

Article

Volunteering: A Tool for Social Inclusion and Promoting the Well-Being of Refugees? A Qualitative Study

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Abstract: Background: The Norwegian government's increased expectations that volunteering can be used as a means of integration and the scarce research regarding refugees' experiences with volunteering is taken as the background for this study. Our purpose is to adopt a salutogenic perspective to investigate whether and how formal volunteering contributes to developing a sense of social inclusion and well-being among refugees in Norway. **Methods:** Qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 volunteers with refugee backgrounds in a semi-rural district in Norway. Stepwise deductive induction was used for analysis. **Results:** Three themes were identified as a result of the analysis: (1) feeling safer due to increased knowledge regarding cultures, values, and systems and achieving mutual acceptance; (2) feeling more confident when communicating in Norwegian and contributing to society, and (3) feeling more connected via social relations. **Conclusions:** Our study indicates that participation in volunteering may contribute to social inclusion and that the participants' resources and volunteering experiences may have a health-promotive impact under certain conditions.

Keywords: social inclusion; refugees; sense of coherence; community participation



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1. Introduction

Increased cultural and ethnic diversity resulting from migration has caused the question of how to facilitate the success of inclusion processes to be a hot topic in many countries [1,2]. In Norway, where this study was conducted, integration has long been viewed as a public responsibility [3,4]. Increasingly, however, white papers highlight the expectation for the volunteering sector to be a key stakeholder in the process of facilitating integration [5–7]. As framed by Norwegian authorities, integration is viewed as a process by which individuals learn about and adapt to society's values and become connected to society both economically and socially; this process is also considered to create belonging and loyalty [8]. Moreover, it is also noted that the voluntary sector should promote fellowship and provide the minority with the opportunity to contribute on an equal footing with the majority [9]. We define volunteering as a contribution, given freely, in an organized context without any expectation of a reward or other compensation to benefit individuals or groups outside the context of preexisting relationships [10,11].

The extant research addressing immigrants' participation in voluntary organizations focuses on comparing the degree of participation by immigrants with the participation of the majority population, as well as immigrants' reasons for and barriers to volunteering [12–15]. Immigrants' experiences with volunteering and how it may impact their

well-being have received little attention. A meta-ethnography including 11 studies concluded that volunteering might be a health-promotive arena that can build meaningfulness, generate belongingness, and develop participants' capacities in terms of skills and knowledge in the new community, even though this process seems to be complex and to depend on factors such as how the immigrants are met by the people in the organization and the inclusivity and helpfulness of the social environment in the organization [16]. One Italian study reports that immigrants' motivations for participation in volunteering were achieving a higher level of social integration by finding employment and the desire to overcome social isolation, improve their language skills and obtain positive public recognition [17].

"Immigrants" constitute a heterogeneous group that includes people of all ages, socioeconomic backgrounds, and reasons for leaving their home countries. In this study, we chose to focus on refugees. Refugees share the characteristic that they have been displaced forcibly due to violence, conflict, and disaster and have sought safety and protection. This background of having fled from conflict and violence increases refugees' risk of psychological distress and often hampers their process of adaptation in exile. The task of coping with and processing the stress they have experienced before, during, and after their flight is simultaneous with refugees' attempts to adapt to a new culture and learn a new language [18–21]. The socioeconomic situation of refugees, which often features unemployment, low incomes, poor language skills, and a lack of social support in exile, is related to depression and, to some degree, anxiety [22]. Factors such as low levels of competence in the Norwegian language, higher psychological distress, lower education, and lower self-reported health and quality of life may also cause refugees to face more hassles and difficulties in the process of adapting to resettlement [23]. Individual resilience, coping strategies, and resource factors, such as access to an ethnically diverse network, social support, and good language competence, may counteract these adverse health impacts [23–25]. Participation in society may enhance resilience and social connectedness. It may prevent poor mental health, particularly for refugees who experience higher levels of formal exclusion in their country of settlement [26]. One review reports that the factors that promote the psychological well-being of refugees during the transitional phase could include scenarios that provide social support, opportunities for people to live a life as close as possible to the life to which they aspire, expanded social networks, participation in training or employment, and a sense of meaning regarding their experiences and current situation [27].

