Independent refugee youth in waiting

Social navigations while in transit in Indonesia

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CHAPTER THREE

Age, Solitary Movement, and Narratives

Re-examining the Stigmas of Independent Refugee Youth[1]

This chapter elaborates on the categorizations and stigmas surrounding independent refugee youth and their travelling conditions. Drawing on the aspect of age and the nature of "solitary movement," in the first part of this chapter I will problematize the label attached to categorizations of age and gender in the international migration context, particularly labels such as "unaccompanied minors," "independent migrant children," "single men," and "single women." I will attempt to provide a clear picture of how young people, who in fact have very different stories, logics, vulnerabilities, and pre-departure experiences, become categorized under a single "catch-all" label. Given that independent youth are not a homogeneous group, this chapter aims to challenge the logic of over-generalizing institutional categorizations.

I aim to debunk the shallow assumptions and categorizations that "unaccompanied minors" are lone child refugees who are being exploited by their parents, while "independent migrant children" are non-refugee children who migrate independently in search of work or education. Furthermore, given that stigmatizing institutional categories are often amplified through the mainstream media and social media, those who fall under the categorization

[1] In an attempt not to reproduce the presumptions or stigmas surrounding the institutional categorizations that I discuss in this chapter and elsewhere, I use the term "independent refugee youth" or simply "independent youth/young people" throughout the dissertation. I elaborated on my reasoning for choosing this term in the introductory chapter. In the particular context of my field research, I consider this term more suitable for addressing a group of independent young people who can be globally classified as both "underage" and "adult." Furthermore, I believe that the term highlights their agency, and by using it, I aim to reduce the presumptions and stigmas directed towards this population.

of "single men" in particular are often seen by the wider public as a non-vulnerable group and a security and economic threat to the transit/destination country; by contrast, "single women" are presumed to be a high-risk group in need of protection. I stress, therefore, that it is crucial to re-examine institutional categorizations and not take them for granted.

Related to the dualism of "refugee minors" versus "migrant children," the second part of this chapter will provide an illustration of how independent youth in Indonesia tell their "refugee narratives" – which relate to the conditions in their home countries that made them migrate – and their "youthful narratives" – which are filled with hope for a better future that they imagine in a resettlement country. I will attempt to demonstrate that while both narratives are prevalent and a major force in the migration context, they are not valued equally by humanitarian and refugee processing administrations. Under the international refugee determination procedures that evaluate the deservingness of an asylum applicant on the basis of their narratives, humanitarian officers tend to focus only on checking the validity of their refugee stories. Moreover, given that refugees are not allowed to choose their resettlement country, their youthful stories – particularly those that imply specific countries – are not perceived positively. This chapter invites readers to see the situation from the perspective of the youth, rather than from the perspective of the institutional refugee regime.

STIGMAS AROUND CATEGORIZATIONS

Given that the Indonesian government "outsources" the management of refugees to international organizations, particularly the UNHCR and IOM, the categorizations that are applied to the refugee population in Indonesia are international, institutional categorizations. To address "underaged" asylum seekers and refugees who have come to Indonesia without a guardian, the UNHCR uses the term "unaccompanied minors" (UAM) and "separated children" (SC). The former, also referred to as "unaccompanied children," are children under 18 years of age who have been separated from both parents and are not being

cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible to do so (UNHCR 1994). The latter are defined as children under 18 years of age who have been separated from both parents or from their previous legal or customary primary caregiver (General Assembly. 2001). In the European context, the abbreviation "UAM/SC" is applied (UNHCR 2001). In the Southeast Asian context, the term "unaccompanied minors and separated children" (UASC) is often used (UNHCR et al. 2013), though my participants in this research were generally classified as "unaccompanied minors," referring to the fact that they were not being cared for by parents or other guardians.

The IOM has slightly different categorizations when defining children who migrate alone. The IOM uses the term "unaccompanied migrant children" and occasionally "unaccompanied minors." In addition, the IOM defines "independent child migration" as "the migration of children who are not refugees and are not coerced or tricked into moving by third persons, it is often carried out with the aim of seeking employment or education" (IOM Geneva 2011). Although the IOM's categorization might have been developed to accommodate broader underage populations who migrate alone, it nevertheless reflects the institutional logic that differentiates between "refugee children" and "migrant children" using the parameter of "motivation." This differentiation is often translated by officers to imply that "genuine refugee children" are not expected to have a vivid desire to pursue employment or education. First, I will demonstrate how these institutional categories are used in Indonesia and how they easily evolve to imply stigmatizing attitudes. Later in this chapter, I will focus on the perspectives of independent young people themselves and will demonstrate the variety of reasons, experiences, and motivations they had to leave their home countries. This perspective also shows that independent youth themselves have clear and distinct hopes and dreams for a better future for themselves.

Institutional categorizations have been widely adopted by many states across the globe, and Indonesia is no exception. These categorizations travel along with the rising number of independent youth searching for asylum and protection worldwide. In the period just before my fieldwork, the number of UASC asylum application cases in Indonesia had been increasing: from 452 in

January 2014 to 1,014 in December 2015 (UNHCR 2016). In Australia, where many independent youth transiting in Indonesia dream to be resettled, 1,832 unaccompanied children arrived as "irregular maritime arrivals" between 2008 and 2012 (Houston et al. 2012). These figures correspond with the global trend that saw asylum applications by unaccompanied young people increase sharply after 2010.[2] With the rising number of applicants, the categorizations of unaccompanied children are defined and handled depending on who is defining them, where and when they are defined, and what aspects are seen as significant (Saglietti 2019).

As the size of these populations grows, the assumptions or stigmas attached to them also multiply – in public discourse, in political campaigns, in state policies, and through (social) media. In Indonesia, for instance, the discussion of "unaccompanied minors" is overshadowed by the assumption that many are in fact acting as a so-called "anchor child," namely "a very young immigrant who will later sponsor immigration for family members who are still abroad" (Ignatow and Williams 2011, 60). This term is believed to have originated in the early 1980s to refer to Vietnamese boat people, and continued to be used throughout the 1990s (ibid) and in some places to this day .

The discourse of the "anchor child" was quickly adopted by anti-migration politicians in resettlement countries such as Australia, the US, and across Europe, which then produced laws that affect the refugee population in Indonesia.[3] During my fieldwork, I found

[2] In 2013, 25,300 new asylum applications were submitted by unaccompanied minors in 77 countries worldwide (the highest number since 2006); Europe received 15,700 of these claims (UNHCR 2014 in Vervliet et al. 2015, 468-469). The number of unaccompanied minors registered as asylum seekers in the EU reached 99,995 in 2015, an increase of 315% compared to 2014 (European Migration Network, 2018). In Sweden, the number of unaccompanied children entering the country increased from 500 in 2008 to 2000 in 2011 (Liden and Nyhlen 2015, 42). In Italy, the number of UAMs doubled from 2012 to 2014; and in Germany, the asylum applications of UAMs tripled to 2,486 between 2008 and 2013 (see Ferrara et al. 2016, 332-333).

