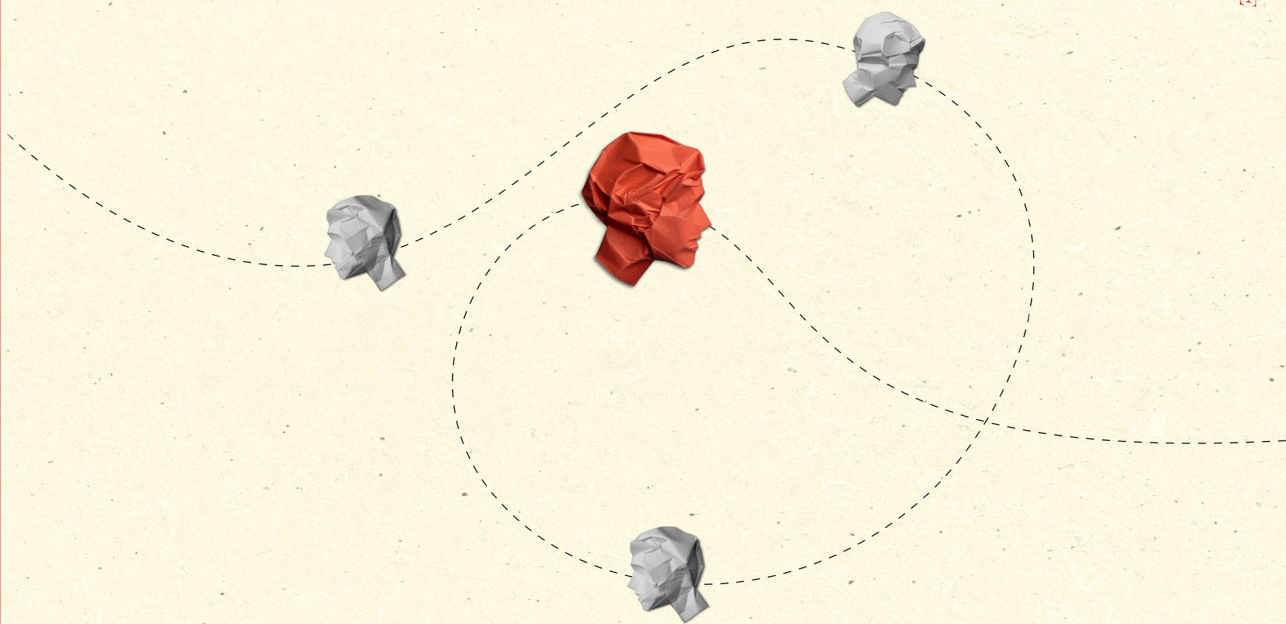


PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL CONDITIONS OF KURDISH REFUGEES IN ROME

*CHALLENGES, IDENTITY,
AND ADAPTATION MECHANISMS*



KWESTAN ALI ABDALLA



Roma TrE-Press
2026



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*COLLANA RICERCHE DI
PEDAGOGIA GENERALE E SOCIALE*

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Ricerche di pedagogia generale e sociale

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Abstract

1. The purpose of this research was to explore how it really feels to have been forced to abandon all of your possessions and leave behind your family and friends.
2. Between January 2017 and June 2018, researchers met with 39 individuals in Rome, using both individual interviews (23) and focus groups.

Participants were displaced persons from the Kurdistan region of Iraq or surrounding regions.

Researchers identified participants through local organizations such as cultural centers, reception facilities and informal social networks developed solely to avoid isolation.

Three themes emerged repeatedly during interviews:

The gradual loss of hope before a refugee decides to travel;

Psychological damage sustained during the travel process, including fear, humiliation and the potential for sexual assault;

The unique nature of Italy's asylum process where refugees face long delays in receiving decisions on their applications, thus delaying their ability to start rebuilding their lives, while at the same time damaging their health;

The quiet, ongoing battle to maintain an identity as Kurd(s) in Rome, a city without space for Kurdish culture;

Finally, researchers also observed that although the system provides little support for refugees, there are still ways that people adapt and develop coping strategies to continue to survive.

A key finding of this research is difficult to hear: Many Kurdish refugees in Rome experience mental suffering as a result of the current living conditions (legal limbo, inadequate housing, lack of employment opportunities, etc.) and not as a direct result of historical trauma experienced prior to leaving their homeland.

In this study we draw in multiple theoretical aspects; migration economics, acculturation frameworks, social capital theory, we do this because a single aspect isn't enough to understand why people leave their homes. We can assume that that they leave because it is easier than to stay in a life so far from the one they were supposed to have, because the life they envisioned and the life they live has such a wide gap it isn't bearable anymore, that gap is what this research is going to capture, what the refugee experience is really like, adding a voice from Rome to a body of scholarship that has until now, focused almost entirely on Kurdish communities in northern Europe. The policy recommendations that follow from the findings are direct, because the situation calls for directness.

Keywords: Kurdish refugees, Rome, Italy, qualitative research, migration, psychological well-being, acculturation, asylum system, social integration, identity, resilience, thematic analysis, Kurdistan Region.

Introduction

During the fieldwork in Rome, I kept meeting young Kurds who were trying to rebuild lives that had not been broken by their own choices. They were caught in a political system that rewards loyalty over ability. An economy that cannot employ its own graduates. The long shadow of a war that never fully ended, even after the fighting stopped. Understanding what pushes people out, and what they find when they arrive somewhere new, is the question running through every page of this study.

Kurdistan has seen people leave in waves over the past thirty years. Each wave had its own character. In the 1990s, people fled political repression and the Ba'ath regime. After 2003, they kept leaving, mostly for economic reasons, layered with a deep disillusionment about what the post-Saddam era had actually delivered for ordinary people. But 2014 was different. The people leaving were no longer just the unemployed and the desperate. University students started going. Civil servants. Small business owners. Doctors and teachers, people who, by most measures, had every reason to stay. But they had done the calculation and concluded that the future available to them in Kurdistan was not worth the cost of remaining. UNHCR figures for 2024 confirmed what people on the ground already knew: registrations of Kurdish nationals in European countries had risen across multiple waves, with arrivals becoming more diverse, often more educated, and, in many cases, more desperate.

Italy has a somewhat paradoxical role in all of this, since its geography, not policy, shapes it as one of Europe's main entry points making it take in a disproportionate ratio of refugees.

What happens in the Italian system shapes refugees' earliest experiences in ways that are hard to undo later. The World Health Organization estimated in 2025 that refugees face mental health risks three to four times higher than host populations. That figure demands explanation, not just documentation. What is the receiving system doing, through its design, its resource allocation, its political priorities to produce or reduce that gap? That question ran through every conversation I had in Rome.

The Kurdish community in Rome is considerably smaller than the communities in Berlin or Stockholm, scattered across neighborhoods, Tor Bella Monaca, Tiburtino, Torpignattara, Pigneto, without forming a single visible presence, but their experience is representative of something much wider. Most arrived through the same irregular maritime routes, registered in reception centers that were not built with their specific circumstances in mind, and found themselves navigating a system that is, at best, indifferent and, at worst, actively counterproductive. The legal, the social, and the psychological are deeply tangled together here, you cannot understand the mental health with-

out understanding the legal status, you cannot understand the legal status without understanding the housing, and you cannot understand the housing without understanding the political choices that put people in conditions where nothing else can move forward.

The study is grounded in qualitative fieldwork, twenty-three individual interviews and two focus group sessions with thirty-nine participants in total, alongside a sustained engagement with the scholarly literature on Kurdish migration, refugee mental health, and acculturation. The fieldwork was conducted between January and June 2025, participants were reached through community networks, reception centers, and the Kurdish Cultural Center in Rome.

What follows is a field-based account of Kurdish refugee life in Rome: what pushed people out of Kurdistan, what they encountered on the crossing and after arrival, how they navigate the specific conditions of the Italian context, and what their coping strategies reveal about both human endurance and human cost. The findings are specific, they resist the move that turns refugees into a category rather than people.

The structure of this study is as follows.

- Chapter one: Research design, problem, objectives, rationale, sampling strategy, methodology, and procedures for establishing rigor and trustworthiness.
- Chapter two: defining the key conceptual terms the analysis relies on.
- Chapter three: Surveying the relevant literature.
- Chapter four: presentation of the theoretical frameworks guiding the analysis.
- Chapter five: examining the drivers of migration from Kurdistan.
- Chapter six: presentation of the full thematic analysis and discussion of findings.
- Chapter seven, eight, nine: addressing the broader impacts of migration, the specific difficulties

Kurdish refugees encounter in Rome, and the coping and adaptation strategies they draw on.

Closing chapter: A synthesis of findings, a reflection on its limitations, and policy recommendations.

There are two points worth mentioning at the outset, first, this study is focused on a particular community in a particular city at a particular moment, Rome in 2005. Findings are relevant in highlighting Kurdish migration and refugee reception in southern European cities more broadly, but those findings don't necessarily apply other national settings or time periods, and if tried to apply it should be done with caution. Second, the samples are only the ones who agreed to speak to a researcher, the ones who are most marginalized and isolated members of the Kurdish Rome community are the ones who are hard-

est to reach through standard qualitative methods, and the study makes no claim to speak for the ones it couldn't reach.

Chapter One

Research Design

The Research Problem

It is undeniable that the Kurdish region has been moving from one crisis to another in the last few decades, never being able to recover in between each crisis. The political turbulence after 1991, the civil war of KDP and PUK, the revolution of 2003 and its long, uneven aftermath all stacked up leaving deep marks on society. Then came 2014, which was different in character from what had preceded it. The ISIS offensive was faster and more violent, and it destabilized communities that had started to feel some stability for the first time in years. Alongside all of this ran a structural economic problem that no political settlement has managed to resolve: an economy built almost entirely around oil revenues funneled through Baghdad, a private sector too underdeveloped to absorb its own workforce, and a labor market where political connections routinely matter more than qualifications. Year after year, graduates left universities to find that their degrees opened few doors, or none at all.

For ordinary people, and especially for the young, the consequences have been serious and cumulative. The salary crisis that followed the fiscal dispute with Baghdad turned financial hardship into something close to a permanent condition for large parts of the population. Teachers, nurses, and civil servants went months, sometimes years, without receiving regular pay in a society where formal public employment has historically been the primary source of economic stability. People responded in the ways available to them: informal work, borrowing, waiting. And increasingly, they left. The calculation many made was not impulsive. It was the product of watching opportunities narrow, watching the gap between what was promised and what was delivered grow wider, and concluding that waiting was no longer a reasonable strategy.

Youth migration from Kurdistan has become, in this sense, a structural feature of the society rather than an emergency or an exception. It extends across educational levels and socioeconomic backgrounds. It includes people leaving for purely economic reasons as well as people who faced specific threats to their safety. Many fall somewhere between those poles not fleeing a specific threat, but living in conditions that simply left no good reason to stay. Numbers can capture how many people left. They say nothing about what going meant for those who went.

Existing studies on Kurdish migration are heavily concentrated on the receiving countries in northern Europe, due to the presence of larger, older, and more established Kurdish communities, countries like Germany, Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom have been the target sites of

research on diaspora formation, transnational political engagement, and integration outcomes. Italy, and specifically Rome, represents an underexplored case that offers several analytically meaningful advantages: its role as a major and contested point of irregular maritime arrival; the particular architecture and limitations of the Italian reception system; and a cultural and institutional environment that combines genuine openness in certain respects with serious difficulties in others. Focusing on Rome makes it possible to generate evidence about an important and underrepresented context while also illuminating dynamics, the relationship between legal status and psychological well-being, the role of community networks in fostering resilience, the experience of acculturative stress, that have broader relevance across European settings.

This study, against this background, is oriented by a single important question: what are the psychological and social realities of Kurdish refugees living in Rome, and how are these conditions shaped by the migration process itself, and by the structure features of Post-arrival experience in the Italian context? Four analytical subquestions develop this central question; first, what principal reasons drive the Kurdish youth to migrate from Kurdistan region, and what are their interactions like in individual cases? Second question we ask is what are the negative and positive psychological and social effects produced by migration for young Kurdish people, their families and Kurdish communities more broadly? Third, what are the challenges that await the Kurdish refugees in Rome, and how the legal, economic, social, and psychological dimensions of those challenges interact and reinforce each other? Fourth, how do the refugees cope and adapt strategically in response to these challenges and what do the said strategies reveal in terms of both individual resilience and collective capacity.

There is also a meaningful gap in the existing literature that this study is positioned to fill. The Italian reception system has received some academic attention, particularly following the sharp rise in arrivals between 2014 and 2016, but sustained empirical research focused specifically on Kurdish refugees in Rome remains scarce. Most of what exists either addresses refugees in Italy in general terms, or looks at Kurdish diaspora communities in northern Europe. Kurdish refugees in Rome are a specific population with a specific history, specific languages, and legal circumstances shaped by where they came from and how they got here. Generating that evidence serves two purposes: intellectually, it extends our understanding of Kurdish migration to southern Europe; practically, it gives institutions and organizations something concrete to work with.

1.2 Research Objectives

The study is organized around five interrelated objectives. The first is to identify and examine the psychological and social consequences of migration

as experienced by Kurdish refugees in Rome, with particular attention to processes of identity transformation, emotional well-being, shifts in social relations and community belonging, and the ways in which these experiences differ between men and women. The second objective is to map and analyze the specific challenges that refugees face within the Italian context, legal uncertainty and bureaucratic complexity, economic marginalization and exclusion from the formal labor market, housing conditions and their psychological effects, barriers to language acquisition, and experiences of discrimination, and to understand how these challenges compound one another.

The third objective is to identify and interpret the coping and adaptation mechanisms that refugees employ in response to these challenges, exploring the strategies through which individuals navigate the host environment, negotiate cultural pressures, maintain or reconstruct a sense of identity and belonging, and sustain psychological functioning under conditions of sustained stress. The fourth objective is to connect the empirical findings generated through fieldwork in Rome to broader theoretical frameworks, principally Berry's acculturation model, Silove's stress-trauma framework, and social capital theory. The fifth objective is to produce findings that carry practical as well as academic relevance: for those designing reception systems and integration services, for mental health professionals, and for community organizations working to improve conditions for refugees in Rome and comparable European cities.

1.3 Rationale for Topic Selection

My engagement with this subject developed over a number of years and through several overlapping channels, academic, professional, and personal. As a scholar based in Sulaymaniyah, I have watched emigration intensify over more than a decade. I have seen what it does to families left behind, to communities that lose their most energetic and educated members at precisely the moments when those people are most needed, and to the migrants themselves, who often find that Europe is considerably more complicated, more conditional, and more difficult than the images circulating on social media had suggested. The events of 2014 were a turning point that I experienced as a member of Kurdish society: the ISIS offensive accelerated departures, added a distinct layer of collective trauma to what was already an extremely difficult period, and made it hard to judge anyone for leaving, because staying had become its own kind of loss.

Italy is an analytically appropriate site for this study for reasons that extend beyond practical access. As the primary maritime entry point for much of the irregular migration originating in the Middle East, South Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa that reaches Europe, Italy absorbs a disproportionate and in many respects inequitable share of the human consequences of global inequality and

political instability. Rome is not, for most of the Kurds who end up there, simply a transit point. It becomes, for better or worse and often for years at a time, their world. The city's institutional architecture, the CAS reception centers on the urban periphery, the bureaucratic rhythm of asylum appointments and territorial commission hearings, the labor market with its particular exclusions and informalities, the neighborhoods where affordable housing remains available, all of these features determine what refugees can and cannot do, and none of it happened by accident. They reflect specific political and administrative choices, and understanding those choices and their consequences is a central part of what this research sets out to do.

1.4 Sampling

1.4.1 Sampling Strategy

Deciding who to include in this research, and how to find them, required balancing two things that do not always sit easily together: being analytically deliberate about who the participants should be, and being realistic about who could actually be reached in Rome. The approach combined purposive and snowball sampling, and the two methods served different purposes.

Purposive sampling came first. Clear criteria were set in advance to make sure participants were drawn from the right population and that the group as a whole reflected meaningful variation, in legal status, length of time in Italy, gender, age, and where in Kurdistan people had come from. Snowball sampling came in alongside this, used mainly to reach people who would not have been accessible through formal channels. Once interviews were underway, participants were asked if they knew others who might be willing to speak. In research with refugee communities, where no official register exists and where people have good reasons to be cautious about strangers asking questions, this kind of referral network is often the only way to reach certain parts of the population.

Recruitment happened through four main channels. The Kurdish Cultural Center in Rome was the starting point. Before formal data collection began, in December 2024, the researcher spent time at community events at the Center, attending events, having informal conversations, and making clear what the research was about and why it mattered. Without that foundation, the interviews that followed would have been shallower, people share more when they know who they are talking to.

Access to CAS reception centers required a separate process. Formal requests were sent to center management, and two centers in the Lazio region agreed to participate. A third declined, a refusal that reflects how guarded those environments tend to be. The WhatsApp groups that Kurdish residents in Rome use to share information and stay connected proved useful for reaching people

who kept their distance from formal institutions for various reasons, geography, distrust, or simple exhaustion with the system. Finally, the snowball element brought in thirteen additional participants, referred by people already interviewed, opening up social networks that none of the other channels had reached.

1.4.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Four criteria had to be met for someone to be included. Participants needed to be of Kurdish ethnic background, this included both Kurmanji and Sorani speakers, as well as Kurdish individuals whose everyday language was Arabic. They needed to be living in Rome or the wider Lazio region at the time of the interview. They needed to be between 18 and 45 years old, the age range most heavily represented in irregular migration from the Kurdistan Region and the period of life in which questions of identity, work, and family are most actively being worked out. And they needed to either currently hold refugee or asylum-seeker status, or to have arrived in Italy through an irregular route within the previous five years.

Language was not an exclusion criterion. Interviews could be conducted in Kurdish (Kurmanji or Sorani), Arabic, or Italian, and translation support was available throughout. Three interviews conducted mainly in Italian were supported by an interpreter hired specifically for that purpose.

Three groups of people were excluded. Those who had been living in Italy for more than ten years were left out because their experience would be too different from those who had come more recently to be usefully comparable. Those who had obtained Italian citizenship were excluded because their legal situation is fundamentally different from people still inside the asylum or protection system. And those whose primary reason for coming to Italy was education were excluded because that experience has little in common with the irregular migration this research is about. All exclusion criteria were explained clearly to potential participants during an initial screening conversation before any formal consent was sought.

