for my sister, since my mother was absent, I took care of her on my own. So when I came to Norway I thought, I can do this, because I have managed for many years already, right? I don't depend on others ... when events happen, I don't get depressed and stuff like that. I have learned to be strong. Things happen in life, but only for a little while ... life has not always been happy, but it has not been bad either. We've had many challenges, but I think it's about learning how to cope with them (Fadwa, 18).

Other participants, in agreement with Fadwa, claimed that they had become self-reliant after learning to manage on their own. They described this ability as useful when navigating towards a new life in Norway.

I've gotten used to doing everything myself. I've been doing this for so long, you see. Before, I wanted to have people around me all the time. Finally, I got used to managing by myself. Now I would rather be alone and manage by myself. I have control, and I know that I will handle situations, because I always have. I like it that way, you see (Cryah, 20).

We presented the findings based on the basic and organizing themes; these organizing themes were grouped under an overarching global theme, "a new life in Norway". We discuss the findings and their implications in light of this global theme.

5. Discussion

The aim of this study is to explore the experiences of a group of URM women living in Norway and to examine the individual and socio-structural aspects that influence their adaptation, with a particular focus on their strengths and resources. We discuss our findings using our theoretical framework with a focus on resilience to help understand the individual and social aspects, and acculturation, the socio-structural aspects.

5.1. 'I am strong'

Understanding how children and adolescents master stress is a key part of resilience research. Some children are greatly affected by stress, while others handle it more effectively (Borge, 2010). Several of the young women characterised themselves as 'being strong'. They attributed this strength to the adversity they had encountered. The young women had experienced traumatic and stressful events before migration and during their journey to Norway. However, they also had many resources and coping strategies available that appeared to safeguard them against the effects of these events, for example having had loving parents (Bjernerud et al., 2018). The nature of protective factors influences adaptation by moderating the effect of the risk factors, so that an individual can master a situation more successfully than if the protective factors were not present (Rutter, 1990).

Resilience is an individual's ability to navigate towards opportunities and experience feelings of well-being. This means the ability to negotiate with one's environment (Ungar, 2005a, 2005b, 2008). The young women in our study seemed to navigate towards goals of social belonging and academic success; they identified these goals as sources of positive adaptation and well-being. To achieve these goals they had to navigate and negotiate the societal expectations and norms to achieve 'equal' status with Norwegians, through for example language competence. The resilience paradigm views children and young people as active social agents that can significantly affect their own lives through the use of resources and coping strategies (Rutter, 1990; Werner, 2000). However, individuals do not grow up in isolation (Sameroff & Fiese, 2000) and in order for a young person to develop and maintain their resilience, a socio-ecological perspective is central. This means that there must be health, social, educational etc. services that support the individual, while at the same time the larger structural conditions (e.g. policies) provide positive pathways to facilitate the achievement of personal goals (Førde, 2014).

Norway, similar to other Nordic countries such as Finland and Sweden, has good systems for taking care of UAMs (Horgan & Ni Raghallaigh, 2017). Our participants emphasized the value of being safe and well taken care of. Those who had come to Norway aged 14 or younger and lived with foster families expressed that they had good caregivers, a place to call home and support. However, some of the young women who had come when they were older, been moved several times between different housing arrangements, and placed in shared housing with inadequate follow-up experienced feelings of instability; they expressed feelings of loneliness and longing for a proper home. URM girls and young women are often from countries with more defined gender roles where much of their time is spent in or near the

home doing housework or in caretaking roles, and close to their mothers. In Bjerneld et al.'s (2018) study the participants talked of missing their mothers when they first came to Sweden as URM and years later as grown women, they still missed their mothers. However they spoke about their mothers as resources and as strong and self-reliant role models. Our study echoes these findings with Baako and Aida mentioning how their mothers helped them to escape from risky situations. Further, the URM girls in Kaukko's (2016) study expressed how they were well taken care of but how they missed having someone to talk to when they felt sad. The need to express their emotions and to have someone to talk to, most likely a woman, seems to be a finding that is particular to young URM women. Despite missing their mothers the young women, both in our study and in Kaukko and Bjerneld's studies, seemed to draw strength from these positive relationships with their mothers. Some of Bjerneld's et al. (2018) participants also mentioned relationships they had built in Sweden with supportive people they could talk to and how this helped them to integrate better. The socio-ecological theory of resilience indicates that resources are factors outside the individual such as supportive networks, like the young women's mothers and also the care givers in the host countries. It is not enough for an individual to be resilient but they also need systems around them to provide further support.

The situation of unaccompanied minors is a social policy issue (Kalve & Allertsen, 2008). As mentioned in the introduction, since 2007, the responsibility for URM in Norway has been under a 'shared solution' scheme (see Fig. 1). There seems to be disagreement about where the responsibility for settling the older group of URM should be placed (Lidén, Eide, Hidle, Nilsen & Wærdal, 2013). Our findings show that for young URM women it is not enough to only provide the basic needs but that stable housing arrangements and positive caring and supportive guardians are important for successful adaptation.