Overall, the government's increased expectation that volunteering should serve as a means of integration, the evidence concerning the promoters and inhibitors of refugees' mental health, and the scarce research about refugees' own experiences of whether volunteering is perceived as a positive arena and whether it contributes to social inclusion serve as the foundation for this study.

Social inclusion is a concept with many different definitions and meanings; however, in this study, we focus on refugees' feelings of social inclusion as well as the five cornerstones for social inclusion developed by Omidvar and Richmonds [28]. These cornerstones are valued recognition (recognition and respect), human development (the nurturing of talents, skills, and capacities as well as the choice to live a life that the individual values and to contribute in a way that both the individual and others view as worthwhile); involvement and engagement (the right and the necessary support to make/be involved in decisions that affect oneself, one's family, and the community as well as to be engaged in community life); proximity (access to shared physical and social spaces to provide opportunities for interaction, if desired, and to reduce the social distance among people); and material well-being (the material resources necessary to participate fully in community life).

The purpose of this article is to apply a salutogenic perspective to explore how formal volunteering may contribute to developing a sense of social inclusion and well-being among refugees in Norway. The salutogenic perspective contributes with a strength-based perspective to explore how refugees' sense of social inclusion may impact their well-being. Refugees are known to be a group that is characterized by a high risk of mental

problems and disease as well as a low socioeconomic status; however, it is interesting to investigate the factors that may strengthen individuals with refugee backgrounds and explore volunteering as an activity that can contribute to refugees' empowerment and well-being. The central concepts in salutogenesis are General Resistant Resources (GRR) and Sense of Coherence (SOC). GRR represents characteristics within or surrounding the person that can facilitate effective tension management [29]. SOC is a life orientation and reflects the ability to identify the internal and external resources to which one has access and to use these resources to promote health and well-being [30]. SOC considers the world as manageable, comprehensive, and meaningful [29]. More specifically, we ask the following research questions: How do refugees experience volunteering as a contributor to their feelings of social inclusion or exclusion in Norway? How might these experiences impact refugees' well-being?

2. Materials and Methods

Qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted to collect information regarding refugees' experiences with, thoughts concerning, and understanding of volunteering. The interviews consisted of elements drawn from the "life story interviews" approach, which focuses on "the essence of what happened to a person. It can cover the time from birth to the present or before and beyond. It includes important events, experiences, and feelings of a lifetime" [31].

2.1. Study Context

The study context is a semirural community in Norway characterized as a large municipality [containing more than 20,000 residents] [32]. The five volunteer organizations chosen for this study engage in welfare- and community-related activities. Three of these organizations are associated mostly with members of the majority population, while multicultural groups operate two organizations.

2.2. Participants and Data Collection

To recruit participants for this study, we used a purposive sampling approach. In this context, purposive sampling refers to sampling that is based on the participant's knowledge of and experience with volunteering. The leaders of the organizations included in the study were asked to participate in the research project. They facilitated contact between the researcher and volunteers with an immigrant background with whom the organizations were familiar. These volunteers were contacted, informed about the study, and decided whether to participate. Furthermore, we used the "snowballing" [33] sampling method, in which study participants helped recruit other volunteers with immigrant backgrounds. We did not stipulate any restrictions regarding country of origin or reason for migration and included persons over the age of 18. The participants were required to volunteer or to have previously volunteered for at least one of the organizations included in the study. Sixteen participants with various immigrant backgrounds were recruited for the research project. Twelve participants had refugee backgrounds. We chose to focus on the refugee group because they share some characteristics related to how they were displaced forcibly due to violence, war, and conflicts, and the general description of refugees as a group as especially vulnerable and in great need of social inclusion [18–23] (see Table 1 for participants' characteristics). To ensure anonymity, we have chosen to list participants' ages and lengths of residence as ranges. The participants agreed to individual interviews that were audio-recorded. The duration of these interviews ranged from 45 min to 2.5 h, with most interviews having a duration of 1.5 h. All the participants agreed to be contacted again if the researcher needed to ask follow-up questions.