1.4.3 Sample Composition

The final sample came to thirty-nine people in total. Twenty-three took part in individual interviews and sixteen participated in two focus group sessions, with no one appearing in both. Among the individual interview participants, ages ran from 19 to 43, averaging 27.6 years. Nine were women and fourteen were men. The focus group participants were slightly older on average, a mean of 31.2 years, ranging from 22 to 43, with five women and eleven men. Across the full sample of thirty-nine, fourteen participants were women and twenty-five were men. This roughly matches what UNHCR data shows about the gender breakdown of Kurdish arrivals in Italy, where men have consistently

made up the larger share, though more women and families have been making the crossing in recent years.

Most participants came from Sulaymaniyah, sixteen in total, followed by Erbil (nine), Kirkuk (seven), Dohuk (four), and Mosul province (three). Time spent in Italy at the point of interview ranged from eight months to six years, with a median of just over two years. In terms of legal status: eleven held formal refugee status or humanitarian protection, seven had subsidiary protection, five were still waiting for a decision, and the sixteen focus group participants were recorded collectively, nine as status-holders and seven as still in process. This spread across legal categories turned out to matter a great deal analytically. The difference between having a secure status and not having one came through as one of the most consistent findings across the entire dataset.

1.5 Methodology

1.5.1 Research Paradigm

This research sits within an interpretivist paradigm. The basic premise is that social reality is not something fixed and waiting to be measured, it emerges from how people interpret and talk about what happens to them. That premise has direct implications for how this study was designed. The psychological and social realities of Kurdish refugees in Rome cannot be adequately captured by surveying large numbers of people and summarizing their answers statistically. What is needed instead is a way of getting close to the meanings people attach to what has happened to them, how they understand their situation, how they talk about it, what frameworks they draw on. Qualitative methods, and specifically the combination of individual interviews and focus groups used here, are built for exactly that kind of inquiry.

Interpretivist research does not mean looser standards. It means a different kind of rigor, one that requires the researcher to be transparent about their own position, honest about how their assumptions shape what they see and how they interpret it, and systematic in the way they analyze what participants say.

1.5.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Twenty-three individual interviews were conducted between January and May 2025. The semi-structured format was chosen because it works well for what this research needed: detailed, personal accounts of experience, told in the participant's own terms. The interview guide, included in full in Chapter Six, gave the conversations a loose structure, keeping them oriented around the main analytical questions. But it was never a script. Participants could follow their own train of thought, bring up things the guide had not anticipated,

and tell their story the way they wanted to tell it. That flexibility was important. Many participants had been interviewed before, by asylum officers, lawyers, social workers, and those encounters had not been comfortable ones. The aim was simply to listen, to treat what participants said as the point of the conversation, not as material to be evaluated.

Interviews took place wherever participants felt comfortable. Most chose the Kurdish Cultural Center (eleven interviews); others preferred a cafe agreed on in advance (eight interviews); four took place in participants' homes or shared accommodation. Interviews lasted anywhere from 43 minutes to nearly two hours, with an average of around 67 minutes. All were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Three participants asked for the recorder to be turned off at certain points, notes were taken instead and written up in full immediately afterward. Transcription was done verbatim, keeping hesitations, false starts, and self-corrections in place, because those features carry meaning that a tidied-up transcript would lose. Identifying details were removed during transcription, and pseudonyms assigned at that stage are used throughout the analysis.

1.5.3 Focus Groups

Two focus group sessions were held in May and June 2025, each with eight participants. The reason for running focus groups alongside individual interviews was straightforward: the two methods produce different kinds of data, and both were needed. Individual interviews generate personal narratives, one person's account of their own experience, shaped by the conversation with the researcher. Focus groups generate something else: people talking with each other, agreeing and disagreeing, building on what others say, sometimes challenging it. That kind of collective exchange can surface things that a one-on-one interview never would. For refugee communities in particular, when several people from the same community are in the room together, the dynamic shifts. The researcher is no longer the dominant presence, and participants can draw on each other for support.

The two groups were organized by length of time in Italy. The first group, eight participants with a mean residence of eighteen months, focused on the experience of recent arrival: the reception system, the early weeks and months, the first encounters with Italian institutions. The second group, eight participants with a mean residence of thirty-eight months, focused on what happens over time: how people negotiate identity, how their relationship to Italy changes, what they have learned and what they have lost. Both sessions were held at the Kurdish Cultural Center. The researcher facilitated both sessions, with a co-facilitator responsible for observation notes, tracking who was speaking, how the discussion moved, what was happening in the room beyond the words being recorded.

1.5.4 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

The analytical method used in this study is reflexive thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022). This approach does not require the researcher to commit in advance to a theoretical framework, which suited a study designed to follow what participants actually said rather than fit their accounts into predetermined categories. It also provides a clear and systematic procedure: six phases moving from familiarization with the data through coding, theme development, review, and refinement to the final write-up.

Analysis began during data collection rather than after it. After each interview, the researcher wrote a short memo, first impressions, things that stood out, early hunches about what the data might be saying. Once all interviews were complete, the full set of transcripts was read through several times before any coding began. Codes were generated inductively, from the data outward, rather than from theory inward, and tracked carefully against the specific passages they came from. Those codes were then grouped into candidate themes, tested against the full dataset, and refined repeatedly. The five themes presented in Chapter Six are the result of that process, not the first version, but the one that held up best against the full range of what participants said.

1.5.5 Positionality and Reflexivity

As a Kurdish academic from Sulaymaniyah, I came to this research with both advantages and risks that are worth being direct about. The advantages were real. Shared language, Kurdish and Arabic, removed barriers that would have made certain conversations impossible. Cultural familiarity helped build rapport quickly and meant that participants did not have to explain things that would have required lengthy background for an outsider. Several people said explicitly that they found it easier to speak openly with someone from Kurdistan than they would have with a researcher from outside the community. That trust, where it existed, showed in the depth and candor of the conversations.

The risks were equally real. Familiarity can produce assumptions, the sense that you already understand what someone means when in fact migration has produced experiences and meanings quite different from those you carry from home. It can lead to projective interpretation, reading your own emotional or political responses into accounts that are saying something more personal and more complicated. And it can create blind spots. I tried to manage these risks through consistent reflexive practice: writing memos after interviews, having my interpretations challenged by a second analyst, and paying particular attention to the moments when what a participant said surprised me or did not fit what I had expected. Those moments of surprise tend to be where the most interesting findings are.

1.6 Trustworthiness and Rigour

Credibility was built through three main procedures. Five participants were shown a summary of the preliminary themes and asked whether it accurately reflected their experience, all five said it did, and two offered additional detail that was incorporated into the final analysis. The period of informal engagement with the community before data collection began gave the research a contextual grounding that improved the quality of the interviews considerably. And triangulation across data sources, individual interviews and focus groups, and across participants with different legal statuses, genders, lengths of residence, and geographic origins, allowed emerging interpretations to be tested and refined rather than simply asserted.

Transferability is addressed through the level of contextual detail provided throughout the study. The findings are specific to Rome in 2025 and make no claim to apply directly to Kurdish communities in other European cities or other periods. But enough contextual information is provided that readers can make their own informed judgments about how far the findings might travel.

Dependability is supported by an audit trail documenting the reasoning behind analytical decisions at each stage, why certain codes were chosen, how themes were developed and refined, what changed and why. A second analyst reviewed fifteen percent of the coded transcripts, agreeing on all major codes and flagging two minor discrepancies that were discussed and resolved.

Confirmability, the degree to which the findings reflect what participants actually said rather than what the researcher expected to find, was addressed through the reflexive memos kept throughout the research and through explicit attention to moments where the data pushed back against the researcher's prior assumptions. The positionality statement above is part of this account: it makes visible the perspective from which the interpretation was produced, and invites the reader to factor that in.

Chapter Two

Definitions of Key Concepts

It is not a bureaucratic requirement to define terms carefully but a part of doing the research properly. Different disciplines, different policy environments, and different cultural contexts are what define what terms like “migration,” “refugee,” and “integration” mean. Loose usage creates ambiguity that runs through everything that follows. The definitions below set out how each term is used in this study and note, where relevant, the ways in which standard definitions are adjusted for present purposes.

1. Migration

At its most basic, migration means the movement of people across geographical boundaries with the intention of settling somewhere new, whether temporarily or permanently (Hopkins, 2006: 54). In this research, the relevant form is cross-border movement, specifically, movement across international borders through irregular means, though the study also includes some participants who began their journeys with valid documents and shifted to irregular status on arrival. Legal status is treated throughout as something to be analyzed, not as a criterion for inclusion.

2. Youth

The definition of youth in the words of the United Nations is people in the 15-to-24 age group, missing what the concept is actually about due to the statistical boundary, a period of transition from family-dependent childhood to independent adult life (Teliet, 2006: 14), it is a period where identity takes shape, social roles are established and decisions with long-term consequences are made. In the Kurdistan Region, these transitions unfold differently than in Western European contexts, family involvement in major decisions tends to be more sustained, the path to economic independence is often longer, and the social weight of marriage, parenthood, and professional standing operates according to different timelines. For this research, the relevant age range is 18 to 45, which reflects the actual demographic profile of Kurdish irregular migration to Italy.

3. Refugee and Asylum Seeker

Under international law, ‘a refugee is someone outside their country of nationality who cannot or will not return because of a well-founded fear of persecution on grounds of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular

social group, or political opinion' the definition established by the 1951 Refugee Convention. It is a workable definition, but it draws the line tightly. It excludes, in principle, people who migrate primarily for economic reasons, even when those economic conditions are the product of systematic political failure. In practice, the line between "genuine refugee" and "economic migrant" is far less clear than the legal distinction implies, and many of the Kurds in this study occupy a position that the law struggles to accommodate.

An asylum seeker is someone who has applied for protection and is waiting for a decision. In Italy, asylum seekers are entitled to accommodation and a basic financial allowance during this period, but face significant restrictions, they cannot work for the first sixty days, cannot move freely between regions, and cannot make stable plans about their future. Within this study, "refugee" is used in the broader colloquial sense when referring to the study population as a whole; legal distinctions are specified where they matter analytically.

4. Acculturation

'Acculturation refers to the psychological and cultural changes that occur when people from one cultural background come into sustained contact with another. It is distinguished from assimilation, which implies a one-way process of adopting the dominant culture, by its attention to the active choices migrants make about how to relate to both their heritage culture and the host society' (Berry, 1997). The framework that most informs this study is Berry's four-strategy model: integration (maintaining heritage culture while engaging with the host society), assimilation (adopting host culture while letting go of heritage culture), separation (maintaining heritage culture while disengaging from the host society), and marginalization (losing meaningful connection to both). The conditions that push people toward each of these strategies, and their different psychological consequences, are explored in Chapters Four and Six.

5. Forced Migration and the Refugee-Migrant Distinction

The distinction between forced and voluntary migration is conceptually useful but practically hard to apply cleanly, because it maps poorly onto the actual range of circumstances that produce movement. Direct persecution or immediate physical danger represent the clearest cases of forced migration. But many people move in response to conditions that are not physically dangerous in any immediate sense yet leave little real choice: chronic unemployment, the inability to access education, the slow erosion of a dignified life. For the Kurds in this study, the reasons for leaving were typically multiple and layered, economic failure, political exclusion, the psychological aftermath of the ISIS period, a sense that the future had closed off. Treating their migration as simply forced or simply voluntary would misrepresent what actually happened.

6. Social Integration

Integration is one of the most politically loaded terms in migration policy, because it is simultaneously a description of a process, a normative goal, and a site of contested claims about what receiving societies owe migrants and what migrants owe receiving societies. At its most basic, it describes the process by which migrants come to participate meaningfully in the economic, social, cultural, and civic life of the society they have joined. When only one side is expected to change, that is assimilation, not integration. Both sides have to move. For this research, integration is understood as multidimensional, structural, social, cultural, and identificational, and as requiring enabling conditions that institutions are responsible for providing: legal security, stable housing, access to work and education, and freedom from discrimination.

7. Psychological Well-being in Refugee Contexts

The use of the term psychological well-being in this study doesn't simply mean the absence of clinical illness, it means the capacity to function across the multiple domains of a human life, be it emotional, social, cognitive, or purposive, in a way that allows the person to go after relationships and projects that fulfill their life. The WHO's definition of mental health as a state in which people can realize their abilities, manage ordinary stress, work productively, and contribute to their communities provides a useful reference point. The refugee mental health literature has documented a consistent finding: well-being deteriorates not only in response to pre-migration trauma but also, and sometimes more sharply, in response to the conditions of post-migration life, legal uncertainty, social isolation, inadequate housing, exclusion from work (Silove, Ventevogel and Rees, 2017). The insight that what happens after arrival can be as psychologically damaging as what happened before departure is central to how the field data in Chapter Six is interpreted.

8. Diaspora and Transnationalism

Communities dispersed across multiple countries are referred to as diaspora, under the condition they maintain a meaningful connection to a place of origin across time and over time, whether it be through cultural practice, social networks, political engagement, or a sense of belonging and displacement, this is especially difficult for Kurdish communities since their homeland is not a recognized state. Kurdistan is a cultural, linguistic, and political community without sovereign territory, which means that Kurdish diasporic identity is built primarily through cultural practice, 'language, music, food, celebration, and political solidarity rather than formal citizenship. Diaspora is about who

you are and where you feel you belong; transnationalism is about what you actually do to maintain that connection, sending money home, staying in touch, going back when you can, and the social ties those practices both express and sustain' (Vertovec, 2009).

Chapter Three

Literature Review

Multiple disciplines are relevant to the scholarship in this research, spanning across sociology, psychology, social work, political science, and area studies, and several geographic contexts from the European cities where Kurdish diaspora communities have taken root all the way to the Kurdistan region itself. The organization of this research is dependent on theme and geography rather than chronology, because that is the structure that best brings out each body of work contributing to the study and where the gaps are

Section One: Studies from Kurdistan and Iraq

Wahida Hama Wis Nasrullah (2005)

One of the very few academic studies to have looked at how international migration affects Kurdish family structures from inside the Kurdistan Region is Nasrullah's master's dissertation, completed at the University of Baghdad and focused on Sulaymaniyah. Working with a hundred migrant families through descriptive historical methods, Nasrullah documented a real reorganization of household life: when male family members left, typically the primary breadwinners and decision-makers, women took on roles they had not been prepared for and were not socially supported to perform. They managed finances, dealt with institutions, and held families together across long distances. Remittances helped materially, sometimes critically, but they did not replace what absence cost. Children grew up without fathers present. Marriages were sustained through phone calls and rare visits. The ordinary, unremarkable texture of shared daily life was gone in ways that left marks that money could not fix. Several interviewees in this study described versions of this dynamic, not in their own experience in Kurdistan, but in what they knew their departure had done to the people they left behind.

Ahmed Ismail Abboud (2016)

though not specifically about Kurdistan, Abboud's study of migration attitudes among university students in Baghdad sheds useful light on the motivational landscape explored in Chapter Five. Where 140 students across different faculties were surveyed, finding that the motivation to migrate was prominent, with the drive being deemed stronger about something more corrosive rather than just simple economics, it finds that the drive is more about the sense that education, qualification, and hard work did not actually translate into advancement in Iraqi society, but by political connection, tribal affiliation, and cor-

ruption, which was a feeling that was described by many Kurdish interviewees in this study, emphasizing that the reason behind leaving wasn't that they were poor in any simple sense, but that they had constantly seen their effort produce the outcome it was supposed to produce, believing that it never would.

Section Two: Arab Studies

Fatima Muhammad Mahmoud (2008)

Mahmoud conducted a study in Libya, which is a land geographically distant from the Kurdish context, but still analytically useful, it worked at the cross section of sociology and development studies, arguing that youth migration should not be looked at as an individual economic decision, rather a systematic process with systematic consequences. She argues that the people who most commonly leave are the educated and ambitious youth, exactly the people society most needs to stay; creating a paradoxical cycle where their departure worsens the conditions that drove them out, driving more people out down the line, deeming the term brain drain too one dimensional for this case, since it suggests a one-directional flow rather than a self-perpetuating cycle. Mahmoud's analysis succeeds in capturing the logic that makes emigration from Kurdistan simultaneously sensible for individuals and damaging for the society they leave behind.

Zaki Ramzi Murtaji (2017)

Murtaji conducts a study where unemployment and national belonging among Palestinian graduates in Gaza introduces a dimension that matters directly here, the psychological and civic, not just the economic effects of being structurally outcasted in your own society. Murtaji draws on 445 interviewees across multiple universities in Gaza, finding that chronic unemployment didn't simply produce materialistic hardship, but a gradual erosion of peoples sense of belonging, even in their community, a sense that they had a share in its future, that its institutions had any responsibility toward them. How do you expect someone who can't build a live in their country to continue feeling like it is theirs. The Kurdish interviewees were no different in describing their slow detachment from Kurdistan, driven not by a single event but rather an accumulation of institutional failures and future that kept failing to arrive.

Section Three: International Studies

Colucci et al. (2014), Mental Health Access in Italy

Colucci and colleagues' study of mental health access among asylum seekers in Italy is essential background for understanding the institutional environment this study examines. Working across multiple Italian reception facilities,

they identified a set of structural barriers that prevented migrants from getting psychological support even when it was nominally available. Translation was inadequate, which meant assessments were conducted in languages people did not fully command. Cultural stigma around mental health meant many people concealed what they were going through rather than risk being labeled unwell. The support frameworks on offer were often built around assumptions that made little sense to the people they were supposed to help. And the precariousness of legal status created a rational wariness toward any state-adjacent institution whose records might find their way to immigration enforcement. A decade later, Caroppo and colleagues (2023) documented the same barriers still in place, which suggests these are not teething problems but features of a system that has not been designed with these populations in mind.

Silove, Ventevogel and Rees (2017), The ADAPT Model

The most theoretically significant work for this study is that of Silove and colleagues, who developed the Adaptive and Developmental Approach to Trauma and Translation (ADAPT). The central argument is a reorientation of how refugee mental health is understood. The framework distinguishes between pre-migration trauma, the violence, persecution, and loss that drove people to flee, and post-migration stressors, the ongoing difficulties generated by the receiving context: legal uncertainty, social isolation, economic exclusion, inadequate housing, discrimination. Silove and colleagues argue, drawing on both theory and substantial evidence, that post-migration stressors can be as psychologically damaging as original trauma, and in many cases more so, because they are ongoing, present, and within the sphere of what institutions could actually do something about. The ADAPT model identifies five dimensions of psychosocial functioning whose disruption produces psychological deterioration: safety, social bonds and networks, justice, roles and identities, and existential meaning. This framework shapes the reading of the field data in Chapter Six.

