FACULTY OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

MASTER THESIS

WHEN POLICY ENGENDERS POLITICS: EXPERIENCE OF WAITING AMONG ASYLUM APPLICANTS LIVING IN BELGIUM.

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Abstract

Asylum seekers who requested international protection in Belgium faced a complex asylum process characterized by lengthy waiting that could last for months if not years. During their wait, asylum seekers encounter multiple challenges, including limited access to information, uncertain legal procedures, and inadequate living conditions. To investigate how asylum seekers navigated these challenges, the research aimed to find out what it was like for asylum seekers to wait for a decision on whether they could live in Belgium legally or go back to their home country. Prompting asylum applicants to describe their waiting experience for a decision, they negated the waiting experience as depressing. Rather than accepting their subjective and narrow descriptions at face value, the research examined broader qualitative fieldwork materials collected from interviews and participants' observations from their everyday activities to show a more nuanced lived experience of waiting. The study collected qualitative data from a sample of eight male asylum applicants from West Africa but focused on the narratives of three principal participants from Nigeria, Ghana, and The Gambia residing in private accommodations in Brussels, Mechelen, and Leuven. The study employed a thematic analysis to examine the qualitative data obtained from interviews and participant observations. The analysis focused on the narratives and primary activities of the principal participants. The study revealed that asylum seekers demonstrated dissatisfaction with the waiting period, which subsequently motivated them to actively engage in coping mechanisms within their religious, entrepreneurial, and family networks to balance their stress.

KEYWORDS: Asylum seekers, waiting period, West Africa

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List of Acronyms

Asylum Information DataBase……...AIDA
Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons……..CGRS
Federal Agency for the reception of asylum seekers……Fedasil
Immigration Office……...IO
Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder……..PTSD
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees……UNHCR

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

Waiting is difficult, but facing persecution is far more awful. The Belgian asylum system aims to protect asylum applicants, but the asylum process is rigorous and involves several stages (Spotti, 2019). Asylum seekers who requested international protection in Belgium faced a complex asylum process characterized by lengthy waiting. This waiting period could create uncertainty for asylum applicants who have fled their home country and hope to start a new life in Belgium (Claus et al., 2023). Gabin, a Ghanaian asylum seeker, fled his country for safety in Europe. He reached Belgium as a single adult and then applied for asylum in 2019. The Immigration Office (IO) informed him that, depending on several factors, the process could take up to six months or longer. But "It borders me when I wait for weeks, months, and now two years for a decision, Gabin lamented." The voluntary waiting period causes noticeable psychological and social challenges for asylum seekers (Hvidtfeldt et al., 2020).

Asylum seekers in Belgium faced significant challenges waiting for the examination of their application for international protection. One of these challenges is the wait that asylum seekers must undergo for a decision on their application for international protection (Connor, 2017). The waiting period is the time between the registration of the asylum application and the final decision. According to Spotti (2019), Belgian law does not specify a respectable timeframe for deciding on an asylum application. As a result, asylum seekers experienced long waiting periods, which are subjective and depend on factors such as the number of asylum seekers compared to the administrative capacity (staff, work time, and space) and the nature of the case (CGRS, 2022).

Belgium still recorded a high number of asylum seekers. In 2015, the Immigration Office in Belgium registered 35,476 asylum applications, a 106.1 percent increase compared to the previous year, illustrating a rise in backlog cases at the end of 2015 to 11,305, up from 4,500 (AIDA, 2015). In 2022, 36,871 people applied for asylum. This number is much higher than in 2021 when it stood at 25,971 people (AIDA, 2022). The increase in asylum applications strained the asylum system in Belgium, which was already struggling with challenges in asylum processing (Walker, 2023) that had made some asylum applicants psychologically aware of a long wait time before a final decision (Zetter, 2007).

The thesis aimed to find out what it was like for asylum seekers to wait for a decision on whether they could live in Belgium legally or have to go back to their home country (Connor, 2017). The study focused on how individuals experience waiting, using time, place, and space to understand their experiences in Belgium. The study investigated the activities of asylum seekers in Belgium during the waiting period for a decision on their asylum application to understand their daily lives, challenges, and coping strategies.

Numerous studies and public opinion have determined that the waiting experience is depressing. Some literature on migration has considered waiting useless and a waste of time (Jacobsen et al., 2021; Hainmueller et al., 2016; Dupont et al., 2005). Phillimore and Cheung (2021) concluded that prolonged waiting undermined the health of asylum applicants. Osuna (1985) found that waiting has a psychological cost for the waiter, while Hartonen et al. (2022) perceived the waiting time for a decision as limbo. In a casual discussion with Mamadou, a team leader at Red Cross Brussels, he admitted that asylum applicants are going through psychologically hard times. He stated, "When I first met some of the asylum applicants, we could talk and laugh together, but months and years later, they mostly talked to the walls." Prompting asylum applicants in this study to describe their experience of waiting time, they articulated their experiences of waiting in terms of damaged time, useless time, and unproductive time. Instead of taking these subjective and narrow descriptions at face value, the research examined broader qualitative fieldwork materials collected from interviews and participants' observations of asylum seekers' everyday activities to show a more nuanced lived experience of waiting and to determine whether the asylum applicants overemphasized their experiences.

I applied the concepts of cognitive appraisal and discipline to accomplish my goals. According to Lazarus (1991), it is the capacity of an individual to evaluate the significance of a situation or an event that triggers his coping ability and the potential result, demonstrating that appraisal is a subjective choice. I argued that asylum seekers' appraisal of waiting impacts their activities positively or negatively. And asserted that positive appraisal is a vital ingredient of waiting, and to wait patiently, an individual has to exercise some form of subjective discipline. I linked asylum seekers' cognitive appraisal of a situation while waiting for a decision to the concept of discipline by applying Foucault's (1975) argument that discipline is a form of power that regulates individuals' behavior in a subtle and pervasive manner to illustrate how asylum applicants experience waiting.

Methodologically, the study used a qualitative research design (Russel, 2006) and employed a narrative approach that focused on the subjective experiences and perceptions of the research participants (Moen, 2006). The transcripts of the interviews were coded and categorized based on recurring themes and patterns that emerged from the participants' narratives and were thematically analyzed. The themes were then further examined and interpreted to identify similar experiences and unique perspectives among the participants (Lochmiller, 2021). The thematic analysis approach allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the waiting experience of the asylum applicants and provided rich qualitative data for the study. I divided the research into four chapters: the introduction (1), the literature review (2), the methodology (3), and the conclusion (4).

1.2 Problem Statement

Asylum seekers go through complicated legal and administrative steps in the asylum process in Belgium. In normal circumstances, it may take about six months for the asylum authority in Belgium to decide on a request for asylum. However, several factors influence the asylum authority to stretch the six-month waiting period to 21 months, and there are no sanctions if they fail to meet the 21-month deadline (CGRS, 2022). The extension of the waiting period and the lack of sanction for not meeting the 21-month extension increase the backlog of cases and the waiting time for a decision. The extended waiting time may impact the psychological state and well-being of the asylum seekers, who are already fleeing persecution, war, or other unsafe events in their country of origin, as they may feel vulnerable and uncertain about their future.

According to Van der Linden et al. (2023), Belgium has lengthy processing times for asylum cases, which may span months or even years. This long wait time could lead to mental health issues like depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). I had an informal conversation with Mamadou, and he stated that "When I first met some of the asylum applicants, we could talk and laugh together, but months and years later, they mostly talked to the walls." Mamadou's claim shows that some asylum seekers' mental states changed after they requested asylum. In a related study, Van Eggemont et al. (2022) discovered that prolonged wait times for asylum processing can leave applicants feeling helpless and hopeless, which Gabin confirmed when he said, "I cannot do anything other than wait... I have nowhere to complain... I depend only on my story... The protection officer has the knife and the cake."

According to Pollard (2021), asylum seekers in the UK felt isolated and unsupported during the waiting period, which worsened their mental health problems. Asylum seekers, especially applicants residing in private residences, needed more support and resources. In the case of Belgium, asylum seekers staying in private accommodations do not benefit from material and financial support (CGRS, 2022). I discussed with Sama, who had an acute challenge finding a reliable job, what he thought about the support provided to asylum applicants. He said;

> Sometimes I used to think I made a mistake by staying out of the center... I do not receive support from any organization. When I do not work, I do not have money… I cannot travel by bus or train… It is even worse when I feel sick (Sama).

A similar study by Laban et al. (2004) concluded that inadequate access to information and support during the waiting period contributed to asylum seekers' uncertainty and insecurity. "When I call my lawyer, he will tell me to keep waiting... I depend on him [the lawyer] to get more information about my file." (Joseph)

Even though the Belgian government has put in place mechanisms to speed up the asylum process to reduce the time asylum seekers have to wait for a decision, the growing backlog of asylum applications means that people seeking asylum still have to wait a long time and therefore endure the challenges that accrue from waiting.

1.3 Research Objectives

The purpose of the study is to:

- ➢ Find out what asylum seekers do while waiting for a decision on their claim.
- ➢ Identify the challenges asylum applicants face while they wait.
- ➢ Identify potential coping strategies that asylum applicants employ to resist the waiting period.

1.4 Research Questions

I built the research around the following questions:

- ➢ How do asylum applicants in Belgium experience the waiting time for a decision on their asylum application?
- ➢ Which challenges do asylum applicants encounter in Belgium while waiting for a decision?
- ➢ Which strategies do they develop to cope with the waiting?

1.5 Significance of the Study

The study is significant for the following reasons.

Firstly, it highlighted the psychological and emotional impact of waiting on asylum seekers, who are vulnerable because of their displacement, and partly touched on the issue of forced migration. Therefore, it could raise awareness among asylum seekers about using their waiting time to improve their daily lives and activities.

Secondly, it could inform policy and practice by identifying areas where interventions are needed to enhance the well-being of asylum seekers. Those applying for asylum are doing so in search of safety, so understanding how the waiting periods affect their daily lives is crucial for their needs and for developing appropriate interventions to support their well-being.

Thirdly, the study can contribute to a broader understanding of the human experience and how individuals cope with adversity. The study gives more information about what asylum seekers do while waiting for their applications to be processed. So, the study helps shed more light on the problems asylum seekers encountered and how they dealt with the challenges.

Lastly, the study has significance from a social justice standpoint. Asylum seekers are a vulnerable group who frequently face numerous obstacles and hardships on their journey to Belgium. To ensure that their human rights are respected, it is essential to comprehend and address the challenges they face during the asylum process, especially the waiting time.

1.6 Scope and Limitations of the Study

1.6.1 Scope of the Study

The scope of the research focused on aspects such as the asylum seekers' perspectives on the asylum process, the challenges encountered, and coping strategies during waiting.

1.6.2 Limitations of the Study

The research has several limitations. Firstly, I limited the study only to asylum seekers currently in the asylum application process in Belgium. It excluded asylum applicants already granted refugee status or rejected by the asylum authority. Secondly, the study relies on self-reported and observational data from the participants, which may be subject to bias or inaccuracies. Thirdly, the study focuses on the waiting experiences of a limited number of asylum seekers in Belgium. Therefore, the research outcome would not represent the general

situation in Belgium. Besides, no female asylum seekers participated in the research, indicating that the study did not consider gender balance. In addition, I limited the research to asylum applicants in the regular procedure. I did not consider asylum applicants in detention or waiting after the first decision taken at the CGRS. Finally, the potential for individual desirability bias because of the topic's sensitive nature may influence how participants share their experiences openly. I mitigated these limitations using appropriate data collection methods and provided reasons for particular research methods.

The chapter has highlighted the problem statement, research objectives and questions, and significance of the study. Additionally, it illustrated the scope and limitations of the study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter explored concepts and literature to illustrate the challenges of waiting that asylum seekers experience.

2.1.Conceptual Framework

I used the concepts of Cognitive Appraisal and Discipline to express asylum seekers' waiting experiences because the two concepts illustrated mutual reinforcement relationships.

2.1.1 Concept of Cognitive Appraisal

Lazarus (1991), a psychologist, explains in his book, 'Emotion and Adaptation', that cognitive appraisals refer to individual evaluation and interpretation of a specific scenario. An appraisal entails assessing the meaning and significance of an event and considering its relevance to the objectives, aspirations, and well-being of an individual. These evaluations are subjective and influenced by beliefs, values, and prior experiences. Therefore, different people may interpret the same event differently, resulting in varied coping responses.

Lazarus divided cognitive appraisal into two parts: Primary and Secondary Appraisals: Lazarus suggested that people use both primary and secondary appraisals to figure out how important an event is. Primary appraisal is the process of figuring out if something is perceived as a danger, harm, challenge, or possible benefit (Lazarus, 1991). In the case of asylum seekers, the first step would be to figure out how important their positions are. Many people request asylum because of persecution or violation of human rights in their home countries. Therefore, an asylum seeker's principal reaction would probably be a fear, danger, or a feeling of panic while waiting for a decision.

In a secondary appraisal, a person looks at how to deal with the event and the coping mechanisms available. Obtaining asylum in Belgium could be difficult because of the waiting time, language barriers, uncertainty, and inadequate social support. The asylum seeker's second appraisal would look at how they deal with problems and how well different ways of coping with challenges might work. For example, they might feel powerless or frustrated if they think they do not have enough tools to get through the legal process.

According to Lazarus, events influence cognitive appraisals, and it is the capacity of an individual to evaluate the significance of a situation or an event that triggers his coping ability and the potential result. The idea of cognitive appraisal that Lazarus put forth could be

used in the context of asylum seekers waiting for a decision in Belgium to unveil crucial insights into the varied experiences of asylum seekers waiting for a decision. The participants in the study reported experiencing fear in their daily activities and about the outcome of their asylum decision.

In Belgium, asylum applicants could attend school to earn French, Dutch, or a vocation. They are entitled to participate in available educational and professional training programs (Bircan, 2018). For those asylum seekers with work authorization, the regional Offices for Employment provide opportunities for professional training. They can also enroll in adult education classes (CGRS, 2022). But how asylum seekers appraise these opportunities determines the extent of the impact of their waiting experiences. For example, according to Leslie (2022), the medieval town of Durbuy (a French-speaking part of southern Belgium) trained 21 asylum seekers to work as kitchen assistants and bartenders in the hotel and catering industries. Kaddy, who has spent two years in the Hotton reception center for asylum seekers waiting for a decision, attested to the benefit of the training program.