[3] The culture of disbelief regarding the motives of unaccompanied minors is often fueled by academics as well. For instance, Heaven Crawley, Professor of International Migration at Coventry University, stated that "…the increase in unaccompanied children entering the EU looking for protection is a conscientious strategy on the part of families to use their children as a hook to bring themselves in" (oral evidence of the EU Sub-Committee on Home Affairs in the House of Lords 2016). This claim was successfully challenged by evidence that unaccompanied children in the UK often refuse family tracing and reunification procedures by the Red Cross, as it may endanger their family back home (EU Sub-Committee on Home Affairs in the House of Lords 2016). Nevertheless, the sentiment about and label of "anchor

that independent youth in Indonesia were aware of the discourse and stigma around so-called anchor children; immigration officials and sometimes even social workers also occasionally hinted at it.

I argue that the practice of addressing independent young people as anchor children in many ways victimizes them. Young people's departure from their parents' home is generally perceived by institutions across diverse contexts as a violation of child protection, because it implies an involuntary act on the part of the child, as well as adult abandonment and exploitation, all of which is potentially very harmful (Boyden and Howard 2013). Depicting unaccompanied minors as anchor children portrays them as being trapped and having no agency in their decision to travel. On the other hand, the agency of independent migrant children (who are not refugees) is more acknowledged, and many are beginning to accept that the migration process is not merely or necessarily exploitative, "but rather a multidimensional phenomenon" (IOM Geneva 2011). The dualism of unaccompanied refugee children as victims and of independent child migrants as strategic fortune seekers often influences how the officers who evaluate refugee applications make decisions. Immigration officers, for instance, often construct "a quite mono-faceted description of UAM, reducing their complexity to the categories provided by his social mandate of recovery and custody" (Saglietti 2019, 16). As we will see later in this chapter, this also takes place in Indonesia.

Independent young people who have migrated alone and who aim to transit in Indonesia are thus confronted with several labels. In both public and governmental discourse, these labels easily become stigmatizing. In accordance with international institutional terms, many of my interlocutors were categorized as "single men" and "single women," given that many of them were aged 18–24 years old. The "single women" were usually perceived as victims and assumed to have a high degree of vulnerability. The "single men," on the other hand, were often perceived as the least vulnerable (this will be further discussed in chapter 4). They often found themselves in an uncertain position in the humanitarian protection system, since general perceptions expect men to be able to cope and to be less vulnerable (Brun 2017, 15). In addition,

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children" feeds this culture of disbelief in society.

single men are often seen as "violent trouble-makers" (ibid), among other negative perceptions. Such stereotypes occur inside refugee agencies and among politicians, but also appear in newspapers and on social media. After the 2015 "refugee crisis" in the EU, "single men" were labeled as "scum," "terrorists," and "rapists."[4] In the Indonesian national media, different public opinions towards refugees have been reproduced, such as "illegal immigrants," "alleged war victims," "ISIS-related groups," and "gigolos" (this will be elaborated further in chapter 6).

CHALLENGING THE STIGMAS

To demonstrate the problems of these stigmatizing labels, the following section will discuss the diversity of independent young people's logics, conditions, and decisions to travel alone, which will debunk the assumptions and stigmas behind these labels and will problematize the messiness of the age-based categorizations that are applied by institutions.

The Decision to Travel Alone

As described above, the migration of "unaccompanied minors" has often been shadowed by the stigma of "anchor children" that is held by humanitarian officers and the general public alike. Some youths do admit[5] that they hope to be able to reunite with their family one day, preferably in a safe setting. However, it would be incorrect to assume that the migration of young people is largely an involuntary act forced on them by their parents. The migration of minors is not only about abandonment and exploitation (Boyden

[4] "Single male refugees," particularly Muslim and Arab refugee males, have been welcomed in Indonesia along with other refugee groups. After the Paris terror attacks in 2015 and numerous incidents of mass sexual harassment in European cities, however, this group has come to be largely portrayed as terrorists and sexual jihadists (Gray and Franck 2019). In online discussion forums, they are called "scum," "jihadists/terrorists," "criminals," and "rapefugees" (Lee and Narghes 2018), and these negative stereotypes have been use to perpetuate messages such as #refugeesNOTwelcome on Twitter (Rettberg and Gajjala 2016).

[5] I am aware of the possibility that some of the young people's statements may not have been completely true or may not correspond to their deepest held personal ideas. It is not my aim to find "truthful story as fixed and isomorphic to a single historical sequence of events" (Kirmayer 2003, 167). Rather, I aim to understand their stories as "experiential truth," which "is relative to the narrator's social position, mental health, and emotional state" (ibid).

and Howard 2013). There are many others reasons why they travel alone without parents or guardians. The following three short stories illustrate the diverse circumstances that can trigger a young person's decision to travel alone. The stories also show that the decision-making process is not always made collectively by the family, but can also be a young person's individual decision. These stories tell us to be critical of the commonly used labels and stereotypes.

> My father has two wives. I lived with my father and his second wife in Brewery… my mother lives in Mari Abad, Quetta. We are all Hazara originally from Afghanistan, but living in Hazara Town in Pakistan. Last year, a brother of my step-mother, who often came to visit her at our house, told her that he likes me and wanted to marry me. So, the marriage was arranged… They brought me to Afghanistan to get a *Tazkira* [Afghan ID card]. After coming home to Pakistan, I told my step-mother that I don't want to get married because he was 50 years old and I don't like him at all. But she said she was going to kill me if I refused to marry her brother. So, I started to contact a friend who lives in Pakistan. She assured me that there must be something that can be done, so she gave me a contact of her brother who was in Indonesia. I started to learn the route and got in contact with a people smuggler. The *nikah* [engagement] process still continued. Some documents were signed and he paid dowry to my parents. After that, I took my *Tazkira* and 5,000 dollars from my step-mother's closet and ran away. I managed to contact a smuggler and arrived in Indonesia. To date, no one knows that I am here.
>
> (Arezoo, 15 years old)

> I lived in Mogadishu with my parents, 6 brothers, and 3 sisters. My father is from Yemen and my mother is a Somalian. As a half-Yemeni, I am often bullied… they [kids in the neighborhood] said that I do not belong to Somalia. One day in 2009, I came home from a walk with my grandmother… I found that all of my family members were killed. My father and brothers' hands were tied with rope

[…] and they had holes in their heads. It was Al-Shabaab. I was 8 years old… so my grandfather and grandmother brought me to their house. In 2014, someone with a cloth to cover the face knocked on my grandfather's door and asked him to hand me over or otherwise they would kill the rest of the family. I was hiding, I did not know what was going on. So, one day my grandfather gave me a passport and a ticket to Malaysia. I just obeyed, as the situation was very unsafe. The most important thing was that I was going out from that area and did not die. After one month staying in Malaysia, the smuggler told me that they cannot contact my grandfather. Later I know that my grandfather was killed. I do not know what happen to my grandmother. So, I went to Jakarta. The Somali people living in Malaysia said "if you do not have a supporter, it is better to go to Indonesia, they have UNHCR."