Table 1. Study participant’s characteristics.

Nickname	Age Range (in Years)	Place of Origin	Residence Time Range (in Years)	Status of Employment or Education ¹	Family Situation
Emira	35–40	Africa	5–10	2 years university, student and employed	Separated, children
Abiya	35–40	Middle East	5–10	2 years university, employed	Married
Sana	50–55	Middle East	20–25	Bachelor’s degree, employed	Married, children
Mariam	40–45	Middle East	15–20	Vocational education, employed	Married, children
Zubayda	55–60	Middle East	30–35	Master’s degree, employed	Married, children
Bashir	30–35	Middle East	5–10	Primary school, unemployed	Single
Berna	50–55	Asia	10–15	Bachelor’s degree, employed	Married, children
Parvin	50–55	Middle East	20–25	Vocational education, disabled	Divorced, children
Francine	45–50	Africa	15–20	Vocational education, disabled	Married, children
Yana	20–25	Middle East	0–5	Student	Parents, siblings
Michel	30–35	Africa	10–15	Bachelor’s degree, student and employed	Separated, children
Sonia	65–70	Middle East	20–25	University (not recognized in Norway), disabled	Married, children

Note: ¹ Level of education refers to the highest completed level of education recognized by the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT).

2.3. Content of the Interviews

Semistructured interviews were conducted as part of this study. The interviews involved elements of the “life story interviews” approach [31] by allowing the participants to share their life stories based on open questions. The participants in the study were initially asked about their premigration life experiences related to their upbringings, education, employment, and volunteering in their countries of origin. They were asked about their paths from their countries of origin to Norway and their experiences on this journey. The main focus of the interviews was on the participants’ involvement in voluntary organizations in Norway, how they were recruited, their experiences with volunteering, and their thoughts on the use of volunteering as a way of promoting the inclusion of immigrants in society and local communities. The interviews were conducted at locations chosen by the participants to ensure their privacy and safety regarding personal preferences in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews were conducted in the participants’ homes (2), at the first author’s office (1), at public cafés (3), in public parks (1), at the participants’ workplace (1), at a public library (3) and digitally via Zoom (1). Sufficient time was provided to allow the researcher to become familiar with and develop a relationship with the participants prior to the interviews.

2.4. Analysis

The first author transcribed all the interviews verbatim and imported the transcripts into NVivo software. The data were analyzed using stepwise deductive induction [34], in which the analysis progresses from an inductive interpretation and adopts a theoretical perspective through the analytical phase.

The first step was to code the data inductively “in vivo”, such that the codes were grounded in the empirical data, a process similar to the coding used in grounded theory analysis [35]. Codes should correspond closely to participants’ statements. This process aims to ensure that the codes are drawn from the data rather than from theories, hypotheses, research questions, and previously chosen themes [34]. The first author performed the empirical inductive coding of all text included in the transcripts. The next step in the analysis was to group the codes that exhibited internal thematic connections. At this stage, the codes were examined inductively and subsequently incorporated theories, previous research, and interest, such that the approach was more abductive. This step was conducted by the first author in a close discussion with the second and last authors. The main theme

relevant to the purpose of this study was “experiences with volunteering”. This approach identified three concepts pertaining to the research question concerning how volunteering may impact feelings of social inclusion and well-being and was guided by the theory of salutogenesis [29]. The concepts were labeled (1) feeling safer due to increased knowledge regarding cultures, values, and systems and achieving mutual acceptance, (2) feeling more confident when communicating in Norwegian and contributing to society, and (3) feeling more connected via social relations. These three concepts and examples of some of the associated codes are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Codes and Concepts.

