



## **Journey of Hazard and Hope**

### **Risks and Coping Strategies of Syrian Women Seeking Asylum in Austria**

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## **Abstract**

Since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011, more than five million people have fled the country and many more have been internally displaced. Almost a million asylum applications have been filed by Syrian refugees in Europe, a third of which by women, and many of whom have been exposed to gender-based violence and other risks during their migration journey. This research project attempts to identify the risks which women refugees and asylum seekers encounter on their journey from Syria to Austria; and the coping strategies they use to minimise those risks. Based on an extensive literature review and interviews conducted with Syrian refugee women, we have found that women face dangers at every stage of the migration process and their needs are not always adequately addressed by national governments in transit countries, countries of destination and international organisations.

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# Journey of Hazard and Hope

## Risks and Coping Strategies of Syrian Women Seeking Asylum in Austria

Anna Dimitrova and Mariia Kostetckaia

### 1 Introduction

The Syrian conflict, which started in 2011, has caused nearly half a million deaths and forced 5.4 million people to flee the country (UNHCR n.d.a), one million of whom have sought asylum in European countries (UNHCR n.d.b). In 2015, the number of asylum seekers arriving in Europe started to increase, with men constituting the majority. However, at the beginning of 2016 it was reported that women and children make up the majority of new arrivals (Council of Europe 2017, 5). This trend raises concerns about the safety and well-being of women and girls fleeing conflict zones, given the dangerous routes undertaken and the additional risks faced during their journey to Europe. This paper aims to uncover the dangers pertaining to the situation of female refugees by looking in particular at the situation of Syrian women who claimed asylum in Austria since the start of the Syrian conflict. In the rest of this paper, we will refer to the definition of refugees used by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as “persons fleeing armed conflict or persecution” (UNHCR 2016).

In late 2010, an outbreak of protests in a number of Arab states in North Africa and the Middle East escalated into the so called “Arab spring” (Kawakibi 2013). In the beginning of 2011, a protest movement began from small gatherings of young people expressing their discontent with the regime in Syria (ibid). In the spring of that year, protests grew in scale and spread through the country. The Syrian government answered with violence and suppressed the demonstrations, which in turn led to the appearance of an armed opposition. A conflict erupted between the armed opposition, the government forces and other armed groups, and escalated into a civil war, which forced millions of people to leave the country.

According to data collected by the UNHCR between 2011 and 2017, just under one million asylum applications were made by Syrians throughout Europe (UNHCR n.d.b). Germany received by far the highest number of asylum applications in the European Union (500,000), followed by Sweden (114,000), Hungary (77,000) and Austria (50,000). Another 5.2 million Syrians have been displaced to neighbouring countries, namely Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt (3RP 2017). Additionally, more than 6.5 million people in

Syria are currently internally displaced (UNHCR n.d.c). Out of the 50,000 asylum applications from Syrians filed in Austria, almost 40,000 persons were granted asylum by October 2017 (Bundesministerium für Inneres 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2017). More than 15,000 (39 %) of these are female refugees.

An increasing number of studies point to the gendered risks for irregular migrants and refugees. While women are exposed to the same hazards as men during migration, their gender makes them particularly vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence, especially when travelling alone (IOM 2017; Martin 1992).

In view of the above, this project is considered to be of high relevance to the United Nations (UN), as well as governmental and non-governmental organisations working on the protection of refugees and women. Women represent half of the more than twenty million refugees worldwide, but in 2014 only 4 % of projects in UN inter-agency appeals were targeted at them (UNOCHA 2015, 23). While this is not the only measure taken to assist female refugees, it signals that the protection of women and girls has not been a priority for the UN agencies. At the same time, refugee women and girls who came to Europe in recent years have been exposed to various forms of violence and discrimination, including but not limited to gender-based violence and domestic abuse (Council of Europe 2017), which calls for more gender-specific assistance from governments and humanitarian organisations.

It could be argued that the representation of refugees, and generally migrants,<sup>1</sup> in Western media has strongly influenced public opinion, acting as a “distorting lens as much as a magnifying glass” (ICMPD 2017, 8). The negative reporting of refugees has contributed to the downsizing of governments’ support to refugees and the reluctance to provide legal routes to Europe, which has directly exacerbated the situation of female refugees. Behind the stereotyped and highly polarized reporting of refugees lie their personal stories. It is the purpose of this project to uncover some of these stories in order to understand better what could be done to improve their situation, in particular the situation of refugee women who often remain hidden from media and public attention.

Our aim is to understand not only the dangers faced by refugee women on their journey from Syria to Austria but also the strategies and coping mechanisms they developed to overcome such dangers. This would help us to produce a set of recommendations based on first-hand accounts, revealing issues which might remain hidden to the outside observer.

As far we are aware, this is the first study to focus on the experiences of Syrian women who sought asylum in Austria since the start of the conflict. We take a comprehensive approach to studying their migration experience by looking at the three main stages of

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<sup>1</sup> The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) defines a migrant as “any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of (1) the person’s legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) what the length of the stay is” (See: <https://www.iom.int/who-is-a-migrant>).

migration: departure from Syria, transit locations, and arrival in the country of destination in Europe; and analysing risks faced at each stage.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 provides a short overview of the theoretical literature and the legal framework on the protection of refugees and women. Insights from the previous literature are presented in section 3, with a focus on the dangers faced by refugee women on their route to Europe. The section also briefly discusses the role of media in shaping public opinion towards refugees and the influence this has on the situation of Syrian women seeking asylum in Austria. In section 4, we present the methods and data employed in the study. Section 5 provides a detailed analysis of our findings. We draw main conclusions in section 6, comparing the insights from the previous studies with our results. In the final section, we offer policy recommendations based on the findings of this study.