(Salem, 16 years old)

One and a half years ago, I came to Jakarta with my sister – she is 12 years old – and my brother – he is 10 years old. My parents are still in Bamiyan [Afghanistan], I went to school until the 8th grade, but I cannot continue as my father told me that I have to go with the *qâcâqbar* [smuggler]. He said that the condition in Afghanistan is not safe, so we have to go first with *qâcâqbar* and my parents will join later. So, we went to Kabul by car and then flew to Hindustan [India]. We were there for four days. I thought my parents would join us there, but they did not come. So *qâcâqbar* brought us to Kuala Lumpur. After that we had to run inside a jungle and swim to reach a boat. I cannot swim and my brother and sister were crying because the water was cold and they were afraid of drowning. My phone was broken so I lost contact with my parents. My *Tazkira* and other documents were all wet and damaged. I was so scared. After a couple of hours in the boat, we reached Medan. From Medan we came to Jakarta by bus. The *qâcâqbar* brought us to a hotel and said he would be back. But he never came. We met an Afghan in the hotel and he suggested us to go to the UNHCR to register. Now we get support from Church World Service.

> They said we just have to wait for several years, and then we will be sent to a third country.
>
> (Rahmatullah, 17 years old)

These stories illustrate the complex reasons for travelling alone and some of the difficult situations in the young people's countries of origin. More importantly, they illustrate that the decision to travel alone is not always taken by young people's parents or relatives; in some cases, the decision may be taken by the young people themselves, with help from friends, or it can be the result of a discussion between the youth and their parents. As the story of Arezoo suggests, although she was travelling alone, she was certainly not an anchor child for her family. Indeed, beyond not contacting her family, while transiting in Indonesia she chose to have no contact with the Hazara community in order to minimize the possibility that someone would recognize her and inform her family of her whereabouts. Arezoo decided to flee Pakistan to escape a forced marriage arranged by her family. It can be expected that, if she is resettled in a third country, she will not invite her father or step-mother, or even her mother, with whom she has no contact, to join her.

The stories of Salem and Rahmatullah reveal similar decision-making processes behind the decision to transfer in Indonesia: the migration journeys of both young men were decided by their parents or guardians for their own safety. If one follows the logic of the "anchor child" stereotype, one would assume that these boys' parents or guardians would be monitoring their progress in the transit country. Yet, their stories do not confirm this presumption. From my close interaction with both of them, it turned out that neither had any contact with their parents back home. Given that they had to survive in the transit country without any support, they lived in a shelter under the protection of the Church World Service (CWS). CWS had attempted to trace their families back home, but so far had not been successful. Every time the two talked about their families, they cried. They worried and had developed a sense of guilt for having allowed their families to "sacrifice" their own wellbeing in order to send them away to a safer place. From my encounters with them, neither Salem nor Rahmatullah ever gave me the impression that they had undertaken the journey in

order to pave the way for their families, but rather for their own safety.

Although we cannot deny that there might be cases where young people are encouraged by family members to make a journey in advance of the rest of the family, it is fundamentally incorrect to assume – as many still do – that such stories apply to the majority of independent young people who migrate from conflict-ridden countries and seek asylum. In my research, in around 85 percent of the cases, the independent youth were the ones who had decided to leave their home country, and they had asked their parents or guardian to fund the journey. Mohsin, a 17-year-old Hazara independent youth who was self-settled in Cisarua, told me that almost 80 percent of the young people in his home village had gone abroad to have a safe life and achieve a better future. When he was still in Afghanistan, he had seen his friends' posts on Facebook. Some were already resettled in Australia, others in Canada. He witnessed how they were able to go to school, some even had a job and could send remittances to Afghanistan. Mohsin had then contacted one of his friends and had learnt which country he should go to, how to contact a smuggler, and how much money he should bring for the journey. After gathering all of this information, he had asked his father to help him pay a smuggler. At first his father had rejected the idea, but after his uncle had helped Mohsin to convince his father, he finally got approval (interview, March 19, 2016).

The role of technology cannot be ignored in young people's modes of communication and interaction. With mobile phones, computers, and the internet, young people can access diverse social media platforms and communication tools. They may contact friends or relatives via phone calls, *Whatsapp*, *Viber*, *Skype*, or *Facebook*. They can virtually witness through pictures what their friends have posted on social media and if they have successfully started a new life in another country. They can easily obtain information on the best routes, journey options, the conditions in the transit countries, and the benefits they can acquire. The dream of a better future far away from war or armed conflict can become very vivid, the picture of a better life very close, and it all may seem so possible to achieve. Above all things, they know that they have friends or relatives to turn to if they need help in the destination

country. Armed with this plan and with social capital, they will then ask permission from their parents to go, and if possible, for help in paying for the journey.

When asked about the possibility that his parents would join him after resettlement, Mohsin replied:

> I asked my parents to travel with me. We could have paid for the entire family [...] but they love Bamiyan. They have large land in the village so they won't leave Afghanistan. My big brothers and sisters are already married and they do not have the aspiration to go out from the country. They just wish me safety and a good future (interview, March 19, 2016).

Mohsin's statement highlights two important aspects that debunk the stigma of anchor children as applied to independent young travelers: first, he, and not his parents, had made the decision; and second, his parents (like others I heard about) had no intention to follow him to his resettlement country.

Not all independent young people transiting in Indonesia are from rich families. Often, therefore, the decision to travel alone is also a financial matter. Migrating abroad is expensive, so many families cannot afford to pay the travel cost of all members. Usually, if in a family there are several young people who wish to go, they have to decide who will have the first turn. Moti, an 18-year-old Oromo boy from Ethiopia, said:

> If we have a lot of money, we will travel as a family. But we are seven people, so it is very expensive. I go because I have a friend in Australia who is helping me. My uncle also helped me, but my friend in Australia is the one I can contact until now (interview, August 21, 2016).

Moti's statement also highlights that a social network is important "capital" for youth travelling alone. When a young person has contacts in transit or destination countries, he or she will have better chances to survive and navigate the circumstances. For this reason, a young person who has good connections for alternative support systems will be more likely to go than a brother or sister

who does not have friends elsewhere.

Acquiring social capital sometimes also means that young people are not in fact travelling completely alone; they may arrange to travel together with friends. In some cases, however, those who plan to travel together with their friends end up departing on different schedules. For "security reasons," agents or smugglers usually only give information about the departure date a couple of days ahead, in order to minimize the possibility that the journey will be impeded by authorities or other parties. Several Hazara boys from Pakistan told me that they and their friends had actually asked the agent to depart on the same day, but had been given different departure dates anyway. They said it had been hard at the beginning, but they had each other's contacts and had managed to meet in Indonesia and stay together while transiting.

