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# Sexual and gender-based violence against refugee women: a hidden aspect of the refugee "crisis"

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**Abstract:** *The current refugee "crisis" in Europe has created multiple forms of vulnerability and insecurity for refugee women including various forms of sexual and gender-based violence. Increasing numbers of women, either alone or with family, are attempting to reach Europe to seek protection from conflict and violence in their countries, but these women are subject to violence during their journey and/or on arrival in a destination country. The lack of adequate accommodation or reception facilities for refugees and migrants in Europe, as well as the closure of borders which has increased the need for smugglers to help them reach Europe, acts to exacerbate the violence and insecurity.* © 2016 Reproductive Health Matters. Published by Elsevier BV. All rights reserved.

**Keywords:** sexual and gender-based violence, refugees, asylum, Europe

## Introduction

Europe is currently experiencing a refugee "crisis", as millions of forcibly displaced people attempt to reach countries of the European Union. Whilst the majority of these refugees are men, increasing numbers of women are now engaging on the dangerous journey to reach Europe.<sup>1</sup> The insecurities inherent in the journey have been highlighted in the media by shocking images of capsized boats and drowned refugees, but far less attention has been paid to other forms of violence and insecurity which refugees experience, and in particular the many forms of gender-based violence (GBV), including sexual violence, experienced by women refugees.

In 2015, over one million refugees arrived by boat in the European Union and in the first two months of 2016 there have already been over 150,000 arrivals.<sup>2</sup> The majority of these landed on the shores of Greece and Italy, mainly on their way to other European Union destinations. Of the sea arrivals in the first two months of 2016, 86% came from just ten countries, with 45% from Syria and 24% from Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup> The highly risky nature of this means of reaching Europe is demonstrated by the fact that at least 3,440 people were recorded dead or missing during the sea crossing in 2015 and 464 dead or missing in the first two months of 2016,<sup>4</sup> although the figures are probably higher because of the number of unrecorded deaths. And

the dangers do not end after the sea crossing. As more and more EU member states and neighbouring countries, such as Serbia or Macedonia, attempt to close their border to prevent the passage or influx of refugees,<sup>5</sup> the journey is becoming more difficult and more dangerous. Refugees have been victims of violence from police and border guards, as well as smugglers, who are now demanding high prices to facilitate entry to the EU.<sup>5</sup>

Whilst the majority of refugees arriving have been men, there are increasing numbers of women and children amongst the arrivals. It is impossible to give an accurate figure for the women refugees arriving in Europe, due to the lack of gender-disaggregated data, but the UNHCR estimates that amongst those arriving in the EU, about 20% currently are women.<sup>4</sup> According to a representative of UNHCR interviewed for this research, the proportion of women refugees has been increasing since 2015, and a greater proportion of women are now

\*The refugee crisis is rapidly evolving and the circumstances in which EU states or neighbouring states are currently allowing refugees to enter or traverse their territory change daily. At the time of writing many refugees have found themselves "trapped" in Greece because of the closure of borders with Macedonia and Bulgaria, and the EU's signature of an agreement with Turkey to allow return of refugees from Greece to Turkey.

travelling alone, or just with their children (UNHCR official, telephone interview November 2015). In some cases, this respondent argued, this is a specific strategy on the part of men who believe that sending women and children ahead will be a more successful means of gaining entry to the EU, as they will be perceived as more “vulnerable” and will thus be more easily offered protection by EU states. The hope is that the husbands or partners can then rejoin their family through the reunification procedure. In other cases women are travelling alone because they are single, or because they have lost their husbands during war. In some cases, families become separated, either by smugglers or officials. There have been cases, for example, where a sea rescue has been carried out by Greek and Turkish coastguards together, with some refugees being brought to Greece and others taken back to Turkey.

The EU’s response to this refugee “crisis” has been heavily criticised by many human rights and migrant support groups for its focus on repression of trafficking and prevention of illegal migration, rather than on protecting the rights and lives of migrants who are desperate to reach Europe.<sup>6</sup> Although, after much argument, an initial agreement on the relocation of 160,000 of the refugees in Italy and Greece to other EU states was reached in 2015, at the time of writing in March 2016, fewer than 300 refugees have so far been relocated.<sup>7</sup>

This article attempts to document the various forms of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) experienced by women refugees, and argues that the EU’s current policies may be acting to increase vulnerability and insecurity for these women. Further, the EU response to the refugee crisis is failing to provide adequate medical or psychological support for the women who have been victims of violence in their countries of origin or on their migratory journeys.