Miller and Rasmussen (2017), The Ecological Model

Miller and Rasmussen's ecological model of refugee mental health argues that distress cannot be adequately understood by focusing on the individual alone. Refugee experience is embedded in family, community, and structural contexts, and distress is produced and resilience is sustained through processes that operate at all these levels simultaneously. Effective intervention has to be similarly multi-level: addressing only the individual's psychological response to displacement, without attending to the community conditions in which that response is embedded or to the institutional conditions that generate ongoing stress, is unlikely to help in any lasting way. This perspective shapes the analytical attention paid in this study both to community-level processes and to the specific effects of the Italian reception system.

Section Four: The Italian Reception System

Overview of the Italian Framework

Italy's reception and asylum system has been substantially restructured over the past decade, driven by the sharp increase in irregular arrivals, the political pressure those arrivals generated, and the shifting European regulatory environment. The system operates across two main tiers. The first and larger tier is the CAS, Centri di Accoglienza Straordinaria, originally established as a temporary emergency measure but now the primary mechanism through which most newly arrived asylum seekers are received. CAS centers are funded on a per capita basis, contracted to private providers, and vary considerably in quality. Academic evaluations have consistently documented overcrowding, poor maintenance, inadequate psychological support, limited language education, and locations on the urban periphery that cut residents off from the city where they will eventually need to build a life. The second tier is the SAI, Sistema di Accoglienza e Integrazione, which offers more structured, community-embedded support for those whose protection claims have been accepted. Research consistently finds better outcomes, psychological, social, and economic, for those in SAI compared to CAS, which means that specific policy choices are producing specific, measurable differences in people's lives and health.

The Dublin Regulation and Its Consequences

The Dublin III Regulation requires that asylum applications be examined in the EU member state where the applicant first arrived irregularly. For Italy, as the primary maritime gateway for arrivals from the Mediterranean and the Middle East, this means bearing a disproportionate share of the processing burden. For refugees, Dublin means being legally obligated to stay in a country that may not be where their family, their language skills, or their employment prospects are best. It means that moving to Germany or Sweden, where established Kurdish communities could provide real support, is illegal and exposes them to the risk of being returned to Italy. And it means that the specific features of the Italian system, with all its limitations, are not a choice but an imposition. The sense of being held in a place not of one's choosing, without the capacity to exercise the kind of agency that normally makes adaptation possible, this is visible in the field data and discussed in Chapter Six.

Section Five: Kurdish Diaspora Studies

Kurdish Communities in Northern Europe

The established literature on Kurdish diaspora communities in Europe is concentrated mainly in northern European settings, Germany, where Europe's largest Kurdish population of over a million people lives; Sweden; and the

Netherlands. The central themes are transnational political mobilization, second-generation identity, and integration pathways. Ostergaard-Nielsen's foundational work on Kurdish transnational politics in Europe (2003) established that diaspora communities are not simply detached fragments of a homeland society but active political actors whose engagement shapes both Kurdistan's politics and the politics of the countries they live in. Baser's comparative study of the Kurdish diaspora in Germany and the UK (2015) showed how different national contexts produce different forms of diaspora political engagement. Ehrkamp's work on everyday transnationalism in Turkish Kurdish communities in Duisburg (2006) explored how the ordinary practices of transnational life, keeping up cultural habits, staying in contact with family, marking Kurdish occasions, sustain identity and community in ways that are largely invisible to policy but essential to well-being. What this body of work contributes to the present study is less its specific findings, which are grounded in very different national contexts, than the conceptual tools it has developed for understanding transnational practices and identity dynamics.

Chapter Four

Theoretical Framework

No single theory is adequate for what this study is trying to understand. The phenomena involved, why people leave, what happens to them on the way and after arrival, how they adapt, what keeps them going, are too layered for any one framework to hold. The six theories described below each illuminate a different part of the picture. They do not always agree with each other, and where they pull in different directions, that tension is useful rather than a problem, it keeps the analysis honest about complexity.

1. Push-Pull Theory

Ernest George Ravenstein's analysis of British census data in the late nineteenth century produced the idea that has anchored migration scholarship ever since: people move because something is pushing them out of where they are and something is pulling them toward somewhere else. The push factors, economic hardship, political danger, limited opportunity, and the pull factors, better wages, safety, established communities of people from home, together explain both why people go and where they end up. The appeal of this framework is its clarity. It describes something real about the basic logic of migration and helps explain the direction and scale of flows without requiring complicated models (Lee, 1966; Massey et al., 1993).

Its limitations are equally real. By focusing on objective structural conditions, income levels, political freedom indices, it tends to treat migrants as responding mechanically to signals rather than making genuinely human decisions shaped by fear, hope, incomplete information, and social obligation (de Haas, 2010). It also underestimates the role of networks. A young man in Sulaymaniyah deciding whether to go to Rome is not comparing Italy against some abstract European benchmark. He is listening to what his cousin who went two years ago has told him, which may or may not bear much resemblance to what he will actually find when he gets there.

Subsequent refinements have addressed some of these limitations. Morokvasic (1984) extended the framework to account for gendered push and pull factors, recognizing that the conditions pushing women toward departure and the opportunities pulling them toward specific destinations are not identical to those operating for men. Castles and Miller (2009), in their widely cited synthesis of migration theory, argued that push-pull models remain useful as descriptive frameworks but require supplementation by theories that account for the social and relational dimensions of migration decisions. Both refinements are relevant here.

2. Neoclassical Migration Economics

Todaro's neoclassical model adds an important refinement to basic push-pull logic: people do not migrate simply because wages are lower where they are. They migrate because they calculate that the expected returns from going, the probability of finding work multiplied by the wage premium if they do, are worth the costs and risks of the move (Todaro, 1969; Harris and Todaro, 1970). That shift from actual to expected income matters. It explains why people take the risk even when they know the outcome is uncertain: if the upside is large enough, the calculation can still come out in favor of going even when the chances of quick success are not high.

What this model contributes here is mainly its account of how expectations are formed, and how they go wrong. The people in this study almost universally expected better economic outcomes in Italy than they found. Social media had a lot to do with that. The images of diaspora life that circulate through WhatsApp and Instagram are selected for success: comfortable apartments, new phones, evidence of a life rebuilt. They are not representative of the average migrant experience, and several interviewees described the months after arrival as a process of revising everything they thought they knew about what Italy would be like.

Massey and colleagues (1993) identified what they call the cumulative causation of migration, the way in which each wave of migrants changes the social and economic context in ways that make subsequent migration easier and more likely, including through the production of social networks and the transformation of community norms around departure. This cumulative dimension is directly relevant to understanding Kurdish migration from Sulaymaniyah, where established social networks connecting the city to specific Italian destinations, particularly Rome, reduce the effective cost and risk of migration in ways that pure economic calculation cannot capture.

3. The New Economics of Migration

Stark and Bloom's contribution was to shift the unit of analysis from the individual to the household (Stark and Bloom, 1985; Stark, 1991). Migration, on their account, is not an individual decision made by someone trying to maximize their own income. It is a household strategy, a way of spreading risk by placing a family member in a different labor market, reducing dependence on the local economy, and creating the possibility of remittance income when things at home get difficult.

This fits the Kurdish case well. Several interviewees described their migration as a family decision in the full sense: the family had contributed to financing the journey, had chosen them as the most suitable member to send, and was expecting remittances that the Italian reception system's employment

restrictions often made impossible to send. The weight of that expectation, the difficulty of telling family that Rome was nothing like what had been hoped, the shame of having nothing to send back, came up repeatedly in the interviews and is examined in detail in Chapter Six.

Taylor (1999) extended the new economics framework to address the information asymmetries that produce systematically unrealistic expectations among potential migrants: because the most successful migrants are the most visible, through remittances, social media, and return visits, potential migrants consistently overestimate the probability of success and underestimate the difficulties of the early period. This informational dynamic is directly observable in the accounts of Kurdish interviewees in this study, many of whom described the gap between expectation and reality as among the most psychologically disorienting features of their arrival experience.

Abrego (2014), working on Central American migration to the United States but developing arguments with broader applicability, added a dimension that the original Stark and Bloom framework does not foreground: the emotional labor required of migrants who must manage not only their own expectations but those of the family that has invested in their departure. The maintenance of a positive narrative about life abroad, even when that narrative does not correspond to reality, is a form of labor that carries its own psychological costs. This dimension appears clearly in the Rome data.

4. Acculturation Theory: Berry and Its Extensions

One of the most widely used lenses for understanding what happens to people's psyche when they move between cultures is John Berry's acculturation framework, it was first developed in 1997 but has been refined through empirical research since then, it rests on two questions: How important is it to me to maintain my heritage culture? How important is it to me to build relationships with the host society? The answers produce four positions.

Integration, which is to hold on to your own culture while genuinely engaging with the new one, this is consistently considered to yield the best psychological outcomes across studies and meta-analysis, including Choy and colleagues' 2020 review of 89 studies across 24 countries. Assimilation, adopting the host culture at the cost of your own, may bring economic gains but often carries real psychological costs related to identity loss and the disruption of family relationships (Berry and Sam, 1997).

Separation, maintaining cultural identity while staying largely within the ethnic community, can be stable if that community provides enough, but it limits the connections that enable social and economic mobility. Marginalization, losing meaningful attachment to both cultures, is consistently associated with the worst outcomes and tends to follow from experiences of discrimination and rejection (Berry, 2005).

The 2025 review by Andronic and Constantin added something important: whether integration is actually achievable depends heavily on whether the receiving society makes it possible. Legal uncertainty, restricted access to work and education, and discrimination do not just make life harder, they close off the integration pathway even for people who want to take it. This is directly relevant to Rome, where the specific features of the reception system actively complicate the options available to people regardless of what they would choose if choice were genuinely available.

Bourhis and colleagues (1997) developed what they call the Interactive Acculturation Model, which adds to Berry's framework by attending to the preferences of the host society as well as those of the migrant. Their central insight is that acculturation outcomes are not determined by the migrant's strategy alone but by the interaction between migrant preferences and host society attitudes, and that when host society attitudes are exclusionary or assimilationist, integration is not achievable regardless of migrant motivation. This qualification is directly applicable to a context in which Italian political discourse around migration has become increasingly hostile.

Rudmin (2003), in a critical review of the acculturation literature, raised important methodological concerns about Berry's framework, particularly around the assumption that heritage culture maintenance and host society engagement are genuinely independent dimensions rather than correlated ones. While these methodological debates have not fundamentally displaced Berry's framework, they serve as a useful reminder that acculturation strategies are not always freely chosen and that the framework requires careful application in contexts of structural constraint.

5. Social Capital Theory

'Social capital, the resources embedded in social networks, including information, trust, mutual support, and shared norms, provides a useful framework for understanding what community actually does for refugees and what it fails to do' (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). Putnam's distinction between two types of social ties is particularly useful here.

Bonding social capital refers to the dense, close ties within a community, the kind that provide emotional support, practical help, a sense of belonging, and the knowledge that someone has your back. Bridging social capital refers to looser ties that cross community boundaries, connections that open doors to information, opportunities, and social worlds that are not accessible from within the ethnic group alone (Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 2001).

The Kurdish community in Rome has substantial bonding social capital. The networks operating through the Kurdish Cultural Center, informal gatherings, and WhatsApp groups provide resources, emotional, practical, informational, that are genuinely important, especially in the difficult early period

after arrival. Bridging social capital is more limited and unevenly distributed. It tends to come with time, with language, and with legal stability. It also depends heavily on where people live: those in peripheral CAS facilities have far less access to the bridging opportunities that come from being embedded in mixed or predominantly Italian neighborhoods. The consequences of that imbalance for integration and long-term well-being run through the empirical analysis.

Portes (1998) raised an important qualification to the generally positive treatment of social capital in the migration literature: dense ethnic community ties can also function as a constraint, creating obligations and expectations that limit individual mobility and imposing conformity pressures that can work against the adaptive flexibility that integration requires. This double-edged quality of bonding social capital is visible in the Rome data, several interviewees described the Kurdish community as both an essential resource and a source of pressure that complicated their navigation of the Italian context.

Nee and Sanders (2001), in their analysis of immigrant incorporation in the United States, argued that the relationship between ethnic community ties and integration outcomes depends on the nature of the broader institutional environment: in contexts with strong formal support for integration, ethnic community ties supplement formal resources; in contexts with weak formal support, such as the Italian CAS system, ethnic community ties become substitutes for formal resources, carrying a heavier load than any informal network is well-placed to bear. This argument directly illuminates the structural position of the Kurdish community in Rome.

6. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in the Refugee Context

'Maslow's model, the idea that physiological needs must be met before safety, safety before belonging, belonging before esteem, and esteem before self-actualization, offers a useful way of thinking about what the conditions of refugee life make possible and what they foreclose' (Maslow, 1943; 1954). For people living in CAS facilities with uncertain legal status, very little money, and no right to work, a significant portion of daily energy goes toward managing basic needs: food, warmth, documentation, staying out of trouble. That leaves less capacity, psychological, practical, temporal, for the things that longer-term well-being actually requires: learning the language, building relationships, developing plans, thinking about who you want to become here.

The strict hierarchical logic of Maslow's model does not hold up perfectly against the evidence, and the field data confirm this in an important way: many interviewees described cultural practice, prayer, and community connection as essential to their psychological survival even in conditions of genuine material precariousness. Higher-order needs do not simply switch off when basic needs go unmet. Tay and Diener (2011), in a large-scale empirical test of

Maslow's model across 123 countries, confirmed that while basic needs satisfaction is associated with positive outcomes, the relationship is not strictly hierarchical, people can and do pursue social belonging, esteem, and meaning even when material needs are partially unmet, and the fulfillment of higher-order needs contributes independently to well-being even in conditions of material deprivation.

Kenrick and colleagues (2010) proposed a revised Maslovian pyramid that replaces self-actualization with parenting and mate retention at the apex, arguing that the original hierarchy underestimates the centrality of social bonds and reproduction to human motivation. While this revision is not directly adopted here, it reinforces the point that social connection, community, belonging, recognition, is not a luxury that follows from the satisfaction of material needs but a fundamental human requirement that operates alongside them. The Maslovian framework is used here as a rough guide to the relationship between material conditions and psychological development, not as a rigid sequence. What it captures well is the cumulative cost of a system that keeps people in permanent survival mode, managing the immediate, unable to build toward anything further.

Chapter Five

Why They Leave, Drivers of Kurdish Youth Migration

It is a rare occurrence that someone takes the decision to leave in just a single moment, rather it's more of an endpoint of a long process, a slow erosion of reasons to stay, and a gradual development of reasons to leave that eventually reaches a point where leaving becomes not just possible but necessary.

Artemyeva (2016: 6122) observes that people are not naturally inclined to uproot themselves: the disruption, the risk, and the loss are real and well understood by those weighing the decision. Which means that when someone does go, it is usually because they have run out of other options, not because leaving was easy. De Haas (2011: 3) makes a similar point from a different angle: migration is rarely the first response to difficult conditions but rather the last resort after other adaptive strategies have been exhausted. The five dimensions explored below are not separate forces, in individual cases they overlap, reinforce each other, and combine in ways specific to each person's life, but they represent the analytically distinguishable pressures that, taken together, are driving Kurdish emigration at scale.

1. The Economic Dimension: Structural Failure and the Devaluation of Human Capital

Kurdistan isn't an outlier in this structural mismatch. Standing (2011), in his analysis of precariat, a global class of people who haven't seen their educational investments yield the secure employment it was supposed to yield, it describes a form of anger and frustration structurally similar to the experience of Kurdish graduates. The KRG's revenues depend on oil income channeled through Baghdad, which by most estimates makes up between sixty and seventy percent of total income in normal years (Jabbar, 2001: 86; Iskandar, 2016: 78-79). When oil prices fall, or when the political relationship with Baghdad deteriorates, the consequences hit immediately and hard: salary delays, public sector cuts, the slow contraction of the one sector large enough to absorb the workforce. The salary crisis after 2014 was not a short-term shock for many public sector workers, it was a sustained emergency, months and sometimes years of unpaid or partially paid wages for teachers, nurses, civil servants, and soldiers in a society where the public sector is still by far the most common source of stable employment.

The private sector, which should in principle fill the gap, has not. Manufacturing and industry are minimal. Agriculture employs a small share of the workforce and even fewer graduates. The service sector is growing but offers

mostly construction, retail, and informal trade, work that does not reward educational investment and offers little stability. The result is a significant mismatch between the supply of educated labor and the demand for it. University enrollment has expanded steadily over the past two decades, a development that successive KRG governments actively encouraged as a marker of modernization, while the demand for qualified labor has failed to keep pace. Young people who spent years and real family resources on degrees find themselves competing for jobs that do not require those degrees, at wages that do not justify the investment, through hiring processes where political connection counts for more than ability (Abu Zaid, 2019). That experience, of qualifications that go nowhere, of effort that is simply not recognized, was described by multiple interviewees as a central reason for leaving.

But there is an important distinction: in Western European contexts, the precariat exists alongside functioning welfare states and legal protections that partially cushion the fall; in Kurdistan, those cushions are themselves dependent on the same oil revenues that have failed to generate adequate employment. The result is what Iskandar (2016) calls double precarity, economic insecurity without the institutional safety net that softens it elsewhere.

It is worth being precise about what kind of economic pressure this is. Several people in this study came from families that were not poor, families with businesses, property, some resources. What drove them out was not destitution. It was something harder to name. Runciman (1966), in his foundational work on relative deprivation, argued that the most politically and psychologically significant form of deprivation is not absolute poverty but the gap between what people have and what they feel they have a reasonable claim to expect, and that this gap is particularly acute for people whose educational investments have been systematically devalued. That is precisely what multiple interviewees described: not destitution but the recognition that the system could not deliver the life that education and effort were supposed to earn. It is not mainly the poorest people leaving. It is often the skilled, the educated, the motivated, precisely the people whose capabilities the economy has no use for. Docquier and Rapoport (2012), in their global analysis of the relationship between education levels and emigration, confirm this pattern: in countries with poor governance and limited labor market absorption capacity, the emigration rate is highest precisely among the most educated, a finding that directly characterizes the Kurdish case.