Considering that more and more young people are deciding for themselves to undertake a solitary journey, it is also important to understand the perspectives of parents or relatives in allowing and even supporting such a decision. I conducted an interview with a *Karbalai*, an elder in the Hazara community who was also a refugee transiting in Indonesia, to understand the perspective of parents. He explained that there are four reasons why parents let (male) youths travel alone: *First*, children and young people are more exposed to dangerous situations outside the house because they engage more in outdoor activities. They play with their friends, go to school, hike mountainous areas, or join youth gatherings. Unlike their parents, who prefer to stay at home, young people are more vulnerable to bomb blasts, targeted killings, or other impacts of war. *Second*, educated and progressive youth are often targeted by the Taliban or ISIS in Afghanistan, because the "terrorists" do not tolerate potential dissidents. This and the first reason above were usually the strongest reasons for young men to flee their home country alone. *Third*, financial issues matter. Although some elders would rather die at home than leave their country, if a family is wealthy there are more options to flee the home country together as a family. However, most families can only afford to send one person to seek asylum abroad. In this case, they will accommodate the wish of their son (this is most usually the case) to make a solo journey to pursue safety and success. *Forth*, from the perspective of parents, allowing a boy to travel alone is easier compared to

allowing anyone else in the family. Boys are culturally allowed to travel alone, which is not the case with girls or women. Fathers often prefer to stay at home to provide for the other members of the family, and if needed, the father will also still be able to support the traveling boy. The *Karbalai* added that, for him, the father, as head of the family, should stay home, because the mother will not be seen as a family leader and so their children will not accept discipline from her (interview, May 2, 2016).

Reflecting on these suggested reasons for why parents may allow their children to travel alone, one could assume that boys are most likely to be allowed to travel alone. Nevertheless, this is no longer the case. I met dozens of Hazara, Somali, and Ethiopian girls transiting alone in Indonesia with the blessing of their parents. Different from Arezoo's story given above, Zahra's story highlights how it is possible for a girl to travel independently. She said that the first person who had made the journey to Australia by boat was her eldest sister, six years ago. Her sister worked at a nursing home in Australia and was able to send money back home for their mother. Now, Zahra was determined to follow in her sister's footsteps. She acknowledged that with the policy change (mentioned in chapter 2) she would not be resettled in Australia, but she was ready to be resettled anywhere safe (interview, May 4, 2016).

This section has problematized the stereotype of "anchor children," which is attached to the category of "unaccompanied minors." In stark contradiction to the main indictment of anchor children, namely that it is a family strategy to use underaged children as a weapon, this section has shown that many young people themselves are the ones who decide that they want to leave their home country. While in some cases the decision to travel is indeed taken by the young people's parents or other family members, this is by no means the only or even the main reason for young people's solitary migration today. And even when the journeys are encouraged by parents, I found no evidence that families have the intention to join their children in a transit or resettlement country. Some youths made the decision and funded their journey entirely on their own; many others decided where they would go on their own and then discussed it with their family. Moreover, this section has shown that girls too are increasingly

Figure 1. Independent young boys from 8 to 17 years old sharing a room in a CWS shelter for minors (photo credit: Henri Ismail 2016).

traveling alone. It is therefore important to acknowledge that those who can be categorized as "independent refugee youth" are not homogenous. Furthermore, I argue that the stigma attached to categories such as "anchor children," "unaccompanied minors," "single men," and "single women" must be debunked.

The Messiness of Age Categorization

This section interrogates the logic of age-based categorizations that are used to determine treatment and prioritization in international refugee protection. The persons who fall within the categories of "unaccompanied minors" and "single males" receive very different treatment, particularly in terms of accessing humanitarian aid. In some cases, the gap between the two categories may be only several days; one informant, for instance, received special treatment as a minor on Friday, but he had to leave the accommodation on Sunday when he turned 18 years old (see illustration in Figure 1). Furthermore, in the asylum registration system, many applicants who claim to be unaccompanied minors, especially boys and young men, often fall under suspicion of actually being an adult "single male" trying to abuse the prioritization criteria. Although age maneuvering does exist as part of youths' navigations (as will be elaborated in chapter 4), this section attempts to demonstrate

that age-based categorizations in the refugee management system are themselves not without problems. I will problematize the universalized standard that marks the age of 18 as a hard boundary between children and adults by presenting ethnographic data that shows the messiness of age-based categorizations in diverse social and cultural contexts.

Institutions' Use of Chronological Age instead of Social Age

Age assessment by the UNHCR in Indonesia is carried out by officers from the registration division, community services, and child protection division. If a refugee registers as a 14-year-old but his appearance is dubious, the registration division will voice their doubts and will propose an age assessment. Between the period of registration and the age assessment, the registrant will not yet be considered a "minor." In the age assessment, the most crucial thing for the UNHCR is to decide whether the registrant is an adult or a minor. If the officers decide that he is more likely to be 16 years old, they cannot change the date of birth that he first registered with (when he claimed to be 14 years old), but he will receive an annotation on his file indicating that he is still considered a minor (16 years old) and deserves 2 years of special treatment (instead of four). If the registration division consider that a person looks more like a 25-year-old but is claiming to be under 18, and after the age assessment the officers are still not convinced of the refugee's claims, usually they will simply record "18 years old" in the documents (interview with an UNHCR officer, October 25, 2016). This means that even though the applicant is claiming to be a minor, he will not be eligible for special treatment.

Given that the UNHCR evaluates the chronological age of a person as a key determinant of treatment, the organization often faces significant challenges in identifying a person's social age. Social age, "with its corresponding rights and duties, is a relative measure that depends on individuals' personal perceptions of the continuities or discontinuities of their life, and on social perceptions of the stages that make up the life cycle" (Séguy et al. 2019). Social age thus differs in many cultures and regions in the world, as it has different stages and different measured conditions. According to Waheeda (a 24-year-old Hazara young woman), in *Hazaraqi* culture, a girl and a boy are seen to reach adulthood at a

different age. A girl is expected to learn to pray five times a day, to cover her head, and to do fasting from the age of 9, while boys usually are expected to learn to pray and to fast starting at the age of 15. Some Muslim religious leaders say that if the education and intellectuality of a boy has already developed by the age of 10, 11, or 12, he also can start learning to pray and do fasting (interview with Waheeda, April 2, 2016). Later, at the age of 16, a boy is allowed to marry and therefore, socially, he will be considered a man. For a girl, she is allowed to marry as soon as she has her first menstruation. Thus many girls as young as 12 or 13 may get married in Afghanistan. To date, arranged marriages are still the norm in Afghanistan and in the Hazara community in Pakistan and Iran.

Nevertheless, for the Hazara community, it is comprehended that the most important aspect defining the maturity of a person is his or her role in solving family problems. In my interviews, I heard many stories about the involvement of very young persons in supporting the economic needs of their family. Although on average a boy will enter the labor market at 15 years old, many children as young as 8 have to work to support their family's needs, particularly if the primary breadwinner in the family is deceased or cannot fulfill his or her duty. Since the movement of women is limited, single mothers often ask a son to become the breadwinner of the family. Even when the main breadwinner is still around, children are often asked to support their family. Hanif, a 22-year-old Hazara young man from Pakistan, told me that when he was 10 years old, he had worked in the carpet weaving industry from 7 AM to 6 PM during the winter. At that time, he was paid around Rp 300,000 (18,75 euros) per month, while an adult would usually receive Rp 1,000,000 (62,5 euros) per month. He said:

> I was compelled to do that because other kids are also doing it… so people will see me as irresponsible if I did not work. During that time, many people were poor, including my family. Maybe there are less children working nowadays... (interview, February 13, 2016).

