

Exclusion within the Exclusion: Immigrant and Refugee Women and Girls

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ABSTRACT: This particular paper has been focused on the multiple discriminations suffered by women and on the problems that they face in the field of refuging and immigration, as recorded to a large extent through informal interviewing of public agencies staff that are involved in this issue. Migrant women are described as “exclusion within the exclusion”, while pointing to the efforts of public agencies in European Union and especially Greece, such as the General Secretariat for Gender Equality, to address the problem.

Keywords- migrant women, refugee women, refugee girls, intercultural counselling, discrimination, asylum

I. INTRODUCTION

Women refugees face increased, varied and intense problems, both during the transition and in the process of joining the host society, starting with language barriers that are often the biggest challenge between them and the local support/counselling agencies [1]. The term *gender dimension* of immigration and refuging focuses on the forms of inequality and multiple discriminations, suffered by migrant women, even when they become victims of exploitation [2]. Specifically [3]:

“*Gender dimension* is used as a term to describe socially-constructed roles of both women and men, which of course change over time.”

Violence against women and girls is one of the most widespread violations of human rights. It may involve physical, sexual, psychological and economic abuse and exceeds the limits of age, race, culture, wealth and geography. It takes place at home, on the streets, in schools, in the workplace, in the agricultural sector, in refugee camps during conflicts. According to the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU) and other organizations, gender violence is a manifestation of the historically unequal power relations between men and women, which led to women’s dominance by men and a variety of discriminations against them. It is also certain that violence against women is an important social mechanism that maintains and reproduces the gendered hierarchy and inequality.

Women refugees are those women who, trying to save themselves and their children, have a painful experience. Being a refugee is a painful situation because of:

- the loss of home and homeland, folks and friends;
- the violent interruption of continuity between the past, the present and the future;
- the constant experience of the threat of death, at every step;
- the prolonged “transit” state, which on the one hand generates hope and on the other cancels any expectations.

Within this refugee population, women are a particularly vulnerable class. In traveling from their homelands to another land, promising a safe and better life, they are not only at risk from the inhospitable sea and the hardships of a long journey. These women continue, as in their countries, to be the victims of oppression and violence. Let us not forget that in some cultural and religious environments, sexism and stereotypes around femininity are particularly powerful, creating a regulatory framework for the instrumental exploitation of the female body and the annulment of female self-action. This is evident in a number of cases from marriage to a minor age and exclusion from education to genital mutilation. Beyond the misery of travel, the stress of survival and the protection of children, women refugees are more likely to be victims of theft, sexual harassment, abuse and rape. Especially exposed to these dangers are women traveling alone. Theft of the minimum money that they carry with them and coercion into fornication, in order to secure a place on a boat, is a common incident. Many of them become victims of

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trafficking during travelling. Traffickers snatch the official documents of women and blackmail them not to speak, using threats to their children. An uncharted group is that of unaccompanied minor girls, far less than boys, for which in some cases, unfortunate experiences have been revealed in fragile ages. Girls have been raped or become pregnant, most of who were victims of traffickers or their wider family environment. In high-risk groups are also women recorded who are stigmatized because of their sexual orientation.

Many of the incidents of violence take place in hospitality centers, as it is revealed. The overcrowding of such a large number of refugee populations in camps for prolonged periods increases the risks and a sense of insecurity for refugee women. Some women narrate what they experienced, usually when they reach their final destination, while others not even then. Officials and humanitarian organizations know that those who speak are few compared to those many silent and sad female figures that each one hides her own story of violence, keeping a rule of silence within an internalized culture of normalization of gender violence.

Governments and relief agencies are unable to provide even the basic means of protection to women refugees, traveling from Syria and Iraq. A recent survey of Amnesty International [4] confirms the above and reveals that women and girls refugees face violence, assault, exploitation and sexual harassment at every stage of their journey, even on European ground. All women described that they felt threatened and insecure during the trip. Many reported that in almost all of the countries passing through, they were physically abused and exploited, since traffickers, security staff or other refugees were touching them or were pushing them to have sex with them:

“If this humanitarian crisis unfolded anywhere else in the world, we would expect immediate, practical steps to be taken to protect groups at greatest risk of abuse, such as women traveling alone and families with women in head. This would include, as a minimum, the installation of well-lit and separate toilets for each sex, as well as separate, safe sleeping areas. These women and their children have escaped from some of the world’s most dangerous areas and it is a shame that they are still at risk on European ground” [4].