I find the experience very exciting. If you go to a restaurant, you think it is easy until you do it yourself. For me, a plate was a plate, but now I know all the different names for plates and cutlery and the diverse ways to serve food (Kaddy).

In one of my conversations with Joseph, he expressed his desire to become a welder but lamented difficulties in language and a limited training program: "I cannot speak perfect Dutch or French... It is not possible to find vocational training in English... Even if I speak Dutch, it will still be difficult to enter a vocational program in welding."

According to Euractiv’s reports, asylum applicants wait for a decision on their asylum claim for a lengthy period, during which they could receive vocational training to improve their job opportunities. The Leslie findings contradicted Joseph's appraisal of vocational training, signifying that subjective cognizance of a particular situation and environment may generate frustration or excitement. Besides, asylum applicants face a new life where public opinion sometimes focuses on their country's résumé, and the media and other news outlets project their image in a way that affects the perception of asylum seekers (Wroe, 2018). RP5 compared the situation of people fleeing persecution:

> If you come from Ukraine, you don't need to talk; they (the Belgian government) just give you all the protection you need, but when you come from elsewhere (another country), they ask you questions like machine guns (RP5).

The asylum seekers' different ways of perceiving their situation while waiting for a decision could generate more disciplined behavior.

2.1.2 Concept of Discipline

The asylum process in Belgium involves various stages of waiting, during which discipline plays a crucial role. Asylum authorities expect asylum seekers to maintain responsible behavior and adhere to the laws and regulations of Belgium.

Numerous authors have discussed the concept of Discipline and its influence on human behavior. I applied the perceptions of Michel Foucault (1975) to shed light on the role of discipline in ensuring the orderly and effective management of the asylum process in Belgium. Foucault (1975) perceived discipline as a form of social order and control. The Concept of Discipline is crucial to this study because of its significance in ensuring that asylum authorities manage the asylum processes in an orderly and effective way to shape the behavior of asylum seekers.

Michel Foucault's definition of "discipline" was used as a framework to understand how asylum seekers experience life while they wait for a decision on their claim. Foucault's (1975) main argument was that disciplinary power aimed to regulate and control individuals in a subtle and pervasive manner. According to Foucault, institutions like prisons, schools, and hospitals use discipline as a form of power to control individual behavior. In asylum, reception centers simulate institutions that used discipline to keep fugitives under control while processing their files. According to Foucault (1975), when asylum seekers request protection, they are subjected to disciplinary techniques such as surveillance and normalization, in which a combination of both produces a "disciplined society" designed to establish and enforce norms and behavior.

The asylum authorities in Belgium have extended surveillance from the physical to the digital space (Spotti, 2019). They could control the behavior of asylum seekers residing in reception centers and private apartments by searching their online activities. RP2 stated that "there are CCTV cameras at the asylum center, both at the entrances in front of the building and the corridors inside the building." This camera operates continuously, and "It is difficult to determine if you are being watched live or if the camera is recording automatically. I have to behave myself when I am in the corridor" (RP2). In an interview with Gabin, he said he found it difficult to use his digital space on social media recently because he feared it might

affect his asylum procedure (Spotti, 2019). He promoted his business activities on WhatsApp because "I am afraid to use my Facebook account to promote my business... I have no idea what information the asylum authority can take from it and use against me." The supplementation of surveillance from the physical to the digital spaces created a sense of visibility and vulnerability among asylum seekers. The knowledge that the asylum authorities watched their online activities influences their behavior, compelling them to conform to social norms and expectations. This surveillance and control contribute to normalizing asylum seekers' daily activities by suppressing and mitigating potential violent expression (Foucault, 1975).

Normalization is the creation of standards and norms to which all asylum applicants and those working within the system (Foucault, 1975), such as immigration officers, lawyers, and judges, must adhere. Normalization creates individuals who are predictable, compliant, and easy to control in subtle and unnoticed ways. Gabin groaned: "I do not even think of going outside Belgium since I requested asylum here. Nothing exists outside Belgium." To RP3, Staying in the same room with more than six others from different nationalities is something I can't complain about." RP5 stated: "I know no one will believe me when I say I am sick... Even if I send the social services a message, they will not reply." The different statements illustrate how asylum applicants changed their way of life and thinking in favor of practical norms governing the asylum process.

The asylum seekers internalized these norms and perceived them as necessary to avoid punishment (Foucault, 1975). Failure to follow the rules may result in harsh consequences, such as the withdrawal of reception benefits and the loss of benefits from the social community. Joseph, for example, described a situation where a church member forgot to pick him up, and he had to control his reaction to avoid damaging his relationship with other church members: "He failed to pick me up in the morning to church… He made me very annoyed... He did not answer my calls; I could not question him when I reached the church." This incident made Joseph realize the importance of adhering to social norms even in challenging situations. He understood that maintaining peaceful relationships and avoiding conflict was crucial for his asylum request and integration into his community. Joseph's experience is not unique; many asylum seekers face similar dilemmas as they navigate their new lives. They constantly find themselves walking a tightrope, balancing their individuality with the need to conform to societal expectations. Asylum seekers like Joseph learn to suppress their emotions and adapt to the norms of their host country, sometimes sacrificing

their own cultural identities in the process. The fear of losing support and benefits dominates asylum seekers' minds, compelling them to prioritize conformity over personal expression.

Gabin lamented the stress he received from his boss at his job site: "He (the boss) knows that I am an asylum applicant... One morning, when everyone was about to sign off electronically, he told me, I have to go back into the warehouse to complete a job... I painfully respected his orders "(Gabin). Gabin's situation indicated submission through character control. He wanted to refuse but was mindful of who he was and how public perception sometimes negates asylum seekers' actions because of how some other asylum applicants have behaved in the past (Klaus, 2018); therefore, he had to control himself since his application for international protection was ongoing.

Asylum applicants had to attend interviews to state why they applied for international protection. Failure to attend interviews may lead to harsh punishments such as detention or deportation. The immigration officers, lawyers, judges, and asylum applicants followed strict protocols and procedures designed to ensure the smooth operation of the asylum system, which controlled them in subtle and unnoticeable ways (Faucoult, 1975).

By surveilling the applicants' physical and digital spaces, the asylum authority created a form of power by creating a sense of visibility and vulnerability among asylum applicants, making it more likely for them to conform to social norms and expectations, even if those norms and expectations were oppressive or unjust (Spotti, 2019).

2.2 The Socio-historical Concept of Waiting

The time it takes to process an asylum claim and the examination of claims in Belgium has changed significantly in recent years. Belgium's asylum system was entirely focused on the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees until the 1980s. The Convention establishes the requirements for requesting asylum. Before the 1980s, Belgium lacked a distinct asylum legislative framework, and the country decided on many claims within six months of waiting periods (Hatton, 2017). Belgium passed the Alien Act on December 15, 1980, which governs foreigners' access to the territory, residence, settlement, and removal, defines refugee and subsidiary protection status, and thus provides the legal basis for asylum claims in Belgium.

From the 1990s to the early 2000s, Belgium saw a significant increase in asylum seekers, mainly from Africa, Central and Eastern Europe, and the Balkans. As a result, asylum applicants had to wait longer than six months (Blommaert, 2001). The Belgian government

took several steps, including signing the Dublin Regulation and establishing a safe third-country list, to speed up the processing time of some asylum claims. Before Belgium's single asylum procedure in 2006, waiting times for an asylum decision were frequently longer and unpredictable. According to a 2006 study by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, the average wait time in Belgium for an initial decision on an asylum claim in 2005 was 11 months, with some cases taking up to a year to resolve. The Belgian immigration office launched the "quicker and easier asylum procedure" in 2006, the most significant change to the Aliens Act since 1980, to speed up the asylum process so that everyone who applied for asylum would know the outcome within a year (Van der Erf & Spaan, 2006; Toktaş et al., 2006).

Nonetheless, waiting times remained an issue, particularly when additional information or documentation was required. Despite the "quicker and easier asylum procedure," the average processing time increased significantly to over 250 days. An indication that the government failed to achieve its objective of reducing waiting. However, a dramatic drop in waiting time was recorded from 2012 to 2015 due to the introduction of the Safe Country of Origin List. This list, regarded as one of Belgium's key instruments in granting asylum to foreign nationals, allowed faster processing of asylum claims from countries deemed safe by the Belgian government (Hunt, 2014).

Since 2013, the asylum process in Belgium has undergone significant changes. For example, in 2017 and 2018, the Alien Act (1980) redefined the first country of asylum and a safe third country as grounds for inadmissibility. These new ideas aim to improve the effectiveness and quality of the Belgian asylum process by developing new procedures to evaluate asylum requests in less time. However, the Belgian asylum procedure continues to be an issue. In 2022, the average wait time in Belgium for an initial decision on an asylum file was around eight months, with some cases taking more than a year to resolve (CGRS, 2022).

2.3 The Asylum Process in Belgium: Waiting Begins

Waiting is part of the daily life of an asylum seeker (Bagelman, 2013). The asylum process has a series of waiting periods, which are crucial components of the procedure. In this section, the study describes the asylum process from when an asylum seeker applied for asylum. It illustrated what waiting meant to asylum applicants and how it affected their day-to-day lives.

The asylum process in Belgium consists of several stages. It begins with the initial registration, when the asylum seeker submits their application at the border, in a detention center, or at the Immigration Office (IO) in Brussels (AIDA, 2022). After registration, the IO sends the application to the CGRS for examination. The process includes a screening to identify priority cases for quicker processing. The CGRS makes a decision, positive or negative.

In theory, the CGRS decides on an asylum file within six months of receiving the application from the Immigration Office. In practice, it takes an average of nine months for the CGRS to decide on a file (CGRS, 2022). Because of complex issues of fact or law, many people simultaneously apply for asylum, and asylum applicants delay complying with their obligations (AIDA, 2022); the CGRS could extend the deadline by three more months. However, it must notify the applicants why and when they can expect a decision. In addition, the deadline for a decision can reach a maximum of 21 months.

To understand how these deadlines applied in practice, I interviewed Gabin, Sama, and Joseph from The Gambia, Ghana, and Nigeria, respectively, who have all been waiting for a decision for two years and more. Through their stories, I gained insight into the emotional and psychological impact of waiting for asylum seekers in Brussels.

I used the asylum seeker's first-hand account of the asylum registration to examine the asylum process. Joseph (one of the principal research participants) plays a predominant role since Sama, the other key participant, had similar accounts of the registration process. Joseph and Sama both applied for asylum at the IO.

> When I arrived at IO, they instructed us to form a line. There were police officers nearby, as well as people passing out leaflets about non-governmental organizations that could help us. I went through a security check inside the building. I waited in a waiting room until they called my number. They ask me general questions about travel routes and family situations. They took my passport. I was fingerprinted, x-rayed, and vaccinated against tuberculosis (Joseph).

The narrative of Joseph recapitulated how a regular asylum procedure is processed. But Gabin's version of the registration process was more challenging than Joseph's. Gabin was subjected to the Dublin Regulation procedure because he began his asylum process in Finland. The Dublin process is a procedure to determine the country responsible for an asylum application within the European Union (Soysüren, 2022). According to the regulation, only one country may examine a file, and the general condition is that the country ought to be

the European Union country where the asylum applicant first set foot or the country that issued the Schengen visa.

> I had previously traveled to the Schengen region and had a Schengen visa from Belgium. The last time I visited the Schengen Zone, I went to Finland and applied for asylum in 2019. They deported me to Belgium, and upon arrival, I had to request asylum at the airport. Unfortunately, the police officers at the airport could not register my application. But I was allowed to enter the country, and the police told me that if I wanted, I could apply for asylum while in Belgium. I applied for asylum in Belgium in 2019 (Gabin).

The Dublin Regulation allows the continuation of asylum applications in the destination country. It does not specify where potential applicants should apply for asylum. However, Belgian law allowed for the request for asylum at the airport. Not registering Gabin at the airport upon his request, according to Gabin, “started the asylum delay tactics.” According to Gabin, the immigration service of Finland informed him that he could apply for asylum at the airport in Belgium, but it was not possible. “He (the police) told me I had a valid visa... So I was free to enter Belgium. I felt like I was in the wrong place. I began to think about where I would sleep. I applied for asylum at the IO in Belgium three days later,” said Gabin.

Following an in-depth interview with the three principal participants about the asylum registration process, only Gabin could point out a challenge he had during the registration process. The study did not get into contact with anyone who said they registered their asylum at the border or while in detention. However, RP2 and RP5 took one working day each to request asylum at the IO.

When the applications are registered, asylum applicants have to wait for the first interview, which takes place at the Immigration Office. The immigration office screened applicants to identify those who fall under "priority cases," which means their cases could be processed quickly (within six months). Priority cases fall under the Dublin Regulation or unfounded files that do not meet the conditions of the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees (CGRS, 2022). All participants said the IO invited them for a "small interview" within one month of waiting.

> The IO invited me within a month. It is a short interview. I had no lawyer; it was just me and the immigration officer. He asked me general questions and said they would send me a letter for the "big interview." I waited months, then one year, and then two years (Sama).

The statements of research participants indicated that the long wait began after the first interview. One of the most frustrating parts of waiting was waiting for an appointment for the "big interview."

> I was checking my box several times a day…Whenever I saw a postal service worker around my area, I used to feel like he had come with my interview appointment letter…I lose concentration at my job because I think of my invitation… When I received my appointment, I could not remember parts of my case (Joseph).

It took the principal participants, on average, one year to receive a letter for the "big interview." In April, when the study conducted the last phase of participant observation, all key participants were still waiting for a first decision. At this time, RP5 and RP2 were awaiting Dublin transfers to Poland and Italy, respectively. RP1, RP3, and RP4 were waiting for a second interview at CGRS.

During the waiting period, asylum seekers in Belgium accessed support services that helped them understand the asylum process and adjust to their new environment. Several organizations and non-governmental organizations provide legal aid to asylum seekers, helping them with their asylum applications and any legal issues that may arise. Additionally, some organizations offer housing assistance for asylum seekers to find housing. Language classes and integration programs are also available to help asylum seekers learn the local language and culture and facilitate their integration into Belgian society (CGRS, 2022).