According to Maliha, a mother in a Hazara refugee community in Indonesia, "many fathers in Quetta, Pakistan register their sons

as older than he actually is in order to get him to enter the labor market earlier so that he is allowed to do adult jobs" (interview, April 17, 2017). She told me that this practice means that many children miss out on their childhood or playtime,[6] and therefore many children become emotionally and mentally more mature than "their age." Alisha, a young Hazara woman who had lived in Iran, also emphasized that maturity goes in line with life experience, and that negative life experiences make people look older than their real age.

> I am 23, but I look older than that. Most of the refugee youth are like that. It is because of the experience of hardship. My family is okay financially, so I did not need to work. But I experienced emotional un-fulfillment, because to be happy you have to have confidence that you are enough for yourself. My family gives emotional affection but [I did] not [receive any] from the society (interview, March 26, 2016).

As an Afghani born and raised as a refugee in Iran, Alisha had always felt the bad reputation and image of Afghan refugees in the country. She had therefore always felt a psychological and emotional tension growing up. She believed that this had affected her appearance and made her look older than she was.

According to Shamina, a young girl from Somalia, in Somali culture young girls will also start to be recognized as a mature person around the age of 15. She said that a significant key to telling if a young girl is becoming mature is after her body starts to change shape due to puberty. Young men from other areas also told me that the socio-cultural image change from childhood to adulthood happens at around the age of 15. Regarding marriage age in Somali culture, 22-year-old Abdul told me that a decade ago, many Somalis had married very young, around 15 or 16 years old, but now they usually wait until around 19 or 20. It depends on the situation of each person, but in general they can freely choose their partner. Some of the Somali young women I spoke with met and married Somali men in Indonesia during

[6] I got the sense that Maliha's opinion that "proper playtime for child development is a crucial phase" had actually been influenced by international/Western children's rights narratives and standards, something which in reality is not the norm in many cultures.

Figure 2. Somali independent women in IOM community housing in Medan. Some of them live in separate accommodation to their husbands (photo credit: Henri Ismail 2016).

transit. After marriage, however, they often stayed separately from their husband until their marriage status had been registered with the UNHCR and their case registration had been combined as a family (see Figure 2). Many young girls I spoke with also aspired to continue their education and they claimed that there were no cultural barriers to pursuing this because they had always been free to do activities outside the house.

Many boys from Somalia and Ethiopia that I met had also started to work before they had turned 18 years old, depending on the situation of their family. Most of the underaged boys from Somalia, Ethiopia, and Yemen that I met had gone to elementary school and some had also gone to junior high school before conflict had broken out in their area, which had forced them to leave their country. Some mentioned that it is pretty difficult to get a job in their home country, but occasionally they had managed to get a casual job so that they could help their parents. Socio-economic class also affected their life experiences with regards to age. Those who were used to navigating a precarious life from a young age appeared to be much more resilient while in transit in Indonesia. On the other hand, those who were from wealthy families might never have worked at a young age but had more chances to leave

their country to pursue asylum abroad. Given that the resiliency of each person is different, I argue that the evaluation to grant special treatment should not be taken merely on the basis of chronological age but also on social age.

By considering young people's social age, humanitarian officers would not conduct age assessments that expect youth to exhibit "childlike behavior" as a precondition to receiving humanitarian aid. Many of the independent youths under the age of 18 that I met had very mature personalities and good negotiation skills, because they had already taken on the responsibilities of an adult in their society. Jafar, for instance, was a 15-year-old boy who spoke English fluently because he had gone to a good private school in Afghanistan. He was the youngest son in the family, but with his language skills he had led the discussions in every correspondence his family had with other people who did not speak Farsi. Since he had worked in his father's shop and had managed everything for him, his negotiation skills were impressive. For an underaged person, he did not have a "childlike attitude" at all. Thus, humanitarian officers who expect "childlike behavior" in order to conduct an age assessment would not find this from Jafar.

Validating Age through Documents

To assess the age of a person before placing them in a shelter or granting them financial assistance, humanitarian officers often ask for documents as supporting evidence to prove their age. However, validating age through documentation can be intricate. Even if the document is real, testimonies from independent youths show that the information written on a *Tazkira* can be "requested" according to need. Hasan, a young man from Bamiyan, told me that it was not until recently that Afghanistan had a national registration system ensuring that all newborn babies born in Afghanistan will would be recorded and would receive a birth certificate. Before the implementation of this national registration system, if someone needed to apply for school, for a formal job, or to get married, they needed the *Tazkira*, which he or she could apply for from the Population and Statistics Office. The applicant had to fill in the form and then ask their community leader or the village head to sign it as confirmation that they really were from the mentioned area. Hasan acknowledged, however, that Afghan officials are very

corrupt, so if you give them some money, they will write down anything.

> I only need three hours to get my *Tazkira* done, because I gave money to the officers. In my *Tazkira*, the information written there is just my name, my father's name, and my grandfather's name. There is no information about date of birth, but they only write down my age when I make the *Tazkira*. So, if you give them money they will write down if you want your age to be 15, 16, or 17 years old (interview, March 20, 2016).

Not everyone, however, is able to successfully bribe officers to produce a modified *Tazkira*. Since many people do not have a birth certificate to prove their age, in this case the officers have to judge their age according to appearance. Hasan claimed that the officers – who are usually Pashtun – often put the wrong information in Hazara people's *Tazkira* on purpose; usually 3–4 years older than the request. He said that this is done intentionally to make Hazara people face more difficulties when applying for schools. Furthermore, when the age stated on the *Tazkira* is not their real age, the youth are often compelled to provide inaccurate information about their age to the UNHCR, even when doing so will jeopardize their access to prioritization to obtain humanitarian aid. Fatiha was 17 years old, but she had registered at the UNHCR as 19 because that was what was stated on her *Tazkira*.

> My family went out to Pakistan and went back to Kabul. We registered in order to get the *Tazkira*. I was 15 years old at that time, but when the officer looked at my face he said I am 17 years old and wrote it down in my *Tazkira*. They, Pashtun, often do this to Hazaras so we cannot register to school or access other rights… When registering to the UNHCR, the translator suggested me to give information which is corresponding with the *Tazkira*. I wanted to tell the UNHCR officers the truth, that I am still 17 years old, not 19 years old. But he said that it is better to be consistent with the document, so if I am resettled to Australia, for example, the difference of age in the documents will not be a problem…

> but I am not counted as underage now… (interview, March 15, 2016).

Fatiha's story highlights the fact that refugee organizations, including the UNHCR, prioritize chronological age and appreciate consistency in the narrative by employing the notion of truthful story as "fixed and isomorphic to a single historical sequence of events" (Kirmayer 2003, 167). This mechanism of assessment that centralizes the idea of chronological age may leave the most vulnerable and needy unprotected and unsupported, particularly if they cannot perform childlike behavior or provide accurate supporting documents to define their age.