## Methods

This article is based on qualitative research carried out in Greece (Kos), Serbia (Belgrade) and France (Paris and Calais area) between June 2015 and January 2016. The research sites were chosen to represent countries within and outside of the EU, and countries of transit and arrival or settlement of refugees, to examine all stages and experiences of the refugees’ journeys after their first arrival by sea from Turkey. In all of the research sites,

interviews were conducted with refugee women and men who were in some stage of their migratory journey. In order to conduct the research in an ethical manner, the potential interviewees were first informed about the nature and purposes of the research and what an interview would entail, and their express consent was obtained before any interview began. They were also informed that they could stop the interview at any time. Potential interviewees were approached directly in the various sites in which they were living, and the purpose of the research was explained to them before asking if they would consent to be interviewed. As in many cases the refugees were on the move and the population was thus mobile and fluctuating, no systematic sampling was possible, and interviewees were selected on the basis of availability and consent to be interviewed, although an attempt was made to interview people of different ages, and social situations (single, in couples, with or without children), and refugees from different countries of origin. All data was recorded in such a way as to guarantee the anonymity of the interviewee, and was not shared with any other persons. A total of 40 female and 20 male refugees<sup>†</sup> were interviewed using an open and non-directive interview methodology which was judged most suitable for eliciting the refugees’ own accounts and perceptions of their experiences during their migration. Interviews were tape recorded in cases where the refugee agreed to this, but in other cases, written notes were taken for analysis. In addition, interviews were carried out with key informants in all sites, including representatives of UNHCR, national and international NGOs, and local migrant support/solidarity associations. Key informants were identified in each site within organisations working directly with refugee populations, both international organisations and national and international NGOs. Finally, additional telephone and email interviews were carried out with regional representatives of UNHCR, the European Parliament, Frontex, the European Asylum Support

<sup>†</sup>As the majority of refugees arriving in Europe are from Syria, these formed the majority of those interviewed. In total, 28 Syrians, 14 Afghans, 12 Iraqi and 6 Eritrean refugees were interviewed. Of these, 35 were interviewed on Kos, 20 in Calais and 5 in Belgrade, Serbia where it was harder to contact refugees. The women interviewed were travelling on their own, in couples or in family groups, whilst the men interviewed were those who were travelling with women.

Office and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). The qualitative field research was supported with a review of all relevant literature on the refugee crisis, including academic articles and grey literature such as reports from international NGOs and human rights organisations.

### **Context: The European Refugee Crisis**

Previous research has pointed to the difficulties and obstacles that may prevent women from migrating, including lack of economic resources, responsibility for children and children's welfare, restrictions on women travelling alone both within their own country and outside it, and fears of violence during migration.<sup>8</sup> These obstacles mean that often women do not migrate until they have absolutely no other choice.<sup>9</sup> Thus the increasing numbers of female migrants risking the journey across the Mediterranean to reach Europe could be attributed to the worsening conditions in Syria and for Syrian refugees in Turkey, as well as a realisation that the Syrian conflict is not likely to end soon, so that these women are taking the choice of last resort. Other refugees are arriving from countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq or Eritrea, which are also experiencing high levels of violence and armed conflict. Although there are increasing numbers of women making the journey to Europe, there is still little research on the specific experiences of these women. The main sources of information on these women's experiences are reports by various NGOs and human rights organisations.<sup>10,11</sup>

Women migrants and refugees are vulnerable to SGBV on their journeys, as well as in their country of destination.<sup>12,13</sup> Many may also be fleeing different forms of GBV in their countries of origin. The prevalence of sexual violence in the current Syrian conflict has been documented by several reports by human rights organisations<sup>14,15</sup> and thus a significant number of the women fleeing Syria are likely to have been victims of such violence. However, there are few provisions in place on the migration routes or in the EU to protect women, or to help survivors of GBV.