2.4 Previous Research on Waiting

In this section, I reviewed past literature on the experiences of asylum seekers waiting for asylum decisions in Belgium and other countries. The review illustrated the relationship among previous studies and highlighted the existential challenges and uncertainties surrounding the waiting process. I reviewed the previous studies to comprehend the psychological impact of waiting and the specific challenges faced by different groups of asylum seekers.

Some studies have emphasized the psychological impact of waiting on asylum seekers in Belgium. Hartonen et al. (2022) emphasized the profound sense of uncertainty and limbo that people experienced while waiting and then pointed out that existential uncertainty led to heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and feelings of hopelessness among asylum seekers. Similarly, Whitehouse et al. (2021) illustrated that asylum seekers were likely to report

experiences of mental health challenges from their previous experiences living and waiting for asylum decisions. This author researched political asylum seekers in two different reception centers in Belgium. They employed qualitative research methods to understand the experiences of asylum seekers in these reception centers. The study found that post-migration stressors, such as uncertainty about legal status, prolonged waiting periods, limited access to healthcare and social support, language barriers, and difficulties navigating the asylum process, significantly impacted asylum seekers' psychosocial well-being in asylum reception centers. According to the study, these stressors contributed to psychological distress, social isolation, and insecurity among asylum seekers.

The situation is more complicated with LGBTQ+ asylum seekers. Ropianyk (2021) explored how LGBTQ+ asylum seekers navigated the reception system and examined the challenges encountered. The author conducted qualitative research and used interviews and observation methods to collect first-hand data from participants. They found that LGBTQ+ asylum applicants faced multifaceted challenges waiting for a decision in Belgium. The author cited challenges such as discrimination, prejudice, and exclusion based on their sexual orientation or gender identity and further revealed that while the reception centers intended to provide a safe and supportive environment for asylum seekers, queer individuals often faced additional difficulties due to their sexual orientation or gender identity (Ropianyk, 2021). Roblain et al. (2017) observed the early-stage experiences of waiting for male asylum seekers in Belgium. They focused on acculturation preferences and understood how asylum applicants navigated the challenges of settling in a new country. They collected data through interviews and surveys. They found that factors such as individual motivations, pre-migration experiences, social networks, language proficiency, the availability of resources, and support systems in the host country influenced the waiting behavior of male asylum seekers.

Studies conducted outside Belgium reached similar conclusions about waiting for a decision. Ramachandran (2022) looked at the tactics used by asylum applicants in Glasgow, United Kingdom, to navigate the asylum process. The author applied a qualitative approach using interviews and observations to collect data from participants. The study measured elements such as language barriers, living conditions, health, and social connections among 30 participants. They found that asylum seekers used diverse strategies and actions to control their lives while waiting. Also, a study by Phillimore and Cheung (2021) found that asylum seekers' poor health resulted from the uncertainty of waiting for a long time. The study used qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate the experiences of refugees during the

asylum waiting period. The author examined how prolonged uncertainty affects asylum seekers' physical and mental health and highlighted the mechanisms through which waiting time contributes to their detrimental health outcomes. The research measured outcomes such as poor physical and emotional health and found that prolonged waiting led to higher levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms among refugees in the United States of America. Mercado et al. (2022) used a qualitative method to research the traumatic experiences of families in the asylum process. And they found that Families arriving in the United States have experienced significant trauma, separation, and loss before and during their journey.

These studies' findings have significant implications for the reception and support of asylum seekers during the waiting period. Asylum seekers' high levels of psychological distress and poor health outcomes underline the need for improved mental health treatments and social support systems. Furthermore, the unique obstacles experienced by LGBTQ+ asylum seekers highlight the significance of fostering secure and welcoming settings within reception centers.

2.5 Themes from Previous Research

This section provided an overview of themes from previous research on asylum seekers' experiences waiting for a decision. It highlighted the main themes that have emerged from the literature and their implications for understanding the challenges faced by asylum seekers. Previous research has illustrated the harmful effects of waiting (Whitehouse et al., 2021; Phillips, 2023). Roblain et al. (2017) and Osuna (1985) concluded that waiting for asylum decisions is tedious and frustrating, especially when the waiting period is lengthy. This section identifies and explains themes that explore the available evidence regarding the waiting experience of asylum seekers in Belgium. The review centered on four major themes: the length of waiting time, vulnerability, psychological health, and access to services and resources.

2.5.1 Waiting Time

One of the themes found in recent literature is the long waiting time. Numerous studies on the asylum process in Europe acknowledged that asylum applicants wait a long time for a decision on their asylum claim (Obi et al., 2022; Bryant, 2022; Sohlberg et al., 2022;

Phillimore & Cheung, 2021), which has become a disturbing component of the daily lives of asylum seekers.

Some asylum seekers do not understand why they wait so long for a decision on their claim (De Backer et al., 2022). Joseph lamented, "I don't see any reason for the asylum process to take so long, and I have no idea what to do to speed up the process." The waiting period was subjective (Hartonen et al., 2021), as asylum applicants may commence the asylum process on the same day but receive a decision at a different time. The IO and CGRS control the duration of asylum procedures. They prioritized and accelerated asylum applications with low chances of success and deprioritized and lengthened the waiting time for applications with high chances of success (Reneman & Stronks, 2021). RP5, subjected to the Dublin procedure, said, "I was told within three months that I had to go back to Italy because that was where I entered Europe."

The hardest part of the asylum process is waiting (Haas, 2017). Gabin said

> I have been waiting for a decision since 2019... Every day, I was thinking about when I would have my interview. Now that I have attended the interview, it is still taking several months for a decision. Whenever I remember that I am still waiting for a decision, I start feeling disturbed inside my body (Gabin).

The long wait made asylum seekers underscore the services rendered by the asylum authority (Ilk & Shang, 2022). The lengthy waiting period makes some asylum seekers think and feel that the asylum authority will provide unsatisfactory service to them (Holbrook, 1993). They interpret the longer waiting time as a pressure mechanism to make them abandon their application and seek other avenues of survival (Foster, 2006). "When you ask them about your case, they only answer that you must wait. I think they want me to get tired of waiting and then abandon the procedure," said Sama.

2.5.2 Vulnerability

Research on the vulnerability of asylum applicants identified the background and reasons for forceful departure, which began with structural and personal factors in the country of origin (Busetta et al., 2021). In host countries, vulnerability revolved principally around the asylum procedure and the place of stay of asylum seekers.

Some asylum seekers are vulnerable at their place of stay and during the asylum process (Llewellyn, 2021). The Immigration Office, the dispatching unit's medical service, and its

designation service analyze the vulnerability of asylum seekers in Belgium at the start of the asylum process to designate applicants to appropriate reception centers (CGRS, 2022). Vulnerable persons such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ+) may face discrimination from other asylum seekers (Burgess et al., 2021), so they are considered during the designation of accommodation. Also, female asylum seekers are often more vulnerable (Canning, 2019). Notwithstanding, recent reports in Belgium emphasize the vulnerability of single men (AIDA, 2022).

Backlog cases and asylum seekers' narratives further increase asylum applicants' vulnerability (Blommaert, 2001). Their inability to understand the asylum processing time (Ramachandran & Vathi, 2022) and to express themselves using Western vocabulary made participants feel abandoned. Some participants compared their vulnerability to that of Ukrainians. Sama stated, "I wish the war in Ukraine would end soon... so that the immigration authority can focus on us." RP3 made a similar lamentation: "There is more space to take in more Ukrainians." The statement of the participants illustrates that they perceived their present waiting as confined (Petäjäniemi et al., 2021) and the ongoing war in Ukraine as an obstacle.

2.5.3 Mental Health

The study used four electronic sources (PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, and Web of Science) to review the literature on psychological health published between 2019 and 2022. The search term included a combination of keywords linked to psychological well-being, asylum seekers, and Belgium. The literature illustrated that a lengthy waiting period negatively impacts the psychological health of asylum seekers.

According to Whitehouse et al. (2021), post-migration stress negatively affects asylum applicants' mental health. Using qualitative research, they conducted an in-depth interview with 41 asylum seekers and staff in two asylum centers in Belgium and then concluded that asylum seekers faced significant constraints regarding their living conditions: absence of privacy, overcrowding, and unhygienic conditions that continuously prolonged their exposure to daily stressors such as social isolation and uncertainty about the future. The study by Patanè et al. (2022) noted high levels of depression symptoms and anxiety among Syrian refugees, similar to Henkelmann et al. (2020), which linked prolonged wait periods to symptoms of sadness, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

During asylum applicants' stay in Belgium, they frequently experience psychological problems, a lack of control over their circumstances, and social isolation (Phillimore & Cheung, 2021). Mamadou's statement supported the psychological trauma asylum seekers go through: "When I first met some of the asylum applicants, we could talk and laugh together, but months and years later, they mostly talked to the walls." Gabin, who mentioned that he resided in two different asylum centers before moving to private housing, corroborates Mamadou's assertion that psychological states change over time.

> I was in a forest; it was a big hall with many people cut off from the city; I could see every other individual from my little space... When they transferred me to another center in Liege, they gave me a small upstairs bunkbed. Sometimes I only sleep for three hours. I am in bed, but my spirit is outside, in Gambia, or wandering in Brussels… I get up much more tired than before I went to sleep. I find it difficult because I have not lived like this before (Gabin).

RP3, who stayed in an asylum center in Brussels, stated, "I have seen asylum seekers fight for things that do not need any fighting. Normal individuals become abnormal because of stress."

The prevalence of mental disorders and psychological symptoms among asylum applicants is high (Hoell et al., 2021), especially among asylum seekers who waited longer and harmed their psychological well-being.

2.5.4 Access to Services and Resources

Access to services and resources is a critical aspect of the asylum process in Belgium. In this section, I examined the living conditions, healthcare access, educational opportunities, and legal support available to asylum seekers in Belgium. By understanding the challenges and barriers they face in these areas, I gained insights into the difficulties and potential impact of asylum seekers' integration into society.

Asylum applicants in Belgium have a right to housing and dignified living conditions during the asylum process. Reports indicated that asylum seekers in Belgium faced significant challenges finding suitable places to stay, influencing some asylum seekers to live in overcrowded housing, where they lack personal space and privacy and necessities such as food, water, and hygiene products are often insufficient or poor quality (Gordon et al., 2020; Roblain, 2017). Additionally, a general search on Google about the situation of asylum seekers in Belgium between 2021 and 2023 illustrated an ongoing reception crisis in Belgium. Many reports indicate overcrowded housing, inadequate access to necessities, or

unsanitary conditions for asylum seekers sleeping on the street (Walker, 2023; Balty & Mistiaen, (2022); AIDA, 2022; CGRS, 2022; Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, 2022).

Moreover, according to Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen (AIDA, 2022), asylum seekers living in private residences have limited access to healthcare compared to those residing in reception centers. Only emergency care is available to those in private accommodations, and it is subjected to numerous bureaucratic procedures. Therefore, some asylum seekers would not have access to the medical attention and support they require. The three principal participants in this study revealed that they have never received medical attention from the asylum authority, and they highlighted the challenges of accessing healthcare. Sama lamented the strict medical procedure: "I do not think about sickness, and I pray not to get sick. I know asylum applicants with real illnesses, but they still do not have enough medication." RP4, who stayed in a reception center, expressed similar frustration:

> When they send me to see a nurse, I know my medication is paracetamol. They just listen to your complaints, and then they give you paracetamol. All the time, it is the same medication…Some asylum seekers even threaten to fight before they provide them with a doctor's appointment (RP4).

The limited access to healthcare creates a significant barrier for asylum seekers in private accommodations and reception centers. They may not receive the necessary medical attention and support they require. The health sector provided limited services through the asylum centers, and asylum applicants in private accommodations did not benefit directly from the health services except in emergencies.

Furthermore, the barriers to educational opportunities for asylum seekers exacerbated their already challenging situation (Manço & Alen, 2012). Adult asylum seekers faced significant obstacles to accessing education. It is problematic to meet the entry requirements for university programs. The teaching languages of most university courses and training programs were French or Dutch, which are national languages not understood by many asylum seekers. Additionally, asylum seekers' status made admission into vocational studies more difficult. Joseph expressed his desire to pursue vocational training in welding but felt it was impossible due to the program's scarcity and his inability to speak one of the national languages.

"I love to do vocational training in welding, but where will I find it? Also, I cannot understand the language in a language school because of stress," said Joseph.

A participant such as Joseph was willing to follow a vocational program but found it challenging to register because he spoke none of the national languages. The limited access to education for asylum seekers would handicap their development of new skills or prospects for a better future, creating a cycle of limited opportunities and making it difficult for asylum seekers to free themselves from present and future challenges. By addressing the educational barriers, asylum seekers would access the tools and opportunities needed to rebuild their lives and contribute to society.

Also, the limited availability of legal support further compounded the challenges faced by asylum seekers. The asylum authority provides free Legal assistance only to those with insufficient financial means (CGRS, 2022). As a result, it leaves many with limited proper guidance and representation, which puts them at a disadvantage when navigating complex legal procedures and increases the risk of violating their rights.

Generally, limited access to healthcare, education, and legal support creates significant barriers for asylum seekers, hindering their ability to rebuild their lives.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Recruitment Criteria and Description of Research Participants

I interviewed eight male asylum applicants residing in reception centers and private accommodations in Belgium. The participants originated from West Africa. The youngest participant was 22. The oldest participant was 36. The median age was 29.2. Two participants came from Nigeria, and two from Cameroon. Ghana, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire, and The Gambia each had one participant. I conducted interviews and participant observation with three participants. The three participants were the principal participants in the research. I only conducted interviews with the other five participants. The small sample size allowed for in-depth interviews and participant observation of waiting experiences, which better documents the existence of an effect of asylum policy on asylum seekers (Hackshaw, 2008). The strength of small sample sizes is the ability to provide in-depth descriptive information unique to a participant and reveal a shared theme among the participants, which could increase the accuracy of results (Hamlin, 2017).

3.1.1 Recruitment Criteria

The study used general and specific criteria to recruit participants.