According to some UNHCR officers, the UNHCR also considers another aspect of measurement, namely biological age. Biological age is diverse across persons, as it is highly influenced by individual living conditions (Séguy et al. 2018). Indeed, the Indonesian officers admitted that they found it difficult to apply because some young people from certain ethnic backgrounds are physically more mature compared to other youths of the same age. In regard to the role of documents in assessing youths' age, UNHCR officers said they took youths' own stories to be the main consideration for granting assistance. The officers confirmed that they used documents such as the *Tazkira* from Hazara youth, as well as birth certificates and passports, only as supporting documents and not as the main evidence, because the officers were aware that such documents can be forged.

This section has demonstrated that categorizations developed on the basis of age are highly problematic. In the age assessment process, institutions such as the UNHCR generally only attempt to validate chronological age, and to a lesser extent biological age, without considering the social age of the applicant. This approach – which focuses on numbers – often overlooks the risks to and resilience of individual young people. When this method is applied as the basis to decide who should be prioritized for protection and who should receive aid, many of the most vulnerable refugees might be left out.

This section has also demonstrated that age-based protections cannot be evaluated solely through document validations, given that documents are easily forged. Even when young people can

provide official documents, there are stories of politics and power struggles behind the issuing of documents such as the *Tazkira*. This section thus invites readers to reflect on the fact that age-based categorizations are not only developed by international institutions for evaluating refugee applications, but also existed in the refugees' home countries. The school and employment regimes in those countries, coupled with social and cultural discrimination, may have created an environment for children to have become aware of their age and how to navigate socially with their age. Age-related social navigations performed by young people (as will be elaborated in chapter 4) should therefore not be analyzed in a vacuum, solely in the context of refugee applications. Rather, it is important to understand that age-related navigations were already being performed in their home countries, prior to their journey to seek asylum protection. Given the fact that their navigational approach may be more of a normality that can be found in any culture and society, the discourse of "refugee cheating" should be diminished.

REFUGEE NARRATIVES AND YOUTHFUL NARRATIVES: TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN

Considering that the UNHCR and IOM, the organizations that handle refugees in Indonesia, have developed different categorizations such as "unaccompanied minors" and "independent child migrants," the dualism of refugees versus (economic) migrants is palpable. For independent youth who really want to be recognized as refugees, any narration or action that could make others perceive them as a migrant should be avoided. Earlier in this chapter, I explained how "unaccompanied (refugee) minors," and the corresponding category of "anchor children," are positioned as victims of adult exploitation without much agency (Boyden and Howard 2013), while "independent migrant children" are perceived as having more agency in deciding their movements. The latter are not seen as having been coerced or tricked; they are not refugees but rather migrate to seek employment or education (IOM Geneva 2011). This general assumption has created a condition where the "refugee narrative" (the story that pushed

the person to leave their home country) is more appreciated by the officers/evaluators than the "youthful narrative" (the hope that pulls them to resettlement countries).

When youths discuss "achieving a better future" as one of their migration dreams, they will easily be perceived as "economic migrants" who are attempting to exploit the refugee processing mechanisms as a means to be resettled in a developed country. In Indonesia, I often encountered comments from immigration officers who thought that the youths were not "true" refugees because they wanted a better life in a third country. This prevailing attitude caused the independent youth to tell only their "refugee narrative" and not to reveal their "youthful narrative," namely their imagined future (I elaborate more on such narrative strategies in chapter 4). The following section aims to criticize the overgeneralizations and expectations regarding independent refugee youth. I argue that unaccompanied refugees also have dreams for their future and this does not change their deservingness to acquire refugee protection. This section shows that when youths are outside of the circumstances of eligibility assessment, they also express their hopes for a better future (youthful narrative) more openly. In acknowledging their dream of a "better future" we allow youth to accentuate their agency and multidirectional movements which is innovative, future oriented, and creative as we will see later in this thesis (chapter 5 -7).

The Refugee Narrative: To be Free from Fear

According to the independent refugee youth I spoke with, the most significant reason for fleeing their country of origin was to be safe from war, conflict, violence, or dictatorship. "To be physically safe" was the most common answer that I heard from youths in the field. Some youths were escaping a direct and personal violent threat, or they were escaping the dangerous and daunting conditions resulting from war and tribal conflict in their area. Such violence and threats could also be caused by their individual activities or by activism, or due to their ethnicity or religious identity. For these reasons, the youths often blamed the government, terrorist groups, militias, or competing ethnic groups in their country as being the perpetrators of (the threats of) violence.

Independent Hazara youth from Afghanistan generally said that

they were fleeing from the threat of the Taliban. Furthermore, as someone from a Hazara and Shia minority, their situation was made worse if they had been involved in activities that were considered "too Western" or "too internationally-oriented," or if they were considered as "not promoting Islam," such as by working at international NGOs, teaching English, or playing music (Mariam, a Hazara refugee young woman, interview, April 28, 2016). Many would say that only being Hazara was already a legitimation for the Taliban to kill them. Hazara youth who stayed in Pakistan emphasized several targeted killings of Hazara people in Quetta (Karimi, interview, February 13, 2016). On February 16, 2013, there was a massive explosion near a crowded grocery market in a Hazara-Shia-dominated neighborhood in Quetta (Layton, 2013). The bomb blast, which was claimed by Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, an "outlawed Sunni militant group," left at least 65 people dead and more than 180 wounded (ibid). This blast followed a suicide bomb attack that killed at least 91 people and wounded 121 people in a snooker club in Quetta in January 2016.

All of the youths' stories shared a similar logic of why they had fled their home country: they wanted to be free from the fear of persecution, terror, and physical danger, either from a "terrorist group" and/or from the government. Independent Tamil youth from Sri Lanka, for instance, also denounced abduction, conscription, and other human rights abuses by the government (Amal, interview, July 15, 2016). Oromo youth from Ethiopia underlined governmental dictatorship and violence in their area, Yemeni youth were escaping the conflict between Houthi rebels and the government, while Somali youths wanted to escape constant civil war and persecution from the Islamist insurgent group Al-Shabaab (which ironically means 'The Youth').

In addition to this, Iranian youth, both those who were born and raised in Christian families and those who were from Muslim families and had decided to convert to Christianity, bewailed the religious persecution from the government (Alisha, interview, July 18, 2016). According to the Death Penalty Database, many converts are arrested and face the death penalty for "apostasy," written in Sharia law, which is enforceable by domestic courts (Cornell Center on the Death Penalty Worldwide, no date; see also Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran article 167 year 1979).

According to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom annual report 2017, minority religions such as Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians, which should be protected under the Iranian constitution, are still persecuted to date. Iranian authorities have also executed Baha'i faith believers, as they are viewed as heretics (Landinfo, 2017).

In some cases, independent youths are not only escaping from a fear of persecution by terrorist groups or the government, but also due to the fear of oppression from their own ethnic community. Several independent youth, particularly Hazara women and girls, mentioned "conventional tradition and culture" as a significant contributing factor to why they had left their country. To be specific, they usually highlighted arranged marriages and other Hazara traditions that limit the freedom and aspirations of young women. Not only Arezoo, whose story is outlined at the beginning of this chapter, but at least ten other independent girls – some still underaged – told me that their parents had been about to marry them to a much older man. In some accounts, girls stated that they had not received approval for their boyfriend from their families, particularly if he was from a different ethnic group. According to UNHCR staff, an increasing number of unaccompanied girls are coming to Indonesia. In the case of Hazara girls, arranged marriage is still a significant factor that forces many to flee their home country.