Concepts	Codes (Examples)
1. Feeling safer due to increased knowledge regarding cultures, values, and systems and achieving mutual acceptance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteering creates a positive feeling of being acknowledged and a feeling that my voice matters. • Volunteering enables you to become familiar with Norwegian culture and norms and vice versa • We will grow old here, and our children may become mayors here • I focus on how I can be included; I need all the information I can get • My culture is totally different from the culture here, so I’ve learned a lot about other perspectives • I felt safe enough to ask about the school system • They never consider volunteering because they think that it’s exhausting and they’re not sure whether to stay
2. Feeling more confident when communicating in Norwegian and contributing to society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If my daughter is coming here, I have to learn the language to communicate • Language is a crucial tool for integration • It is harder to learn the language for adults and elderly people • I can both give and receive—you need others, and others need you • I love to help people; it’s soul-related • I can work without speaking the language • I think that it’s important to help others; it is a two-sided process • I thought: Do I have something to contribute?
3. Feeling more connected via social relations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteering is fun, and you get to know many people • I know many people, both from volunteering and work; you acquire a large social network when you participate here and there • When I volunteer, I get to know many people with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds • We need to be together here in Norway or else life is going to be hard. • In Norway, you can’t just knock on your neighbor’s door and ask for a coffee

2.5. Ethics

The participants signed an informed consent. They were informed of their right to withdraw from the study without stating a reason, and they were assured that confidentiality would be maintained both with respect to the transcribed data (which were anonymized systematically) and in any publications resulting from the study. The participants’ confidentiality in publications was secured by assigning them nicknames, presenting their ages in intervals, and referring to their countries of origin only in terms of continents. The study was approved by the Norwegian Center for Research Data prior to the beginning of the data collection process under reference number [888539].

3. Results

3.1. Feeling Safer Due to Increased Knowledge Regarding Cultures, Values, and Systems and Achieving Mutual Acceptance

The participants in the study expressed their desire for integration and to become a part of the society in Norway and the local community. They noted their interest in contributing on an equal footing with ethnic Norwegians by participating in society, entering the labor

market, and earning their own money. Some participants had the ambition of creating a good life for themselves and their children. Francine discussed her approach to other immigrants who did not want to participate in Norwegian society due to specific cultural and religious factors: “We are here with our children. It is in this society that we will become old, and our children may become mayors here, or I don’t know, but we are here. We can keep our culture, but we must be open to the Norwegian culture as well”.

Norwegian culture and norms, as well as Norwegian traditions and political systems, were viewed by the participants in the study as crucial for immigrants to learn. Volunteering was considered a safe context to ask questions regarding the school system or the welfare system, as well as other practical questions related to Norwegian society and culture. The participants experienced other volunteers as very open and helpful.

Several participants in the study reported that cultural learning was not limited to immigrants’ learning regarding Norwegian culture; rather, it was equally important for Norwegians to learn and accept the culture of the immigrants. This mutual acceptance was viewed as highly valuable for refugees as well as for the rest of society. Emira reflected on the volunteering context as a way of helping society accept and become a safer place for all: “If you participate in volunteering, you meet people, you learn about norms and values and the Norwegian culture . . . and you begin to accept the Norwegian culture as well, and the Norwegians also accept the foreigners’ culture. Some are prejudiced . . . but when you meet them and talk to them and when they get to know you, they see you differently. (. . .) When he doesn’t know you, he doesn’t feel safe, but when we know each other, we both feel safe”.

However, several participants in the study described immigrants as a heterogeneous group with varying interests. Not everyone considered volunteering as a meaningful activity, and not every immigrant had the same degree of interest in becoming a part of society. Some participants reflected on people they knew with immigrant backgrounds who were not eager to participate in volunteering. Abiya shared some thoughts regarding why it may be difficult to recruit and include more immigrants in volunteering: “(. . .) They never consider being a volunteer because they think working as a volunteer is exhausting, and they ask me why they should do it. What will I get in return? And I answer that they have to integrate into society with Norwegians, other Africans, Afghans, Poles, and every other nationality that lives here. (. . .) But they don’t want to, and I understand them. They have eight kids . . . they have voluntary work inside their own home. (. . .) And some are unsure if they are going to stay here, that one day UDI [the Directorate of Immigration] may come and take their passport and say ‘you are not going to stay here in Norway anymore’”.