3.1.1.1 General Criteria

The study used the following general criteria to recruit the eight research participants:

- Gender: Male asylum seekers
- Origin: West Africa.
- Age: 18 and above.
- Have a reception place.
- Waiting for a decision
- First asylum application in Belgium.

3.1.1.2 Specific Criteria

The specific criteria applied to the three principal participants. The three participants were Joseph from Nigeria, Sama from The Gambia, and Gabin from Ghana. They all met the following additional specific criteria:

- ➢ They have been waiting for a decision for at least two years.
- ➢ Resided in a private accommodation

I recruited only male asylum applicants because of the challenges and demographic composition of asylum seekers in Belgium. Many asylum seekers in Belgium are male (CGRS, 2022). Furthermore, current literature and reports conclude that male asylum seekers encountered unique reception challenges and disparities in treatment compared to females in Belgium (AIDA, 2022; Walker, 2023). Table 1 illustrates the characteristics of the research participants.

Table 3.1: Characteristics of Research Participants

RP	Country of origin	Sex	Age	Educational level	Entry year Belgium	Civil status	Main asylum reason	Socio-judicial status
2	Cameroon	M	33	University	2022	Married	Sexual orientation	Asylum seeker
		M	29	Secondary	2020	Living together	Political	Asylum seeker
2	Nigeria	M(J)	36	Primary	2018	Single	Political	Asylum seeker
		M	26	University	2021	Single	Political	Asylum seeker
1	Ghana	M(G)	34	Secondary	2019	Married	Political	Asylum seeker
1	Sierra-Leone	M	22	Primary	2019	Single	Family problems	Asylum seeker
1	The Gambia	M(S)	30	Secondary	2015	Living together	Sexual orientation	Asylum seeker
1	Cote d'Ivoire	M	24	University	2021	Single	Political	Asylum seeker

M = Male; G = Gabin; J = Joseph; S = Sama: RP =Research Participants
Average age = 234/8 = 29.2

Table 1 illustrates participants' biographic data and other information: country of origin, marital status, sex, age, the reason for requesting asylum, level of education, the date they entered Belgium, and a socio-judicial state. The participants were from different countries in

West Africa: Cameroon, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Ghana, Syria, and Cote d'Ivoire.Their date of entry into Belgium is different from the date they requested asylum.

Additionally, all the participants had received formal education. All but two of the research participants had completed secondary school. The majority of participants were single. Two participants were married and left their families in their home countries. Two had cohabited (lived together) in their home country and had children.

Four participants were single. Five participants had political problems, while two described themselves as homosexual. They could not say if they had meaningful employment in their home country, except for Joseph, who testified that he was a military man.

3.1.2 Description of Principal Participants

3.1.2.1 Overview of Joseph

I met Joseph on a Saturday in December while volunteering at the Lunch for All project in Brussels. He was a tall male figure (about 1.70 m), 36 years old, and dark-skinned, with no beard on his chin or hair on his head. He smiled often and spoke English as a second language. I observed Joseph's activities twice at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I also went to his house in Mechelen to collect data on his living space and to confirm his earlier narrative of his activities after my observation. He lives in a small room suitable for one person. He perceives waiting time in terms of vanity. He said, "I don't feel anymore like I am waiting for a decision. I feel like I have settled. I can stay in this condition for the next 20 years." Further questioning revealed a biblical background in his view of waiting: "I am waiting for God's time because my life is in God's hands" and "I am patiently waiting for God to answer me at the appointed time." The observation and his perception indicated that clinging to the church helped him minimize subjective waiting (Maier et al., 2022).

3.1.2.2 Overview of Gabin

I met Gabin in December. He was transferred from Finland to Belgium following the Dublin Regulation. Like Joseph, he requested political asylum in Belgium. I interviewed him in Pidgin English. I met him once at his home and four times at Rue Heyvaert, Brussels. He was an entrepreneur. I observed Gabin more times than the other principal participants. There were moments when we could not continue the conversation because he had to attend to his matters. Gabin buys cars in Europe for private individuals and small and medium-sized

companies (clients) in West Africa. He bought most of his vehicles online. And upon the recommendations of his friends, he purchased cars not advertised online. The final place of his business transaction was Rue Heyvaert, Brussels, where the Socar shipping agency transports the vehicles to the shipping port in Antwerp. He was dissatisfied with waiting. “I have not physically seen my children for about four years. I see my children only through WhatsApp video calls. They look bigger than when I left them in 2019. It makes me feel that I have stayed in Belgium for a long time (Gabin).”

3.1.2.3 Overview of Sama

Sama requested asylum because of his sexual orientation. I observed his activities in Leuven. His main activity was babysitting a nine-year-old boy for a relative. He took the child to and from school and stayed with the child at home when the child's parents went to work. I interviewed him in the Pidgin language in Leuven. He resided with his relative and had an unstable part-time cleaning job through which he earned little money (Lisa, 2016).

The diverse backgrounds of the participants contributed to the complexity of their waiting experience and underscored the need for a comprehensive understanding of their circumstances.

3.2 A Narrative Research Approach

This section illustrates the different fieldwork activities.

3.2.1 Accessing the Fields

I employed a narrative-qualitative research approach in the study. A narrative approach was essential because of its potential to reveal human actions and behaviors in society. Following this approach, I allowed participants to determine the information they intended to share (Lewis & Adeney, 2014). It permitted me to listen to and respect their narratives to capture the nuances of the participants' lived experiences and gain insights into their emotional, social, and psychological aspects of waiting (Barreman, 2007). Generally, the approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and ensured that participant narratives remained central to the study.

I started fieldwork in December 2022 and ended on April 30, 2023. I did the fieldwork in multiple geographical locations: Brussels, Leuven, and Mechelen (Hannerz, 2007). All the cities were accessible by bus and train.

In December 2022, January, and February 2023, I volunteered for the Red Cross and Lunch for All projects in Brussels. These two non-governmental organizations managed their activities in the same building in Brussels at different intervals. The main activity of these organizations was to provide lunch to asylum applicants and illegal migrants in Belgium. I contacted these organizations online through their team leaders in December 2022. I informed the team leaders of my reasons for volunteering, and they positioned me at service spots where I could contact the beneficiaries of the projects and participants for my research. I volunteered at each organization once a week for three months. In my main activity, I electronically counted the daily beneficiaries and distributed tea to them.

3.2.1.1 Field Challenges and Solutions

The experience of trying to gain access to research participants was very discouraging during the first few weeks of volunteering. Not all the beneficiaries who came for lunch were asylum seekers. Therefore, I had to distinguish asylum seekers from non-asylum seekers. To achieve my result, I had to carefully observe, listen, and initiate friendly conversations with the beneficiaries to determine their status. Even after a casual discussion, it was difficult to identify a beneficiary's status (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007). I became worried I would not realize the thesis or have to restart the search for another organization where I would have easy access to asylum applicants. However, I later gained experience in the field. I changed the research methods from interviews and focus groups to interviews and participant observation.

I had to employ purposive and snowball non-probability sampling techniques to identify research participants. Through these sampling techniques, I identified participants who met the research sample criteria and gained a profound understanding of recruiting a rare sample from a population (Naderifar et al., 2017). I was fascinated to observe firsthand how to get a research participant through referral. The shift in research methods enriched and broadened my perspective on the complexities of adapting to my research environment. I wanted narratives from four principal participants; I ended up with three (Valerio et al., 2016). I contacted participants through word of mouth, passing from one potential participant to another. For instance, Joseph provided information that led to the recruitment of Gabin and Sama.

3.2.2 Participant Observation

I actively engaged in the daily activities of the three participants. I attended church services, did grocery shopping, and visited their places of residence and work. I played a more active and interactive role as a researcher. I got closer to the research participants during the fieldwork to obtain first-hand knowledge (Russel, 2006) of their lived experiences waiting for a decision. In my role, I remembered how my personal experiences may reflect and differ from those of the research participants. It was challenging to determine how deeply I was involved in the participants' lives during my observation (Robin & Sluka, 2013). But from my fieldwork experience point of view, my position as an immigrant with roots in West Africa influenced my immersion in the field. Notwithstanding, my cultural background provided room for trust and honesty for participants to respond to the interview questions.

During meetings, I took down observers' field notes. I started making field notes in January 2023 to document my thoughts and recollections of my fieldwork experiences. The field notes served as records of observed activities with participants and my memories of events during the conversation-style interviews (Gupta & Ferguson, 2007).

3.2.2.1 Observation Challenges and Solutions

Taking field notes was frustrating, particularly during participant observation sessions (Zegarra, 2022). Taking field notes sometimes made the participant nervous and disrupted the natural flow of activities. I had this experience with Joseph when he was preparing the sacrament in the church on a Sunday morning. And also when Gabin was searching for cars on the internet. To address this, I relied more on my memory and minimized the frequency of note-taking. I also increased the number of times I visited a participant, which made them accustomed to my presence and note-taking, allowing me to capture crucial details effortlessly. To minimize nervousness, I incorporated activities that created distractions, such as walks in the park with Sama and sharing a drink with Gabin in a snack bar, which enhanced the natural flow of conversation.

Another field challenge was managing participant behavior. When observed, some participants may change their behavior (Oswald et al., 2014). It was challenging to know how the participant behaved when not observed. I visited participants several times and discussed issues such as African politics, which was out of the scope of the research, to understand and

manage the disparity in behavior between when a participant was not observed and when he was observed (Berreman, 2007).

Through participant observations, I gained first-hand data for the research. This method enhanced the trust needed to interview the research participants and created the opportunity to understand the temperament of each participant, which was beneficial in upgrading interview questions and handling conversations.

3.2.3 Interviews

The interviews aimed to understand behaviors, emotions, relationships, and coping strategies through the participants' own words. This information contributed to the overall research.

I used semi-structured interviews in the form of a conversation to collect data (Russel, 2006). The participant provided the data in the form of a narrative. The participants recounted their stories as they knew them, and I collected data on the part of the narrative suitable for the research (Barreman 2007). I conducted nine voice-recorded interviews with the three principal research participants. I conducted recorded interviews lasting 40 to 70 minutes. Each recording lasted an average of about 36 minutes. In total, I conducted voice-recorded interviews for about five hours.

Each interview lasted about 50 minutes on average. I patiently and attentively listened to their responses, probing further when necessary. This initial phase provided valuable insights that guided my subsequent participant observations. To enhance the validity of my findings, I referred back to the discussion during the participants' observation to ensure consistency. I conducted interviews and observations with patience (Berreman, 2007). I started the research with interviews and then proceeded with participant observation. During the field observation, I brought up questions I had asked the participant during the interview. Using both methods enriched the quality of the collected data by preventing conflicting data, and I gained a better understanding of the subject matter.

3.2.3.1 Interview Challenges and Solutions

I had challenges during interviews and in conducting pre-arranged interviews. The participants rescheduled some appointments. The participants sometimes canceled an appointment. For example, I made an appointment with Gabin to meet him in Brussels, where he performed the final phase of his business, to no avail. He called and postponed the

meeting. He cited personal reasons. Also, I had difficulties having a free-flow interview with Sama in Leuven because he frequently attended to a child under his care. As a result, I had to stay longer than planned, and on one occasion, I had to reschedule my visit.

The delays hindered the smooth progress of the research. The change of appointment affected the timeline of the data collection and analysis. The delays caused by Gabin's reasons and Sama's lack of focus during an interview led to rescheduling interviews, which impacted the overall process and timeline of the data collection and analysis. Additionally, the disruption during interviews meant I had to stay in Leuven longer than initially planned, which disrupted my activities. I could have avoided the delays with better communication and planning.

In addition, I had difficulties redirecting participants to the subject matter. The participant wanted to know more about the asylum process. They solicited information beyond the scope of the research. Participants wanted to know how to access specific asylum support services, the Dublin procedure, and the specific roles of particular asylum bodies. I partially answered some of the questions because of ethical research reasons. However, giving them a general response about their situation strengthened my relationship with the research participants. Also, I created a research guide (see appendix) in which I always marked the point at which I stopped before the disruption to ensure that I stayed on course with the research topic. The research guide acted as a memory prompt for a list of areas I intended to cover during the interview.

The conversational style of the interview eased and fortified interaction with the participants. The interview session was often long because the participants engaged in detailed and out-of-research-scope narratives. I allowed them to talk while I took notes only on what was essential for the research. In most instances, their long conversation was full of details but with many repetitions.

I conducted the interviews in three languages. I interviewed in French, English, and Pidgin English. I used the Pidgin language during interviews and observations because the three principal participants originated from West Africa, where they used the Pidgin language to communicate daily. They understood and spoke the pidgin language with precision. I used Pidgin English on most visits. So I would like to provide a brief clarification about the language.

Pidgin English is an informal, conversational, and daily spoken language derived from the African dialect and Standard English. The language derived its word structure from a sociohistorical dialect mixed with standard English. The coastal belts of West Africa have a variety of spoken Pidgin English. However, the pronunciation and accents differ from one country to another because of the heterogeneous variation of the dialects spoken in specific countries. I used Nigerian Pidgin English (Faraclas, 2008), Ghanaian Pidgin English (Huber, 1999), and Cameroonian Pidgin English (Ayafor & Green, 2017) to conduct the oral interviews with the key participants. The pidgin language created a comfortable and inclusive environment for the principal participants. They felt the absence of a language barrier when narrating their stories. This approach allowed deeper levels of engagement and authenticated the interviews since participants could express themselves freely and confidently. Moreover, I gained valuable insight into the cultural nuances and perspectives of the participants' respective narratives.

I concluded my fieldwork on April 30, 2023. I maintained occasional connections with the principal research participants. This ongoing relationship allows me to stay updated on any developments or insights that may arise, even after I leave the field.

3.2.4 Transcribing and Coding

I transcribed and coded the collected data to analyze and interpret the interview data, identify themes and patterns, and draw conclusions from the research. To make sense of the data, I listened repeatedly to the recordings, which I used to produce eight pages of transcribed text.

I used narrative analytical techniques and applied first-pass transcription to the oral narratives (Riessman, 2008), which allowed me to write the initial oral record to make the data analysis easy. I captured the original spoken words, phrases, and sentences and aspects of the participants' speech patterns, emotions, pauses, and non-verbal clues to the extent possible. This technique minimized the cost of the research. I translated all the recordings from Pidgin English to Standard English, listening to the records and reading notes recorded in Pidgin English. I completely omitted the Pidgin English and Standard English phonetics and interruptions in the transcription and compensated for the omissions with the field notes to obtain a source of knowledge.