2. The Social Mirror Effect: Social Media and the Construction of Expectation

Social media has changed the scale and continuity of this comparison drastically, the families in the previous generations would go months without hearing their migrated loved ones, numerous pictures and videos immediately

arrives to them on their smartphones, the scenic photographs, the restaurant meals, the moments of apparent success all create a running background of cross-border comparison that formulates drive in ways that are hard to consciously resist.

When classmates, cousins, and former neighbors in Europe post photographs of apartments, travel, and what looks like a rebuilt life on social media, something shifts in how people at home understand their own situation. Life abroad becomes progressively idealized, the difficulties, the loneliness, the bureaucratic grind, all edited out. And staying starts to feel like a choice rather than simply circumstances: not just a hard situation, but the wrong decision, the smaller life, the quiet admission of a kind of defeat (Ghafour, 2019: 241).

What social media has changed is the scale and continuity of this comparison. Previous generations went months without news from people who had emigrated. Today the images arrive constantly on smartphones, the scenic photographs, the restaurant meals, the moments of apparent success, and they create a running background of cross-border comparison that shapes aspiration in ways that are hard to consciously resist. Pearce and Rice (2013), analyzing the relationship between internet access and migration intentions across multiple developing country contexts, found that social media exposure to migration-related content consistently raised migration intentions, even after controlling for objective economic conditions. People did not need to be materially worse off to want to go, they needed only to see enough images of others who had gone and appeared to be doing well.

The images are systematically misleading. They show the best moments of migrant life without the waiting in corridors, the fear before asylum hearings, the evenings alone in a room where nobody speaks your language. Diminescu (2008), in her analysis of the connected migrant, showed that communication technology transforms the migration experience in ways that are simultaneously enabling and distorting: migrants can maintain more sustained contact with home, which reduces isolation; but the content of that contact tends to emphasize success and conceal difficulty, which means the information reaching potential migrants is systematically filtered. Massey and colleagues (1993) described a related dynamic at the community level: as migration becomes normalized within a sending community, it generates what they call a culture of migration in which going abroad becomes the expected trajectory for ambitious young people, and the social costs of staying, the sense of being left behind, rise steadily. Several interviewees in this study described exactly this dynamic: the gradual transformation of migration from an unusual choice to the obvious one, as departure became the norm within their peer group.

De Haas (2010), in a broader critique of how migration theory treats the information environment, argued that the bias toward positive expectations surrounding migration is structural rather than individual, it reflects the social dynamics of how migration-related information circulates, not the irrationality of individual migrants. Understanding why expectations were so consistently

and widely wrong among this study's participants requires attending to that structural bias rather than attributing the gap between expectation and reality to personal miscalculation. Several interviewees described the months after arrival as a process of painful revision, the life they had imagined and the life they found were genuinely different, and the adjustment took time and cost something.

3. Political Exclusion and the Collapse of Civic Trust

'For many young Kurds, the economic reasons for leaving cannot be separated from a political one: the understanding that access to jobs, advancement, and resources in Kurdistan is substantially determined by political affiliation, and that those without the right connections to the dominant parties, the KDP in Erbil and Dohuk, the PUK in Sulaymaniyah, face a disadvantage that individual effort cannot overcome' (Abu Zaid, 2019). This is not simply a perception. The partisan allocation of public sector jobs, government contracts, and institutional resources is documented and openly discussed inside Kurdish society, even if rarely addressed through official channels. Salih (2013), in his analysis of political economy in the Kurdistan Region, characterized the KRG's patronage system as one in which party affiliation functions as an informal qualification that supplements, and frequently overrides, formal educational credentials in access to public employment. For young people who had invested in education as a route to advancement, the discovery that merit comes second to loyalty produces something specific: not just economic frustration, but a felt sense of institutional injustice, a challenge to the legitimacy of the whole social order.

Rothstein and Teorell (2008), in their analysis of government quality as a driver of emigration, found that perceived corruption and nepotism in public institutions are among the strongest predictors of emigration intentions among educated young people, stronger, in many contexts, than absolute income levels. Their argument is that people tolerate economic hardship considerably better than they tolerate what they experience as procedural injustice: being passed over for someone less qualified, watching effort consistently fail to produce the outcomes it should, discovering that the rules operate differently for those with connections. This resonates directly with what interviewees in this study described. For many, the decision to leave was as much a response to experienced injustice as to experienced poverty.

Several interviewees described a gradual process of estrangement from Kurdish institutions that preceded the decision to leave, a growing sense that they were not seen by the structures that were supposed to serve them, that their voices did not register, that the gap between official rhetoric about opportunity and development and the reality of daily life had grown too wide to paper over with optimism. Murtaji's (2017) research on Palestinian graduates in Gaza

documents a structurally similar process: the erosion of civic attachment that follows from sustained institutional exclusion, the transformation of citizens into strangers in their own society. For the interviewees in this study, migration was not only a search for better economic conditions. It was also an exit from a civic relationship that had come to feel like a betrayal, a withdrawal of loyalty from institutions that had withheld recognition.

4. Migration as Household Strategy: The New Economics in Kurdish Context

A common recurrence found in the cases documented here is household risk diversification strategy, where leaving was not an individual decision, but a family one where Households deliberated, planned, and pooled resources in ways that closely match Stark and Bloom's (1985) account of migration. Families contributed financially to the journey, sometimes from savings built up over years, sometimes through debt borrowed from relatives or informal lenders. They selected the family member whose departure would best serve the household's strategic interests, usually the most educated, the most linguistically capable, or the most socially connected member. And they organized their expectations around eventual remittances that would reduce household dependence on the failing local economy. The person who left was not just carrying their own hopes. They were carrying a collective investment, financial, emotional, and reputational, that created obligations extending well beyond their own life.

Carling (2008) extended the new economics framework to address something it had largely overlooked: the experience of those who do not migrate but whose lives are restructured around the migration of those who did. His concept of involuntary non-migration points to the family members, most often women, most often mothers, who remain behind, absorb the household's reorganized responsibilities, and manage the emotional cost of sustained absence without the psychological relief of having made the journey themselves. This dynamic appears in the accounts of several interviewees in this study who described in detail what their departure had done to the families they left behind: the responsibilities their mothers took on, the gap their absence left in their parents' daily life, the aging that happened across a distance that made presence impossible.

The weight of household expectation was visible throughout the interviews. Young men in particular described bearing the family's expectations in a way that was not experienced as external pressure but as identity, as part of who they were and what they were for. Taylor (1999) identified the informational asymmetry at the heart of this dynamic: because the most successful migrants are the most visible, through remittances, social media, and return visits, families consistently overestimate the probability of success and underestimate the

difficulties of the early period in Italy. When the conditions in Italy made it impossible to meet those expectations, the legal prohibition on working during the waiting period, the small asylum allowance, the difficulty of finding informal work even with authorization, the result was not simply disappointment. It was shame. Abrego (2014) describes this specific form of shame, the failure to meet the remittance expectations that family members have organized their own economic lives around, as among the most psychologically damaging features of the migration experience for people from cultures in which family obligation is central to identity. A felt failure of duty that was both personal and relational, and all the more painful because it could not be admitted without threatening the story the family had built around the investment of sending someone abroad.

5. Psychological Dimensions of Departure

Psychological reasons can also be seen under the economic, social, and political reasons, be it they are harder to articulate but they are real nonetheless. Two emotional states came up consistently enough across participant accounts to be worth naming separately, though in practice they often co-existed and reinforced each other.

The first is a kind of growing disconnection from the social world, the feeling of becoming invisible within it, of one's presence not registering in the ways a decent social life requires. This is different from ordinary unhappiness. It involves a specific kind of non-recognition, a sense of not being seen by the people and institutions around you, that makes continued participation feel both uncomfortable and pointless. Honneth (1995), in his influential account of recognition as a fundamental human need, argues that being treated as invisible, irrelevant, or unworthy of acknowledgment constitutes a form of harm that is distinct from material deprivation and that motivates both individual and collective action. The experience is not simply one of not having enough, it is one of not mattering, of existing in a society whose institutions do not acknowledge one's capacities or contributions as worth recognizing. Several interviewees described their decision to leave in terms that directly echo Honneth's framework: they were not only responding to economic failure but to the felt experience of social non-recognition, of being present without being seen.

Low level chronic anxiety can also be observed as the second psychological dimension, where it has been normalized through years of constant crisis. 'Growing up in a society that moved from one emergency to another, the political instability of the 1990s, the ISIS war and its aftermath, the economic collapse following the budget dispute with Baghdad, produces what trauma researchers call hypervigilance: a persistent background alertness that becomes so habitual it no longer feels like a response to anything specific but simply a

feature of inner life' (Sakiz, 2015; Herman, 1992). Betancourt and Khan (2008), in their review of the mental health consequences of political violence on young people, documented the specific ways in which sustained exposure to instability reshapes psychological development: young people in chronically insecure societies tend to develop truncated time horizons, a reduced capacity for long-term planning, and a heightened sensitivity to threat that serves protective functions in dangerous environments but becomes a burden when the environment changes. This is precisely the psychological profile that several interviewees in this study described of themselves before departure, and that many found persisted well into their time in Rome.

Blitz and Otero-Iglesias (2011), in their research on young people in conflict-affected societies, documented the specific motivational pattern that emerges from prolonged insecurity: a systematic narrowing of time horizon, a reluctance to invest in long-term plans in a context where long-term plans consistently fail, and a growing orientation toward exit as the only rational response to an environment that punishes investment and rewards departure. For some interviewees in this study, migration was partly an attempt to escape this hypervigilant, short-horizon mode of being, a move toward somewhere that felt safer, more predictable, where it might be possible to think further than the next month. Whether that expectation was fulfilled depended enormously on what was encountered after arrival, and, as the empirical chapters document, the Italian reception system was not always well-designed to deliver it.

6. Gender and the Experience of Departure

The forces driving departure do not operate the same way for men and women, and attending to that difference matters both analytically and for understanding what male and female participants brought with them to Rome.

The most frequently described driver between male interviewees was the combination of failure and something called the masculine role disruption: the inability to become the household provider that holds heavy cultural and societal weight in Kurdish society. Several men described the shame of unemployment less as a practical problem than as a relational one: a failure of identity, a falling short of who their families and communities expected them to be. Migration, for them, was partly an attempt to recover a sense of adequacy that the situation at home had made impossible.

Female interviewees exhibited a more diverse picture, economic motivation wasn't excluded from the picture of course, even described in terms similar to the men, but several women also described different aspects that were specific to their situation like a desire for freedom and autonomous living that family structures and social expectations in Kurdistan constrained; an aspiration to professional development in environments less limiting for women; and in some cases responses to specific domestic situations, controlling relationships,

pressure to marry, family conflict, that made staying untenable in ways distinct from the economic and political factors driving male departures.

This should not be romanticized. The journey itself and the conditions of arrival exposed women to specific risks, violence during the irregular crossing, vulnerability in reception facilities, exploitation in informal labor markets, that their male counterparts did not face to the same degree. The aspiration for greater freedom was often pursued at real cost, and the accounts of female participants document both the genuine possibilities that migration opened and the particular hardships it created.

Chapter Six

Empirical Research, Fieldwork Design, Interview Grid, Transcriptions, and Thematic Analysis

This chapter is the empirical core of the study. It is organized in six sections. Section 6.1 describes the research design in detail, the interview guide, focus group protocols, and how data was collected in Rome. Section 6.2 reproduces the interview grid in full. Section 6.3 describes the focus group design and protocols. Section 6.4 presents four complete interview transcriptions, selected to represent the range of experiences and legal situations across the sample. Section 6.5 provides the thematic analysis, organized around the five principal themes that emerged from systematic analysis of the full dataset. Section 6.6 discusses the findings in relation to the theoretical frameworks in Chapter Four.

The decision to present the empirical chapter in this form, with the full interview grid, complete transcriptions, and a structured analytical narrative, reflects both the supervisor's guidance and the methodological commitments of this research. Reflexive thematic analysis requires transparency: showing not just what themes were identified but how they were constructed, and providing the raw material against which the analysis can be checked. The transcriptions included here were selected because they illuminate both what is shared across participant accounts and what is specific to each individual, not because they are typical in any simple sense, but because they are analytically rich.

6.1 Detailed Research Design and Data Collection

6.1.1 The Fieldwork Context, Rome, January to June 2025

The fieldwork for this study was conducted in Rome over the span of six months, starting from January and lasting until June 2025. Rome was chosen due to being a common but underwhelmingly researched destination for Kurdish refugees in Italy, and because the combination of formal reception infrastructure, CAS centers, the SAI system, and informal community structures, the Kurdish Cultural Center, community networks, made it possible to reach participants across a range of legal statuses, residential situations, and lengths of residence.

The fieldwork transitioned between three interconnected phases: first being a community orientation phase in December 2024, second being a primary data collection phase consisting of individual interviews from January to April

2025, and lastly a focus group phase from May until June 2025 that built on the relationships formed earlier and on the analytical themes beginning to emerge from the interview data.

Before formal data collection began, the researcher spent several weeks in Rome attending community events at the Kurdish Cultural Center in Via Genova, a regular Friday gathering, a Newroz celebration, and two informal social occasions. The purpose was not to collect data but to become a known presence within the community, explain the research to potential participants, and develop a feel for the social landscape that would shape the quality of the formal interviews that followed. This period confirmed the analytical importance of several dimensions that were later foregrounded in the interview guide: the significance of legal status differences within the community, the role of specific neighborhoods in shaping social experience, and the gendered dimensions of community participation and support.

Individual interviews were conducted at locations agreed in advance with participants, with privacy and comfort as the guiding criteria. The Kurdish Cultural Center provided a private room for eleven interviews. Eight took place in cafes chosen by participants, typically in their own neighborhoods. Four participants asked to be interviewed at home or in their shared accommodation, which allowed an additional layer of observation, the physical conditions of housing, that proved analytically useful. Two visits to CAS centers were arranged through prior agreement with center management; two interviews were conducted on-site, alongside researcher observation of facility conditions and informal conversations with residents who did not become formal participants.

6.1.2 The Sample in Detail

The twenty-three individual interview participants are described below in terms of the characteristics most relevant to the analytical themes: pseudonym, age, gender, region of origin, legal status, length of residence, and residential area in Rome.

Table 1: Individual Interview Participants

Sardar (27, male, Sulaymaniyah, refugee status, 3 years, Testaccio); Dilan (24, female, Sulaymaniyah, subsidiary protection, 2 years, Pigneto); Yusuf (35, male, Kirkuk, refugee status, 6 years, San Lorenzo); Shilan (29, female, Sulaymaniyah, humanitarian protection, 4 years, Torpignattara); Hozan (32, male, Dohuk, asylum determination, 18 months, CAS Tor Bella Monaca); Kamaran (40, male, Erbil, refugee status, 5 years, Tiburtino); Baran (26, male, Halabja/Sulaymaniyah, asylum determination, 16 months, CAS Ponte Mammolo); Solin (29, female, Zakho/Dohuk, humanitarian protection, 4 years, Torpignattara); Narin (31, female, Erbil, subsidiary protection, 4 years,

Pigneto); Azad (33, male, Sulaymaniyah, refugee status, 5 years, Ostiense); Leila (22, female, Kirkuk, asylum determination, 10 months, CAS Tivoli); Hassan (38, male, Erbil, refugee status, 5.5 years, Centocelle); Rawa (25, female, Sulaymaniyah, subsidiary protection, 2 years, Torpignattara); Aland (28, male, Sulaymaniyah, asylum determination, 14 months, CAS Guidonia); Hanar (30, female, Erbil, humanitarian protection, 3.5 years, Pigneto); Rizgar (36, male, Kirkuk, refugee status, 4.5 years, Tiburtino); Shaho (24, male, Sulaymaniyah, asylum determination, 8 months, CAS Fiano Romano); Zana (34, male, Sulaymaniyah, refugee status, 5 years, San Lorenzo); Siyan (27, female, Erbil, subsidiary protection, 3 years, Torpignattara); Karim (41, male, Mosul, refugee status, 6 years, Centocelle); Helin (23, female, Dohuk, asylum determination, 12 months, CAS Guidonia); Layla (31, female, Sulaymaniyah, humanitarian protection, 3.5 years, Pigneto); Barzan (37, male, Kirkuk, refugee status, 4 years, Tiburtino).

Focus Group Participants: Group 1 (recent arrivals, mean residence 18 months): Soran (27), Dilzar (24), Hana (22), Rauf (29), Kawa (31), Yara (25), Faris (33), Niga (26). Group 2 (established residents, mean residence 38 months): Rebin (38), Rojan (34), Sava (29), Bayar (36), Diyar (31), Shirin (28), Tara (32), Karam (40).

6.2 The Interview Grid

6.2.1 Development and Structure of the Interview Guide

The interview went through multiple phases before reaching its final stage. The starting stage consisted of research questions, theoretical frameworks, and reviewing interview guides that were used in published research on refugee mental health and acculturation. That initial version was then reviewed by two Kurdish community members, neither of them research participants, one with recent experience of the Italian asylum system, the other with several years of residence in Rome. They were asked whether the questions made sense, whether any might cause distress, and whether anything important was missing. Their feedback led to significant changes: several questions were simplified, two were removed because they risked reopening trauma without adequate contextual preparation, and three new areas were added, the role of the Kurdish community in Rome, the experience of learning Italian, and the relationship between legal status and planning for the future. A pilot interview with one community member, who did not subsequently participate in the main study, led to further minor adjustments to the sequence and phrasing.

The final guide is organized into six sections: a preamble read to participants before recording begins; Section A on background and migration history; Section B on the journey and first experiences in Italy; Section C on current living

conditions and challenges; Section D on identity, belonging, and psychological well-being; Section E on coping, support, and community; and Section F on the future and reflections. The guide was a scaffold, not a script. The researcher followed the order of sections but varied the specific questions depending on how each conversation developed, followed up on themes that participants raised themselves, and used consistent judgment about how to phrase questions based on each specific person and context.

6.2.2 The Interview Guide, Full Text

PREAMBLE (read before recording begins):

Thank you very much for agreeing to speak with me today. My name is Kwestan, and I am a researcher from the University of Sulaimani in Kurdistan. I am conducting a study about the experiences of Kurdish people living in Rome, what brought you here, what your life is like now, and how you are managing. There are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions I will ask. What matters is your honest experience, however complex or difficult it might be. I am interested in your life and your story, not in testing or evaluating you in any way.