Most participants in the study volunteered alongside people from many different countries and cultures, and they viewed the shared thoughts and perspectives across cultures as essential and valuable. The study participants reflected on the complexity of a society that features people from every corner of the world and noted that they found interacting with people from different countries and with other stories, cultures, and religions to be interesting and enlightening. Sonia was passionate about the possibility of achieving a good society: “We are all humans, and we are all equal. The world is one country. We have to like each other, and we have to help each other. (. . .) I believe in that”.

Even though the participants in the study considered a multicultural society to be necessary, some also viewed Norwegians in general as skeptical and discussed the fact that other people with immigrant backgrounds did not want to engage in social interaction across cultures or even across social classes or religions, which prevented them from desiring to volunteer. Sonia said, “It is still like this today; we have women who do not want to mingle with others because of religion (. . .) it is not merely that they are not educated . . . but because of their conservative thinking”. This conservative thinking or these doubts regarding people who are different from oneself was considered by some of the study participants to be natural. Still, they noted that it is important to overcome this tendency to become familiar with other people and discover similarities.

3.2. *Feeling More Confident When Communicating in Norwegian and Contributing to Society*

The participants considered learning the language to be one of the leading personal outcomes of volunteering that could support their social inclusion in Norway. The language was considered crucial for participation in society, education, and entering the labor market. Some participants noted that volunteering was a low-threshold context in which they could practice Norwegian. Rosita shared, "If someone feels a bit uncertain about their language skills, they may come and use their native language a bit and try to join the conversation with others in Norwegian. It is a good practice situation".

The need for contexts in which to practice Norwegian was viewed as important, especially in the context of Norway, where participants did not feel that it was natural and acceptable to speak with foreigners or even their neighbors. This situation was viewed as a sharp contrast to their cultures and countries of origin, where they had talked to everyone, including neighbors and people on the street or on the bus. Some participants noted that language courses arranged by public services were important. Still, learning and practicing the language in social contexts such as volunteering, or the labor market was considered crucial.

Francine reflected on the paradox that one must learn Norwegian to enter the labor market. At the same time, one can practice the language most effectively in the context of paid work and in other social contexts. She said, "I told them I can work even though I can't speak the language, and it went so well that summer, so I got a permanent job". Francine obtained a job working in the kitchen of a bakery and continued to improve her skills in the Norwegian language as time passed. She also reflected on the professionalized nature of the Norwegian labor market and noted that every occupation requires a formal education.

Participants did not commonly express the notion that volunteering could lead to a paid job. Still, some mentioned that volunteering contributed to their curriculum vitae, and a few experienced volunteering as a steppingstone to the labor market. Sonia and Bashir reflected on the difficulty accessing the labor market despite their volunteering, language practice, and employment training organized by NAV (the Norwegian Labor and Welfare Administration).

One common opinion held that it was challenging to learn a new language, especially for adults. Yana shared her thoughts regarding the differences between adults and children in the context of arriving in a new country and being required to learn a new language: "(. . .) I look at my parents now, and it is not that easy for them to be included, or . . . it is difficult for them to learn the language, right. It isn't as easy for them as for us. I mean, my little brother speaks Norwegian fluently".

The opportunity to contribute as a volunteer also enhanced the participants' confidence because they all described themselves as "other-oriented". Many participants felt that volunteering and helping others were effectively a part of themselves and their personalities, and all the participants found volunteering to be a meaningful activity. Some participants mentioned the need to give back to society, and some posited a natural duty to contribute to society when they had the opportunity. Many participants considered participation to be a way of becoming a part of the Norwegian society and the local community in which they settled, and they noted that it was important for them to feel useful and needed by someone in their new society. Michel described the need to do something meaningful by reference to his experience as an asylum seeker: "It was so difficult to be in an asylum reception alone, with no social network and no opportunity to engage in activities. You couldn't work or go to school, you couldn't do anything, so you just had to sit there. I didn't stay there as long as many others, it was about 7 months, but it was long enough to destroy me mentally; it was very stressful. When I came out into society, it was much better".