I coded the data after transcription. I used Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis, or CAQDA, to code the data (Kelle, 2004). I inserted the transcribed materials into the software

package Ethnography 6.0 (Qualis Research), constructed a coding framework, and wrote memos and themes using the software. The software has features that facilitate the creation of memo lists based on themes and topics in coded recordings. I created active themes from interviews and highlighted them in a memo notebook that connected the themes.

The computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDA) tool was essential during the data analysis. The software developed a comprehensive coding framework and effortlessly composed memos and themes. The distinctive characteristics of the software facilitated the arrangement of memo lists according to themes and topics extracted from the encoded transcripts. This comprehensive methodology enabled a more profound comprehension of the interrelationships among different themes and enhanced the qualitative analysis procedure.

The software allowed cross-references and related topics from different data sources (transcribed interviews and field notes). The ability to fill in and organize thematic materials from various sources was most important in linking my diverse data. However, I conducted much of the analysis manually, on notebooks, and through sketching notes relating to particular parts of the data.

The manual analysis procedure was time-intensive yet fundamentally essential for acquiring an in-depth understanding of the connections between the data. I conducted the manual analysis by making notes and sketching the main points and observations as I read the research materials. Through precise note-taking, I captured variations and made connections between themes that the automation could have neglected. In addition, I could critically evaluate the validity and reliability of the collected data through manual analysis and identify gaps in my understanding and the collected data, which further enhanced my knowledge of the data.

The software's cross-referencing functionalities significantly facilitated transcription and coding. It enabled effortless navigation across various sources and illustrated the interconnections among them. The tool offered a comprehensive illustration of my research materials and exposed the connection between the progression of themes. However, the manual exploration and note-taking processes remained essential for extracting significant insights from the collected data to formulate and analyze various themes.

3.3 Narratives: Belgium as a Place of Refuge

This section examined the coping strategies of the principal research participants. I provided an in-depth analysis of their daily activities to illustrate how they navigate the challenges of waiting for an asylum decision.

3.3.1 Safety Thoughts

"I want peace of mind, a place where I will not be afraid." Joseph

"I feel that Belgium is a safer country for people like me. I see gay people feeling at ease on the street." (Sama)

Safety thought was a coping strategy for the principal research participants. The participants' appraisal of safety illustrated their emotions and coping strategy (Lazarus, 1991) to resist waiting. I started with the participants' safety because the asylum process is entirely about the safety of asylum applicants. I intended to find out if participants thought they were safer in Belgium. I analyze the views of Joseph and Sama, who requested political and sexual orientation protection, respectively.

Most research participants expressed a willingness to resettle in Belgium (Neumayer, 2004). I attributed this to the progressive peace they visualized in Belgium. Joseph wanted an environment in which he would not be afraid. The assertion of Joseph denotes the comparison of his safety concerns back home with his safety in Belgium. He desired a place where he could have peace of mind and would not be afraid to connect his past experiences to his future expectations.

Joseph had served in the military in Nigeria and witnessed violence and unrest. He desired to be free of conflict after seeing the destruction it caused. Belgium, with its reputation for stability, security, and respect for human rights, appeared appealing to Joseph. He hoped that by moving to Belgium, he would be able to obtain the calm and stability he craved and start over again. The need for physical safety and his desire for emotional well-being motivated his decision to seek protection in Belgium. He did not explain the political reasons that caused him to flee his country in 2016. However, he merely admitted that unacceptable things happened when he was in the military and that he would not want to talk about them. I deduced from his statement that his past and past actions that were not accepted in his home country could also be his worries in Belgium. His fear of the past, present, and possible future

in Belgium illustrates to some extent why he still could not feel safer in Belgium, as noted in his statement above.

As discussed in subsection 3.3.3.1.2, Joseph's fear brought him closer to the religion. Joseph turned to the church for comfort and protection out of fear of his history and the possible repercussions it may have on his conduct in Belgium. The church, with its strong sense of community and moral instruction, offered Joseph a unique network of support that provided Joseph with a sense of acceptance and belonging (Snyder, 2016). Joseph dealt with his home country's experiences and present situation by engaging in religious activities and interacting with other Christians. He found strength in his faith, could freely share his worries at church, and received direction from spiritual leaders who fed him with words of confidence and hope for a better future. Therefore, Joseph's relationship with the church gave him renewed purpose and optimism to perceive Belgium as a safer palace.

Sama had no safety concerns in Belgium. He considered Belgium safer because the reason (sexual orientation) that caused him to request asylum in Belgium was "practicable here [in Belgium] without any fear." He recounted occasions where he talked openly with people from his country about his sexual orientation and "still felt secure sitting among them."

Gabin, who also requested political asylum, admitted to living in safer conditions in Belgium. "They shoot me behind my head on the street in Ghana... I went to the hospital. A few days later, I traveled to Europe since my visa was still valid," said Gabin. He said he would have lost his life or mental state if he had stayed in his home country. But since he arrived in Belgium, he has never felt unsafe because of the gunshot wounds (Gerkens & Merkur 2020). "When I think of my life, I sometimes care less about how long I wait for a decision," said Gabin.

The three main participants contrasted their experience of safety with their present situation and narratively constructed the safety they could achieve in the future in Belgium. The participants connected their traumatic experiences in their home country to their thoughts of safety in Belgium, a country where they could find peace and security.

3.3.2 Place of Stay

Waiting takes place at a particular location. In the asylum process, asylum applicants have the right to material reception, including accommodation, food, and clothing. In this subsection, I focused on asylum applicants in private accommodations who were the principal participants.

3.3.2.1 The Narrative and Observation of Gabin

"The IO registered my asylum and said I should wait for accommodation. They told me to go to Fedasil. I got a place to stay after three weeks… It was a big tent in a bush," Gabin said. Fedasil provided Gabin with a place to stay, which was uncomfortable for him. He had to stay in the “big tent in a bush” for about three months, then he was transferred to Liege, where he spent close to ten months, and then decided to rent a room in Brussels.

Gabin's business activities (3.3.3.3.1) forced him to search for private accommodation in Brussels. He rented a room from someone from his country. I went to the house in April to confirm the facts of Gabin's residence. He has a room in a three-bedroom house. He shared the kitchen with the owner, and Gabin did not own kitchen utensils. The house has two bathrooms. He shared the general dining room and the sitting room. He admitted greater comfort as compared to the reception center. I did not enter his room. But he could change his dress and keep some of his documents for his business transaction, and from his phone conversation during previous meetings, I believed he stayed in the house. Though he stated that at his age (32), he had less liberty in the building, his sleeping space was very comfortable, and he had privacy and control over his room. However, he had some challenges in his living space; for instance, he had limited storage, and his room had no windows. Since he had no kitchen, he used a small electric stove and a mini fridge in his room. Gabin mentioned that he occasionally relied on takeaways or ate at restaurants to compensate for this limitation. Also, he complained about shared bathroom facilities, which posed occasional inconveniences, especially during peak hours, but had adapted by establishing a schedule to avoid clashes with other residents. He admitted to developing the resilience to make the most of his living space. His story indicated the role of friends during waiting.

3.3.2.2 The Narrative and Observation of Joseph

Joseph's room was small. He was relatively content with his sleeping place. He first stayed in Hasselt with a friend for years, and then the Church decided to rent him a room in Mechelen. Joseph was 36 years old and had lived within the European Union's borders for about ten years. It was a warm midday in April when I arrived in Mechelen by train to meet Joseph. We took a bus, then walked about 5 minutes to Joseph's residence. He stayed in a small room suitable for one person. The room had enough space for a single bed, a wooden lampstand, a metal table, a chair, and a wardrobe. The walls of the room had neutral white paint. His bathroom and kitchen were located in the basement. I sat on the chair with my notebook on

the table while he sat on his bed. I aimed to observe his perception of comfort in his sleeping place and discuss his immediate neighbor's community.

He had a positive perception of his immediate environment. He had never had a problem with anyone in the community and had no friends in his neighborhood. However, he had a negative perception of his living space. He regarded his living space as too small for someone of his age. "I can stand in the middle of the room and touch two sides of the walls," said Joseph. He stretched his hands from one wall to another to indicate that his room was small. He had many things in his room. His ‘under-bed’ and wardrobe (inside and on top) were full of bags. The small window in his room provides enough ventilation for one person.

He claimed that he would never again tell someone he was an asylum seeker. But what struck me the most during our discussion was his assertion that "I don't feel anymore like I am waiting for a decision. I feel like I have settled. I can stay in this condition for the next 20 years." I questioned him further to find out what he meant. His arguments carried a lot of Biblical backgrounds, such as vanity, indicating the extent to which one of his coping strategies of downplaying waiting time has impacted his reasoning about time. What I learned from Joseph's neglect of waiting time is linked to his belief in God. He considered his living space small but was willing to stay there for as long as possible, provided he could not get something better. The utterances of Joseph indicated themes of discomfort, acceptance, and regret for his residence.

3.3.2.3 The Narrative and Observation of Sama

Sama had a more difficult situation than Joseph but had a different view of his sleeping place. Sama was the youngest of the three key participants. He was 30 years old. Sama, as compared to Joseph, appreciated his living space. "I do not have a room, but I have a key to a door. I can go there [to the house] any time and sleep." Sama said having a place to sleep is very important for him. He showed me his key to the main door and testified that "I come and leave the house when I want." He exercised the power of self-control. The one time I went with him to a grocery shop in Leuven, I noticed the key he showed me was with him, and he used the key to close and open the door when we left the building and returned from the grocery store. Sama stayed in Leuven with a relative and babysat the relative's child. He stayed in a house with one room, a parlor, a kitchen, and a toilet. In the building, he had a mattress that he kept in the room of his relative, and he used it at night to sleep in the sitting room. The sitting room was big enough to accommodate the mattress, with extra space

remaining. Samas's thoughts about his sleeping place produce themes of contentment and accessibility.

The three key participants have varied views about their sleeping spaces. The difference in their perception produces a variety of themes, ranging from limited comfort and freedom to discomfort. Securing a place of stay can be a challenging process for asylum applicants. In the case of Gabin, he initially had to visit the IO and register his asylum, but they did not immediately provide him with accommodation. He later rented a room in Brussels. Joseph was fortunate to have a friend in Hasselt who allowed him to stay for several years before the Church rented him a room in Mechelen. Sama was lucky to have a comfortable place with one of his relatives. These examples highlight the difficulties and uncertainties that asylum applicants may face in securing a stable place to stay.

3.3.3 Major Activities of Principal Applicants

The three principal participants had different primary activities. I observed their activities in April 2023. I observed their major activities to gain insight into their coping strategies and experiences of waiting for a decision from the asylum authority in Belgium. I considered their activities a coping strategy because they confessed that these activities sometimes helped them forget about waiting. The first participant, Joseph, attended church services for several hours each Sunday and participated in various church activities, such as preparing the sacrament and organizing church equipment. The second participant, Sama, was a caregiver. He spent hours each day taking care of the child of a relative. He found comfort in having a key that gave him access to the house at all times, which reminded him of his country of origin. Finally, the third participant, Gabin, was a dedicated entrepreneur. He spent hours searching for and buying cars online. Despite the uncertainty of their situation, Joseph, Sama, and Gabin found moments of peace through their activities. I observed Joseph's activities at the church and job site.

3.3.3.1 Religion and the Job Life of Joseph

"It's not always about money. Sometimes I work for free or to benefit from material things. I put my trust in God," Joseph,

3.3.3.1.1 Job Activities

I first observed Joseph at his job site in March 2023. I took a train from Brussels to Krainem Station to meet Joseph. I met him at the Krainem Metro Station in Brussels, where a church member who wanted Joseph to work in his home picked us up with a car a few minutes later. Joseph introduced me as a friend from Brussels. The church member gave Joseph a job to do in his compound. Joseph's task was to remove wild weeds from specific areas around the compound. Additionally, he had to transport piled-up trash in a wheelbarrow from the yard through a lightly muddy road passing through a tree garden and keep it where a trash collection company could pick it up.

Joseph considered it easier to transport the garbage than to uproot the wild grasses. The compound was large, and the wild grass was sparsely distributed in the yard. I assisted him in moving around to search for the grasses and then uprooting them. We wore hand gloves to remove the wild grass. According to Joseph, the church member had told him that the wild grass itches and produces rashes when in contact with the human body. "It is not the first time I am doing this job, and this is not the only church member I work for part-time," said Joseph. He also assisted other church members in transferring their household equipment when they changed apartments. He said that when "I assisted with a transfer, I profited from items such as clothes and other household equipment that I keep in my room." This testimony explains why his room had many bags of items on top of his wardrobe and under his bed.

However, they paid him for uprooting the wild weeds. They do not reward him on task or piece rate. Instead, his payment depended on the morality of the Christian. He testified, "They always give me more than I expected, and the amount varied each time I do the same or similar jobs." Joseph. I spent more than an hour with Joseph as he performed his task with ease and joy. Joseph's views about his jobs illustrate themes of contentment, hope, and dependence.

3.3.3.1.2 Church Activities

"I trust in God... Thanks to Him [God], I have Christians to support me. I have renewed my faith in God since I joined the Church. I know God will provide for my needs," said Joseph.

During the interviews and observations, all except the participant from Ghana described themselves as Christians.

> I met this woman when I was sleeping in the street in Hasselt in 2018. She invited me to the church. Since then, I have continued attending church meetings. The church members helped renew my love and faith in God. And I got my asylum lawyer through a church member (Joseph).

The statement of Joseph above illustrates re-involvement in religious devotion. He engaged himself in the practice of faith with a church he did not know before he arrived in Belgium (Wuthnow, 2020). He expresses the importance of joining the church because it "renews my love and faith in God," and it was "through a church member that I got a lawyer." The church activities kept Joseph busy on Sundays and sometimes during the weekdays. The church meetings allowed him to make new contacts and access social and emotional support, which he needed the most. The church activities, therefore, absorbed some of Joseph's experiences of boredom and loneliness.