Escaping a repressive tradition or culture was generally not mentioned by young women from Ethiopia or Somalia as a trigger to migrate. Gender inequality seemed to be less of an issue for Ethiopian girls; they said that they could marry anyone at any age and could do any activities during the day without a male companion. The Somali girls I met also did not mention a repressive society as a reason to flee the country. For youths from Ethiopia and Somalia, the main reason they gave was to escape war and conflict and avoid persecution due to their political opinions and activities.

Additionally, some independent youths said that their journey had been motivated by the desire to escape the discrimination they had faced in a previous transit country. I heard this kind of refugee narrative mostly from independent Hazara youths who had stayed for some time in Iran. They had faced discrimination

by the Iranian government and also by Iranian society, which sees Afghan refugees in general as unwelcome outsiders. For the last 20 years, Iran has imposed restrictions on Afghan children accessing formal education, in order to encourage Afghan refugees to go back to Afghanistan (Hoodfar 2012, 149). Leila, a 21-year-old Hazara, who had spent virtually her whole life as a refugee in Iran, told me about her difficult life there:

> I left Afghanistan with my family when I was four years old. My parents told me all sorts of stories about the cruelty of Pashtun people to Hazaras and also about the wars in Afghanistan and during the Taliban occupation. My family moved to Quetta, Pakistan, at first, but then decided to go to Iran. We lived in Iran for 14 years. I could not go to formal school as I was a refugee and I did not have any documents. I learned in a learning center for Afghan refugees until grade 12 [...] No Iranian would come and be a volunteer in the learning center. In Iran, we have similar culture, same religion, but we did not feel secure as they often treat us badly [...] I have been a refugee for my whole life. To be honest, I am very tired of being a refugee. I want to be resettled somewhere and feel a sense of belonging to a certain place (interview, March 26, 2016).

Leila's moving story is very interesting as it illustrates that for Hazara youth, Indonesia might not be the first or the only transit country on their journey. The logic and decision to move might therefore exist along a pathway that began long ago, and which might become strengthened by accumulated factors from the country origin as well as in previous transit countries. More importantly, Leila's story reminds us that a "refugee" is not only a legal category defined by the UNHCR. For the youth I met, "being a refugee" is a condition of needing protection from the international community, regardless of the legal approval of any institution. It is crucial that the youth are convinced that they deserve international protection based on their difficult life experiences.

This section has outlined a variety of stories from independent youth showing the fear, threats, or unbearable conditions in their

home countries that forced them to flee. Given that the independent youths that I met were from diverse countries of origin, they were escaping various actors: terrorist groups, authoritarian governments, repressive traditions, and even their own families. In relation to the problematization of age-based categorizations, as discussed earlier in this chapter, it is important to note that the various children that fall under the single category of "unaccompanied minors" have diverse stories. This serves as a reminder that categories can easily create an illusion of homogeneity, yet people should be treated according to their unique circumstances, specific needs, and individual conditions. The "refugee narratives" I heard were generally very sad and depressing, but paradoxically, these kinds of stories are perceived positively by humanitarian officers, given that such stories are very important in refugee status determination and protection. The next section will illustrate the other side of youths' stories – their hopeful and optimistic stories – which are, however, less appreciated by evaluators in the refugee management system.

Striving for a Better Future: The Youthful Narrative

This section will elaborate on the "youthful narrative," which projects creativity and forward-looking aspirations for a better future, such as pursuing education and job opportunities, and living in a "modern society." I am fully aware that using terms such as "youthful" and "creativity," "innovation" and "forward-looking attitude" reproduces Western constructions and categorizations of global youth (Ansell 2005). I nevertheless find the term "youthful narrative" useful because I identified certain forms of narratives that were drawn from the youths' own aspirations, hopes, and dreams that were distinct compared to the aspirations of older refugees.

According to some independent youth, obtaining a better future is not only about a future that is free from fear, but also one where they will be able to manifest their purpose and aspirations in life. Arash, a 17-year-old Hazara boy from Joghuri, Afghanistan said that he had fled in order to be able to study and find a good education in a safe place (see illustration in Figure 3). This dream seemed possible and feasible after he had seen how many of his friends who had left Afghanistan had been resettled in Australia, Canada, or the USA. Many friends posted good news and beautiful pictures on Facebook describing how they were going to school,

Figure 3. Some youths continue their education in self-organized learning centers while in transit and learn English to prepare for their future education in a resettlement country. These pictures were taken in the Refugee Learning Nest (photo credit: Henri Ismail 2016).

so he too had decided to go before he finished elementary school. For Arash, there was no good accessible education or promising future for him in Afghanistan, with its constant war and violence. He said that almost all of his friends from school had gone to other countries. Some had gone to Europe and some to Australia. In general, he said that migrating to another country was a dream for all young people; only elders wanted to stay in Afghanistan. When a person managed to flee Afghanistan, people would see them as lucky, not as a traitor. Arash and his peers would discuss among themselves where they would go once they were ready and had enough money, because there was nothing for them in the future if they were to stay (interview, April 15, 2016). Having migration as the common desire also put pressure on young men in Afghanistan. If a person did not go, he would feel as if he had been "left behind." Given this peer pressure, migration was also perceived as an initiation phase for boys, to prove their capability and maturity.

Considering the fact that they could not go back to Afghanistan due to the war, and that they had been desperate in Iran due to the structural discrimination they faced from the government and the social exclusion they faced in society, many Hazara boys who had been born and raised in Iran also expressed a motivation to achieve their dream of a good future and better opportunities by migrating outside of Iran. Homayun had started his migration journey from Iran because of education-related reasons.

> I had been staying for 6 years in Iran and went to school until grade 7. After that, I decided to go back to Afghanistan and planned to continue my school there. I wanted to continue to university, but I cannot study in an Iranian university, so the only choice was to study in an Afghan university. If I go to an Afghan university, I must retake elementary school from grade 7 in an Afghan school, because I need to study Dari [language]. That is why I left Iran after grade 7, I did not want to waste my time. I could not access university in Iran unless I have documents from a high institution in Iran or from the UNHCR, which I did not have (interview, November 20, 2016).

I heard of the dream of pursuing good education during conversations with many independent youth from different countries of origin. Akbar, an independent Somalian youth, said that in addition to the war he and his peers had faced in his home country, young people in Somalia nourish the aspiration to leave the country to study or to have a better life, preferably in Norway, Sweden, or Finland. Nevertheless, since the trip to Europe is getting more dangerous, many choose to come to Malaysia and Indonesia first.