Traffickers aim at women who travel alone, knowing that they are more vulnerable. When they do not have the financial resources to pay for their travel, traffickers often try to force them to have sex. At least three women reported that the traffickers, and those who worked with their network, harassed them or other women and offered them a discounted transport or less waiting for them to enter the boat and cross the Mediterranean, in exchange for sex. All women told Amnesty International that they were afraid throughout their trip to Europe. The women, who were traveling alone, were not only the targets of traffickers but they also felt they were physically threatened, when they were forced to sleep in facilities with hundreds of single men. Several women have also reported battering or verbal abuse by security guards in Greece, Hungary and Slovenia.

II. THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

The General Secretariat for Gender Equality, in the framework of its networking at EU level on issues of equality and in the light of information and awareness rising on the major issue of refugees, presents some parts of the European Parliament Report on the reception of refugee women and asylum seekers in the EU [5], on the basis of which:

The majority of immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers enter the EU through Greece and Italy, but most asylum applications are submitted to Germany. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, in the year 2015, a number of 1,015,078 people arrived by sea in the EU (58% men, 17% women, 25% children), while the January’s 2016 figures show an increase of women refugees, compared to December 2015 (49% men, 19% women and 32% children). The number of women and children refugees accounts for 55% of all refugees having arrived in the EU since January 2016, while from this percentage women account for 21%.

It is worth noting that in European legislation, in accordance with Directives 2013/33/EU [6], 2013/32/EU [7] and 2011/95/EU [8], women can be recognized as refugees if they have been subjected to gender violence (e.g., physical, sexual, domestic, threatened to amputate their genitals). Given also the particular difficulties of women, it recognizes certain aspects that deserve particular attention for women refugees; most notably:

- (i) The need to provide adequate information on women’s rights and the rights of their children, by reception center staff.
- (ii) Special training on gender discrimination for asylum personnel.
- (iii) The interviews of women asylum-seekers should not be given in the presence of their folks, so that they can express themselves freely.
- (iv) The existence of special reception areas for the children of women applying for asylum.
- (v) The existence of separate chambers for the living of men and women, with the exception of families wishing to stay together.
- (vi) Hygiene and safety conditions.

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(vii) Women's access to medical and psychological care.

(viii) Particular care, in the form of protection, for young, unaccompanied girls and women, to minimize the risk of exploitation by third parties.

(ix) Avoiding detention in prison, in the case of children, pregnant and minors.

(x) Children's access to schooling premises and language learning, during their stay in reception centers.

Besides the very first steps to address the problem, there is a consequent and prolonged need for offering counseling support to women (vii) and educational services to girls (x). Due to the different cultural origins of these immigrants and refugees, the rather old issue of cross-cultural counseling, even since 1970 [9], has been recently addressed to counselling psychology in a more urgent and intense manner [10]. The main concern in this respect (vii) is the proper training of the counseling agencies personnel (ii) to cultural awareness. This is an imperative but difficult task to achieve, because of the many difficulties that arise in delivering such training [11]. Regarding refugee girls (x), similar concerns and difficulties are also generally expressed in educational context, with intercultural pedagogy being "quite a burning issue in the present world" that "has gained increasing attention from the side of school counselors and is presenting them new challenges", both personal and pedagogical [12].

III. THE GREEK REALITY

As mentioned in the previous section, the number of refugees and immigrants in Greece remains stable, amounting to 60,000-65,000 persons [13]. This proves that, on the one hand, many immigrants are legally or illegally leaving for other European countries or returning to their home country or in Turkey; on the other hand, the "tank" refreshes, at a slower pace, from those who are still arriving. It is characteristic that from March 2016 to February 2017, the arrivals from Turkey reached 30,336 persons. It is estimated that the women's refugee population amounts to around 25,000 adult women and around 3,000 young girls [14].