Before we begin, I want to explain a few things about how this works. Everything you tell me is completely confidential. I will record our conversation with your permission, but the recording is only for my own transcription, no one else will hear it, and your name will not appear in anything I write. I will use a different name instead. You can stop at any point, decline to answer any question, or end the interview whenever you like, there is no obligation to continue if you feel uncomfortable. If there are things that are difficult to talk about, please tell me and we can move on. My aim is that this conversation should feel safe and respectful. Do you have any questions before we start?

SECTION A

Background and Migration History

A1. Can you tell me a little about yourself, where you are from in Kurdistan, what your family is like, and what your life was like before you made the decision to come to Italy? Probes: What did you study or work in? Who was in your family at home? What was your neighborhood or city like?

A2. When did you first begin to think seriously about leaving Kurdistan? Was it a gradual process, or was there a specific moment when things became clear? Probes: What was happening in your life or in Kurdistan at that time? What had changed, or what had failed to change?

A3. Who else was involved in the decision to leave? Was this something you decided alone, or was your family part of the process? *Probes: How did your family respond to the idea? Did they support you, oppose you, or were they mixed? Who contributed to financing the journey?*

A4. Before you left, what did you know about Italy? What did you expect it to be like, and where did those expectations come from? *Probes: Had you spoken to others who had already come? What had they told you? What had you seen on social media or television?*

SECTION B

The Migration Journey and First Experiences in Italy

B1. Can you tell me about the journey itself, how you traveled, what happened along the way? I want to understand what the journey was like, though I understand if there are parts that are difficult to talk about. *Probes: How long did the journey take in total? What was the most difficult part? Were there moments when you thought you might not make it?*

B2. What do you remember most about arriving in Italy? What were the first few weeks like? *Probes: What was the reception process like? Where were you taken? Who did you meet? How did you feel during those first days?*

B3. How did you navigate the asylum process, the application, the interviews, the waiting? Was there anything that helped, and what was most difficult about it? *Probes: Did you have any legal assistance? Did you understand what was happening? What did the uncertainty feel like?*

B4. In those early months, how were you feeling emotionally? Looking back, how would you describe your psychological state during that first period? *Probes: Were there moments of hope? Moments of despair? What kept you going?*

SECTION C

Current Living Conditions and Challenges

C1. What is your life in Rome like now? Can you describe what a typical day looks like for you, from morning to evening? *Probes: Where do you spend most of your time? Who do you see? What do you do for work or occupation?*

C2. What are the most difficult aspects of your current situation in Rome? If you had to identify the two or three things that make daily life hardest, what would they be? *Probes: Is it more the practical and material difficulties, money, housing, legal status, or is it something more social or emotional?*

C3. Can you tell me about your housing situation? Where do you live, what is it like, and how does where you live affect your daily experience? *Probes: Do you have privacy? Is the location convenient? What does your living arrangement allow or prevent you from doing?*

C4. How do you manage financially? Have you been able to work, and if so, what kind of work? If not, what has prevented you from working? *Probes: How do you feel about your financial situation? Does it affect your sense of independence or dignity?*

C5. Have you had any experiences of discrimination, hostility, or unfair treatment in Rome because of who you are? *Probes: Can you describe specific incidents? How did you respond, and how did those experiences affect you?*

SECTION D

Identity, Belonging, and Psychological Well-being

D1. How do you think about your own identity now, who you are, what you belong to? Do you think of yourself primarily as Kurdish, as Iraqi, as a person living in Italy, or in some other way? And has this changed since you arrived? *Probes: Do you feel more or less Kurdish here than you did at home? What does being Kurdish mean to you now, in Rome?*

D2. Do you feel that you belong in Rome, or in Italy more broadly? What would need to be different for you to feel more at home here? *Probes: Are there moments when you feel you belong? Are there people with whom you feel most yourself?*

D3. How has the experience of migration affected your sense of who you are as a person, your confidence, your values, your sense of your own capabilities? *Probes: Have you discovered things about yourself that you did not know before? Have there been dimensions of yourself that have been lost or changed in ways you did not choose?*

D4. I want to ask you directly about your psychological and emotional well-being. Honestly, how are you doing? How do you feel

inside, most of the time? Probes: Are there things that affect your mood or mental state most, positive or negative? Do you feel you have the emotional resources to deal with your situation?

D5. Is there anything about your experience that you find particularly difficult to talk about or think about, things that you tend to push away or avoid? Note to researcher: Approach this question gently and do not press if the participant declines. Have contact details for support services available.

SECTION E

Coping, Community, and Support

E1. What helps you cope with the difficulties you face? What keeps you going? Probes: Is it the Kurdish community? Religion? Work? Exercise? Contact with family? A particular person?

E2. What role does the Kurdish community in Rome play in your life? How connected do you feel to other Kurdish people here, and in what ways does that connection help or complicate things? Probes: Are there specific places or events where the community comes together? What does it mean to you when you are with other Kurds here?

E3. How much contact do you have with your family back in Kurdistan? How does that contact affect you? Probes: What do your family know about your actual situation? Is there anything you hide from them, or that is difficult to explain?

E4. Have you had any contact with Italian people, as neighbors, colleagues, friends, or in any other context? What have those encounters been like? Probes: Do you feel that Italian people are generally welcoming, indifferent, or hostile? Are there individual Italians who have been important to you?

E5. Are there any formal services, from Italian institutions, NGOs, or other organizations, that have genuinely helped you? Probes: What made them helpful? What would have made them more helpful? What services do you wish existed but do not?

SECTION F

Future and Reflections

F1. What are your plans and hopes for the future? Where do you

see yourself in five years? Probes: What do you most want your future to look like? What do you most fear? What do you think will actually happen?

F2. If you were speaking to a young person in Kurdistan who was thinking seriously about coming to Italy, what would you tell them? What do you wish someone had told you before you left?

F3. Is there anything important about your experience that I have not asked about, and that you feel it would be valuable for me to understand?

Closing: Thank you very much for your time and for sharing your experience with me. I am grateful for your trust. Before we finish, I want to check in, how are you feeling now, after this conversation? Is there anything I can do for you, or any information or support that would be helpful?

6.3 Focus Group Design and Protocols

6.3.1 Rationale for Focus Groups

The two focus group sessions were designed as preparation phase to the individual interviews. Focus groups produce a different kind of data, where it wasn't one person's account in the box of the researcher's questions, but that of people talking with each other, building on what their peers say, sometimes disagreeing, and sometimes seeing their own experience in someone else's life. That collective dynamic is particularly useful for research with refugee communities. When several people who share a background are in the room together, the power dynamic shifts. Disclosures that feel difficult one-on-one, experiences of shame, stigma, or conflict within the community, can become easier when others are visibly in the same position.

6.3.2 Group Composition and Setting

The two groups were composed by length of residence, because time in the Italian system is one of the most important variables in the dataset and because grouping people this way would allow for focused discussion of specific phases of the experience. Group One comprised eight participants who had been in Rome for twenty-four months or fewer. Group Two comprised eight with longer residence. Within each group, gender balance was maintained as closely as the available pool allowed. Both groups met at the Kurdish Cultural Center, which was familiar, private, and practically accessible for people coming from

different parts of the city. Sessions were held on early Saturday evenings, when community members were most likely to be free, and each ran for approximately one hundred and fifty minutes, including a short break.

6.3.3 Focus Group Questions and Facilitation Approach

The focus group guide was shorter and more open than the individual interview guide. The group conversation itself generates material that requires less prompting than a one-on-one interview. The guide opened with a question that allowed people to introduce themselves without requiring full biographical disclosure, then moved through four main discussion prompts for each group.

Group One (recent arrivals), Discussion Prompts:

1. What was the moment, when you arrived in Rome, when you most clearly understood that things were going to be different from what you had imagined? What happened, and what did it mean to you?
2. What have you found most difficult about the reception process, the legal system, the housing, the waiting? And is there anything that has surprised you in a positive way?
3. When you think about your identity, who you are, where you belong, how do you feel right now, in this moment? Has that feeling changed since you arrived?
4. What do you think would need to change in Rome, in the Italian system, in your own situation, or in the Kurdish community here, for things to be genuinely better?

Group Two (established residents), Discussion Prompts:

1. Looking back at the first year in Rome, and comparing it to where you are now, what has changed most? What has improved, and what has remained difficult?
2. What have you learned about how to survive and navigate Rome that you would want to pass on to someone who arrived tomorrow?
3. When you think about your identity now, Kurdish, or Italian, or both, or neither, how would you describe who you have become here? What have you gained and what have you lost?
4. What does the Kurdish community in Rome most need, from Italian institutions, from the community itself, and from individuals who have been here longer?

The facilitator's role was to introduce the prompts, make sure everyone had room to speak, follow threads that seemed analytically important, and hold space for disagreement without shutting it down, because productive tension is itself part of the data. The co-facilitator kept detailed observation notes, tracking who was speaking, watching non-verbal responses, and recording what the audio would not capture.

6.4 Interview Transcriptions

The four transcriptions below were selected from the full corpus of twenty-three interviews to represent the range of situations, perspectives, and experiences in the dataset. They are reproduced as close to verbatim as possible, with minor changes only to remove identifying details, to clarify translation where a literal rendering would be ambiguous, and to regularize formatting. Hesitations, false starts, and self-corrections have been kept where they carry meaning. Translations from Arabic and Kurdish are the researcher's own.

Transcription 1: Sardar, 27 years old, Sulaymaniyah

Male. Arrived in Italy September 2022. Refugee status granted June 2024. Degree in civil engineering, University of Sulaimani. Currently working informally in construction. Lives in a shared apartment in Testaccio with three other Kurdish men. Interview conducted in Arabic, March 2025. Duration: 82 minutes.

Researcher: Thank you very much for agreeing to meet with me today. Can we start at the beginning, can you tell me a little about yourself and what your life was like in Kurdistan before you came to Italy?

Sardar: Yes, of course. I am from Sulaymaniyah, from the Bakaje neighborhood, which is in the east of the city. My family is from there, my parents and two sisters still live there. My father had a small construction business, nothing large, but it was stable. He built small houses, renovation work, that kind of thing. I studied civil engineering at the University of Sulaimani, four years, I graduated in 2019. I was a good student. Not the best, but serious. I worked for my father during the summers and I believed, genuinely believed, that after graduation I would have a future there.

Researcher: What happened after graduation?

Sardar: I tried for two years. Two years. I applied to every engineering company in Sulaymaniyah, Erbil, Kirkuk. I had qualifications. I had experience from my father. I had references from my professors. I had nothing, meaning, I had no party connection. No uncle who was a senior official. No family relationship to anyone who could make a call. And in Kurdistan, in those sectors, construction, government contracts, infrastructure, that is what decides everything. Not your degree. Who knows you. Who you know.

Researcher: Can you describe how that felt, over those two years?

Sardar: [pause] It felt, it is hard to describe. It is not the same as simple dis-

appointment. It is something more corroding. You work hard your whole life because you believe that hard work means something. That effort produces results. And then you discover that this is not true, not because you were wrong about effort but because the system does not work the way you were told it does. It was not just me. I had classmates, very smart people, much smarter than me, in the same situation. After a while you start to feel that you are invisible. That you exist but you are not seen. That is a strange feeling to have in your own country.

Researcher: Was there a specific moment when you decided that you would leave?

Sardar: There were two moments, really. The first was when my friend Kawa, my closest friend, we had studied together, shared a room, everything, left in the summer of 2021. He went through Turkey, the boat, Greece, and then he came to Rome. He sent me voice messages, the apartment he was in was not comfortable, he described all the difficulties. But he was there. And something in me shifted. Not envy exactly. More like: if Kawa can go, why am I still performing loyalty to a place that has not performed any loyalty to me?

Researcher: And the second moment?

Sardar: The second was six months later. There was a tender for a construction supervision contract, a government road project. A real project, well-funded, exactly the kind of work I was trained for. I prepared the application with enormous care. Every document was correct, every technical specification was addressed. And the contract went to someone who had graduated two years before me, who had never worked a day in construction, whose father was a senior figure in one of the parties. I found out through someone who works in that ministry. I went home that night and I said to my sister: I am leaving. She cried. But she did not try to stop me.

Researcher: And your parents?

Sardar: My father cried also. [quiet, pause] He is not someone who cries easily. He pressed money into my hands, money from savings he had accumulated over many years. He said: 'Go. Do not come back until you have something.' And then my mother made me dinner as if it was a normal evening. She did not say much. But she was very careful with the food that night. She made everything that I liked. I did not understand until I was on the road and I thought about it later, it was her goodbye. She could not say it in words so she said it with the food.

Researcher: Can you tell me about the journey?

Sardar: The journey. [long pause] Yes. I went to Istanbul first, I had a visa from before, I had been once for tourism. From Istanbul I went to Izmir, which is where the boats leave from. I paid a smuggler, a significant amount, money my father gave and money I had saved. In Izmir you wait. You do not know how long. I waited nine days in a house with twenty other people, Kurds, Syrians, Afghans, some Africans whose country I did not know. Small rooms, food once a day, no going outside.

Researcher: And the crossing itself?

Sardar: I will tell you what I remember. We left at night, two in the morning, I think. A rubber boat, the kind they sell for children's pools but made larger. Thirty-four people, the smuggler said not to count. The Greek coast was not far in kilometers, but in the dark, with waves, it felt impossible. After forty minutes, I think forty minutes, the boat started taking water on one side. People moved to the other side. The boat tilted worse. A woman with a baby, I remember her, she was Iraqi I think, very young, was screaming. I was thinking: I am going to die in this water and my mother will never know exactly where. [pause] But we did not die. A Greek coast guard vessel appeared. They took us out of the water. Some people were very cold. One old man could not stand. We were taken to a camp.

Researcher: How long were you in Greece?

Sardar: Four months. In a camp in Lesbos, the Moria camp, though by 2022 they had rebuilt it somewhat after the fire. Still very poor conditions. Sixteen people in a structure designed for eight. Toilets that did not always work. I registered with the Greek authorities because they told me I had to, but my intention was never to stay in Greece, the Kurdish community there is very small, there is not much network. My plan was always Rome. Kawa was there. Other people I knew from Sulaymaniyah. After four months I found a way to travel through North Macedonia, Serbia, Slovenia, on foot for parts of it, in trucks for other parts, until I reached Trieste, and from Trieste by train to Rome.

Researcher: What was Rome like when you arrived?

Sardar: Strange. Enormous. I arrived in Termini station at night, this enormous hall full of people from everywhere, all moving in different directions. I called Kawa from a payphone, I had no working phone at that point, and he came to meet me. He took me to where he was staying, a shared apartment in the Appio-Latino neighborhood, seven people in three rooms. That first night

I slept on the floor and I thought: I have arrived. Whatever this is, I have arrived. There was a specific feeling, exhaustion, but also something lighter underneath it. I remember it very clearly.

Researcher: How did you navigate the asylum process once you were in Rome?

Sardar: Kawa explained the basics, he had been there six months already. The first step is to report to the questura, the police headquarters, and request a first appointment for formal registration. The wait for that first appointment was, in my case, eleven weeks. Eleven weeks of existing without any official status. I could not access services, I could not formally work, I could not do anything official. Kawa's household was generous; I contributed what I could. After registration, you have what they call an audizione, a hearing with the territorial commission, where they assess your claim. My hearing was scheduled for fourteen months after registration. Fourteen months.

Researcher: Fourteen months of waiting. Can you describe what that was like psychologically?

Sardar: I have thought about this a great deal, because I believe it was the most damaging period of my time in Italy, more than the crossing, in some ways, because the crossing was acute and then it was over. The waiting is chronic. It does not end. Every day begins the same. Every day you do not know if today will be the day you receive a letter that changes something. You stop being able to plan because you do not know what legal status you will have in three months. You cannot apply for certain jobs. You cannot rent an apartment in your own name. You are present in the city, you walk the streets, you go to the market, you exist, but you are not present in any official sense. You are a ghost.

Researcher: What did you do during that time?

Sardar: I learned Italian. This was the most important thing I did. I found a free course at a municipal social center near the apartment, three mornings a week. Within six months I had enough Italian to have basic conversations. Within a year I was reading the newspaper. The language was not just practical, it was psychological. Each new word, each sentence I could understand, was evidence that I was accumulating something. That I was not standing still while the waiting wore me down. I also did informal construction work, cash, of course, no contract. My engineering training meant I could understand what needed to be done, and the people I worked for quickly discovered this and gave me more complex tasks. But I was paid less than Italian workers, because I had no contract, no choice.

Researcher: And your status now, you have received refugee status?

Sardar: Yes, in June 2024. It was a relief, of course. But the period after the decision was also disorienting, which surprised me. I had been in waiting mode for so long, organized around the uncertainty, adapted to it, that receiving the decision was not simply a transition to normal life. I had to learn how to plan again. How to make commitments. How to book something for next month and believe I would still be here next month. That sounds simple but it is not.

Researcher: How do you feel about your identity now, Kurdish, Italian, something in between?

Sardar: I am Kurdish. That has not changed and it will not change. But I am also someone who speaks Italian well, who knows this city, who has built something here. I do not think of those things as contradictions. I am more Kurdish in some ways here than I was in Kurdistan, I think about what it means to be Kurdish every day, I explain it to Italians who have never heard of Kurdistan, I defend it when it is not understood. At the same time, I go to Kurdish community events and I see people who have organized their entire lives inside the Kurdish network and who, three or four years later, still cannot buy a bus ticket independently in Italian. I understand that choice, the community is protective, it is familiar, it is the only space where you do not have to explain yourself. But I am glad I made a different choice.

Researcher: What about the future?

Sardar: My immediate future is clear: I am working toward having my qualifications officially recognized by the Italian system. It is a long process, bureaucratic, involving documents from Kurdistan that are difficult to obtain because the university system there does not always cooperate well with foreign recognition procedures. But I have begun. I am also thinking about bringing my mother to Rome, if she is willing. She is aging and she is alone since my father died last year. [pause] That is something I think about every day. The question of family, of what distance costs, and whether it can ever be fully repaired.

Transcription 2: Dilan, 24 years old, Sulaymaniyah

Female. Arrived in Italy June 2023. Subsidiary protection granted April 2024. Studied one year of pharmacy at the University of Sulaimani before migration. Currently working part-time in a Kurdish restaurant near Termini station. Lives in a shared apartment in Pigneto with two other Kurdish women. Interview conducted in Sorani Kurdish, April 2025. Duration: 71 minutes.