I observed Joseph's church activity because it benefited him enormously more than the other participants, and he used Biblical vocabulary each time I met him. I went twice with Josehph to the church in the Brussels metropolitan area in February and April 2023. The churches had a social gathering atmosphere, with prominent religious devotions among the attendees of the church services. The church had a mixed congregation: about 50% Belgians, 40% United States tourists, and 10% other nationalities. Joseph had the opportunity to meet people with similar religious backgrounds but different ethnic, national, and linguistic cultures. He viewed the church social gathering as an opportunity for positive social bonding. The church held meetings in English and Dutch using translation headsets, which they shared with each church member. The electronic device switched to one for English and two for Dutch.

Some asylum applicants develop social relationships with others through their participation in religious services. The informal social relationships may subsequently result in personal relationships with individuals through dialogue around the church compound, during which the conversation may revolve predominantly around sharing past experiences. Joseph stated, "I have gained new contacts and acquired the telephone numbers of others to prolong my relationship with them."

The church premises provided a social space within which Christians could socialize. I observed that Joseph played an active role in preparing the sacrament and arranging and rearranging church equipment. When Joseph arrived at the church premises in the morning, he "prepared the bread and water and then placed them in the church." This bread and water are later blessed and shared with the congregation as the Body of Christ. According to

Joseph, he prepared the sacrament "every Sunday, especially when the missionaries are absent " because they gave him a priesthood title. The fact that Joseph prepared such a secret sacrifice depicts the extent to which he was trusted and belonged to his Christian community.

Furthermore, Joseph performed routine Sunday church tasks. The two times I visited him at the church, Joseph was responsible for collecting all the headsets used for translation from a store room, where they charged the headsets, then replaced them in the store room and inserted them on charge at the end of the church service. Such a function made it easy for new and old (absentee) church members to recognize him. In April, when I had my last interview with Joseph, I asked him how he experienced his activities in the church.

> I do not have a place to call mine now… Going to church always makes me feel at peace. I feel relief in the church… Everyone is willing to accept me as one of their own; just singing and praising God together makes me feel like they are all giving me the support I need… They pay my house rent and are responsible for my transportation to and from the church… I thank God (Joseph).

Joseph expressed the internalization of his experiences within religious practices in profoundly personal terms through his involvement in church activities. Implicitly, he illustrated his relationship with the church as a way to survive his dilemma of waiting for a decision. Even more profound for him was sharing his burdens with Christians willing to provide him with emotional and financial support, enabling him to achieve personal security. Religious practices and devotion are crucial for Joseph because they have helped to maintain his cultural identity, improve his sense of discipline (Wuthnow, 2020), and relate him to the past while at the same time shaping his present lifestyle. The observation data illustrate Joseph's sense of belonging in a particular social space where he exercised meaningful social roles and gained emotional security.

My observation of Joseph produces themes of guidance ("I got my lawyer through the church"), dependence ("they helped me pay my house rent"), and self-discipline ("I follow the church doctrines"). The partial immersion of Joseph in church activities helps him reduce his thoughts of waiting and feelings of loneliness.

3.3.3.2 Activities of Sama in Leuven

Sama stayed in Leuven. His main activity was babysitting for the child of one of his relatives. The 12-year-old child attended a day school in Leuven. Joseph took the young boy to and from school every morning and afternoon and spent time with him at home.

"I shower the child in the morning, dress him up, and then take him to school by bus. I bring him back home from school after" (Sama).

3.3.3.2.1 Caregiver

I participated in Sama's activity to bring the child back from school. I met him at the bus station in Leuven. We took a bus to the child's school. Sama has done this for about seven months. Before, the relatives took the child to and from school, but since Sama lost his cleaning Job, which was his main activity, he assisted with the child. When we arrived at the school, we walked into the school building. The child was sitting in a waiting room. Most of the other pupils had left. It seems we were late. But according to Sama, he "always arrived at that time because of the bus schedule."

Sama took the child, and we went home by bus. He had very little to tell the child. He asked the child general and necessary questions, such as, "Did you finish the food I put in your bag?" On the bus, I sat behind them. At home, he helped the child change his clothes and get him something to eat. This activity, according to Sama, was part of his daily routine.

3.3.3.2.2 Grocery Shopping

Also, I participated in grocery shopping in an African-owned shop in Leuven with Sama. The shop in Leuven was where he spent some time with friends. The shop sold items that originated in Africa and Asia. According to Sama, he bought most food items in this shop.

> I come here [to the shop] to buy food items... The items are expensive… But I can meet friends; we share ideas and have fun together. I feel comfortable sitting in the shop as long as I want, and I think no one sees me as a thief or tells me to leave… I feel equal to others… The food items and their smell make me remember home [my country of origin], and I feel like I am buying in my country (Sama).

Sama admitted that the food "items are expensive," but the buying of the items made him "remember home." He created the connection between home and cost. I observed that his priority was the feeling of remembering home and not the cost of the food items. He

developed a homey sentiment in this shop by buying familiar home food items. The social change he sought from the shop exceeded the financial burden. He could also create and express the connection of feeling to the people in an African-owned shop. His construction of cultural familiarity and ethnicity through the purchase of food items from Africa with the people in the shop created an atmosphere within which he saw himself as equal to every other person and not as someone waiting for a decision to stay in Belgium legally.

This type of social place (an African-owned shop) was vital to Sama. The process of Sama achieving a befitting degree of ethnicity and cultural identity at the African-owned shop illustrated momentary social links that constituted profound social support for an asylum applicant waiting for a decision. In addition, Sama's feeling of home illustrated his experiences with places and spaces that triggered his emotion of familiarity with home (Huttunen, 2005).

The conversation in the African-owned shop went beyond usual business transactions. Sama felt at ease with the shop owner. They discussed politics and social life, and he could collect items on credit. The conversation and trading model in the shop regenerated home-country memories. Part of their conversation focused on preparing and eating certain food items sold in the shop compared to European dishes. My observation of Sama's activities generated themes such as trust, regrets, and familiarity.

3.3.3.3 Activities of Gabin in Brussels

I contacted Gabin through Joseph. Gabin was 34 years, married, and had three children back home. He had light skin. He always looked tired when I met him in Brussels. Gabin, who originated from Ghana, had migrated to Belgium to improve his business opportunities but requested international protection in 2019. Despite the challenges he faced waiting for a decision, Gabin remained resilient and determined to continue in his line of business. He worked tirelessly as an order picker with a logistics company in Londerzeel at night and engaged in his car business during the day. The weariness on his face was a testament to his long working hours.

> I have very little time for myself… I work from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. four times a week. I sleep very little during the day, and then I go online to search for cars. Sometimes friends recommend second-hand vehicles to me. I am too engaged, but I have to. I used to be very stressed out waiting for my decision, but now I put most of my time into my business and work. If I don't work more, the cost of living in Belgium will take my capital, and I will have no money (Gabin).

Gabin spoke passionately about his experience in Belgium. He related his work to the cost of living in a private apartment in Brussels: "If I don't work, the cost of living will finish my capital." Through our conversations, I realized Gabin was worried about waiting and its effects on his capital.

3.3.3.3.1 Entrepreneurial Activities

Gabin's main activity was to buy cars within the European Union and resell them to small and medium-sized enterprises in West Africa. Gabin, a businessman turned asylum applicant, was always interested in lucrative second-hand car business opportunities. Gabin's mastery of buying second-hand cars in Belgium and other European Union countries and reselling them to small and medium-sized enterprises in West Africa was commendable. I had the chance to witness his activity firsthand in Brussels, where he meticulously navigated through the active online second-hand car markets in Europe, negotiated deals with sellers, and ensured that he procured the best second-hand vehicles at profitable prices. He aimed to buy low and sell high in the destination country. The first thing that caught his attention in a car was the brand: "It should be Toyota; I care less about the model; second, the price; third, the quality," said Gabin. The second-hand cars he purchased, he said, "always had minor or major reparable faults." His attention to detail and knowledge of the online market were evident as he carefully inspected each vehicle. He assessed the conditions of each car as stated online and its potential resale value.

He bought most of his cars online. He searched various websites and online marketplaces, carefully analyzing each listing to find the best deals. Gabin was well-versed in the art of online car shopping. He utilized advanced search filters and conducted thorough research on the sellers. Also, Gabin could evaluate cars online by spotting hidden imperfections in a second-hand vehicle and accurately assessing its condition through detailed photographs and descriptions. His objective was only to purchase second-hand cars with high resale potential.

> Searching for cars online has become a relief for me, a way to temporarily forget about the stress and pressures of my daily life. It's like a little adventure, exploring different models, comparing prices, and reading reviews. Sometimes, I find hidden imperfections in a car that my friends have not seen yet (Gabin).

When he finally got approval to buy a car in Belgium, he made an appointment with the seller and drove to the dealership, where he paid in cash. He had networks in the Netherlands, Germany, and Finland, where he bought most second-hand cars. In these countries, his agents

visited the car and then paid in cash to the seller. They would transport the car to Brussels, where he checked it physically for the first time. His main challenge is transporting cars from Finland, where "he buys most of the second-hand cars he needs at a cheaper rate" (Gabin).

He received the cars in Brussels, where he negotiated the final payment for their transportation by ship to West Africa. When the vehicles arrived in Brussels,

> I controlled the unloading of the cars from a truck, and they each drove to the SOCAR parking garage, where I confirmed the cars for shipment to West Africa… And then pay for transportation for each car separately ” (Gabin).

The Socar shipping company transported the cars by land using trucks to the Anwepen shipping port for shipping to West Africa. Despite the challenges of buying cars online, such as the inability to physically inspect them, Gabin's careful approach was to minimize risks and maximize his chances of finding and purchasing valuable second-hand cars that he could resell for profit.

3.3.3.3.2 Jobing as an Order Picker

Besides Gabin's main activity, he worked at night in a logistics factory. He took on this additional job to supplement his income and support his family back home. Despite the long hours and physical demands, Gabin combined this job with the car business. Gabin said, "I have been in his part-time job for over one year." And he combined the job with the car business because of the cost of living in Belgium. He stated, "If I don't work, the cost of living in Belgium will take my capital." In Belgium, asylum applicants who reside in private accommodations do not benefit from material assistance. Gabin had to combine his business with a part-time job to continue his business because he had used part of his capital to support himself while waiting for a decision.

Gabin's meeting the demands of his clients in West Africa did not only bring economic benefits and foster friendly connections, but it also immensely helped to keep him very busy in his usual line of business, which helped him overcome some of the hurdles of waiting for an asylum decision in Belgium.

The three participants had different main activities. Joseph found solace in attending church services and participating in various church activities. Sama was a caregiver and assisted his relative with grocery shopping. Gabin combined business activities with his job. These

activities provided moments of peace and helped the participants temporarily forget about the waiting.

3.3.3.4 Commonality in Participants Narratives

3.3.3.4.1 Sports (football)

The principal participants used sports to mitigate the effect of waiting. They watched football matches and participated in football gambling (McDonald et al., 2022). They found comfort and entertainment in the delight of watching football matches on television. They passed their time by cheering for their favorite team or placing bets on football matches. The excitement and anticipation that came with each game provided a temporary escape from waiting for an asylum decision.

“I watch football on television in the evenings. It makes me think and feel like I used to watch football with friends back home. But I cannot shout as I used to back home because I usually watch the matches at home alone,” said Sama.

"I watch football on my telephone when my best team is playing" (Joseph).

Watching football generates happiness for football lovers (Pringle, 2004). The football games provided a sense of nostalgia and connection to past experiences. It reminded the research participants, especially Sama, of the joy of watching football with friends back home. However, the solitary nature of watching matches alone at home prevented him from fully expressing his excitement as he used to. Despite this, watching football still brings happiness to his life, allowing him to temporarily escape from the challenges of waiting. Sama occasionally participates in football betting, but Joseph does not.

Gabin had a similar experience. He watched football in an African-owned café in Brussels. In the cafés, according to Gabin, "expressing anxiety during a football match by jubilating and shouting was part of the entertainment."

I watch football with different nationalities. "I cannot watch football at home, especially when my favorite team is playing... I go to an African snack bar, where I have entertainment while I enjoy the game (Gabin).

Gabin passed the time by watching football matches in an African-owned café in Brussels. According to Gabin, the lively atmosphere in the African-owned café had football fans from

different backgrounds coming together to support their favorite teams. Gabin found solace in this community, as he could freely express his emotions without judgment. The excitement of the game provided a temporary escape from the boring everyday routine of waiting for a decision. According to Gabin, watching football with other nationalities in Belgium created bonds that transcended cultural differences and made him realize the power of sports to unite people and provide a much-needed respite from the monotony of waiting.

Joseph admitted he loves football and watches it on his telephone when his best team is playing.

Whether engaging in football gambling or simply enjoying the game on television, on the telephone, or in a Snack bar, sports, especially football, serve as a means for Sama Joseph and Gabin to alleviate boredom and find solace while waiting for a decision.

3.3.3.4.2 Gender Role

I only recruited male participants for this research. So, I considered it essential to deduce gender narratives from participants' stories. For instance, in an interview with Gabin (status: married), he said, "As a man, I have to provide for my family, so I have to keep on struggling no matter the circumstances." Gabin's narrative indicated and projected a male self-image in connection to power and resilience, as he acknowledged the long waiting time and the struggles involved. He linked his male gender to a self-image that should withstand the situation he found himself in (Kurtz et al., 2018). Thus, he expressed his male gender as a form of coping.

However, Sama perceived the male gender as problematic. He thought obtaining assistance as a single male adult during the asylum process was challenging (Griffiths, 2015).

"It is difficult to find help here [in Belgium], and because I am a man, it becomes more difficult. Even when I am sick, people are still careless. They [people] only think that I am here to find work" (Sama).

RP2 perceived that single male asylum applicants had a lot of disadvantages in Belgium. He pointed out that "media discourse was pessimistic towards West African asylum seekers, making life more difficult for them." In recent months, numerous outlets (Walker, 2923; AIDA, 2022) have confirmed that single male adult asylum applicants had difficulties finding shelter in Belgium, which may affect the asylum applicant's mental health.

3.4 Results

In this section, I thematically analyze the themes generated from the data collected from the research participants.