5.2. Structures for adaptation

In order to gain insight into the arena within which the young women were trying to make a new life, we discuss the findings using the acculturation framework to examine the policy and societal structures in Norway. Berry (1997)'s acculturation framework illustrates the strategies people from one context use to adapt to a new context. The participants in our study expressed that they worked hard to adapt to Norwegian society and culture by gaining cultural competence, acquiring language skills, creating social relationships, taking part in 'Norwegian activities' and getting relevant education. Some also expressed the wish to retain elements of their original culture, for example by creating social relationships with others of the same ethnicity, as well as through religious practices. By developing a bicultural identity through adaptation to the majority culture, while maintaining their original culture and identity, the participants navigated towards integration as their acculturation strategy (Berry, 1997; Javo, 2010). Integration is presented as the most successful acculturation strategy for immigrants because it allows the individual or society to choose 'the best of both worlds'. Moreover, research indicates that the strategy has a particularly positive impact on immigrants' adaptation to a new society (Berry, 2011; Berry, Phinney, Sam & Vedder, 2006; Berry & Ward, 2016; Sam & Berry, 2010). Nevertheless, integration can only be successfully implemented if the host society has an open and inclusive approach to cultural diversity (Berry & Sam, 2016).

The young women expressed that Norwegians kept their distance or rejected them until they had mastered the language and the cultural codes. They felt excluded both in school and working life. Several of the participants expressed that Norwegians neither understood nor wanted to understand them. They felt that they had to adapt to 'fit in'. Only when they achieved this did they experience being accepted and included. Although this lack of acceptance was difficult for the young women, they rose to the challenge and showed their resilience by managing to fulfil the expectations of the host society through

mastering the language and building social networks. This is not only particular to our Norwegian sample, experiences of similar challenges were shared by the Somali women in Sweden (Bjerneld et al., 2018). They talked about Swedish society's lack of understanding of their previous lives, a lack of knowledge about Somali culture and an expectation for them to adapt quickly to a completely new society. Although many of these issues are also relevant to URM boys and refugees in general (Daniel et al., 2020), some issues are particular to women such as health care workers' lack of cultural competence during pregnancy and birth (Bjerneld et al., 2018). Fandrem (2011), asserts that in order to be able to talk about integration as an acculturation strategy the majority population must not only accept and value the linguistic and cultural contributions that immigrants bring, but must also want to accommodate and include immigrants in all arenas of society. The question that then arises is whether the participants were steered to adopt an assimilation rather than integration strategy. Gullestad (2002) and Olwig (2011) state that Norwegian society views itself as homogeneous, and that there is safety and familiarity within this view – a perspective echoed in Finland and Denmark. The physical, ethnic, cultural, religious difference that immigrants embody, thus threatens this homogeneity and society's sense of security (Lems, Oester & Strasser, 2020). A homogenous nation perceives cultural and existing differences between the national 'self' and the foreign 'other' within the national territory. A 'them' and 'us' perspective leads to segregation in society. Both segregation and assimilation strategies can be understood as attempts to create or recreate the national order (Seeberg, 2014). When immigrants who want to integrate are pressured to assimilate, this results in lower levels of life satisfaction (Ward, 2009) and loss of cultural identity (Dahl, 2013). In our study Fadwa expressed this as an inability to not 'quite be yourself', and Damisi said it was her 'responsibility to become Norwegian' – reflecting outward pressure to become something more acceptable to their host society. Fadwa then stated that it was important to remember who you are, thus asserting that even though she needed to become Norwegian to succeed in her new home, she also needed to remember where she was from and there was strength in maintaining her cultural identity because without that she would 'be sick'. Sam and Berry (2010) argue that an assimilation strategy is not particularly positive, and according to Døving (2009), research has shown that involuntary cultural assimilation can lead to experiences of powerlessness and alienation among minorities.

Norway's official settlement policy for immigrants is integration and not assimilation. Thus, there seems to be a consensus that immigrants should integrate into a multicultural society (Døving, 2009). Berry, Phinney, Kwak and Sam (2006) argue that in Norway there is a discrepancy between political and societal attitudes. The policy aims at inclusion, whereas society seems to support assimilation. In a survey where native Norwegians were asked their opinions on integration in Norway, about half said that immigrants should try to become as similar to ethnic Norwegians as possible (Blom, 2009; Kyllingstad, 2017). Thus, many in Norway consider homogeneity as desirable and normative. In addition, many immigrants experience the integration policy as solely based on Norwegian premises, at the cost of their original culture and identity (Berg & Lauritsen, 2009; Daniel et al., 2020).

