

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON REPRODUCTIVE CHOICE

Participatory study on views, strategies and needs of refugees

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Background

Migrants with refugee backgrounds are at higher risk of unwanted or unintended pregnancies. To better reach and support new refugee groups, more knowledge is needed about their views, strategies and needs. This research focuses on relative newcomers from Syria and Eritrea, as well as groups that have been in the Netherlands much longer, from Afghanistan and Somalia. The study is being conducted in close cooperation with four refugee grassroots organizations: Culture in Harmony, Himilo, Voice Of All Women and Syrian Women's Group Emmen.

Research method

At the heart of this participative, qualitative research is a team of eight co researchers with refugee backgrounds. In 2021, they received extensive training from Rutgers and Pharos. In 2022, they conducted 118 interviews and 8 focus groups with women and men of different ages, relationship statuses and religions. All data were translated and transcribed by them.

N = 177 (118 interview participants + 59 participants of 8 focus groups)

Results

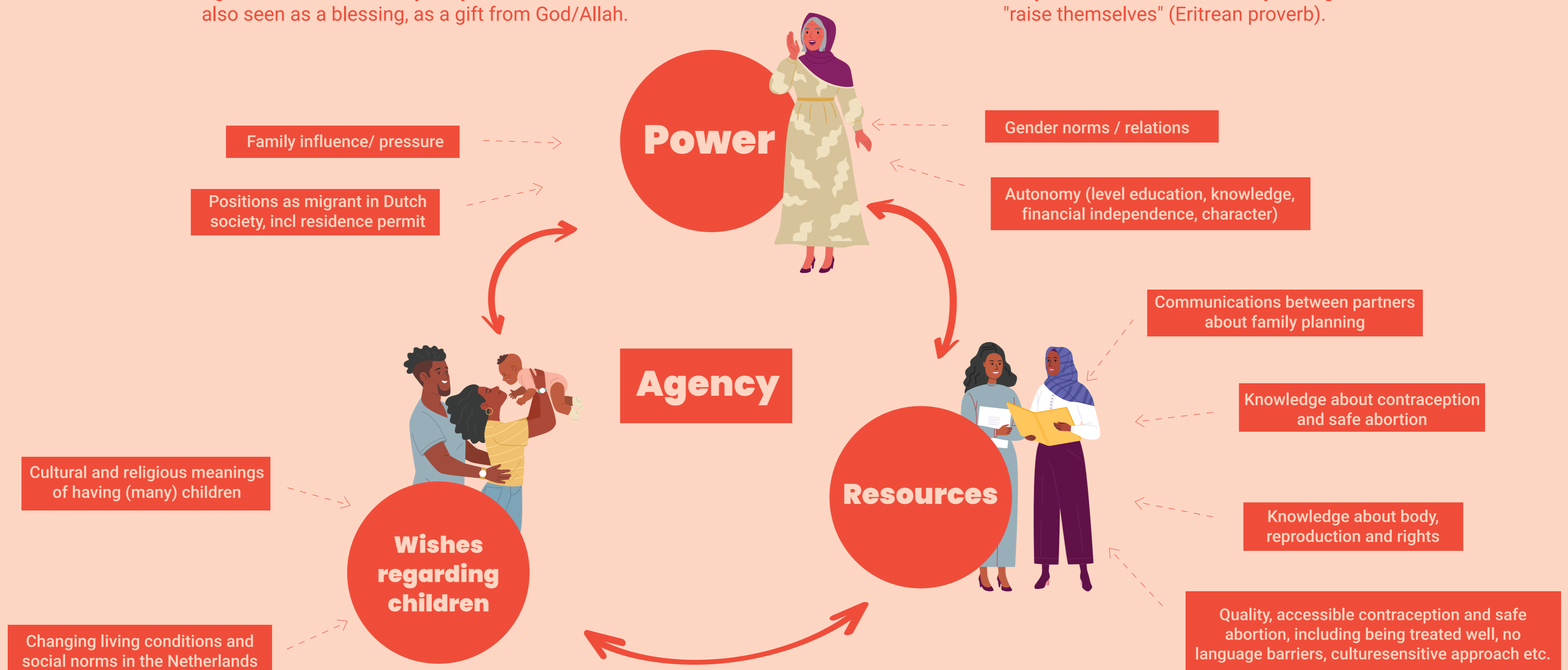
A number of factors emerge from this research that influence the agency people experience regarding their reproductive life. Agency is about being able to fulfill your desires, and to do that you need power/influence and resources. We also explored what needs and strategies refugees have regarding information, education and services and what refugees view as culture sensitive, effective approaches of professionals.

There is a Somali expression, "bring as many children as possible to the earth, their future is in the hands of God." In Somalia, there was often no planning or talking about it. Here in Holland or Europe, circumstances force you to make choices. Children are expensive. Housing, schooling, outdoor activities.
(Ilhan, Somali man, 16 years in NL, married, 4 children).

The study offers insights in factors that influence the reproductive choices of refugees. In the country of origin, large families are often preferred and people are expected to marry at a young age. Marriage is seen as an essential condition for a good life and having children is a natural consequence of this. Children are of great value to the family; they raise social status. Children are also seen as a blessing, as a gift from God/Allah.

Social conditions also play a role, like poverty and war. *"Especially when you see how many people we are losing because of war and problems in our country... I also lost many family members, including three of my brothers. I feel responsible to expand my family so that they have not gone in vain."*
(Awet, Eritrean woman, 29 years old, 7 years in NL, married, 2 children).

But living in the Netherlands makes it not easy to raise many children. The absence of family means that parents lack support. Moreover, all kinds of agencies make it clear to young parents that in the Netherlands there are cultural parenting norms about how to raise your child and what children need. This is often very different from the country of origin, where children "raise themselves" (Eritrean proverb).



Conclusion

Most refugees come from social contexts in which large families are favorite and the use of contraception is neither evident nor accessible for everybody. Living in the Netherlands has a huge impact on the reproductive choices refugees want to make. Power dynamics linked to gender relations but also to family hierarchy and family culture play a role in the agency people experience. Dutch professionals can contribute to the empowerment of refugees by delivering the resources people need to make their own reproductive choices, which include access to information, support and contraception in an open, culture sensitive environment.