On the other hand, some participants mentioned being unsure and exhibiting self-doubt when they were asked to engage in volunteering. Mariam said, "I thought . . . do I have anything to contribute? I think this is a common thought . . . and we think of coming from a different culture, with a different language. I don't know how they reflect; do I do

things the right way? Is it wrong? People worry ... but when you see the reaction when you do something good ... then ... ”.

The participants in the study all reflected on their experiences of being newcomers in society and noted the prominence of a feeling of uncertainty alongside a fervent desire to be included and to become a part of society.

3.3. Feeling More Connected via Social Relations

All the participants discussed acquiring social networks and social relations through their volunteering. A recurring theme was that volunteering could prevent or mitigate loneliness by allowing the volunteer to acquire social contacts and contribute to something positive, especially during the winter, which was viewed as dark and quiet. Many participants noted that they had developed an extensive social network through volunteering and work, and several mentioned they had more ethnic Norwegian friends than friends from their country of origin.

On the other hand, several participants described the difficulty of making friends in Norway. Norwegians were characterized as introverts with whom it is difficult to become familiar in the absence of any reason to initiate contact. Volunteering provided the participants with such a reason, and all the participants noted that they had established friendships and social relations both with Norwegians and people from other cultures through volunteering. Francine expressed a great appreciation for social relations across generations, a point that was closely connected to her culture. As she shared, “it feels inclusive meeting different people, right ... you meet both young and elderly people!”. However, not everyone felt they had made close friends through volunteering due to factors such as age and personal chemistry. Zubayda shared her thoughts as follows: “As I said, the difference in age was great, and of course you would rather be with people of your own age, but it was so much better than nothing. (...) At that time, I had to accept those who accepted me. (...) But after a while, I learned the language and chose my own social network. My network consists mostly of people who contribute and want to help others”.

Some participants experienced that the social network acquired through volunteering did not necessarily carry over to the private sphere. Participants also noted that it takes some time to become familiar with people and that while volunteering may be a path toward inclusion, the timeline and context of the volunteering were to be considered a decisive factor in this context. Some participants also related the experience that the lives of Norwegians were often fully booked outside the volunteering context, and so it was not easy to be social with other volunteers apart from the act of volunteering itself.

4. Discussion

In this study, we have explored how some volunteers with refugee backgrounds experience their volunteering and investigated how these experiences may contribute to the development of the individuals’ feeling of social inclusion and well-being. Participants volunteering activity caused them to feel safer, more confident, and more connected to their new society. They experienced volunteering as contributing to most of the cornerstones of social inclusion [28], such as mutual respect, human development in terms of nurturing skills and capacities, and the ability to make contributions valued by themselves and others. Furthermore, volunteering provided them with the right, the opportunity, and the necessary support to make decisions regarding their lives, as well as the opportunity and the support needed to engage in society in a shared space that could facilitate interaction and reduce social distance.

4.1. Social Inclusion and Sense of Coherence

The participants in this study consisted of a resourceful group of people with refugee backgrounds. Although they had experienced traumatic life events and fled from their countries of origin to settle in Norway, they all had resources that might impact participation in volunteering, such as university education obtained by 6 participants, or the vocational