## 2 Theoretical and Legal Background

### 2.1 Main Concepts and Definitions

Despite the large number of studies on refugees, displaced populations, and more generally on migrants, there are no standardised definitions in the literature regarding the use of the terms. The implied meaning depends on the larger context. For the purpose of this study, we will refer to the most common IOM and UN definitions of the terms relating to migration, refugees and displaced populations.

*Forced migration* is a term used to describe any forced relocation of people, arising from man-made or environmental threats (IOM 2011). *Refugees* fall within the category of forced migrants, however in contrast to internally displaced people, they have crossed international borders in search of protection (ibid). A person who has applied for a refugee status but is still awaiting final decision is considered an *asylum seeker*. A distinction can be made between the use of the term “refugee” by international organisations and national governments. The UNHCR, for example, defines it in a broader sense as a “person fleeing armed conflict or persecution” (UNHCR 2016). National government, on the other hand, use a more narrow definition, referring only to persons who have gained a refugee status in the respective state after an asylum application has been filed and approved. For the purpose of this paper, we use the UNHCR definition of refugees.

The 1951 Refugee Convention defines refugee as a person who “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country” (UN General Assembly 1951, 152). According to the definition, an armed conflict itself does not provide grounds for asylum. International law focuses on the individual

cases of asylum seekers and their reasons to flee rather than the general situation in the country of origin.

Media outlets often fail to distinguish between the different groups of migrants, such as refugees and economic migrants, using the terms almost interchangeably and creating confusion among the public (Singleton and White 2017). As a result, the image and motives of refugees are often distorted, which fosters general hostility against them.

The terms *smuggling* and *trafficking* are also often misinterpreted (White eds. 2016). The difference is significant and lies in the issue of consent; individuals consent to smuggling and pay smugglers to be brought across borders, after which the interaction ends (European Commission 2015). Human trafficking, on the other hand, always involves violation of human rights and exploitation (ibid), which could take the form of forced labour and forced prostitution, for example. People smuggling always happens across international borders, which may not necessarily be the case for human trafficking (ibid). It is important to mention that smuggling and trafficking can be connected. For example, a person who opts to hire a smuggler might become a victim of trafficking when the person is forced to work or provide sexual service to the smuggler in addition to the price already paid (Council of Europe 2017).

## 2.2 International Laws for the Protection of Refugees and Women

In order to uncover the risks faced by refugee women, it is important to have an understanding of the international legal and institutional framework in place to protect them. This section will briefly discuss whether gender is adequately addressed in international refugee laws and procedures.

De-facto right to asylum is included in Article 14 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN General Assembly 1948), however, it is a non-binding document. The 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol (UN General Assembly 1967) are the guiding UN documents for the protection of international refugees. The UNHCR is a UN agency providing aid and protection to people fleeing violence, conflict and persecution. According to the dominant interpretation of the 1951 Convention, gender, unlike race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, cannot form a basis for protection under international law. However, in 2002 the UNHCR issued guidelines on gender-related persecution that urges states to adopt a gender-sensitive approach to the five aforementioned grounds for asylum (UNHCR 2002). This means that gender alone is still insufficient to qualify as a ground for granting asylum, but it could be used as an additional factor when combined with one of the five grounds mentioned in the 1951 Refugee Convention.

In the European Union, the Dublin Regulation (Regulation (EU) No 604/2013) determines the EU Member State which is responsible for processing an asylum

application (normally the Member State where an asylum seeker first entered the EU). The regulation has received heavy criticism from the UNHCR and other international organisations due to the unequal treatment of asylum seekers across Member States and the disproportionate burden falling on external border regions (UNHCR 2006).

Another document which is central for the protection of women's rights in Europe is the Istanbul Convention that came into force in 2014 (Council of Europe 2011). It contains specific articles (59-61) for the protection of asylum applicants, as well as general principles of promoting equality between men and women, of non-discrimination and of the protection of women from different forms of violence, such as forced marriage, sexual exploitation and other forms. The Convention calls on states to implement gender-sensitive policies in order to promote equality and the empowerment of women.

Article 59 of the Convention specifically protects victims of gender-based violence whose residence status depends on that of the spouse, stating that they should be granted an autonomous residence permit. Article 60 is arguably one of the most important provisions of the Convention, as it calls for the recognition of gender-based violence against women as a form of persecution within the meaning of Article 1, A (2), of the 1951 Convention. For the states, it means that they shall interpret the 1951 Convention in a gender-sensitive way and grant refugee status if the applicant is able to prove persecution on a gender basis.