Incidences of GBV have been reported on the refugees' route. Human Rights Watch, for example, reports incidences of SGBV against refugees in detention in Macedonia, and transactional sex during which women were promised priority treatment of their cases and faster release if they agreed to sexual relations with the male guards.

One woman recounted the behaviour of one of the police officers in a detention centre:

*"He tried whatever he could to get me alone in a room with him. He used to approach me and whisper to me that I am very beautiful and that he would help me out, that he would personally look into my case."<sup>16</sup>*

The current refugee crisis is not the first occasion when the problem of violence against women refugees has been raised. Theoretically, gender equality issues have been mainstreamed both into the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) and the Frontex operations. The CEAS directives which have recently been recast on paper oblige EU member states to take gender issues into consideration both in reception conditions for asylum seekers and refugees, and in the refugee status determination process.<sup>17,18</sup> In practice, however, these Directives have so far had little impact in improving refugee women's access to protection within national asylum systems in Europe<sup>19</sup> and survivors of GBV still face both legal and practical obstacles when trying to access services, rights or protection.<sup>20</sup> Frontex, the European border agency, has also recently integrated gender guidelines into its Fundamental Rights Training.<sup>21</sup> An official for Frontex told me that *"based on the manual, the European border guards are trained that their work requires gender sensitivity at all stages of dealing with a migrant: interception, reception, assistance, interviewing and deprivation of liberty. Practical examples and guidelines are given in all the modules."* (Frontex Official, email interview, July 2015)

The Frontex training also includes guidelines on how to treat women where there is a suspicion that they may have been victims of sexual violence. With regard to interviews by border guards, it states that *"Women should not be pushed to talk about problems related to sexual violence nor to provide any details on the substance of their claim for international protection. If border officials suspect that a woman has been a victim of sexual violence, or if she is unable or unwilling to discuss certain events relating to such an incident, they should ask discreet and indirect questions that could enable them to identify what appropriate protection measures could be taken and to what specialised agency they should be referred to. It is important to ensure the presence of female border guards in field control operations and in the course of routine border tasks"*.<sup>22</sup> In an interview with a representative of Frontex it was also underlined that if border guards suspect that there has

been any kind of violence or coercion within a family group, they should interview all members of the family separately (Frontex Official, email interview, July 2015). However, despite these written guarantees both with the CEAS directives and in the Frontex border guard training, in practice no such attention is paid to issues of gender, and reports by human rights organisations suggest that in many cases not only have border guards not been offering specific protection to women, including those who they suspect may have been victims of violence, but the same border guards may be the source of violence and human rights abuses against migrants.<sup>23,24</sup> In several interviews during this research, officials and representatives of NGOs and UNHCR talked about the “crisis” situation and the impact it was having on their ability to actually implement any of the existing guidelines. As one interviewee from MSF working in the Greek islands explained, “*there are so many people, and they are so desperate to move on as quickly as possible, that we just can’t really do much for them*” (MSF Official, Kos, July 2015).

### Research Findings

Analysis of the interviews with both refugees and key informants highlighted a number of varying forms of violence and insecurity which were gender-specific. The analysis also highlighted the ways in which conditions for reception of refugees both created new forms of violence and exacerbated existing violence, such as domestic/intimate partner violence.

#### War-related violence

The Syrian women I interviewed on Kos had experienced violence directly in Syria or had a close family member who had experienced violence. They talked about violence from all sides in the conflict, the official Syrian army, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and rebel forces. The husband of one of the women, for example, had been killed in Aleppo, so she had fled with her two children, aged 20 and 12. She said that she no longer felt safe in Syria and that she had lost everything she had. She explained that in addition to the insecurities arising from the war she experienced another layer of insecurity as a woman alone without a husband. Another woman, travelling with her husband and two baby sons, had had her house and all her possessions destroyed by a bomb, so the family had decided to leave to seek

safety for themselves and their children. There are many similar stories of women and families who no longer felt safe and had fled to protect themselves and their children, determined to reach Europe to find a safe place to re-start their lives. Many had little hope of ever being able to return to Syria. “*I feel as though I have lost my home for ever*” (Syrian woman, Kos, July 2015), said one woman, echoing the feelings of many others.