education obtained by 3 participants as well as the ongoing employment or study in which 8 participants engaged. All participants expressed the motivation to make efforts to be included in society. These resources may be linked to GRR and SOC [29], which enable refugees to cope with the tension resulting from the challenges they have encountered pre-displacement, during displacement, and after resettling. It seems to be essential for the participants to be socially included and to participate in society, and they identified the knowledge and tools that were necessary to comprehend and manage the challenges they met on their way toward social inclusion; they also reported the processes, actions, and experiences they encountered in their new country to be meaningful. High levels of GRR and SOC result in reciprocal relationships, which may lead to better health [36], and people with high levels of GRR and SOC have stronger beliefs that they possess the resources necessary to cope with the difficulties they encounter in the process of acculturation than others. Our study indicates that refugees' participation in volunteering may promote their feeling of social inclusion. The refugees' personal resources and their experiences of volunteering causing them to feel safer, more confident, and more connected may have impacts on the promotion of health. These conclusions coincide with previous findings regarding volunteering [16,17] and social participation as a factor that can enhance resilience, allow individuals to reestablish their social lives, and potentially prevent poor mental health [26]. However, refugees and immigrants do not constitute homogenous groups and are likely to benefit from volunteering in different ways. Integration is a concept that may be problematic; the meanings of this term are diverse and often describe a social imaginary including the state, the nation, and the relationship between the minority and majority populations that are taken for granted [37]. For example, it cannot be presupposed that all refugees seek to integrate or participate in the activities and culture associated with their host country. Research has shown that immigrants acculturate differently during resettlement [38]. Some refugees may seek to maintain their cultural values in exile and may thus reject the values of the resettlement country (separation). Others may reject the values of both their own country and the new country in exile, leading to marginalization, while still others adopt the values of the culture that receives them and may thus discard their heritage culture (assimilation). Reflections on these differences must be taken into account. Volunteering may promote comprehensiveness, manageability, and meaningfulness for some but not necessarily for all.

4.2. Barriers to Social Inclusion and Participation

Another interesting finding of this study pertains to several paradoxes and contradictions that must be illuminated by further research. As Norwegian authorities promote volunteering as a means of obtaining labor market qualifications, on the one hand, it is necessary to consider how inclusive the labor market truly is. Immigrants need a context, i.e., a workplace in which they learn the language of their host country; however, workplaces require language skills before hiring, and the lack of such language skills may prevent immigrants from entering this arena. In addition, the Norwegian labor market is professionalized and requires education, which also makes it difficult to access for refugees who must both learn the language and acquire an education [39]. Other studies indicate that even when immigrants have acquired all these necessities, they continue to experience limited access to the labor market [40,41]. Since volunteering is an arena for social inclusion for some immigrants, it is also necessary to acknowledge that the context and the people encountered by immigrants are crucial for the success of this dynamic process. Previous research has also found that some immigrants experience difficulties accessing social networks because knowledge of the language is necessary for immigrants to be liked and accepted [42]; in this context, it is relevant that the participants in this study highlighted the potential difficulty of learning a new language as an adult as well as the challenges of transferring the social network acquired through volunteering to the private sphere. Social networks may be stressful if they represent sources of conflict or if social support is lacking; hence, the quality of social relations is crucial [43].

5. Strengths, Limitations, and Reflexivity

The participants in this study were diverse in terms of their countries of origin, lengths of residence in Norway, ages, and experiences. Of the 12 participants in this study, only two were men. The participants were resourceful and were not representative of the majority of refugees in Norway. This group may have reflected specific characteristics of the immigrants who volunteer in NGOs, as previous research has found that resourceful people volunteer at higher rates than others, except that women are generally underrepresented in this context [44]. The interviews were conducted by a white ethnic Norwegian, which may have influenced the content that the participants shared during the interviews [45]. The participants were all interviewed in Norwegian. The interviews were conducted with sensitivity to the participants, and sufficient time was allotted to the interviews to allow some degree of trust to be developed between the researcher and the participant as well as to clarify or explain any ambiguities. The researcher was open, curious, and interested in all the stories and experiences shared by the individual participants, which led them to relate detailed stories and experiences describing their lives. The researcher who conducted the interviews has an educational background in health promotion, and this latent focus may have caused the participants to give less attention to the challenging aspects of volunteering and to highlight mainly their positive experiences; however, the participants were also asked about the negative aspects of volunteering. One researcher conducted the empirical inductive coding alone, and it could have been a methodical strength if a second researcher coded some of the material. However, the analysis and grouping of codes were discussed thoroughly in structured meetings between the authors to strengthen trustworthiness.

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