International organisations which focus on migration and refugees also adopt policies that specifically aim to combat gender-based violence against female refugees and, more generally, female migrants. The UNHCR Handbook for the Protection of Women and Girls sets out the legal standards and principles that guide their work to protect women and girls and outlines the different roles and responsibilities of States and other actors (UNHCR 2008). The IOM Gender Equality Policy 2015-2019 aims to ensure that IOM's external and internal activities contribute to gender equality and address the specific needs and capacities of all beneficiaries, regardless of sex and gender (IOM 2015a).

## 2.1 Armed Conflicts and Forced Displacement

There are three main channels through which a conflict causes the displacement of people: it could engulf the civilian population, be the direct objective of an armed group, or disrupt the economic and social life in the area (Ferris and Winthrop 2010). Often these three forces act together and are difficult to disentangle from one another. Castles points to the close link between forced migration and economic migration: "Failed economies generally also mean weak states, predatory ruling cliques and human rights abuse. This leads to the notion of the 'asylum-migration nexus': many migrants and asylum seekers have multiple reasons for mobility and it is impossible to completely separate economic and human rights motivations – which is a challenge to the neat categories that bureaucracies seek to impose"



(Castles 2003, 17). What is more, civilians caught in a crossfire often become the subject of exemplary violence by armed groups struggling for control.

Forced displacement exposes people to various vulnerabilities, including but not limited to trauma, loss, and fear; separation from family members, social networks and communities; lack of shelter or problems related to camps; loss of land and property; lack of access to employment; discrimination, stigmatization and sometimes criminalization because of their displacement; lack of personal documents which often restricts access to services, such as healthcare and education; lack of political rights; and recruitment from armed groups (Ferris and Winthrop 2010, 10).

Additionally, asylum seekers often undertake high-risk journeys across international borders and face lengthy procedures and hazardous conditions in refugee camps and reception centres. In many cases, people are displaced to areas where they face “marginalisation, discrimination and hostility, are exposed to landmines or explosive remnants of war, or are targeted for abuse and attack” (GPC 2010, 9). In short, displaced people are among the most at-risk people on the planet, and are often subjected to intolerable living conditions, human rights abuses and uncertainty regarding their future well-being (Landry 2013).

## 2.2 Women and Forced Migration

While women and girls constitute half of migrants and refugees around the world (O’Neil et. al. 2016), there has been limited research focusing on their experiences or acknowledging that these could be fundamentally different from the experiences of men (Grieco and Boyd 1998). In the academic literature, migrant women have been stereotyped as dependents or companions of male migrants, with an emphasis on their roles as wives, daughters or mothers (ibid.). More recently, migration has been recognised as a “gendered process and experience” (IOM 2017, 33). An increasing number of studies point to the gendered risks for irregular migrants and refugees. While women are exposed to the same hazards as men during migration, their gender makes them particularly vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence, especially when travelling alone (IOM 2017; Martin 1992).

Women also face higher risk of death during migration, in particular those who are pregnant and/or travel with children (Pickering and Cochrane 2012). They are more likely to be left behind if they cannot keep up with the pace of the group (Malakooti 2015), and more likely to be placed below deck during overseas journeys, which puts them at the risk of fuel inhalation and burns, and even death in the event of an accident (Gerard and Pickering 2013).

In general, women face higher risks of human rights abuses and death at all stages of migration than their male counterparts (IOM 2017). Already in the conflict zone, gender-based violence is exacerbated and sexual violence is frequently used as a tactic of war

(O’Neil et. al. 2016, 4). Governments are often unable or unwilling to provide protection and women are forced to flee to protect themselves and their families. Once displaced from their homes, women and girls are again vulnerable to violence and abuse from smugglers, family members and other perpetrators in refugee camps and transit locations (ibid.). Female refugees are also considered most vulnerable to human trafficking (IOM 2015b).

Furthermore, female migrants and refugees often have additional responsibilities, such as taking care of their children, siblings or elderly relatives, which further complicates their experience (Bukachi and Juma 2010). They may face early or forced marriage as a strategy to overcome financial strains or fear of sexual abuse (O’Neil et. al. 2016). Women are often unable to access decision-making structures and, as a result, their voices concerning decisions that influence them and their children remain unheard (Bukachi and Juma 2010).

### **3 Refugee Situation**

#### **3.1 Journey of Hazard**

The journeys to Europe undertaken by Syrian refugees are fraught with danger. The lack of safe routes and hefty border restrictions prompt them to use the help of smugglers and cross at dangerous locations. The most common route, through the Mediterranean, is considered the deadliest migration route in the world – more than 3,000 migrant<sup>2</sup> deaths were recorded there in 2017 (IOM n.d.), which corresponds to 1 in 36 migrants attempting to cross that year. This is a higher death rate compared to 2016 (1 in 88 migrants) when the number of arrivals through the Mediterranean reached its peak, and indicates that the journey has become more perilous, possibly due to an increase in dangerous smuggling practices, such as the use of unsound vessels, simultaneous departure of boats and increased frequency of crossing during the winter months (Black et. al. 2017). According to IOM’s Missing Migrants Project, nearly 15,000 people have drowned in the Mediterranean trying to reach Europe within the three years since 2014 (IOM n.d.).

An increased number of migrant deaths by land was also reported in Europe in 2017 (32 deaths in the first half of the year compared to 23 for the same period in 2016), despite the drop in the total number of arrivals (IOM 2017, 25). Most casualties occurred in the Western Balkans and were caused by dangerous conditions and travel-related accidents (IOM 2017). Even though it is hard to determine how many of the migrants who died on the route to Europe described above were refugees, the high death rates speak of the unsafety of these routes.