The question of whether other identities are seen as acceptable or not is part of this debate. Visual differences are of greater importance than invisible differences. The most obvious and perhaps most sensitive issue is that of race, an ongoing continuing challenge to European societies. The young women in the study felt alienated when coming into Norwegian society and experienced that people kept their distance from them. Race and racism are often unacknowledged in debates about migrant integration (Kyllingstad, 2017). This 'silence' on race may be explained by the sensitivity of these issues in contemporary 'multicultural' societies. In Norway, 'culture' is often used as a proxy for race (Kyllingstad, 2017). Blending race with culture – as markers of difference – poses challenges to a peaceful co-existence in multicultural societies. Since 9/11, symbols of Muslim identity, such as wearing a hijab,

have also become important visual markers of difference and points of contention that reflect conflicts related to migrant integration, and that particularly impact women. Meanwhile, differences that have been accepted, normalised and even celebrated include food and music (Erdal & Oeppen, 2013). Erdal and Oeppen (2013) argue that maintaining identities and cultures from immigrants' home countries is considered acceptable as long as they do not threaten the core values and norms of the host society.

Norwegian integration policy can be seen in light of a broader multicultural debate. The debate focuses on the relationship between an agreement that all people are equal on the one hand and acceptance of inequalities and cultural autonomy on the other (Gressgård, 2002). One key issue is the degree to which minority groups can practice their own cultures in Western democracies. These democracies are based on a universal equality ideology, which implies that democracy should be prioritized over cultural groups. Thus, the premise for multicultural integration in Norway is based solely on the ideology and culture of the majority (Gressgård, 2002). When the majority group, without consideration or consultation of minority groups, constructs the rules for coexistence then integration policy is at risk of being an assimilation process.

One of the key elements of multiculturalism is the need for fair participation. In many European societies, one still sees cultural diversity without intercultural interaction or fair participation (Danielak, 2019). If multiculturalism is viewed and accepted only as tolerance of different cultures within a society, without the simultaneous implementation of policies and programs to reduce barriers to participation, then segregation becomes the practice and the political ideology (Berry & Ward, 2016). In order for multiculturalism to be a reality, there is a need for development and implementation of policies that support fair participation. Moreover, for such policies to succeed they must be understood, accepted and considered beneficial by both majority and minority groups (Berry & Ward, 2016). For example, our study indicates that lack of full inclusion of URM older than 14 years in the child welfare service system, under the same premise as Norwegian children in the same age group, may hinder their full participation in society because they are not afforded the same rights as their peers.

Norwegian immigration policy emphasises integration, but this is only achieved in multicultural societies characterized by mutual adaptation, positive perceptions of diversity and policies that support cultural maintenance and fair participation. As the majority in Norway seem to support an assimilationist approach, and Norwegian policy has not succeeded in the goal of fair participation, one can wonder how far an integration strategy can be practiced in Norwegian society today.

6. Limitations

It was initially difficult to access participants because we had to use the child welfare service workers as gatekeepers. They have heavy workloads and thus responses were slow and this limited the time we had to conduct the study. This resulted in a small sample whose experiences may not be applicable to the wider group of URM young women/girls. However, the similarities found with Bjerneld et al. (2018) and Kaukko (2016) strengthen the viability of our findings, at least within the Nordic context. Conducting narrative interviews provided us with rich data but we would have gained more insight if we had interviewed more young women. Nevertheless, by conducting research with an under researched group we add some knowledge to the field of URM girls experiences during settlement, although our findings may resonate more within the nordic context. An additional limitation is that all participants were from African countries which limits the diversity of experiences. Moreover, as it was particularly difficult to recruit within the target group, the young women in this study may represent a particularly resourceful group. Although all the participants, except one where we used an interpreter, had good language skills they were still not communicating in their native languages, and some nuances may have been lost.

7. Conclusions

The aim of the study has been to direct attention to an area where there is relatively little research: URM girls' adaptation to life in Norway. The young women actively looked for people and situations that could help them to adapt to a new life in Norway, thus exhibiting strengths. They showed resilience by focusing on their new life and having plans and dreams to succeed in their lives. They especially navigated towards social acceptance. However, in order for them to achieve this, they felt they had to adopt behaviours similar to their Norwegian peers. This led to a struggle between the need to belong, which meant adopting an assimilation acculturation strategy and the need to also hold onto their own cultural identity, an integration strategy. Norwegian immigration policy aims at integration and not assimilation of refugees. However, the majority of the population seems to support an assimilation approach. Thus Norwegian policy makers have not succeeded in their goal of fair participation. We question the extent to which an integration strategy can be practically implemented in Norwegian society today, and the implications this has for those trying to make a new life in Norway. Although our research does not show strong gender differences between the experiences of the young women and research that has been done with boys/young men, it still highlights the need for a gender sensitive approach to the settlement of URM especially in relation to the need for emotional support and perhaps, women, or mother figures that can be there for them as they navigate their way into a new life.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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