Researcher: Thank you very much for agreeing to meet with me. Can you begin by telling me a little about yourself, where you are from and what your life was like before you came to Italy?

Dilan: I am from Sulaymaniyah, from a neighborhood called Bakhtiary. My family is, ordinary. My father drives a taxi, my mother stays home, I have two brothers. We were not rich but we were comfortable enough. I had started studying pharmacy at the university, I chose it because I was good at sciences and because my uncle is a pharmacist and he has a good life. After one year, I had finished my first year, I made the decision to leave. Not because of the university. Because of other things.

Researcher: What were those other things?

Dilan: [pause] It is complicated to explain completely. Some of it is general, the economy, the feeling that Kurdistan was going nowhere, that my generation would not have the lives we expected. Some of it is more personal. My family was beginning to talk about marriage. I was twenty-two. The man they had in mind was, fine. He was fine. A teacher, a good family. But I did not want to be married at twenty-two to a man who was fine. I wanted to live first. To be a person before I was someone's wife. That sounds selfish when I say it, but I believed it. I still believe it.

Researcher: Did you tell your family this?

Dilan: [laughs softly] No. I told them I wanted to continue my studies in Europe, that the educational opportunities were better, that I wanted to come back with a European qualification. This was not a complete lie, I did want those things. But the real reason was also what I told you. My mother cried. My father did not speak to me for three days. Then he arranged money for my journey and he said to me, I remember his exact words, 'Go, but do not forget what you are.'

Researcher: Can you tell me about your journey?

Dilan: Yes. I went through Turkey, I had a tourist visa. I stayed with a distant relative in Istanbul for two weeks. Then from there to a town near the Greek border. The crossing, I went by boat. I prefer not to describe this in detail. What I will say is that it was night, there were many people, the water was cold, and I was very frightened. I arrived on a Greek island, Samos. They took us to a reception center there.

Researcher: How long did you stay in Greece?

Dilan: Three months in Samos. Then they moved me to a camp on the mainland, near Athens. Another month and a half. During this time I thought a great

deal about what I had done and whether it was right. Not in the sense of doubt, I did not doubt that I had to leave. But I thought about what I had left: my family, my room, my language everywhere around me, the neighborhood I knew. In the camp, there were people from many countries, and communication was very difficult. I felt for the first time in my life what it means not to be able to express yourself in the language around you. That is a special kind of isolation.

Researcher: How did you get from Greece to Italy?

Dilan: There are people who know the routes. You pay, you follow instructions. For me it was by boat again, from a port near Patras in Greece to the heel of Italy, Calabria. The crossing took about twelve hours. I was sick the entire time. When we arrived, the police were waiting, the Italian police, not hostile but very formal. They took our information. There was a Kurdish woman from Erbil who had lived in Germany for many years and spoke Italian well, and she translated for me. I was taken to a CAS center in Catanzaro, in Calabria. I was there for two months before they transferred me to Rome.

Researcher: What was the Rome transfer like? And what was the CAS center in Rome like?

Dilan: The Rome center was in Tor Bella Monaca, I think many Kurdish people from this period were sent there. A large building, many people, a long bus journey to anywhere useful in the city. I shared a room with three other women, two Somali and one Nigerian. We did not share a language but we lived together peacefully. The staff were not unkind, but they were overworked and there were not many of them. The days were long and empty. You wake up, you eat breakfast, you have nowhere to go. The Italian lessons were once a week and lasted ninety minutes. That is not enough.

Researcher: What did you do with the time?

Dilan: I studied Italian on my own. I had a phone, basic, but it worked, and I used YouTube, an app called Duolingo, and most importantly I spoke with people. Anyone who would speak with me. There was a volunteer who came to the center twice a week, an Italian woman, perhaps fifty years old, a teacher by profession. She spoke no Kurdish and no Arabic, only Italian. I followed her everywhere like a shadow. She thought this was funny. By the end of two months I could have a basic conversation. When I arrived in Rome I was already beginning to be independent in the language.

Researcher: How did things develop after the center?

Dilan: After receiving my subsidiary protection decision in April 2024, I

became eligible for the SAI system and was offered a place in a shared apartment, three Kurdish women, in Pigneto. This changed everything. I had a room with a door that closed. I had a kitchen. I had the ability to cook my own food, which sounds like a small thing but is not, because cooking is connected to home and family and smell and memory in a way that is very deep. I felt like a person again rather than a case number.

Researcher: You mentioned wanting to live, to be a person before becoming a wife. Do you feel that has happened, in Rome?

Dilan: [long pause, then carefully] Partly. I am living alone, or rather, with women friends, without family supervision. I work, I earn my own money, I decide how to spend my evenings. These are real freedoms that I did not have in Kurdistan, and I do not minimize them. At the same time, I am not living the life I imagined when I left. I thought Europe would feel, I do not know exactly, more like arriving somewhere than like continuing to struggle. But the struggle is just different here. Different difficulties, different constraints. The visa uncertainty, the language, the loneliness of being far from my mother.

Researcher: Tell me about the loneliness.

Dilan: The loneliness is the part that was hardest to predict. In Kurdistan I was never alone, there was always someone, always family, always neighbors who knew you. Here, even when I am with people, there is a kind of fundamental aloneness that does not fully go away. It is the feeling of being in a place where no one knew you before you were a refugee. Where there is no shared history, no collective memory of who you are. In Sulaymaniyah, if I walked through Bakhtiary, people would see my face and know my father's face and my grandfather's face. Here I am, new. Only myself, with no past visible to anyone around me.

Researcher: How do you cope with that?

Dilan: Some days better than other days. I pray, I was not very observant in Kurdistan, honestly, but here I have become more religious, which surprised me. I call my mother every other day, long calls, we talk about ordinary things, what she cooked, what my brothers are doing. I have two friends here, Kurdish women from Erbil who I met through the community, who are genuinely important to me. And I work, which gives structure and gives me contact with people. My Italian has become fluent. Speaking Italian, being understood completely, makes me feel less invisible.

Researcher: What about your identity, how do you think of yourself now?

Dilan: I am Kurdish. But I am also becoming someone that the Kurdish woman who arrived in Calabria eighteen months ago would not quite recognize. Not worse, different. I make decisions that woman could not have imagined making. I challenge things that she would have accepted. At the same time, there are values, family loyalty, hospitality, certain ways of relating to people, that I have held onto more firmly here than I might have at home, because they are part of what connects me to who I am when everything else has changed. I think that is what people mean when they talk about integration, not becoming Italian but becoming someone who can live here fully without pretending to be something they are not.

Researcher: If you could speak to the young woman in Sulaymaniyah who was deciding whether to leave, what would you say to her?

Dilan: [smiles] I would say: it will be harder and longer than you think. I would say: learn the language before anything else, before looking for work, before trying to make Italian friends, before anything. I would say: do not trust the images on your phone. The life in those images is real for some people, but it took them years and struggles that they did not post. I would say: find one Kurdish person who has been here longer than you and stay close to them for the first year. They will save you many mistakes. And I would say: you will be lonely, more than you expected. That loneliness is part of the cost. Decide if you can pay it.

Transcription 3: Yusuf, 35 years old, Kirkuk

Male. Arrived in Italy March 2019. Refugee status granted January 2022. Degree in economics (incomplete), University of Kirkuk. Now employed as a construction worker with a formal contract. Lives alone in a rented studio apartment in San Lorenzo. Interview conducted in Arabic, May 2025. Duration: 93 minutes.

Researcher: Yusuf, you have been in Italy longer than almost anyone else I have spoken with, more than six years. I want to start by asking what that length of time has taught you.

Yusuf: [laughs] What has it taught me. That is a very large question. It has taught me patience, not the kind you choose, but the kind that is imposed on you until it becomes part of you. It has taught me that things are possible that seemed impossible. And it has taught me that being rebuilt is slower than being broken. The breaking is fast. The rebuilding takes years and it is never quite the same shape as before.

Researcher: Can you start at the beginning? What was your situation in Kirkuk before you left?

Yusuf: Kirkuk is a complicated city, you know this. Kurdish, Arab, Turkmen, always contested, always the object of political dispute between Erbil and Baghdad. I was born there, my family is from there, I identify as Kurdish but I grew up in a city that was never entirely ours. After 2017, after the referendum and the events that followed, the situation in Kirkuk became very difficult for Kurdish people in particular. There were incidents, I do not want to go into detail, that involved my family directly. We received a visit that made it clear we were not welcome to remain as visibly Kurdish as we had been. My brother left for the Kurdistan Region. I decided to go further.

Researcher: How did you come to Italy?

Yusuf: Through Turkey, as most people do. The boat crossing to the Greek islands. Then the journey through the Balkan route, which in 2019 was still possible without the degree of violence it later involved. I arrived in Trieste and from Trieste to Rome, where I had a distant contact, not close, a man from Kirkuk who had been in Rome for three years. He gave me a floor to sleep on for three weeks while I found my way.

Researcher: Tell me about those first years, before you received your status.

Yusuf: The first three years were the most difficult of my life. And I lived through difficult things in Kirkuk, I know what difficulty is. But those three years had a specific character that is hard to describe to someone who has not experienced it. You wake up every day in the same uncertainty. You go to sleep in the same uncertainty. You are in a city of three million people and you do not officially exist. You cannot rent an apartment. You cannot open a bank account. You cannot apply for most jobs. Your legal permission to remain is renewed every few months with an expiry date on it that makes every plan conditional.

Researcher: How did you survive materially during that period?

Yusuf: Construction work, like Sardar. The construction sector in Rome is largely informal for undocumented and irregular workers, you show up at certain meeting points in the morning, a contractor comes, he chooses who he needs, you spend the day carrying materials or doing work that requires more skill, you are paid in cash at the end of the day. I understood construction, my uncle had a business in Kirkuk, I had worked summers, so I was useful and I found regular work. But the pay was considerably below what Italian workers earned for the same task, and the conditions were sometimes unsafe, and you

could not complain about either of these things because complaining meant finding yourself removed from the list.

Researcher: Can you describe a specific moment from those years that stayed with you?

Yusuf: There was an evening in the second winter. February. I was in a shared room with five others, a small room in Tiburtino, we paid an amount that was extortionate for what we had but there was no alternative. I had worked a full day and I was exhausted and I was eating alone from a container I had carried from a market. One of the Italians at the next table, we were in a kind of communal area in the building, looked at me and said something to his friend. I did not understand all of it but I understood the word 'clandestino' and the tone. And I thought: I am thirty years old. In Kirkuk I had a family, I had a house, I had dignity. I ate at a table. Here I am eating from a container and someone is calling me names. [pause] That feeling, that specific collapse of dignity, stayed with me for a long time.

Researcher: How did you get through it?

Yusuf: The community. Consistently, always, the community. There is a group of Kurdish men, mostly from Sulaymaniyah and Kirkuk, who meet on Friday evenings in a cafe near San Lorenzo. When I arrived in Rome, my contact introduced me. Every Friday. For six years I have gone to those Fridays, except when I was sick. We eat, someone brings food from home, another brings something bought, we argue about politics, we watch football. For one evening I am not the invisible foreigner. I am Yusuf from Kirkuk, and these people know what that means. They know the city, they know my neighborhood, they know the history. That recognition, of being known, is worth more than I can calculate.

Researcher: You received your status in 2022. What changed?

Yusuf: Everything changed and nothing changed. Everything changed in the sense that I could now rent an apartment, open a bank account, apply for a formal employment contract. I did all of these things within a year of the decision. I rented my studio, it is small but it is mine, and I found a formal construction contract with a company that builds and renovates apartments. I have taxes deducted from my salary. I have a health card. I exist officially. Nothing changed in the sense that the city was still Rome, the work was still construction, the community was still Friday evenings in a cafe. But the quality of those things was transformed because the anxiety was reduced. When you are not spending part of every day managing the fear of what might happen to your status, you have more of yourself available for living.

Researcher: What about your identity, six years in Rome, what has happened to your sense of who you are?

Yusuf: I am Kurdish, from Kirkuk, and I am also someone who belongs to Rome in a way that is real. I know this city better than I know any other city on earth. I know which roads flood in winter and which neighborhoods have the best Kurdish bakeries and which construction companies pay on time. This city is in me now. At the same time, when I am with other Kurdish people here, I am not Italian-Kurdish, I am Kurdish-Kurdish. Both are true. They do not cancel each other. My daughter was born here, she is two years old, Italian by birth, and I speak to her in Kurdish. She will be Italian and Kurdish, and I will make sure she knows what both mean.

Researcher: You have a daughter who was born in Rome. Tell me about that.

Yusuf: Her name is Lina. She was born in November 2023. Her mother, we are not married, it is complicated, is from Mosul. Lina is Italian by birth, which means she has rights I spent three years without. She will never wait in those uncertainty corridors. She will go to Italian school and speak Italian and Kurdish and maybe Arabic. For her, both worlds will be available from the beginning rather than one at a time. When I watch her sleep, I think: this is what it was for. All of it.

Transcription 4: Hozan, 32 years old, Dohuk

Male. Arrived in Italy September 2023. Asylum determination in process at time of interview. Worked for eight years as an automotive mechanic in Dohuk before migration. CAS reception center, Tor Bella Monaca, eastern Rome. Interview conducted in Kurmanji Kurdish, April 2025. Duration: 64 minutes.

Researcher: Thank you, Hozan, for agreeing to speak with me here. Can you begin by telling me a little about yourself and why you left Dohuk?

Hozan: I am from Dohuk. I am a mechanic, eight years I worked in a garage there, specializing in European cars, BMW and Mercedes mainly. I was good at my work. I am not saying this to boast, I am saying it because the contrast with what I do here, which amounts to nothing, is important to understand. In Dohuk I had a specific identity. I was Hozan the mechanic who everyone knew, who fixed your car correctly the first time, who told you honestly what needed to be done. That identity is gone here. I am a number on a list. I wait.

Researcher: What made you decide to leave?

Hozan: I had a business partner, or I thought I did. We were going to open our own garage together, a proper one with a license and equipment. We had saved for three years for this. When we went to register the business, we discovered that we needed a certificate from the municipality certifying that we had no criminal record and that we were not involved in certain political activities. This certificate, the official price is nothing, it is a right. But in practice, the man in the office required a payment to process it in a reasonable time. We paid. Then there were additional requirements, another office, another payment. After four months and money we could not afford to lose, we were told that the space we had rented for the garage was in a zone that was now subject to a different commercial classification and our license category was no longer valid there. This classification had been changed while we were applying, which I suspect was not coincidental. My partner gave up and took a job driving. I decided I would not spend another year of my life in this system.

Researcher: Tell me about the journey.

Hozan: [very quietly] I will tell you the facts. I paid a smuggler in Dohuk, a well-known operation, half the people in my neighborhood know someone who has used them. Turkey, Istanbul, then Izmir, then the boat. The boat was the worst thing I have experienced in my life. [pause] I will leave it at that. I arrived in Italy, Calabria, in very poor condition. Cold, sick, frightened. I was taken to a reception center. After a few weeks I was transferred to this center in Tor Bella Monaca.

Researcher: What is daily life like here?

Hozan: [long pause] You want me to describe it honestly? A day here: I wake at six-thirty because the building is loud. Breakfast in a communal room, bread, jam, one coffee. Then the day opens in front of me, and it is, empty. Entirely empty. I have nowhere to go. The language course is on Tuesdays and Thursdays, ninety minutes each time. I have attended every single session since I arrived. In those sessions I have learned perhaps one hundred and fifty Italian words. The teacher is a volunteer, she is kind, but ninety minutes twice a week is not enough to learn a language. After the course, I return to the center. I read, I downloaded books on my phone before I left Dohuk, I still have Kurdish novels I am reading for the second time. I exercise in my room when there is space. I go to sleep.

Researcher: And your asylum case?

Hozan: I registered in September 2023, the questura gave me the appointment after six weeks. My audizione, my hearing, is scheduled for October 2025. Two years after registration. I understand this is normal, or at least com-

mon. I do not understand how it can be normal. Two years of a person's life, suspended.

Researcher: How are you psychologically? I want to ask directly.

Hozan: I am honest with you: not well. I am not in crisis, I am not in the situations that require intervention. But I am not well. I think about my worth as a person. In Dohuk I was useful. Every day I used my hands and my knowledge to fix things that were broken. People brought me their problems and I solved them. Here I cannot contribute anything. My knowledge is completely irrelevant in this building and this situation. A mechanic who cannot touch a car, cannot earn, cannot apply his skill, what is he? I am thirty-two years old and I feel like I am disappearing. That is the honest answer.

Researcher: Is there anything that helps?

Hozan: There are two other Kurdish men in this building, Soran from Sulaymaniyah, Latif from Erbil. We are not from the same region but here we are brothers. We eat together when we can, we speak Kurdish, we share news from home. That is something. To hear Kurdish spoken in this building is, like water when you are thirsty. I also pray. I was not particularly devout in Dohuk but here I pray five times a day. It gives structure. It gives the feeling that I am connected to something beyond this room and this waiting.

Researcher: What do you want for the future?

Hozan: [simply] I want to work. I want to use my hands. I do not need luxury. I do not need to be rich. I need to wake up in the morning and have somewhere to go, a skill to apply, money that I earned by my own labor. Everything else follows from that. If I can work, I can rent a proper room. If I can rent a proper room, I can think about the future. Right now I cannot think about the future because I cannot think past October, the hearing. After October maybe things will be different. That is what I hold onto.

6.5 Thematic Analysis

6.5.1 Overview of the Analytical Process

The thematic analysis followed a six-phase process described by Braun and Clarke (2022) as familiarization, initial coding, theme searching, theme reviewing, theme defining, and writing up. The corpus consisted of twenty-three interview transcripts, approximately 280,000 words of transcribed dialogue, alongside detailed observational notes from two focus group sessions. Initial

coding generated 847 distinct codes, later organized into 34 candidate themes, which were reviewed, consolidated, and refined through multiple rounds of analysis until the final map of five overarching themes was established.

The five themes are not rigid, since life experiences do not fit neatly into one category, and the same passage of transcript often flexibly pours into more than one theme at once. Think of them not as categorization but more as analytical lenses; five ways of bringing different perspectives of a complex experience into focus. Each theme is described, illustrated with extracts from the data, and discussed in relation to the relevant theoretical frameworks.