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<sup>2</sup> The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) defines a migrant as “any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of (1) the person’s legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) what the length of the stay is” (See: <https://www.iom.int/who-is-a-migrant>).

When crossing international borders, women are especially vulnerable and exposed to violence. In her report to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on refugee women, Ms. Gisela Wurm names numerous risks and hazards, including gender-based violence, that female refugees face on their way to Europe and in the countries of destination, “taking the form of coercion, survival sex, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, domestic violence, harassment or extortion” (Council of Europe 2017, 3).

Sometimes women in transit have to pay a much higher price for their journey than money: smugglers may rape the women in exchange for a place on a boat, in addition to the fee they have already paid (Council of Europe 2017). According to reports received by Doctors Without Borders, there were also cases of sexual violence, forced marriages, and forced prostitution in Libya, through which many women have been transiting (Doctors Without Borders 2016). Smugglers, however, are not the only perpetrators; violence against women in transit can also come from abusive partners, family members, other refugees, and even guards and staff working in camps. Sleeping areas and sanitary facilities in the transit settlements are often not gender-separated increasing the possibility of violence (Council of Europe 2017).

On their way to safety, refugee women and girls are often unable to access basic services in transit centres, including sexual and reproductive health care. The lack of clear information and inability to access interpreters, especially female ones, hinders women and girls from accessing services and leaves them vulnerable to smugglers and other opportunists (Women’s Refugee Commission 2016). Often female asylum seekers who are victims of gender-based violence are too afraid to speak about their experiences as they fear stigmatisation and want to reach the country of destination as quickly as possible, and as a result perpetrators remain unpunished (Council of Europe 2017).

In addition to higher risk of death and gender-based violence while crossing international borders, once in Europe, refugee women might again feel unsafe or even face violence. For example, there are reports of women being beaten or physically abused by security officers in some European countries (Women’s Refugee Commission 2016).

In 2015, when the number of refugees and asylum seekers coming to Europe reached its peak, many reception facilities were not able to meet the needs of female refugees (Council of Europe 2017). In Greece, for example, the absence of identity checks at the entrance to a transit camp and holes in the fences around the facility allowed people to pass through easily (ibid). In France there were reports of women wearing adult nappies in order to avoid going to toilets at night as they felt unsafe (ibid). Although the situation has improved since then, problems such as lack of female security guards in the camps and non-segregated sanitary facilities remain (ibid.).

In Austria, according to the Ministry of the Interior, “every measure had been taken to take into consideration the gender dimension of the refugee crisis and that specific attention was given to vulnerable groups throughout the status determination process” (Council of

Europe 2017, 12). Security officers at the reception facilities receive special trainings; psychological support and medical care are provided to refugee women victims of violence; police officers receive training on gender-based violence (ibid). However, according to the findings of this project, which will be discussed in Section 5, the measures taken by the Ministry seem to be insufficient to address some of the needs of refugee women.

### 3.2 Media Coverage

Media coverage plays an important role in shaping public opinion and creating policy discourse; it is their responsibility to provide a balanced coverage of events. Nevertheless, in recent years Western media outlets have largely failed to present the refugee situation in Europe in a neutral way (ICMPD 2017; IOM 2017). Numerous factors have hindered or biased media coverage on migration issues, such as censorship and self-censorship, lack of resources, lack of skills and knowledge, inexact use of terminology, rise in hate speech, political pressure, and lack of international focus (IOM 2017). As a result, migration coverage has been framed in a mostly negative context.

Western media outlets have followed two main narratives when describing the situation of refugees arriving in Europe: one focusing on their numbers and the potential threats to the security and well-being of host societies; and the other - more emotional reporting - focusing on the human loss and suffering (ICMPD 2017). Most media coverage follows a narrative of sensationalism, providing very limited information on the personal stories of refugees and the reasons that drive them to escape their homelands (ibid.).

According to a report by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD, 2017), in Austria “the largely neutral media reporting at the beginning changed over the year, giving way to increasingly negative coverage of refugees” (ICMPD 2017, 17). By 2017, the number of negative articles in Austria media was almost double the number of positive ones (ICMPD 2017). The lack of personal stories of refugees in media could be related to this tendency of negative reporting. What is more, the unfolding humanitarian crisis quickly developed into a platform for far-right groups and political leaders to “advance a rhetoric defined by stereotypes and xenophobia” (ICMPD 2017, 17). The highly polarised and politicised coverage of the refugee situation ultimately gave the government justification to downsize the assistance to refugees and implement stricter border controls (ICMPD 2017). This directly impacts the situation of refugee women, who are generally more vulnerable when crossing international borders and in refugee camps.

It could be argued that social media also contributes to the creation of a negative refugee image. In September 2015, a photo of a big group of young male refugees getting off a train at the Munich central railway station was published online (GettyImages 2015); the photo was accompanied by a short neutral message. Soon this photo was shared on social media multiple times and was turned into an “invaders” meme, which was used as a “proof” that all refugees are young males (Snopes 2016). Female refugees and children also

arrived in Munich the next day but this fact was missing from the stories on social media (ibid.).