> In Somalia, if they have a little bit of money, they will immediately leave the country. There was no future we can hope for there… Many of my friends came to European countries by boat for studying or working, but my mom forbade me because it is too dangerous. Many Somalis also go to Malaysia because it has a free visa for all Muslim countries. I have a lot of friends who study in UUM [Universiti Utara Malaysia], UPM [Universiti Putra Malaysia], or UM [Universiti Malaya]. I have tried so many times to get a scholarship but I failed… (Akbar, interview, July 15, 2016).

Education is a very prevalent "buzzword" among the reasons why young people migrate. Young people comprehend and internalize education as their primary need, so they are very motivated to achieve it. Education is often seen as the most

obvious "way out" from a dark situation. Moreover, the success stories of other people who have reached the top of the social status ladder often stress the importance of education in their journey. For example, the story of Malala Yousafzai, a teenage blogger who survived a Taliban targeted killing and went on to become the youngest Nobel Prize laureate, has influenced many girls and young women in Afghanistan and Pakistan to strive for education. Moreover, Hazara youth "witness" other successful Hazara people on the news and on social media who have become politicians, doctors, and lawyers.

The desire to obtain better and higher education is often related to how the youth see it as a ladder to a better future. A better future can mean a good job or a respected position in the workplace with a high salary; but it also implies the desire to move to a higher social status for the sake of recognition and self-articulation. Therefore, aside from education, independent youths often express their hope to get a good job for themselves and also to be able support their family back home. Selina, an independent Oromo girl, emphasized that she felt stuck in Indonesia indefinitely, and this worried her as what she wanted most was to start working and help her family. Her plan was to get a good job as soon as she was resettled so that she could send money to her family in Ethiopia, or even visit them. Her brother had been captured by the government for saying something against the dictatorship, so she had to become the breadwinner of the family. She was crying as she told me that she had not heard from her mother in two years. Selina was desperate because she knew that her family needed her and yet she still had not heard from the UNHCR about the progress of her asylum claim (interview, May 23, 2016).

Today, more and more girls and young women are migrating with the additional hope of becoming the breadwinner for their families back home. Ayaan, a young Somali woman, told me that in recent years there were more independent women travelling alone from Somalia. Although there are no cultural restrictions for women to travel alone, parents are usually not happy if their daughter has to go abroad and become the family breadwinner. However, with the constant war and fighting in the country, many male family members are dying. This means that daughters are becoming responsible for their mothers and younger siblings.

Moreover, since fleeing Somalia will put the young women in a safer position, mothers are now tending to agree if their daughters want to go to another country to pursue better opportunities (Ayaan, interview, July 17, 2016). This phenomenon also applies to those coming from Iran, Pakistan, and even Afghanistan. The story of Zahra's sister related at the beginning of this chapter shows that the task of providing for one's family is no longer exclusively the responsibility of male family members. Whenever the situation requires, young women must also be ready to become the family breadwinner.

Aside from getting a good education and accessing job opportunities, youths said that another significant hope is to live in a society where the people are more open minded, so that they can fully express themselves without any judgment from society. Aminaa, a Hazara girl, told me:

> You know sister, in Afghanistan we are a century back from you people. Women cannot sit together with men in a room… we cannot have opinions, and we will easily be judged if we do certain activities. I do not want to go back. If I remember Afghanistan, it is just because my mother is there. I want to live in a society that respects gender equality, where I can be anything and do everything without being judged (interview, February 3, 2016).

Aminaa is certainly not alone. Independent young men and women alike desire to live in a society that is "more modern" and "less restrictive" for them to exercise their agency. Freedom of expression and freedom of movement are alluring elements they hope to achieve in developed countries, and it is a strong attraction for them to take the migration journey. Indonesia's role in providing a democratic and flexible social setting for the independent youth to actualize themselves will be elaborated on in chapter 7. Here, I want to highlight that the ability to express themselves, to articulate their ideas, and to achieve self-actualization are crucial element of young people's youthful aspirations.

This section has elaborated on the plans and hopes for a better future as expressed by the independent young people I met. A "better future" here can be understood as everything better than

their life was in their home country, such as better security and education, a more inclusive society, better work opportunities, technology, and infrastructure, a more modern way of living, and a more forward-looking society. Just like other push and pull factors, the "refugee narrative" and the "youthful narrative" reflect two sides of the same coin. Both narratives must be comprehended simultaneously in order to understand the logic of independent youths' migration decisions. Nevertheless, in the international refugee regime, youth are encouraged to highlight their "refugee narrative" only and to repress their "youthful narrative." They are afraid that their "youthful narrative" will label them "economic migrants" and thus jeopardize their chances of asylum protection. I argue that young people must be more stimulated to express their "youthful narrative," as this will strengthen their agency to keep their bodies and minds active. Their hopes and dreams for a "better future" also provide much-needed energy when navigating uncertain conditions with dignity while in transit in Indonesia; this will be discussed further in the next chapters.

CONCLUSIONS

Independent youth transiting in Indonesia do not constitute a homogenous category. Among those within similar institutional categorizations (unaccompanied minors, single men, single women), there are significant differences that need to be understood and taken into account. Independent youth who are seeking asylum in Indonesia vary widely in terms of age, they come from diverse cultural backgrounds, they are of different genders, they are from varying social classes and religions, and they bring with them and develop along the way different experiences, logics, motivations, and dreams. It is important to avoid generalizations and take this wide variation into consideration. In many cases, using age as the basis for protection has been proven to be unfitting.

In this chapter, I have also problematized presumptions about unaccompanied minors as anchor children, who are often seen as victims of adult exploitation. I have illustrated that unaccompanied minors are agentive persons who participate in the migration decision-making process. I have also problematized the age-based

categorizations in the international refugee management system, which are merely based on the idea of chronological age, and take the age of 18 as the defining marker of the "global model of childhood" (Ansell 2005). By centralizing the discussion of social age, I have shown how the construction of age is messy and complicated across different social and cultural contexts. Moreover, I have argued that age-based categorizations potentially lead to the exclusion of minors who need urgent assistance, yet end up in non-priority categorizations. Thus, I argue that if age is the sole aspect of the prioritization of protection, then it needs to be evaluated contextually by considering other aspects of risk and resilience, as well as individual capability and capacities.

This chapter has illustrated the agency of independent refugee youth, which they implement via multidirectional moves (encompassing bodies and ideas) and exercise all along their journey, starting in their country of origin. Combined with young people's considerations when choosing to transit in Indonesia, as described in chapter 2, this chapter has highlighted their decision to travel, often alone, which is influenced by the combination of fear and difficult, unstable situations in their home countries on the one hand, and the hope of achieving a better future in a safe place on the other. I argue, therefore, that the victimizing overtones used when independent refugee children and young people are discussed must be minimized, so that the agency of both refugee children and migrant children can be equally recognized.

After understanding the context of Indonesia as an enabling transit country in chapter 2, and after unfolding the perceptions and stigmas associated with the institutional categorizations that independent youth face in this chapter, the following ethnographic chapters (chapters 4–7) will focus on independent youths' social navigations in different settings. Closely related to the "youthful narrative" described in this chapter, the next chapter (chapter 4) will elaborate on young people's narrative strategies and self-representation strategies when navigating the outsourced institutions that manage the refugee population in Indonesia.