In Greece as well, the problems are increased for women and girls refugees, since they live in difficult conditions, without resources, without work in rough housing, with little food, with a lot of traumas mostly psychological. At the same time, it remains debatable:

- whether they are aware of the fact that gender-based violence against women can be recognized as a form of serious harm, justifying the granting of asylum or supplementary protection;
- but also whether the relevant authorities, such as the first-time reception and asylum services, are well-informed and the staff well-trained to implement it.

Ultimately, the public, irrespectively of their degree of awareness on migration issues, should be informed about the ways that the state addresses the problems faced by immigrants and refugee women.

In this respect, it is appreciated that the General Secretariat for Gender Equality (GSGE), in cooperation with the Greek Ministry of Citizens Protection and UNHCR, has published "Guidelines for the protection of women and girls in the first reception in Greece and the process of asylum" to women who apply for asylum, mainly for the staff of all the agencies involved in this matter. These guidelines have been prepared in accordance with the "Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Violence Against Women and Family Violence" [15]. In there, information is provided on the procedures to be followed in first reception centers and asylum application agencies. It is clear that staff must inform women and girls about their right to lodge an application for asylum or supplementary protection, due to possible persecution that either suffer or are likely to suffer, because of their sex. Some of the asylum applications based on gender-persecution, which have occurred or are likely to happen in their country of origin or have occurred during their travel or entry into the host country, are related to:

- Acts of sexual violence.
- Domestic violence.
- Forced family planning; in some countries, compulsory weddings or compulsory abortions are taking place.
- Cladectomy.
- Punishment for violation of social ethics; in no case can the customary law be considered as superior to the rights of women.
- Discrimination against homosexuals.
- Trafficking.

Especially vulnerable to gender-based persecution are considered to be single women, single parent families, elderly or widowed women without families, women with disabilities or health problems and those who are poor. In addition, all these women who oppose social rules about sexual orientation, female genital mutilation, forced marriages, etc.

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Some other key issues addressed in this guide refer to further information to be provided by these agencies to refugee women; information related to their rights, assistance services that can help them and concern their medical, psychosocial and legal support; information on the dangers of trafficking. Of course, the prerequisite for all these is the operation of bureaus to denounce abuse, which must ensure easy access and confidentiality. After the complaint, the protection of these women must be ensured, with continued legal assistance and support. Clearly, such bureaus must provide their services to all women, regardless of nationality, meaning that they should also be addressed to the natives. In the case of female immigrants and refugees, information on and access to these bureaus is even more difficult and requires special knowledge on different cultural aspects, on behalf of their personnel. Finally, the know-how on immigration issues already held by NGOs or other groups of citizens should encourage state agents to seek it and co-operate with civil society actors.

In terms of counseling (vii) and educational services (x) available, although Greece receives the largest number of immigrants and refugees, namely 60% of those arriving in EU [13], the situation is not better, largely due to the economic crisis that has been imposed on the country [16]. The counselors' initial training seems inadequate regarding intercultural counseling, as they state being sympathetic to culturally different clients, but feeling powerless about the effectiveness of their services for lack of systematic intercultural training [17]. In the educational context, merely 0.2% of the country's schools have had until recently the proper personnel and infrastructure to offer intercultural educational services [18]. Nevertheless, efforts have been made lately to improve the situation also in this sector.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the relevant agencies for refugees and immigrants must be staffed by gender-sensitive personnel and auxiliary staff, consisting of psychologists and physicians. Staff serving female immigrants and refugees should be women, properly trained in providing childcare to minors. In addition, during the asylum interview process, it is of particular importance that women are not represented by men, who are their relatives, but that they should be interviewed on their own. The reasons for individual interviews with women, even if they are accompanied by male relatives, are many:

- they may have more reasons why they are entitled to asylum;
- they may be ashamed of disclosing to their family members their fears or persecution, because of their gender;
- they may be victims of domestic violence.

In addition, for underage girls, attention is drawn to the fact that they must be treated like all children, regardless of gender, primarily as children and secondarily as immigrants. Their detention should be avoided and in no case be restricted to entry into the country without documents. Lastly, appointing a commissioner to safeguard the interests of children is recommended, in which case it should be a female commissioner.

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