#### Violence experienced during the journey

Many of the women interviewed had also experienced violence from various sources during their journeys to the EU. One source of violence against women refugees is the smugglers or traffickers<sup>‡</sup> who facilitate their journeys to reach Europe. Women travelling alone, or just with children, are particularly vulnerable to attack, and during my interviews there were several accounts of women who had been raped or sexually assaulted on their journeys. One woman interviewed in Kos was travelling with a woman friend who had been raped by smugglers and badly injured. Several other women interviewed talked about the violence they had experienced at the hands of smugglers, including sexual violence and also the pressure to exchange sexual relations in return for the price of their passage when they did not have enough cash to pay for this journey. The UNHCR has also noted what they call “transactional sex”, with women being forced to swap sexual relations in return for help on their passage to Europe. Staff of NGOs working in the refugee camps around Calais in France who were interviewed for this research also pointed to the demands for coerced sex by smugglers, and the existence of networks of “sex workers” within the camps (GSF staff member, Calais, December 2015; MSF staff member, Calais, January 2016).

European political leaders have been quick to point to smugglers or traffickers as a key source of the current “crisis”, and have even gone so far as to suggest bombing smugglers boats as a means of reducing the number of refugees attempting to reach Europe.<sup>25</sup> However, as it becomes harder to reach the EU, and more and more routes are closed

<sup>‡</sup>Whilst the terms smuggler and trafficker are often used interchangeably in media and political discourse, there is in principle a distinction between smugglers who are paid to bring migrants or refugees via illegal routes into Europe (or another destination) and traffickers who smuggle men and women for the purpose of illegal exploitation in the destination country.

off, it is likely that the demand for smugglers, and the price that they ask for facilitating the passage into Europe, will increase. A UNHCR representative interviewed for this research expressed the fear that the increasing restrictions on entry into the EU, and the prospect of even more closed borders, would increase women's vulnerability to violence at the hands of these smugglers, and the demand for sex to ensure passage. (UNHCR representative, telephone interview, November 2015)

Smugglers were not the only sources of violence identified in this research. Women interviewed in Kos, for example, explained that they had been victims of violence at the hands of the Turkish police and coastguards as they crossed the country and attempted to leave for Greece. An MSF psychologist told me about one woman she met who had been detained by Turkish police and imprisoned for 45 days, during which time she had been separated from her husband and subjected to severe sexual violence. The woman showed signs of extreme trauma and was reluctant to talk about the violence she had experienced. (MSF psychologist, Kos, June 2015)

Threats also come from within the group of refugees, and women refugees interviewed said that they felt insecure when they were travelling in groups including many single men. The threat of GBV was illustrated by an interviewee from the UNHCR who explained that one of his protection colleagues on the Greek island of Lesbos had had to intervene to protect women from three rape attempts (UNHCR official, telephone interview, November 2015). Women refugees in camps near Calais also said that they were scared of other refugees within the camps. One woman interviewed said that she tried not to leave her tent because *"it is too dangerous for me outside"* (Iraqi refugee, Grande-Synthe, January 2016).

### Family and Conjugal Violence

During interviews with key respondents, MSF staff reported cases of both psychological and physical violence within families of refugees during their journeys (MSF officials, Kos, July 2015). As well as the insecurities of their journey, these women suffered abuse from their own husbands, who not only did not protect them, but posed a threat. Women in this situation find it almost impossible to leave their abusive husbands or partners because of the challenge of continuing the journey alone or with just their children. So they find

themselves stuck in a violent relationship with no hope of escaping. Respondents in Serbia also said that they had noted cases where husbands were violent to their wives, but again they felt that there was little that they could do to help these women who were determined to continue their journey as quickly as possible. There have also been reports that women who have arrived in an EU country have had little help or support in escaping violence from their husbands or partners. One report in Germany, for example, recounted the story of a Syrian woman whose husband raped and beat her whilst they were living in a temporary camp set up to house newly arrived refugees. When the woman tried to file a complaint with the police they would not listen to her, and there was no real help either from social work or refugee support services. A group founded to help refugee women in Berlin explained that:

*"There is no real security for asylum-seeking women because whenever they are attacked, either physically or sexually harassed, nobody knows what to do. There is no clear policy".<sup>26</sup>*