3.4.1 Challenging Living Conditions

The living conditions in asylum centers and private accommodations were challenging (Gordon et al., 2020). Legal provisions provide adequate living standards in reception centers, but the current practical situation presents contradictory pictures (CGRS, 2022). The problems raised in the accommodation center and private apartments differed but were similar.

3.4.1.1 Inadequate Privacy

Accommodations have inadequate privacy (Zill et al., 2021). There is less privacy in the asylum reception centers than in private accommodations. Participants complained of difficulty living in small spaces without adequate privacy. RP2 articulated that while living at the asylum center, his sole desire was for the "door to be closed." He described how fellow asylum seekers and personnel entered and exited the rooms without prior notification.

> Fellow asylum applicants come into the room without even knocking. Personnel knock and then push open the doors as they wish. It is like they are just walking to their bedroom. Sometimes I intend to change my clothes, but I am afraid someone is coming to open the door (RP2).

Gabin also testified to the inadequate privacy in asylum centers.

> Five people or more in one room! I do not have any privacy… When I go to the bathroom, I sometimes need to follow a line… I have to shower either very early in the morning or very late at night. It is okay if they are my family members. Living with five strangers in a room is difficult (Gabin).

However, in the private accommodations, Gabin stated:

> I now have a room in the house of someone from my country… but here [in Belgium], I see him as a brother. I can access the bathroom when I want, and I can switch off and switch on the lights in my room whenever I want. I have some privacy (Gabin).

The concept of privacy requires the availability of sufficient space that facilitates the creation of an environment that is conducive to intimacy and homeliness (Grønseth & Thorshaug, 2022).

3.4.1.2 Inadequate Space

The participants expressed dissatisfaction with the limited size of the storage space, the absence of curtains on the windows, and the inadequate space to store their belongings. RP4 said he had to keep personal items under his bed due to spatial constraints. Joseph described in more detail an atmosphere where space seemed too "small" in private accommodation:

> I used to live in a big house with lots of space. You can see that I can stretch my hands a little and touch the wall in this room. I cannot buy more things because I do not have space to keep them. My under-bed is already fully occupied, just like the wardrobe. It is stressful to arrange things in the room. Here, my room is my wardrobe; my room is my kitchen; my room is my dinner table; and I eat on my bed. I feel disturbed being in this small room (Joseph).

3.4.1.3 Security Concern

There was a security problem (Tazreiter, 2017). The participants accepted that Belgium was safe because of the lack of imminent persecution and violence, which caused them to flee their homes. But they thought asylum centers manifested minimum security. RP1 noted, "There is no security camera in the center." Gabin said he left the camp for security reasons.

> I have seen strange things happening in the center. People fight in groups and stop before the staff arrives. Some people will steal... Even if you see it, you cannot talk because you are afraid. People from countries with many asylum applicants in the center have an advantage because they will only protect their fellow countrymen (Gabin).

Insecurity for asylum applicants living in private accommodations means more than fighting and stealing (Essex et al., 2021). Asylum applicants in private accommodations view insecurity in terms of discrimination. Joseph stopped introducing himself as an asylum applicant to other Christians because some Christian friends made him feel insecure due to his status.

> She did not know my status. Since we meet at the church, we exchange numbers as I do with other Christians. I visited her to work in her compound, but one day she called me and said certain things about my status, and she was even afraid of my presence in her house (Joseph).

Incidents like this were not strange to Gabin, who said, “I was shocked when I told some friends who did not know my status in Belgium that the IO had not called me yet for an asylum interview.” He said the behavior and language of those around him changed, making him feel embarrassed and insecure to talk about his status again elsewhere.

Asylum applicants in Brussels go through tough times to navigate their relationships with fellow asylum applicants, the asylum authorities, and friends. As a result, asylum seekers feel uncertain about the future of these relationships, and research on asylum applicants that focuses only on interviews may overemphasize the pessimistic experience of asylum seekers.

3.4.2 Loss of Future Direction

A common phrase among the participants was that they did not know what to do. They could not connect their present moment to the future because of the uncertainty and inadequate opportunities in their current situation (De Backer, 2022; Hartonen, 2021; Reneman, 2021). Joseph, a 36-year-old man, said, "I feel like I have settled." He seemed wrapped in the gospel of Jesus Christ and refused to value human time.

> I arrived in [Netherlands] Europe with much hope, thinking about a bright future. But now, the picture of that bright future has disappeared. I do not think anymore about the future. I feel like I am already living in the future. I feel the presence of God in my heart. What else do I want? I have left my future in the hands of God. I have to be patient, waiting for God to help me. My religion teaches me a lot about patience. Now, I Just eat and sleep. When a Christian wants my service, I provide it. Too much waiting in Belgium and my previous waiting in the Netherlands have killed my earthly thinking of the future. The asylum process is slow... With my orange card, I cannot find a stable job, and it is challenging to register for vocational training. I cannot plan my next week; I cannot be myself. In the church, life will always exist (Joseph).

Joseph expressed his frustration with the asylum process in Belgium. He claimed that the asylum authority had "killed him" because of the slow asylum process, but life will always exist in the church. In addition to confirming the slowness of speed that Joseph had mentioned, RP5 lamented, "I do not know why it takes them so long to decide on a file."

Furthermore, Gabin admitted,

> I sleep in the reception center at 4 a.m. and wake up at 7 a.m. I left the center, rented a room in Brussels, and decided to work at night in a factory because the sleep had dried from my eyes. When I do not work at night, I stay on my laptop computer, searching for cars online, so I can fall asleep at any moment. I feel pain in my eyes and head when I cannot sleep. I do not sleep well. It is not a good life. I used to be very busy during the day and fall asleep at night before I applied for asylum (Gabin).

Sama said the waiting process has made him mentally ill. He compared his situation in Belgium with his life back home and admitted that he had faced challenges back home but had meaningful day-to-day activities. In his country, "I had a purpose and a sense of

direction... But now, I have no clear direction or purpose." The endless waiting for a decision on his asylum application affects his mental health. Sama dreamed of the days when he would wake up with a sense of purpose and tackle challenges to make progress in his life.

> In my country, I could plan my day, but here [in Belgium], I do not have a plan because I have to wait for a decision to stay legal, and I do not know how long I have to wait. Now, I feel like I am nowhere because nothing is happening; I am just waiting. My everyday life has little meaning. I depend a lot on others. In my country, I had jobs that made others rely on me, and I used to have a busy day. Instead, here [in Belgium], on the street, at home, anywhere, I pray to God daily, asking Him for a better future, and I find hope in praying (Sama).

The recurrent theme described above indicated that participants wanted to engage more in meaningful things. They wanted activities such as attending school (vocational training) or having a stable job. They felt that at their age and in good health, they ought to contribute usefully to society rather than sit passively waiting for a decision. They described life as on hold (Moreira, 2019): "I feel like I am settled" (Joseph).

Although they performed certain activities, they described them as having no direction because of their status, which attracted fear and an ambivalent vision of the future.

The fear of participants in their current circumstances revealed how they thought about the future. They perceive the future through the following themes: hope, patience, and the Mercy of God (religion).

The participants hope for a better future. They believe their situation will change with time, and they will improve their connection with friends in their country of origin and make new friends in Belgium. Their prospects highlighted the importance of connectivity (Ramachandran & Vathi, 2022). The participants linked religion and patience to hope. The participants acknowledged an uncertain future but patiently waited for it and prayed to God for the best to come out of it. They believed that through faith in God, they would find solace and strength to confront any challenges. The participants understood hope not as passive waiting but as an active belief in the possibility of a better tomorrow. This belief gives them the strength to persevere through difficult times and the desire to continue to struggle for a brighter future.

3.4.3 The Feeling of Fear: An Open Trap

The feelings of fear was common with asylum applicants in the Dublin procedure, who had a different view of entrapment from participants in the regular asylum process. The participants in the regular asylum procedure saw entrapment as a physical prison, while those in the Dublin procedure expressed entrapment as being looked upon as a fugitive (Fontana, 2022).

> I am on the Dublin procedure. They want to send me back to Poland. They wasted all my time, you see! I have been waiting for four months like a prisoner. No activity, no place to go, no decision, and now they say I have to go to Poland and start the asylum procedure again. I will go to France, but they wasted my time here. I am tired of the waiting. If I go to Poland, they will still say wait. I speak French, and here [in Belgium], I can easily express myself in a language I am comfortable with without any translator. I will go to France. I will not go back to Poland. I have spent six months here [in Belgium]. There is no work to keep me busy (RP5).

RP5 seemed worried about the Dublin procedure and wanted to find a way to reduce the stress of waiting. He thought it would be better to go to France, where he could express himself in French, than to Poland, where he would restart the asylum procedure. He felt trapped in the Dublin procedure, which made him feel like a fugitive if he ran away to prevent a possible transfer to Poland.

RP3, who was in regular procedure and had been waiting for a decision for about a month, had a similar but optimistic view of entrapment.

> I know I have to wait. My friends already in the asylum procedure had informed me of the challenges. I prepared my mind for it. I sometimes feel like I am in prison, but practically, I am not. I am free. I can go out and come back when I want. But I can say I am in an open prison in Belgium. I cannot go out of Belgium (RP3).

Feeling trapped meant the asylum seekers thought they had no control over their situation. They were at the mercy of the asylum process, uncertain when or if they would have refugee status. The restrictions placed on their movement made them feel even more trapped. They are confined in Belgium and unable to explore or experience life outside the country, which may hinder their ability to learn from different cultures. This sensation of confinement weighed heavily on their minds as they searched for the freedom to travel and explore other countries, which can lead to increased stress, anxiety, and depression (Li et al., 2016). Despite the restriction, they remained resilient and determined to navigate present and future challenges and uncertainties.

3.4.4 Time and Space

It is worth noting that the participants in this study are asylum seekers who fled their home countries and are now living in Belgium. They have encountered multiple challenges in adapting to their new environment and have participated in activities in Belgium that helped them recollect memories of connections in their home countries (Sagbakken, 2020).

The participants expressed how their experiences in Belgium affected their perception of time and space and how they related their present situation to past activities in their home country. They lived a double life considered detrimental to their mental health in Belgium.

The main participants attributed their coping strategies to past activity in their home countries. Sama found delight at the African-owned grocery shop. There, he saw familiar food items and met friends with whom he shared similar African experiences;

> I go to the African-owned shop because they sell the same food items I used to buy in Africa. I can meet friends and discuss things without feeling like a foreigner. It makes me feel like I am in my country with friends. The shop brings back memories of the past (Sama).

The connection between memories of their home country and activities in the host country did not apply only to Sama. Joseph and Gabin had similar perceptions. Joseph supported Sama's perception by admitting:

> In my country, I go to church every Sunday. I had many Christian friends that I talked with after church. The difference is that here [in Belgium], I have to listen and smile more to fit into the new Christian community. I am a Christian like them, but their culture affects my interactions. I feel confused sometimes among other Christians… Even when I have to visit Christians at their houses, I still struggle to align with their way of life. It is a struggle all the time (Joseph).

Cultural differences affected Joseph's way of life, even though he had made friends with the church community (Groen, 2019), so he adapted to new values. Gabin finds himself in a completely different milieu. He formed relationships with second-hand car dealers and traders from Africa and, sometimes, discussed family affairs with them.

> I missed my family. I can only tell them what to do over the phone. It is a difficult thing to do. My business back home is functioning…But it cannot operate at the level that I want. It is painful when I think of how my life used to be. My close community is 100% African. I do not talk, and I feel like I am in Europe. I do not see European culture in my daily activities. I buy cars online, a foreigner brings them to me, and I pay a foreigner to ship them. Where do I meet the Belgians? I

> feel I am out of my country because of the application of rules and limited corrupt practices in my line of business (Gabin).

The participants illustrated that their memories of their home country were significant in how they experienced the host country. This perception helped them navigate the waiting period in the asylum process. They remembered the past because it was so valuable not to forget, especially as the present was too challenging. The participants' reliance on home country memories in connection to familiar activities and communities in Belgium alleviated the boredom of waiting.

3.4.5 The Asylum System

The asylum system refers to the legal process through which individuals seeking international protection in a country can apply for refugee and legal status. It generated the stressors and difficulties asylum applicants encountered (see Section 2.3). This subsection focused on the meaning asylum applicants give to asylum proceedings. The participants describe their experience with the asylum process as a struggle, uncertain, and disempowering.

3.4.5.1 A Struggle

The asylum process is a struggle (Grønseth & Thorshaug, 2022). Gabin had much to say about his asylum registration process being a struggle. He spent time with me, recounting the difficulties he went through to register his asylum claim. Gabin claimed that the challenges were “unacceptable." He attributed his struggle to the complexities and bureaucratic nature of the asylum procedure (Dallara & Lacchei, 2021). According to Gabin, his frustration started because they did not register his asylum at the airport.

> I know I will apply for asylum at the airport… Instead, they gave me an appointment paper to go to the immigration office, where many people were applying for asylum. Since I cannot speak French or Dutch, I could not understand the procedure by myself (Gabin).

The participants viewed the numerous papers they had to fill out with the help of asylum staff who could not understand their accents clearly as a struggle to provide information and ensure that the information was received as delivered.

I will pronounce a word in English more than two times for the staff to understand me... The staff speaks English very well …I understand them… But when I say a word in English, they find it difficult to understand me (Joseph).

However, for one participant, the struggle during the asylum process helped him generate inner strength. The IO asked several times about a safe place in my country. I realized it was useless to think of safety back home when I knew it did not exist.

"I refused and kept refusing, which gave me the inner strength to fight for protection in Belgium (RP2)."

3.4.5.2 An Uncertain Procedure

The asylum process is full of uncertainty (El-Shaarawi, 2015). The participants could not predict the outcome of their claim. There are two types of asylum decisions: a positive decision (refugee status or subsidiary protection), which grants legal status, and a negative decision, which leads to deportation. The asylum applicant's well-being in Belgium generally depends on a positive decision. Uncertainty about the decision is stressful. “I had no idea how long I would wait for a decision. I was not sure if I would get a positive or negative decision. Whenever I consider the possible outcome, I am disturbed. It reminds me of the risks I face at home” said Joseph.

Sama compared the procedure to prison.“The asylum process is more than a prison. In prison, you know when you will get out. Here, I do not know anything. I do not know when the decision will come or the type of decision. I cannot stop thinking about this decision,” Sama said.