Media reports can also contribute to the stigmatisation of refugees and cause further social isolation (Briant et al. 2013). Negative depictions of refugees in the media create tensions in society and hinder the integration of refugees. Female refugees are especially vulnerable to such biased media coverage. Their stories are rarely given focus in the media, their problems are not a part of public discourse, and as a result, society remains unaware of their existence and special needs.

## **4 Research Design and Methods**

### **4.1 Qualitative Interviews**

As part of our research, we conducted qualitative interviews with four female refugees from Syria residing in Austria and with an expert from a humanitarian organisation, who is a social worker and primarily works with refugees and asylum seekers. In particular, we chose the method of semi-structured interviews to approach the participants. Semi-structured interviews are characterised by a flexible, open and interactive structure, which allows interviewees to lead the narration and to give their own perspectives, experiences, understandings and interpretations (Lewis-Beck et. al. 2004). While we provided several key questions which defined the area of our research, we also allowed the interviewees to digress and speak about topics and ideas which they considered important and wanted to discuss in more detail. This approach is particularly advantageous in comparison to structured interviews, since it highlights information which is important to participants, but could have been omitted by the researchers (Hogan and Dolan 2009). The data collected from the interviews will be systematically analysed, by defining major themes and categories that describe the phenomenon being investigated.

### **4.2 Recruitment of Participants and Interview Guidelines**

We made contact with potential interviewees through social media and snowball sampling. A friend of one of the authors, who is a refugee from Syria, knew one of the respondents personally and asked her to participate in our interview. Three further respondents were found through social media in groups for Syrian refugees, to which we got access with a help of the friend. The interviews were conducted individually, face to face, and in the native language of the respondents, with the help of an interpreter. The interview with the expert, to whom we got access through our academic network, was held in English.

Before starting the interviews, we made sure that we briefly introduced ourselves and our research and thanked the interviewees for their willingness to share their experience. We also made clear that the respondents are not obliged to answer questions if they do not feel

comfortable doing so and that all answers would be treated confidentially, solely for the sake of academic research, and not forwarded to third parties.

In the course of the interviews, we asked the respondent to share their experiences at different stages of the migration process: their situation in Syria after the start of the conflict, their journey to Europe, and their stay in Austria. The expert was asked about her experience working with female refugees and asylum seekers from Syria, the difficulties they face in Austria and their needs. The semi-structured interviews allowed us, on the one hand, to guide the course of the conversation and, on the other, to be flexible with the direction in which the respondents want to go. It also allowed us to ask additional questions and get detailed information on the experience of the interviewees.

### 4.3 Limitations

The following limitations were identified in our research, which could potentially influence the results. Due to the limited sample of participants, the results of our study are not representative and exhaustive of the experiences of Syrian refugee women during migration. Moreover, there could be a participation bias as the experience of women who refused to participate in our interviews could significantly differ from the experience of those who participated. This could be due to unwillingness to share traumatic experiences, pressure from family members and other reasons.

Another limitation of our research could be related to the interpreter who helped us during the interviews. Our interpreter was male and non-professional, which means that, first of all, some women might have been reluctant to share certain experiences with him and, second, information might have been distorted and lost in translation.

Furthermore, the topics discussed during the interviews are sensitive. It was important to make the respondents feel comfortable, therefore in order to avoid negative reactions we specifically underlined that the women are not obliged to answer all of our questions. Some women might have not told us about their most traumatising experiences.

Lastly, husbands of the interviewees might have also influenced the results as some of them were present during the interviews, which means that some women might have been reluctant to share specific experiences in their presence.

## 5 Results

### 5.1 Brief Introduction to Our Interviewees

In the course of our research, we interviewed four Syrian women who gained a refugee status in Austria between 2015 and 2017. At the time of the interview, the women were between the ages of 24 and 50; two of them made their journey to Europe on their own,

two other applied for family reunification and came to Austria after their husbands. Although we did not explicitly ask the women about their economic background, they all possessed sufficient financial resources to travel to Europe. One of the interviewees held a university degree, two others had secondary education, and the fourth dropped out of school in the 6th grade. All four women we interviewed got married before they came to Austria, and two of them have children who are under the age of 18.

The expert we interviewed is a social worker employed by an international non-governmental organisation. She works in a publicly financed house for asylum seekers whose applications are still under consideration. Her job involves providing consultation to asylum seekers regarding legal, medical and psychological support, supervising them in the hospital, and supporting them with other issues they may have. The expert works mostly with women from Syria and other Arabic-speaking countries and communicates with them freely in Arabic.

## 5.2 Before the Journey: Experience of the Syrian War and Travel Arrangements

All of our interviewees lived in areas of Syria heavily affected by the war (Damascus and Aleppo). They all experienced various dangers from the armed conflict, and their feelings of unsafety and fear for their futures were the main reasons for leaving Syria. All respondents stated that they lost close friends and relatives, which was a traumatising experience for them. The expert also confirmed that almost all of the refugees she is working with suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) related to the experience of loss.

The lives of those respondents who did not leave Syria immediately after the beginning of the conflict were seriously affected by the war. One woman, who was studying in a university in Damascus and continued attending classes even during the military actions, described the everyday difficulties she had to overcome. She decided to interrupt her studies and leave the city after she lost a close friend in a bomb attack, but came back when she believed that the situation in her city was safer again. It was important for her to finish her studies and get a degree before leaving Syria.