Theme 1: The Slow Erosion, Conditions of Departure and the Psychology of Leaving

Every individual described this in some way: the decision to leave is never a singular moment, but an endpoint of a long deterioration where a slow narrowing of possible futures occurs until leaving becomes not just possible, even necessary for many. What makes this theme analytically interesting is how consistent it is across participants with very different biographies. The structural conditions vary. The psychological experience of closure does not.

Sardar's account is among the most detailed in the dataset. The two years of applications and rejections before he left were not primarily an experience of poverty, his family had resources. They were an experience of discovering that the criteria determining advancement in Kurdish society had nothing to do with the criteria by which he had organized his life. He had invested in the wrong currency. Dilan's account adds something Sardar's does not: the gender dimension of departure. For her, the desire for autonomy, constrained by social expectations around marriage, was a distinct and powerful force, not reducible to economic calculation.

A common pattern throughout the data is what could be called the normalization of departure through communities. As each peer, neighbor, or classmate leaves, migration becomes more thinkable for those who remain, and staying begins to require an increasingly active justification. As several interviewees described, each farewell gathering is a data point in a cumulative social calculation: if this person went, and that one, and three others from the same neighborhood, then remaining starts to need an explanation that the home environment may no longer be able to provide.

This theme has direct implications for the theoretical framework, since Push-pull theory describes the conditions that builds the motivation to move but fails to highlight the psychological processes which turns the motivation into a decision. The new economics of migration framework captures the household dimension of departure decisions but tends to reduce the migrant to a strategic actor in a household calculation, losing the individual psychological experience of what it actually means to leave. This theme points toward an account that holds the structural, the relational, and the psychological together without collapsing any of them into the others.

Theme 2: The Wound of the Journey, Trauma, Dehumanization, and Embodied Experience

Every person interviewed made the journey by abnormal ways, where every journey involved danger, hardship, and repeated exposure to conditions that strip away an ordinary humans dignity. The crossing does not end when you arrive. It stays with you.

Sardar's account of the sea crossing from Turkey to Greece, the overcrowded rubber boat, the water beginning to enter, the young Iraqi woman with a baby screaming, the thought that he might die without his mother knowing where, is one of the most detailed in the dataset. But it was not exceptional. Seven other interviewees described moments of similar extremity during their crossings, and even those who did not face the acute danger of capsizing described the chronic stress of the journey, the cold, the darkness, the physical proximity to strangers, the absolute dependence on the smuggler's decisions, as something that left a mark. Dilan's account is deliberately sparse on the details of her crossing: 'I prefer not to describe this in detail.' That brevity is not the absence of content. It is the management of content that remains, at the time of interview, too charged to narrate in full.

What grabs attention about the journey is not mainly the specific dangers, which are well documented elsewhere, but the frequent experience of dehumanization that the journey involves. Participants consistently described a process in which ordinary social identity, their roles, relationships, and standing within a social world, was temporarily suspended, replaced by an experience of being managed, counted, processed, and stored as a body rather than acknowledged as a person. The camp experience in Greece produced this effect with particular intensity: the registration number, the communal sleeping arrangements, the queue for food, the prohibition on movement. Dilan's formulation, 'In Kurdistan I was a person... In the camp I was a number on a bracelet', was echoed in different words by six other interviewees.

The continuing presence of the journey after arrival takes different forms. For some it shows up as hypervigilance, a persistent state of heightened alertness that was adaptive during the crossing but continues to activate in situations where it is no longer needed (Herman, 1992). For others it is present mainly in what they choose not to discuss, the areas of reticence that mark the transcripts and that, in the focus group data, were actively managed by other participants who changed the subject when journey accounts began to go too deep. That protective behavior, the collective regulation of traumatic material, is itself an important finding. The community develops norms around what can and cannot be narrated in shared space, and those norms do real psychological work.

Theme 3: Legal Uncertainty and Temporal Disorientation

Lack of legal education is the theme that appears most frequently and connects most directly to psychological well-being across the entire dataset. Waiting for asylum decisions, for permits, for work authorization, this is not simply

waiting. It is a specific form of temporal suspension that makes ordinary adult functioning, and particularly the ability to orient oneself toward the future, systematically difficult.

Hozan's account gives one of the most direct expressions of this. Two years between registration and hearing, described not with anger but with a *k*The focus group data reveal a dimension of this theme that the individual interviews did not fully capture: legal uncertainty creates social stratification within the Kurdish community itself. ind of bewildered matter-of-factness: 'I understand this is normal, or at least common. I do not understand how it can be normal.' That sentence captures something important, the way in which structural dysfunction becomes internalized as a condition of life rather than recognized as an institutional failure. Sardar's description of the period after his positive decision adds a dimension that existing literature does not fully address: 'I had been in waiting mode for so long, organized around the uncertainty, adapted to it, that receiving the decision was not simply a transition to normal life.' The positive decision itself can be disorienting. The adaptive modes that sustained the person during uncertainty are no longer appropriate, and the capacity for forward planning, atrophied by years of enforced presentism, takes time to recover.

The focus group data reveal a dimension of this theme that the individual interviews did not fully reveal which is that legal uncertainty creates social stratification within the Kurdish community in and of itself. Participants who had received positive decisions described a tendency to distance themselves from those still in process, not from indifference, but from a form of protective anxiety. The fear that visible association with undocumented individuals might jeopardize their own precarious security produces a social sorting that causes real pain for those on the less secure side of it. This is not an individual choice. It is a direct consequence of a legal regime that makes security scarce and makes association across legal statuses risky.

The connection to Silove, Ventevogel and Rees's ADAPT framework is direct, specifically to the safety, roles, and identity pillars. Legal uncertainty undermines the sense of safety that is a prerequisite for higher-order psychological functioning, and it disrupts the role-based identity, as worker, provider, student, community member, that gives adult life meaning and structure. Hozan's words, 'I am thirty-two years old and I feel like I am disappearing', describe exactly what the ADAPT framework predicts: the erosion of role-based identity under conditions of sustained functional exclusion.

Theme 4: Identity Under Pressure, Kurdish Identity, Host Society, and the Work of Belonging

How do you know who you are when the world that shaped you is no longer there? When you are required, for the first time, to explain things that were previously unremarked background? These are not abstract questions for the people in this study. They are daily practical ones.

Kurdish identity intensifying as diaspora was one of the most consistent findings across the data. Narin's formulation captures it well: 'In Erbil, I was just a person. I was Kurdish but I did not think about it every day. Here I am Kurdish every day because I have to explain what that is.' Having to explain, defend, and assert a cultural identity that was previously taken for granted generates a reflexive awareness of what that identity actually contains, its history, its meaning, its boundaries. Several interviewees described this awareness as a deepening of commitment: having had to think seriously about what being Kurdish means, they feel they know it more clearly than they did before.

Against this intensification, the data document a genuine and often positively experienced engagement with Italian culture, particularly through language. Learning Italian is consistently described not just as a practical necessity but as something more, an experience that opens access not only to employment and services but to ordinary human connection, to humor and warmth, in ways that matter beyond their practical dimensions. Dilan's account of deliberately pursuing Italian language contact while in the CAS center, following the volunteer teacher, treating every interaction as an opportunity, illustrates what Berry's framework would recognize as the integration strategy in practice: active engagement with the host culture without abandonment of the heritage.

Stigma and discrimination constitute a significant source of identity pressure. The experience of being perceived as a migrant, a refugee, or an Arab, a category applied to Kurdish people by many Italians unfamiliar with the distinction, was documented across the data in forms ranging from explicit slurs to subtler signals: the attentive looks Solin described in Parioli, the micro-interactions that mark one's presence as notable or unwelcome. The coping strategies developed in response, the careful attention to dress and comportment described by several interviewees, the self-presentation management that one called 'making yourself small', are psychologically costly in ways that are not always visible from the outside but that accumulate into a real burden over time.

Theme 5: Resilience and Its Conditions, Resources, Strategies, and Collective Survival

The fifth theme revolves around what people make happen, despite a world designed not to support them. Resilience, in this dataset, is not a personality trait. It is not something some people have and others lack. It is a capacity whose emergence depends on specific conditions: community, language access, legal stability, cultural continuity. When those conditions exist, people build something. When they do not, people struggle, and that struggle is a response to a system, not a failure of character.

The Kurdish community in Rome shows itself throughout the dataset as the primary resilience resource, not through formal institutional support but through what might be called distributed social infrastructure: the Friday evening gatherings Yusuf describes, the WhatsApp groups, the shared Newroz

celebrations, the informal networks through which knowledge of the asylum system, legal assistance, and employment opportunities circulates. These practices produce the bonding social capital that formal services cannot replicate: the restoration of ordinary social identity, the maintenance of cultural continuity, the experience of being known rather than processed. The community's limitations are equally visible, its modest bridging social capital, its internal stratification by legal status, the limited institutional recognition it receives, and these provide the basis for specific policy recommendations.

Language acquisition is consistently identified as a second major resilience resource, not simply because it provides practical access to employment and services but because of its psychological significance. The moment at which a participant can navigate Italian bureaucracy independently, read a notice on a wall, or hold a real conversation with an Italian neighbor represents a qualitative shift in their sense of agency and competence. Italian is experienced not as an external requirement, something demanded for admission to Italian society, but as an internal acquisition, a capability that belongs to the person and transforms their relationship to the environment around them.

Faith practice and cultural expression, prayer, the marking of Ramadan, the Newroz celebration, Kurdish music and food, are described by multiple interviewees as sources of continuity, meaning, and identity stabilization that hold up against the disruptions of legal uncertainty and institutional exclusion. Several noted, with some reflection, that they had become more observant in Rome than they were in Kurdistan, a pattern consistent with Branam and colleagues' (2023) finding that religious practice functions as a protective factor for Kurdish refugees and that diaspora conditions often intensify rather than erode religious commitment.

The literature on self-compassion, particularly Rashidian and colleagues' (2025) finding that the capacity to treat oneself with kindness in the face of failure and suffering predicts reduced depression among Kurdish refugees, appeared in the data in forms that interviewees did not themselves name as self-compassion but that correspond closely to it. Yusuf's observation that 'being rebuilt is slower than being broken' and Dilan's 'I am learning to hold both without letting either one decide for me how I feel about myself' are examples of what psychologists would recognize as self-compassionate self-talk: acceptance of one's situation without excessive self-blame, combined with a kind of steadiness in the face of ongoing difficulty. That these capacities appear more often in interviewees who have been in Rome longer and whose legal situation is more stable suggests that self-compassion may be, at least in part, something that develops through sustained navigation of adversity rather than simply a fixed personality trait.

6.6 Discussion of Empirical Findings

The five themes together reveal a picture of Kurdish refugee experience in

Rome that confirms and extends the literature we know in several important ways.

Three discussion points summarize the analytical contribution of the findings.

First: post-migration stressors are central.

The data heavily confirms what Silove and colleagues' argued, which is that psychological distress among refugees in the host countries is largely produced by post-migration social and institutional conditions rather than being simply a continuation of pre-migration trauma. Across the dataset, accounts of psychological difficulty are organized primarily around legal uncertainty, inadequate housing, unemployment, and social isolation, conditions that are not inevitable features of migration but products of specific policy choices. The implication is direct: interventions designed to address pre-migration trauma alone will be of limited use if the conditions generating ongoing post-migration stress are not simultaneously addressed.

Second: the community as a structural resource.

Social capital theory, as applied in Chapter Four, suggested a significant bonding social capital resource that the Kurdish community in Rome constitutes. This is confirmed by the field data and add detail: the community's function is not only institutional but rather distributed throughout informal networks; gathering on Fridays, WhatsApp exchanges, collectively celebrating cultural events, those alone deliver what formal services cannot: social recognition, cultural continuity, and replacing being processed by being recognized. The community's limitations are equally visible and provide the basis for specific policy recommendations.

Third: integration as a structural outcome, not only an individual choice

Berry's framework identifies integration, the simultaneous maintenance of heritage culture and engagement with the host society, as the strategy associated with the best psychological outcomes. The data from Rome confirm this but add a crucial qualification: integration depends on structural enabling conditions, legal stability, language access, housing in integrated neighborhoods, freedom from discrimination, that are in Italy unevenly distributed and often absent. The CAS system, as currently designed, actively prevents integration by combining peripheral location, inadequate language instruction, enforced idleness, and social isolation in a configuration that makes integration practically unavailable even for those most strongly motivated to pursue it. This is not a natural feature of refugee experience. It is an institutional product, and it can be changed.

Chapter Seven

What Migration Does, Impacts on Individuals, Families, and Communities

Don't mistake migration for a single event. It is the process of years that produces different effects at different stages, effects that are not only negative or positive but both, often simultaneously. For those who migrate, there are real losses and real gains, genuine transformation alongside genuine disruption, and an ongoing relationship to two cultural worlds that never resolves cleanly in either direction. For the families left behind, the picture is equally mixed: remittances help when they come, but their absence, when legal or labor-market conditions prevent the migrant from earning, creates its own financial and relational strain. The departure of educated and skilled people represents a real loss for the sending society. And the gradual normalization of emigration as a life path can produce a cultural shift in which staying begins to feel like a failure of ambition. Migration needs to be understood in this full complexity, not as a simple or unidirectional process.

7.1 Psychological and Identity Impacts on the Migrant

Migration commonly produces a time during which the unrecognized assumptions about one's identity, where one belongs, and what one is worth are suddenly shaken and must be searched for somewhere new; for Kurdish refugees in Rome, this process is complex, the loss of the society within which identity was developed and maintained, the family, the neighborhood, the professional role, and the community of people who knew you is real and often deeply felt.

Kamaran, the architect working as a construction laborer, described this with particular clarity. His identity as an architect had been defined not just by technical knowledge but by the social recognition that knowledge received, by clients who sought his opinion, colleagues who respected his judgments, the physical buildings in Erbil that he could point to as evidence of what he had contributed. In Rome, that recognition is unavailable. His knowledge is invisible. And the identity it sustained has been substantially dissolved.

Then again, migration also produces genuine character development, the kind that stems from being forced to manage one's own affairs independently, to navigate bureaucratic and linguistic environments that are initially completely opaque, to solve problems that no one in one's family has faced before. Several interviewees described discovering capacities in themselves that they

had not known they had: languages acquired, systems decoded, relationships built across cultural distances. Solin's description of the daily journey between Torpignattara and Parioli, between her own neighborhood and her Italian employer's world, as a traversal of two social worlds that both now belong to her captures something important: migration has extended her psychological range rather than simply narrowing it.

7.2 Effects on Families Left Behind

The impact on families left behind in Kurdistan is complex but true. Where remittances flow, they provide genuine financial support, helping families meet daily needs, fund education, or invest in small property or business. For the many interviewees in this study whose legal situation prevented or severely limited employment, however, the expected remittance flow had not materialized or had been far smaller than anticipated. The emotional consequences of that failure, the inability to fulfill the provider role, to justify the family's investment in sending them, were significant and recurring.

Several of the interviewed individuals talked about fabricating their life in Rome for their families in a way that was considerably more positive than the reality, hiding their real conditions to avoid making their family anxious and to protect the family's narrative investment in their departure. That maintenance of a false front carries its own psychological cost, and it means that families in Kurdistan are often making decisions based on information that does not accurately reflect what migration actually involves.

The absence of male household members, the majority of interviewees, produces structural changes in domestic organization that parallel what Nasrullah (2005) documented: women taking on decision-making and provider responsibilities that were not previously theirs, without the social support that would make that transition manageable. Children grow up without fathers present. Elderly parents manage alone or with reduced support. These consequences unfold quietly and without institutional recognition, representing costs that never appear in economic analyses focused exclusively on remittance flows.

7.3 Societal and Developmental Impacts on Kurdistan

Looking at the Kurdish society more broadly, the summed effects of large-scale emigration of educated young people represents a challenge that conventional policy instruments struggle to understand. The selective character of emigration makes this particularly serious: because it is driven by the structural failure to reward qualifications and effort, it tends to extract precisely the people whose skills would be most valuable for development. A society that trains engineers, doctors, and teachers at public expense and then through its failure

to provide conditions in which those qualifications can be productively used exports that human capital to other economies is effectively subsidizing those destination economies. That subsidy compounds over time and is very difficult to reverse.

7.4 Positive Dimensions: Remittances, Skills Transfer, and Transnational Connection

Migration's impacts are not exclusively negative, and honesty requires attending to the genuine benefits alongside the costs. For families receiving remittances, even the partial and irregular flows possible under the constraints of the Italian reception system, the financial relief is real and significant. Beyond remittances, emigration can generate positive effects through the eventual return of people with skills, languages, and experience acquired abroad; through the transnational networks of information and connection that diaspora communities maintain with their home societies; and through the cultural changes, around gender roles, civic expectations, and institutional norms, that returned migrants can bring back with them.

These benefits are real but contingent. They depend on eventual return or on maintained connection to the home society, which requires that the migration experience not be so damaging, so long, or so disorienting that it severs the affective ties to home permanently. Whether those ties hold depends considerably on what happens in Rome.

Chapter Eight

The Reality of Rome, Institutional Conditions and Structural Challenges

The institutional conditions in which Kurdish refugees in Rome drop into is not a neutral backdrop to their experiences, if anything it actively shapes them. The specific features of the Italian reception system, how it houses people, how long it takes to process claims, what it allows and prohibits, determine what is possible and what is not, what resources exist and what barriers stand in the way, and in many cases what kind of psychological life is sustainable. This chapter describes how that system operates in practice, drawing on participant accounts, academic literature, and official documentation.

8.1 The Asylum Process: Timelines, Procedures, and Their Effects

Italy stands out as the slowest country in European union in terms of asylum determination process. Under the EU Procedures Directive, applications should be decided within six months, but in Italy it takes two to three years. For asylum seekers, this is not an administrative inconvenience. It is a life condition. It determines whether they can work legally, rent an apartment in their own name, access certain health services, or make any of the practical commitments that building a stable life requires.

The sixty-day period, during which employment is legally prohibited before work authorization can even be requested, adds to the problem by making sure that the period of maximum need is also the period of minimum access to the labor market. People arrive with nothing and are then legally prevented from earning anything for at least two months.

Interviewees also state that several aspects of the hearing process itself added to the stress. The *audizione*, the formal interview with the territorial commission, requires asylum seekers to narrate the circumstances that drove their departure in enough detail to establish the credibility and specificity of their protection claim. This happens in a formal institutional setting, often through an interpreter who may not share the participant's dialect or cultural background. Multiple interviewees described the anxiety of this: having to produce a coherent and convincing account of one's own suffering and danger, knowing that the legal outcome depends on how credible the commission finds you, is a specific and additional form of pressure that the process imposes rather than relieves.