Not knowing how long they will have to wait for a decision and whether it will be positive or negative creates a constant state of anxiety and fear in the mind of the asylum seeker.

3.4.6 Restriction and Powerlessness

The participants feel powerless and restricted (Grønseth & Thorshaug, 2022). They demonstrated their level of restriction in space and work. The limitations they face go beyond access to employment. The participants considered the restriction punitive. The inadequate control over their lives heightens their feelings of powerlessness and contributes to their overall stress levels.

3.4.6.1 Work Restriction

The participants expressed frustration with the limitations on their ability to work and contribute to society. They were eager to work and support themselves financially, but legal

barriers prohibited them. This further deepens their sense of helplessness and dependence on others.

In Belgium, asylum applicants' right to work (Neumayer, 2004) starts four months after they apply for asylum (CGRS, 2022). The participants who complained about unemployment the most were those under the Dublin procedure. "I did not receive the right to work because I had a Dublin transfer decision before my right to work could start" (RP1). As a result, he did not have access to the labor market. The main participants in this research accepted that they had the right to work, but finding a stable job with the orange card was difficult, and when they finally got a job, “it was always short-lived” (Sama).

> I started to work after four months… Working makes you busy... When I work, I sometimes forget about the wait…I sleep well because I know I will have money to buy what I need… but the work is always short-lived… Employers complain about limited work rights (Sama).

The restrictions on work for asylum seekers have a detrimental impact on various aspects of their lives. Financially, they face difficulties supporting themselves and meeting their basic needs. Interpersonally, the inability to work limits their social interactions and integration into society, leading to feelings of isolation and exclusion, making it even more challenging for them to adapt to their new lives, especially within the first four months of the asylum process.

3.4.6.2 Geographical and Location Restrictions

Furthermore, the movement of asylum seekers is limited to Belgium (Majcher, 2021). There is freedom of movement in the European Union, but this right does not extend to asylum applicants. In Belgium, asylum applicants are not allowed to leave the country. Moreover, the restriction is even more severe if the asylum seeker stays in the reception center. According to Gabin,

> The asylum authority decides which center I go to and when… The time I have to be at the center… I did not like my first center, but I had to stay there. After three months, they transferred me to another center…I was free from the transfer from center to center when I got private accommodation. I cannot leave Belgium… But I feel better now. (Gabin)

In conclusion, the asylum system is a complex and challenging process for asylum seekers, highlighting the need for better understanding and support to navigate the asylum process and adapt to new lives.

3.4.7. Way Out; Coping Strategies

The participants used different coping mechanisms to resist waiting. One common coping strategy among the participants was religion. Additionally, participants turned to family members in Belgium and outside Belgium whom they could call for long hours to explain their problems. Another coping mechanism that emerged was the practice of having a positive outlook. These coping mechanisms assisted in balancing the daily lives of the participants.

3.4.7.1 Religion

The participants described themselves as religious. They explained that religion provided inner strength and direction during the asylum process (Maier et al., 2022). They relied on God as their principal source of peace and a positive mindset. Religious activities such as listening to worship songs, hearing sermons from pastors, and attending church services allowed them to feel connected to God and other Christians, thus providing them with a sense of relaxation and mindfulness.

"I believe and trust in God. He gives me strength daily. I know God has done soo many good things for me, and He will do more good things." (Joseph)

"I read the book of Psalms in the Bible... I follow online and recorded videos of the gospel to keep my mind at peace with God." (Sama)

"I pray every night, and anytime I feel like praying... I pray when I feel depressed about the decision. Prayer is part of my life now." (Gabin)

The participants depended on God to relieve some of their stress. They pray, attend church services, and listen to preaching to be at peace with their minds. They believed that trusting and having faith in God provided the inner strength they needed to overcome waiting. Looking towards the future, these individuals relied on their beliefs to navigate the uncertainties ahead. Believing in a higher power gave them hope and reassurance that everything would eventually fall into place. They found strength in the belief that their struggles were part of a bigger plan from God and that they were not alone in facing adversity.

3.4.7.2 Strength from Family

The participants described the extent to which support from the family had helped them confront the difficulties they encountered. This support came in various forms, including accommodation, financial assistance, and moral support (Dolan & Sherlock, 2010). For example, Sama testified that he received free housing and occasional financial support from a relative: "I stay in the house of my relative for free; he gives me food and pocket money from time to time." Others found support by speaking to family members in their home country. Gabin, for instance, receives most of his support from his wife and regularly communicates with her to discuss their children and seek advice on maintaining a positive mindset. "I call my wife every day to find out about my children and to tell her my situation in Europe. She will advise me to pray often and to trust in God" (Gabin).

3.4.8 Positive Outlook

In addition, to support from family, participants also employ a positive outlook as a coping strategy (Petäjäniemi & Kaukko, 2021). They strive to see things from an optimistic perspective, finding strength in their faith and focusing on their daily activities. For example, Joseph mentioned that his belief in God has not failed him since joining the Church in Belgium, and he prays and worships to maintain a peaceful heart.

"God has not failed me since I joined the Church in Belgium. I pray and worship God, and I ask Him daily for a positive asylum decision" (Joseph).

Similarly, Gabin tried to forget about the stress of the asylum process by behaving like any other person with legal status in Belgium while conducting his car business.

"I behave like any other person with legal status in Belgium when I am doing my car business. I do my best to forget about the asylum stress" (Gabin).

A positive outlook does not only relieve the asylum applicant, but it also changes the way others look at them. When asylum seekers like Gabin maintain a positive outlook and try to forget about the stress of the asylum process, it benefits them and changes how others perceive them. By behaving like those with legal status in Belgium during his car business, Gabin shows that he is determined to move forward and contribute to society. The attitude helped them cope with the challenges of seeking asylum and inspired them to forget about their stress.

3.4.9 Future Plans

The participants discussed their visions for the future, which varied according to their perspective of life. They all agreed it would be a time of immense one-way change, positive or negative, and considered access to health institutions vital. Gabin said, "I will continue my car business." Joseph: "I want to attend school to become a welder." Sama: "I intend to open an African grocery shop."

They emphasized the importance of accessing appropriate medical attention after their decision, as it would impact their overall well-being and ability to pursue their goals. However, they expressed emotional fears that their dreams could be shattered if they received a negative asylum decision in Belgium, which could lead to deportation and persecution in their home country.

3.5 Ethics and Positionality

3.5.1 Ethics

Power balance: The voice of participants were heard and valued. I created a comfortable environment where participants felt safe and welcome so they could discourse about their experiences and points of view. I acknowledged power dynamics during the interviews and addressed them by creating a level playing field for all participants. I did so by encouraging open dialogue and listening actively. I allowed participants to express themselves freely without fear of judgment. Also, I acknowledged that each person's experiences and perspectives were unique and valid. Therefore, I gave each contribution the attention it deserved. As a result, I cultivated a sense of trust and mutual respect among participants, enabling them to engage in meaningful discussions and share their stories authentically.

Data storage: I ensured strict data security measures to protect the privacy of all the information collected. I used secured storage methods; I used a password to lock information stored on my laptop, USB key, and telephone and then made the data as anonymous as possible.

Participants consent. The participants consented to participate in the research. I informed participants of the aim of the research and told them they could stop participating at any stage. I informed participants about the potential risks and benefits associated with their involvement in the interviews. Before obtaining their consent, I provided detailed information

about the research purpose, procedures, and expected duration. I addressed the questions and concerns of participants about the topic and ensured that participants fully understood what their participation entailed.

Anonymity and privacy: I used pseudonyms and different countries of origin to identify each participant. No participant's personal identification information was shared or disclosed during the research.

3.5.2 Positionality

My cultural background may have influenced the data collection process. I am from West Africa, just like the participants. It may have introduced biases in the data collection process. For example, my familiarity with cultural norms and values in West Africa could have influenced the way I asked questions and interpreted their responses.

My experience as an asylum applicant who resided in a private apartment may have influenced the research. For example, I had a different perception of waiting than asylum seekers in the reception centers and other private apartments. I had student status, implying I had health insurance and work rights outside the asylum process. Moreover, my prior knowledge of the Belgian asylum system shaped how I framed questions and analyzed the data.

My experiences as an immigrant may have influenced the research process. For instance, my experiences made me more empathetic toward the participants and their struggles, potentially affecting how I interpreted their responses. Additionally, it allowed researchers to ask more nuanced and insightful questions that those without immigrant experience would not have imagined.

To ensure that my perspectives did not overshadow the participants' voices, I employed inflexibility to mitigate potential bias. Nevertheless, future research including participants from diverse cultural backgrounds will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the experience of waiting in Belgium.

3.6 Discussion

Interviewing and observing asylum seekers in Belgium uncovered much more about how asylum seekers navigated challenges through coping mechanisms during the often protracted period of waiting for a decision. The waiting time becomes part of the participants' travel and

life paths, as they still face obstacles in determining their immediate and long-term futures. The participants still felt stranded and unable to proceed with their lives due to uncertainties stemming from inadequate support from the immigration system and their nearest communities. While I discussed waiting from a structural point of view that makes asylum seekers vulnerable in the face of a strict immigration and asylum system, the everyday world is a very dynamic place where connections and strategies change over time and have a visible effect on the lives of asylum seekers. And even though asylum seekers' lives are different and challenging in the new country, they did not give in to the passive nature of their lives and the fact that they are powerless.

Citing de Maier et al. (2022), the interviews and observations with asylum seekers indicate that they employ varied coping strategies to navigate life in Belgium. Participating in activities organized by the church, making friends, doing business, and having a positive attitude are examples of how these strategies contribute to and enrich their everyday experiences. The coping mechanisms enshrined in the daily activities of asylum seekers are forms of relief from waiting. Conducting research with asylum applicants relying only on interview techniques would have generated the theoretical and omitted practical lives of asylum applicants in private residences, which may be better than they claimed.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

In summary, the asylum process in Belgium is characterized by a series of waiting periods, with waiting periods playing a crucial role in the asylum seekers' daily lives. Asylum seekers in Belgium face a complex journey characterized by lengthy waiting periods, which create uncertainty for those seeking international protection. Belgian law does not specify a must-respect timeframe for deciding on an asylum application (Spotti, 2019), and asylum applicants often experience long waiting periods that differ for each asylum seeker (CGRS, 2020).

The study illustrated the waiting experiences of asylum seekers in Belgium. Some academic literature criticizes the waiting experience for its depressing effects, stating that prolonged waiting undermines the health of asylum applicants (van der Linden et al., 2023; Laban et al., 2004). The study used qualitative fieldwork materials collected through interviews and participants' observations to show a more nuanced lived experience of waiting. The study capitalizes on the dissenting conceptualization of waiting time as an opportunity to be productive. The study applied the concepts of emotions (Lazarus, 2015) and discipline (Foucault, 1975) to accomplish its goals, arguing that waiting may impact an individual's activities positively or negatively. The study used a qualitative research design and employed a narrative approach (Lewis & Adeney, 2014) that focused on the subjective experiences and perceptions of the research participants. The study investigated the waiting experience of participants, particularly those residing in private residences in Belgium. The study associated prolonged waiting periods during the asylum process with fear, anxiety, and depression among asylum seekers.

4.1 Answers to Research Questions

Table 4.1: Table Research Questions and Results

Research questions	Results
How do asylum applicants in Brussels experience the waiting time for a decision on their asylum application in Belgium?	Asylum applicants under the same procedure and reception conditions expressed different modes of daily experience during waiting. Participants reported experiencing both positive and negative effects of waiting, with the most common concern being the number of hours they slept at night and during the day. The study also found that prolonged waiting periods during the asylum process were associated with increased levels of fear, anxiety, and depression among asylum seekers.
Which challenges do asylum applicants face in Belgium while waiting for a decision?	Asylum seekers faced various challenges during their waiting period, including limited access to material and financial support, restricted access to healthcare, isolation, a lack of social support, inadequate access to information about their case, uncertainty about their future, poor living conditions, the extension of surveillance to digital spaces, and unfavorable community and public opinion.
Which strategies do they develop to cope with the waiting?	Participants used diverse coping mechanisms, which included religion, entrepreneurship, caregiving, traditional gender roles, sports, and sports gambling.

4.2 Research Contribution

The significance of the study lies in its ability to shed light on the psychological and emotional impact of prolonged waiting on individuals who are already vulnerable due to displacement. Asylum seekers request asylum in search of safety. Understanding how waiting periods affect their daily lives is crucial for their needs and for developing appropriate interventions to support their well-being. The research contributes to the existing literature on the waiting experience of asylum seekers by illustrating that, though they encountered challenges, asylum seekers in private residences developed coping mechanisms to resist waiting. And that asylum applicants, especially those in private apartments, overemphasized their challenges of waiting.

4.3 Validity and Reliability

The study is valid and reliable. The author collected primary and secondary data himself for the study. The research questions emerged from the UNHCR Innovative Service Project on Bridging the Gap between Human Experiences.

Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. The author had no control over who the participants were. I based all questions on reliable research on migration and asylum, and I wrote them in Standard English. Secondary data sources—journals, news articles, and websites—were carefully selected. The study fulfilled its purpose of answering the research questions.

4.4 Suggestions for Future Research

Additionally, future research could focus on how gender affects asylum seekers' experiences in host countries. Another study might be conducted on the long-term outcome of asylum applicants after they have received a decision on their asylum application.

Appendix: Outline of Interview and Observation Phases

A. Introduction
- Participants' consent and Purpose of the interview
- How I will use the data
- An overview of the study as well as the questions

B. Demographic Information
- Age
- Gender
- Country of origin
- Education level
- Employment status

C. The Asylum Application Process
- When they arrived in Belgium,
- How they applied for asylum in Belgium
- The waiting duration for a decision since the application was submitted
- Knowledge of the progress of their asylum application
- Have you had legal representation?

D. The experience of waiting
- Impact of waiting on mental and emotional well-being
- Trouble getting food, a place to sleep, or medical care
- Coping strategy with the uncertainty and stress of waiting
- Have you made any social connections or formed any support networks while waiting?

E. Social Integration
- Participation in social or cultural activities in Belgium
- Making new friends or social connections in Belgium
- Have you experienced inclusion or exclusion from the local community?

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