Another woman moved several times from city to city together with her family, searching for a safe place. They eventually found themselves in the crossfire of military groups and were not able to leave their location for three years. They were living in a basement of a building that did not have electricity or water as they thought it was safer in case of bombings. Being in a wheelchair, the woman could hardly leave the house. During this time, she also suffered from a lack of medical care as she was not able to see a doctor or get necessary medications. Her young son missed several years of school and her daughter had to hide from military men, being afraid of sexual assault. Her eldest son went missing and for several years the family had no information about his whereabouts. This aggravated her psychological and physical health. The situation became even more dangerous for her

once her husband left for Europe to apply for an asylum. Based on the accounts of the respondents, the war in Syria had seriously affected the wellbeing of women and their families.

The women we interviewed had different strategies to escape the war. Two of them stayed in Syria while their husbands travelled to Europe and later applied for family reunification. One of the two married her fiancé shortly before his departure. The expert confirmed that applying for family reunification was a common strategy for married women, as it allows them to avoid the dangerous journey their husbands make. This is also reflected in the overall trend of asylum application in Europe, the majority of which are filed by males (Eurostat n.d.).

The other two women we interviewed undertook the journey to Europe themselves. For one of the women, the reason for traveling alone was the fact that her husband was the sole breadwinner of the family, which includes two children aged under 18, and if he had undertaken the journey, the long asylum application and reunification procedures, the family would not have the financial means to support themselves. She left her children with her husband as she did not want to expose them to the risks of the journey.

The other woman decided to travel to Europe in order to escape an abusive family and other dangers she faced in Lebanon, where she was living after the start of the conflict in Syria. She was contacted by a cousin living in Germany, who proposed to marry her and help her escape from Lebanon to Europe. She did not know this cousin in person but decided to accept his offer. She travelled to Turkey on her own, where she met her cousin. Even though she did not like him, she agreed to marry him because she thought this was her only chance to get to Europe.

### 5.3 During the Journey: Transition Locations

The following section focuses on the experience of two respondents, who undertook the journey from Syria to Europe on their own. Both travelled to Lebanon at the start of the conflict, hoping to return to Syria once the war ends. However, they faced poor living conditions, abuse from authorities, and no prospects of getting protection under refugee law in Lebanon, which motivated them to seek asylum in Europe. After spending four years in Lebanon, one of the women said she had lost hope that the situation in Syria would normalise and realised that there was “no future for my boys there” meaning her children. She further explained that in Lebanon her children could neither get a legal status, nor continue with their education.

Lebanon does not have formal Syrian refugee camps and does not grant asylum under the 1951 Convention, which the country did not sign. This limits the much needed assistance that humanitarian organisations could provide to displaced Syrians in Lebanon. Nonetheless, Lebanon hosts the largest number of externally displaced Syrians (1.5 million)



who resort to living in overpopulated Palestinian camps (European Commission 2017). One of our respondents lived in such a camp and described the dire conditions therein, including potentially unsafe facilities. She recalled cases of residents who died from electric shocks while taking a shower. However, she did not experience any gender-based violence as she was staying with her family. The conditions in unofficial Syrian refugee camps seem to be even worse, based on the accounts of the expert we interviewed. She had visited such an informal camp close to the Syrian border and described a hazardous environment, where refugees are suffering from poverty and poor living conditions, and where violence is not rare. The refugees she encountered there often expressed their wish to look for asylum in Europe or at least to move out of the camp to one of the Lebanese cities but they did not possess financial and legal means to do so.

A young woman we interviewed, who was also living in Lebanon before departing to Europe, stated that she experienced numerous abuses from her family and husband, including a forced marriage and a forced abortion, which was possibly risky since abortions are not legally permitted in Lebanon. She also allegedly experienced several assaults while in Lebanon, once from a police officer who threatened her with a gun and raped her when she was alone on the street. She felt like she could not report the crime to the police, since the perpetrator was a policeman himself. This speaks of the unsafe conditions for women in the country, especially for refugees who are in a vulnerable position. After the incident, the woman we interviewed felt that Syria would be a safer place than Lebanon, despite the war situation. She even travelled back to Syria but decided to return to Lebanon after her aunt's house in Syria, where she stayed, was half destroyed by a bomb.

The lack of official and safe routes for refugees to travel to Europe and the hefty border controls make the journey dangerous, especially crossing the Mediterranean Sea by boat. One of the respondents travelled from Turkey to Greece on a rubber boat, which she described as overcrowded and whose driver had difficulties navigating it. She also mentioned that Turkish police saw them preparing to depart but did not try to stop them after the smuggler bribed them. Another respondent crossed the border between Turkey and Greece by swimming across a river together with her husband.

While in Greece, one of the women preferred to sleep on the streets in a sleeping bag, together with other refugees, rather than in a refugee camp because the camp did not provide separate facilities for women and she was afraid of the men there who, as she claimed, looked aggressive. The concern about the unsafe conditions in the Greek refugee camps was one of the reasons the woman decided not to apply for asylum in Greece but to continue to other European countries.