8.2 Housing Conditions: The CAS System and Its Consequences

“Housing quality is not incidental to psychological well-being. The empirical literature consistently documents that where people sleep, how much privacy they have, and how far they are from the city they need to integrate into are direct determinants of mental health outcomes and integration capacity” (Caroppo et al., 2023; ActionAid, 2024). The interview data confirm this in detail.

The CAS facilities in the Lazio region vary in quality, but the accounts from interviewees housed in them, Hozan in Tor Bella Monaca, Baran in Ponte Mammolo, Aland in Guidonia, Shaho in Fiano Romano, describe a consistent set of conditions: significant overcrowding, very limited privacy, inadequate programming to fill the days, and peripheral locations that effectively cut residents off from the urban environment in which integration will eventually need to happen.

The location of many CAS facilities being so peripheral is not an accident, it reflects the property market and political choices that prioritize cost minimization over integration effectiveness. A bed in a facility on the eastern periphery of Rome costs the Italian state considerably less than a bed in a central location. The long-term costs, in mental health services, in delayed labor market entry, in integration failure, are borne by different budget lines and different institutions, and are therefore less visible to the people who set the accommodation contracts. This fragmentation of costs and consequences is a structural feature of the system, and it produces predictable and foreseeable harm.

8.3 Language, Employment, and the Integration Paradox

There is a relationship between language, employment, and integration in the Italian context that contains a set of paradoxes that would be almost absurd if their consequences were not serious. Italian language acquisition is, as the field data consistently show, the single most important determinant of both practical integration capacity and psychological well-being. Yet access to quality language instruction is most limited for those who need it most: asylum seekers in CAS centers, at the earliest and most vulnerable stage of their reception experience, typically receive ninety minutes of instruction per week from volunteer teachers. Those in the SAI system, who are already further along in the process and have in many cases already begun informal language acquisition, receive structured and systematic instruction. The result is an inverted relationship between need and provision that widens rather than closes the gap. Employment presents the same paradox. Formal work is the most reliable route to economic independence, social integration, and the kind of psychological well-being the Italian system nominally seeks to produce. Yet the sixty-day

prohibition on work authorization, combined with subsequent barriers, credential recognition processes that can take years, labor market access limitations for those without Italian language proficiency, employer discrimination against holders of asylum documentation, creates systematic obstacles to precisely the outcome the system is supposed to achieve. Kamaran's situation, a qualified architect spending three years carrying bricks on construction sites because no institution will process his qualifications in a reasonable timeframe, is an extreme but not atypical case.

8.4 Social Exclusion and Experiences of Discrimination

There are documented cases of social exclusion and discrimination across the data in forms ranging from the explicit racialized insults in public spaces, employers refusing to hire holders of asylum documentation, to the subtle: the attentive looks in certain neighborhoods, the social distance maintained by Italian acquaintances who remained acquaintances rather than becoming friends. The political climate around migration in Italy, which has intensified considerably since 2018 and was at a heightened pitch during the fieldwork period in 2025, creates a broader context in which these individual experiences sit. Refugees are aware that their presence is understood by a significant portion of the host population as a problem to be managed rather than a situation that calls for solidarity.

The psychological effects of sustained exposure to discrimination and social exclusion are well documented in the mental health literature (Bhugra and Becker, 2005; Kirmayer et al., 2011) and were visible in the interview data: reduced civic trust, social withdrawal, and the systematic self-presentation management that several interviewees described, the daily effort of presenting oneself in ways designed to minimize the risk of discriminatory treatment. That effort is real and it has real costs. It consumes psychological energy that is then not available for the higher-order work of integration and development that the receiving system nominally exists to support.

Chapter Nine

How People Cope, Adaptation, Resilience, and the Future

The focus was mainly on difficulty in the previous chapters analysis, focusing on what goes wrong, what is inadequate, and what the conditions of reception in Rome make impossible. This chapter focuses on what works with equal seriousness: to the capacities, strategies, and resources that Kurdish refugees in Rome draw on to maintain psychological functioning, sustain identity, and build lives despite the conditions they navigate. Resilience is not the absence of difficulty. It is the capacity to function under difficulty, to maintain purpose and connection in the face of disruption, and sometimes to grow in ways that the difficulty itself makes possible. The accounts collected here document remarkable resilience alongside real suffering, and both deserve serious attention.

9.1 The Integration Strategy: Conditions and Outcomes

According to Berry's model, integration, the simultaneous maintenance of heritage culture and genuine engagement with the host society produces the best psychological results. The data from Rome substantially support this. Among interviewees who had been in Rome for three or more years, were legally secure, and had developed functional Italian language proficiency, the pattern Berry describes was consistently visible: strong Kurdish identity maintained through community participation and cultural practice, combined with Italian language fluency, Italian social relationships, and economic participation in the mainstream labor market. Sardar, Solin, and Yusuf all exemplify this pattern, and all describe a psychological condition that, not without difficulty or loss, is stable, purposive, and forward-looking. That contrasts sharply with the temporal disorientation and psychological erosion described by those still in the determination process.

The integration strategy not being equally available to everyone is the crucial qualification. It requires specific enabling conditions like legal stability, language access, housing in integrated neighborhoods, social networks that bridge the ethnic community and the host society whose presence or absence is substantially determined by the structure of the reception system rather than by individual motivation. Hozan's situation in Tor Bella Monaca, legally suspended, linguistically isolated, residentially segregated, is not the result of a failure of will on his part. The interview makes clear that his motivation to integrate is strong. His situation is the result of a structural configuration that prevents the integration strategy from being available to him regardless of what he wants.

9.2 The Community as a Resilience Infrastructure

It would be wrong to think that the Kurdish community in Rome is a single organization, rather it is a distributed network of practices, relationships, and shared cultural life which functions as a resilience infrastructure. The Friday evening gatherings that Yusuf describes, present in his life every week for six years, are a good example of how this works. Informal, voluntary, culturally specific, and providing something no formal service can replicate: the experience of being fully known within a shared world of cultural reference and collective memory. Research on ethnic communities and refugee resilience (Zibaei, 2024; Branam et al., 2023) consistently confirms the protective function of ethnic community ties, and the data here add detail by documenting the specific practices through which community functions as a resource.

The community's limitations are equally important to acknowledge. Its bonding social capital, dense, internally trusting ties, is substantial, but its bridging social capital is more limited: the cross-ethnic connections that provide access to Italian labor markets, institutional knowledge, and the social acceptance that comes from relationships with Italians who have chosen to engage across cultural distance. The development of bridging capital was associated in the data with length of residence, language proficiency, and specifically with living in ethnically diverse neighborhoods, Pigneto, Torpignattara, rather than in peripheral CAS facilities. This residential geography of social capital accumulation has direct and actionable implications for reception housing policy.

9.3 Language as Empowerment

It is worth mentioning that the Italian language acquisition plays a role in psychological resilience. Across the data, language proficiency is consistently associated not only with practical benefits, access to employment, services, and information, but with a qualitative shift in subjective experience that interviewees describe in terms of agency, presence, and self-efficacy. The language is experienced not as an external requirement imposed by the host society but as something that belongs to the person, a capability that changes their relationship to their environment from one of managed exclusion to one of active participation.

Dilan's account of her approach to language learning in the CAS center in Calabria, following the volunteer teacher, reading every public text available, treating every conversation as an opportunity, illustrates the way in which language acquisition can function as an active strategy of psychological resistance to the passivizing effects of the reception system. She was not waiting to be taught. She was taking the language.

The policy is direct in implying the inadequate provision of Italian language

instruction in CAS facilities as a major operational gap. It is a significant intervention in the psychological trajectory of asylum seekers, and a counterproductive one. Increasing the quantity, quality, and cultural appropriateness of language instruction, from a few hours per week to a systematic daily program, would be one of the highest-return investments available to the Italian reception system.

9.4 Faith, Culture, and the Maintenance of Meaning

Interviewees didn't shy away from describing religious practice and cultural expression as essential resources for maintaining psychological well-being and a sense of identity continuity under the pressures of migration and reception. The intensification of religious observance in diaspora contexts, noted by multiple interviewees who described becoming more devout in Rome than they had been in Kurdistan, is consistent with a substantial body of cross-national research (Branam et al., 2023) identifying faith as a protective factor for refugee populations. The mechanisms are multiple: faith provides structure and routine, the five daily prayers that Hozan described as giving shape to an otherwise shapeless day; it provides connection to a community of practice that extends across national borders; it offers a framework of meaning that holds up against the disruptions of legal uncertainty and institutional exclusion; and it provides what several participants described as a sense of being seen and valued by something beyond the institutions that have reduced them to case numbers.

The annual Newroz celebration organized by the Kurdish community in Rome, described by multiple interviewees as the single occasion in the year when the weight of the migration experience lifted most completely, illustrates the function of cultural celebration as a community-level resilience practice. Its significance goes beyond entertainment or nostalgia. It is a performative assertion of collective Kurdish identity, a demonstration that the community exists and is alive, and a yearly opportunity for mutual recognition that ordinary daily life in Rome does not provide.

9.5 Self-Compassion and Psychological Flexibility

Rashidian and colleagues' (2025) finding that self-compassion, the capacity to meet one's own failures and sufferings with kindness and non-judgment rather than harsh self-criticism, predicts reduced depression among Kurdish refugees appeared in the data in forms that interviewees articulated without clinical vocabulary but with real clarity. The interviewees who described their psychological state most positively, who seemed, across the full length of the interview, to be navigating their situation most successfully, consistently showed something recognizable as self-compassion: an ability to acknowledge

difficulty without being defined by it, to recognize their own limitations and failures without catastrophizing, and to maintain a warm relationship with their own struggling selves that neither denied the struggle nor surrendered to it.

Yusuf's observation, 'being rebuilt is slower than being broken', and Solin's advice to a hypothetical new arrival, 'it will be harder than you imagine and better than you fear', are examples of this quality: the capacity to hold the full truth of difficulty and possibility at the same time, without collapsing into either despair or denial. That capacity, the data suggest, tends to develop over time and under conditions of legal stability. It is not simply a personality trait that some people have and others do not. It is something that grows, or fails to grow, depending on what conditions the receiving system provides.

Conclusion

This research set out with a clear question: what is actually happening to Kurdish refugees in Rome? Six months of fieldwork, thirty-nine participants, nearly three hundred thousand words of transcribed conversation, and sustained engagement with the literature have produced a picture that is both analytically specific and, I believe, genuinely consequential, for the people it describes and for those making decisions about their lives.

There is a central finding that I want to emphasize because it runs against a common assumption, and that is that psychological distress among Kurdish refugees in Rome is to a considerable extent produced by post migration structural conditions rather than being a continuation of pre-migration trauma, as we mentioned, legal uncertainty, inadequate housing, unemployment, social isolation, and experiences of discrimination are not unfortunate events, but inevitable companions to the refugee experience. They are predictable products of the policy choices in the Italian reception system. And this matters because it means the psychologic distress documented in the Kurdish population is in major part an institutional product, and hence an institutional responsibility.

Second: the Kurdish community in Rome is doing work that the formal system probably does not know how to do and cannot do. It delivers, through informal practices of mutual support, cultural celebration, information sharing, and collective identity maintenance, something that formal services cannot replicate: the experience of being known rather than categorized. This community receives no systematic institutional recognition or resource support. It should.

Third: integration is dependent on structure rather than just willingness, according to Berry's framework which says integration, and maintaining cultural heritage while engaging with host society is the strategy that could produce the best psychological outcomes.

The evidence for this from Rome is clear. What is also clear is that integration does not emerge from individual motivation alone. It requires enabling conditions: legal stability, language access, integrated housing, freedom from discrimination. The CAS system, as currently designed, makes integration practically unavailable for many of the people it houses, regardless of how strongly they want to pursue it. This is not a neutral outcome. It is an institutional choice.

A limitation of the study that should be acknowledged is the sample of thirty-nine interviewees, which were reached through community networks and reception centers. This skews toward the more connected and more linguistically accessible members of the Kurdish community in Rome. The most

isolated, most traumatized, and most legally precarious people were likely underrepresented. The fieldwork was conducted over a specific six-month period in 2025 and reflects conditions at that particular moment; the Italian reception system changes in response to political and legal developments, and conditions may have shifted by the time this is read. And the study, like all qualitative research, produces interpretive rather than causal findings, it can demonstrate what patterns exist and illuminate the mechanisms that generate them, but it cannot produce the quantitative estimates of effect size that some policy audiences require.

The people whose voices are documented here navigated extraordinary difficulty with extraordinary resources. Sardar, who spent fourteen months as a ghost in Rome's bureaucratic system and came out as an engineer reconstructing his professional identity. Dilan, who chose loneliness in exchange for freedom and is learning, slowly, honestly, what both cost. Yusuf, who has been in Rome six years and still goes to the Kurdish Friday gathering every week because, as he said, that is what keeps you human. Hozan, who waits in Tor Bella Monaca and knows with complete clarity what he needs: to use his hands, his knowledge, his humanity. A system that cannot find a way to let him do that is not serving him. And it is not serving itself.

Policy Recommendations

The following recommendations are grounded in the empirical evidence produced by this study. They are directed at the Italian government and its relevant ministries, the municipal authorities of Rome, the non-governmental organizations operating in service of refugee populations across Rome and the Lazio region, and the European institutions whose regulatory mandates govern national asylum reception policy.

1. Accelerate Asylum Determination

The single most impactful reform that directly improves refugee psychological well-being and integration capacity is a significant reduction in the time-frame between asylum application and final decision. The target of processing initial applications within six months, as prescribed by the EU Procedures Directive, should be treated as an operational standard rather than an aspiration. Achieving this will require significant investment in the staffing and resources of the territorial commissions, better information systems to identify and address backlog accumulation, and a political commitment to treating asylum determination as a legal obligation owed to people entitled to have their cases heard in reasonable time, not as an obstacle to manage migration. The health costs, integration costs, and long-term public expenditure costs of the current timeline considerably exceed any savings generated by delays.

2. Fundamental Reform of the CAS System

CAS system produces an obvious worse psychological and integration outcomes than SAI system, at higher costs in the short term and long term. This is documented in this research and confirmed by academic literature and NGO reporting. Reform should address four things. Size: reducing maximum facility capacity from the current practice of eighty or more residents to a maximum of twenty. Location: requiring that facilities be in areas with reasonable proximity to city centers and public transport, not on the urban periphery where residents are effectively cut off from the city they need to integrate into. Programming: mandating a minimum of ten hours of Italian language instruction per week delivered by qualified teachers, plus access to vocational assessment and employment counseling. Management: requiring that facilities employ staff with refugee support qualifications, not only administrative and security functions.

3. Eliminate the Pre-Authorization Waiting Period for Work

The removal of the sixty-day prohibition on work authorization for newly applying asylum seekers is necessary. Early access to employment, even in limited or part-time forms, is among the most reliable predictors of positive integration and mental health outcomes. The psychological benefit of being able to contribute through labor, to earn one's own income, and to structure one's day around purposive activity starts from the first day of work. The argument that employment authorization incentivizes asylum applications is not supported by the evidence and should not continue to be used to justify a policy whose costs in human well-being are substantial and whose deterrent effects are minimal.

4. Create a Rapid Professional Qualification Recognition Pathway

Italy needs to develop a pathway that can specifically recognize professional qualifications of holders of refugee status and subsidiary protection, one modelled on the successful fast-track systems developed in Canada and Germany, and one that treats the recognition of foreign qualifications as an investment in integration and economic productivity rather than a threat to professional standards. This pathway should include not only formal equivalency recognition but bridging programmes that allow holders of partially recognized qualifications to demonstrate current competency through supervised practice or assessed placement.

5. Formally Resource Community Organizations

The Kurdish Cultural Center in Rome and comparable community organizations serving other refugee populations deserve formal recognition as partners in the reception and integration system, with dedicated funding, co-production relationships with formal service providers, and stable multi-year grants rather than the precarious project-based funding on which they currently depend. Co-production models, in which formal services and community organizations work together to design and deliver support, have produced better outcomes than parallel systems in multiple European contexts (Phillimore, 2015) and should be systematically explored for the Italian context.

6. Develop and Fund Culturally Adapted Mental Health Services

Psychosocial and mental health support services designed specifically for

Kurdish and other refugee populations, delivered in relevant languages, informed by cultural understanding of the contexts and stigmas involved, and attentive to the post-migration stressors identified in this research alongside pre-migration trauma, should be developed as a public health priority rather than left to the intermittent and underfunded efforts of NGOs. The evidence base for culturally adapted service models is substantial (Colucci et al., 2014; Caroppo et al., 2023; Rashidian et al., 2025) and should inform investment decisions.

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This study is about real people. Kurds who left their homes, traveled to Rome, and found themselves suspended in a legal limbo — unable to go back, unable to fully arrive. The goal was never simply to collect data. It was to understand what it actually feels like to be a person who had no choice but to leave everything behind. Between January and June 2025, we sat down with thirty-nine people in Rome — through twenty-three individual conversations and two group sessions. They came from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and surrounding areas. We did not meet them in offices. We found them through cultural centers, reception facilities, and the quiet networks they had built among themselves just to keep from getting lost. Five things kept coming up. The slow, grinding erosion of hope that happens before someone finally decides to go. The psychological damage left by the journey itself — for many, it was dangerous and humiliating in ways that do not just fade. The particular cruelty of legal uncertainty in Italy's asylum system, which does not simply delay people's lives but actively damages them. The quiet, daily struggle of trying to hold onto a Kurdish identity in a city that has no real place for it. And finally, the remarkable ways people find to survive anyway — not because the system helps them, but often in spite of it.

The central finding is uncomfortable: the mental suffering of Kurdish refugees in Rome is not simply the echo of old trauma brought from home. Much of it is being produced right now, by the conditions they are living in. Legal limbo. Inadequate housing. No work. No community. These are not natural disasters. They are policy choices. The study draws on multiple theoretical lenses — migration economics, acculturation frameworks, social capital theory — because no single lens is wide enough to capture what refugee experience actually involves. It adds a voice from Rome to a body of scholarship that has, until now, focused almost entirely on Kurdish communities in northern Europe. The policy recommendations that follow from the findings are direct, because the situation calls for directness.



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