The other respondent, who got married in order to travel to Europe, was very dependent on her husband during the trip, including financially, and was not aware of her legal rights as an asylum seeker. For example, she was afraid being caught by the police and returned to Syria. They took precautionary measures such as travelling during the night time and avoiding the attention from the local population. Following the advice of her husband, she

took off her headscarf as soon as she arrived in Greece in order to look “European” and hide the fact that she is from Syria.

While crossing international borders, two of the respondents had encounters with police and they both described this experience as positive. One of the respondents called the police “very helpful” and “kind”. They also received help from volunteers at the borders, who provided them with warm clothes and food. However, there have been reports of violence and abuse by police and authorities against refugees crossing European countries (Women’s Refugee Commission 2016). The expert we interviewed also mentioned several cases of abuses against refugees she had worked with, which occurred mostly in Eastern European countries. For example, one of the women told the expert that she was beaten by a police officer in Hungary.

#### 5.4 Arrival and Reception in Austria

Personal network played an important role for the decision to choose Austria over other European countries for all of the respondents. They also received various forms of support, including financial, from the friends and relatives already residing in Austria. These connections significantly helped them to overcome initial difficulties. For example, one of the women shared that she did not feel like a refugee because of the help provided by her network. Some of the women were also helped by their network with finding a job and accommodation. The expert also confirmed that many Syrian women do not stay in the houses for asylum seekers, or if they do, then not for a long time because they prefer to stay with friends and relatives.

Upon arrival in Austria, the respondents had to spend some time in reception centres while their documents were processed. Three of them reported having negative experiences in such centres. Two of the respondents complained about the lack of separate facilities for men and women. One of the women reported that she was put into the same room with a man who verbally abused her and threatened to sexually assault and kill her. When she complained to a police officer working there, she got the impression that she was not taken seriously. The officer allegedly acted insensitive and diminished her situation by saying “Why are you crying? You are so beautiful.” Another respondent reported being mistreated in a reception centre - she was provided with a wheelchair to assist her, however, it was very old and broken and she got injured by falling from it. Nonetheless, she had a positive experience from the fact that her family was allowed to visit her in the reception centre on a daily basis.

All respondents reported receiving help from different institutions and organisations, such as Caritas, Red Cross, Humana, and House for women (Frauenhaus). However, the expert pointed to the lack of psychological support for refugees, which is very vital considering the traumatic experiences most of them have lived through. The expert also referred to other gaps in the system of support for refugees residing in Austria. For example, there is

need for additional integration courses, help for finding accommodation (as many refugees encounter difficulties finding housing because of their refugee status), more translation services, and more support for refugees once their refugee status is confirmed and obtained, for example advice on job and education opportunities. Another serious issue reported by the expert is very long bureaucratic procedures that significantly delay the implementation of good initiatives aiming to help refugees. For example, it took several years to establish free of charge German courses for asylum seekers while they are awaiting decisions on their cases, which sometimes can take up to several years.

Even though three out of four respondents wear headscarves, they did not report experiencing negative attitudes towards them in Austria. However, one of the women told us about an episode she considers racist - she visited a doctor who refused to examine her and to provide medical assistance. She decided not to complain because she was afraid of creating “a problem”. Although personal experiences vary when it comes to discrimination based on religion, refugee status etc., the expert pointed out that some of her clients faced discriminatory attitudes in their everyday life in Austria.

## **6 Conclusions and Policy Recommendations**

### **6.1 Summary of the Main Findings**

While being a refugee is a traumatising experience for everyone, female refugees face even more risks, including gender-based violence. Based on the existing literature and on the conducted interviews we can conclude that women found themselves in dangerous and traumatising situations in all three stages of the forced migration: in their home country, on their way to Europe and in their countries of destination.

In Syria, most of the refugees were traumatised by the war situation, including the loss of family members, friends, and property. According to previous literature, women who stay in the conflict zones are also at higher risk of sexual violence. The findings from our interviews confirm that women are exposed to such risks, especially if their husbands and fathers are away participating in the military actions or on their way to other countries to claim asylum. The economic background largely determines whether women are able to escape the conflict zone and seek asylum abroad, especially in Europe. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds often remain trapped in Syria or in camps in Lebanon and other neighbouring countries without perspective of being recognised as refugees.

The absence of a safe route to Europe and the lack of legal procedures to claim asylum for the European Union directly in Syria or its neighbouring countries, makes the dangerous journey through international borders the only option for many refugees to reach a safe place where their right for asylum guaranteed under the Declaration of Human Rights would be respected, unlike in the countries neighbouring Syria, the majority of which did

not sign the 1951 Refugee Convention or limit their protection only to people originating from Europe. The restrictions imposed by the Dublin regulation not only put pressure on external border countries, but also expose refugees to additional risks while illegally crossing internal EU borders. However, women are willing to take these risks for the sake of the safe future for them and their families.

This dangerous route to Europe is the reason women often rely on their husbands to undertake the journey and apply for family reunification once in Europe. Getting married in order to gain protection and make their journey safer is also a strategy employed by some women. For a woman we interviewed, it was considered the only possible option to escape the abuses she faced in Syria and Lebanon. However, this strategy often makes women dependent on their husband and puts them in a more vulnerable position.

Women who decide to undertake the journey without their husbands encounter various risks including dangers when crossing the borders. In addition to the general risks faced during the journey, e.g. crossing the Mediterranean in a rubber boat, there are reports of women forced to provide sexual service to smugglers at border crossings (Pickering 2011).

Women are exposed to dangers also in transit locations. Those women staying in Lebanon are in a particularly vulnerable position since the country does not offer refugee status to Syrians and does not provide official refugee camps for them. Refugee camps often do not offer gender-separated facilities and many women prefer to stay on the streets as they do not feel safe in camps. Female refugees are also more vulnerable to violence from authorities in transition countries and in Europe, for example a woman we interviewed was sexually abused by a policeman in Lebanon and treated insensitively by an officer in a reception centre in Austria. This implies that even in countries with good track records of treating refugees, some police officers are not specifically trained how to treat potentially traumatised refugees and there is a shortage of female staff (Council of Europe 2017).

Once in Austria, the process of gaining refugee status is quicker for Syrians than other asylum claimants, according to the expert interviewed. The expert also implied that Syrian women are in a particularly advantaged situation since the family reunification process does not take a long time to complete.

We found that women employ certain strategies to minimise the risk faced during the migration process and once the country of destination is reached - getting married in order to get protection during the journey, sending their husbands first and applying for family reunification, travelling in a group of family and/or friends, avoiding sleeping in gender mixed facilities in transition centres and camps, taking off headscarves once in Europe in order to avoid attention from locals and to look more “European” as well as avoiding travelling during the day, relying on networks and connections. Some of these strategies include violation of laws, such as crossing international borders illegally or not applying for asylum in the first safe country but it should be taken into consideration that the international laws sometimes fail to give an adequate protection to people in vulnerable

situation, especially women, fleeing the conflict zones. As already mentioned, the lack of legal and safe routes to Europe and impossibility to get a legal protection as refugees in the neighbouring countries is the reason refugees resort to illegal border crossing.

The interviews we conducted and the previous literature gave many examples of women suffering from violence from individual perpetrators. However, the existence of the structural violence and gaps in the system of protection and support for female refugees should also be recognised. This includes, for example, the above-mentioned limitations when it comes to claiming asylum under international law. Further gaps involve the lack of safe gender-separated facilities in the refugee camps and reception centres, and the shortage of female interpreters and police staff. Most of the programmes that aim to assist refugees do not recognise special needs of women, and as a result, do not specifically target female refugees. This opens possibilities for individual perpetrators to commit crimes against women.

Refugee women are not only suffering from gaps in the system of refugees' protection, but also from larger societal inequalities and gender dynamics. This involves, for example, historical marginalisation of women which makes them more dependent on their families and spouses and puts them into vulnerable position and opens possibilities for gender-based violence and discrimination. Therefore, strengthening the protection of female refugees cannot be discussed in isolation from the broader discourse of women's rights and gender equality.

## 6.2 Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following policy recommendations are proposed.

General recommendations:

- Considering the risk of death and gender-based violence faced by asylum seekers, particularly women, on their route to Europe, it is essential to create safe routes and/or allow asylum applications to be filed from abroad.
- States should be encouraged to apply 1951 Refugee Convention in a gender-sensitive way, considering cases of female applicants irrespective of their family members.
- International and humanitarian organisations should provide the public with information about the situation of refugees in order to counter their negative representation in media. One way to do this could be providing a platform for refugees to share their personal stories and talk about their needs. This would be particularly important for refugee women, who remain hidden from media attention. Changes in public opinion could contribute to more actions to be taken by governments for the protection of female refugees.

Recommendations regarding refugee camps and facilities in transit countries and countries of destination:

- In view of the reports of police abuse and the lack of experience working with people in vulnerable situations, trainings should be provided to police officers and others working in reception centres and refugee camps. The police and other staff members should be trained to recognise victims of gender-based violence among refugees. Safe environment and adequate support should be provided to such victims.
- In refugee camps and reception centres, information should be provided to refugee women in understandable language regarding their legal rights. This would make women less dependent on family members and encourage them to report gender-based violence.
- More female staff should be employed in reception centres and refugee camps, including as interpreters. This would remove certain barriers for female refugees looking for help.
- Gender-separated facilities, including bathrooms and sleeping areas, should be ensured in reception centres and refugee camps. Where possible, separate shelters for refugee women should be available. Such measures would create safer environment for women in transit and keep them away from staying overnight in precarious locations.
- In refugee camps and in the destination countries, women should be provided with access to sexual and reproductive health-care facilities.

Recommendations regarding the integration and empowerment of female refugees in Austria:

- Considering the psychological trauma experienced by most refugees and the distressing situation they are in, psychological support should be provided free of charge. Although in Austria such support is provided by some organisations, the waiting time is very long. Women are particularly in need of psychological support, especially if they experienced gender-based violence and/or abuse from their family and partners.
- Additional support should be provided to refugees in Austria, in particular for finding jobs, housing, educational opportunities and integration.
- It is important to create safe environment for refugee women, especially victims of violence, in order to empower them and help them integrate faster in society. It could involve language courses reserved just for women and educational programmes, with child-care facilities.

While our research has showed some of the problems refugee women face on their journeys and countries of destination, there is the need for further research on the issue.

Nonetheless, refugee women and girls are much more than a problem that needs to be addressed. They can make a substantial contribution to the development of their communities if offered an opportunity.

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