### Inadequate accommodation as a source of insecurity

The vulnerability of refugee women to GBV is exacerbated by the inadequacy of the reception and accommodation conditions in many countries. The situation in the Greek islands where refugees are currently arriving in large numbers is catastrophic, with no accommodation available for most refugees, meaning that they are left to sleep in the open air in parks, fields or on the streets. In Kos, the local authorities did provide the first refugees to arrive with accommodation in a derelict hotel but this was a shell of a building with no running water or electricity, and only two toilets to be shared between the eight hundred or so occupants at the time of field research on the island. Women and men were forced to share outside water taps for washing, plus some mobile showers put in place by MSF. These inadequate conditions increased women's vulnerability to GBV, and many of the women interviewed for my research expressed fears about sharing space with unknown men, particularly single men, who were perceived as a specific threat. There was a clear gendered division of space within the "hotel", with women found barricaded in the upstairs bedrooms, whilst the more public areas downstairs were full of men. Women I interviewed told me that they left

their rooms as infrequently as possible, and that they never went out of their rooms at night time, even to use the toilets. As one woman said, *“It is dark at night, there are no lights, and so many men downstairs, so we don’t go out of our rooms, even when we need to”*. (Afghan woman refugee, Kos, July 2015) Fear of violence within this accommodation led to some women and families moving out to sleep in surrounding fields with no shelter or facilities. An Afghan family said they felt safer sleeping on their own in the middle of a field than in the rundown hotel. The family in question had three daughters and felt that they were exposed to risks of sexual harassment and violence by men in the hotel. (Afghan family, Kos, July 2015)

Accommodation facilities are also lacking once the refugees are lucky enough to reach a destination state within the EU. In October 2015, I met Syrian families in France, camping in makeshift tents on the pavements and borders of a busy road junction. One woman was camping out with her 21-day old baby, born just after she had reached France. Another older woman who had arrived from Homs in Syria with three teenage children expressed her dismay at the living conditions, *“My husband was killed and I came here with my children. It took three months to arrive here, and now we are living in the streets, with nowhere to wash or take a shower”*. Even for those who have been in France for a longer period, the problem of accommodation remains severe. A Syrian woman who arrived in France one year ago after fleeing Syria, following a period of incarceration for opposition to the government, is still living in emergency accommodation provided by the 115 service (an emergency housing service for the homeless). She is housed in a hostel where she shares a room with three other women, and a bathroom and toilet with another dozen women. The hostel is closed between 9 am and 6 pm every day, during which time she walks the streets to pass the time and to keep warm. She talked about her feelings of vulnerability and the aggression of which she had been a victim whilst out on the streets, and also the way in which this regime had exacerbated her health problems, which were still untreated.

## Discussion

The initial findings from this qualitative research show that women refugees attempting to reach and traverse Europe to find protection, are vulnerable to

multiple forms of insecurity and violence, and that the ways in which the EU is managing this “crisis” have not done anything to reduce these vulnerabilities. The closing of borders has made the use of smugglers more and more necessary, thus rendering women vulnerable to SGBV from smugglers, or obliging them to engage in sex to pay for their passage. At the same time police and security forces in countries on the refugees’ route may also commit SGBV against women, and there has been little action taken at national or at EU level to prevent this, or to punish the perpetrators.

Lack of adequate accommodation facilities for refugees creates situations of insecurity for women. Already in July 2015 in Kos, many refugees were sleeping outside in fields and parks, and as the influx has grown, there has been no move to provide any further accommodation. The situation is similar or worse in other Greek islands, as well as in other locations along the migratory route. Lack of any adequate accommodation facilities and access to any sanitary facilities has a major impact on women’s health and well-being as well as exposing them to violence.

Migration can also lead to changes in relations of power and gender relations within families and couples, and in some cases to increasing incidences of domestic violence or to an exacerbation of existing domestic and intra-familial violence.

A final finding of this research was that women who are survivors of GBV generally have no one to report this to. According to several of the key informants interviewed for this research, one of the major barriers to developing effective policies and programmes to prevent GBV and to provide help and support to survivors, is the reluctance of refugee women to talk about their experiences and particularly to testify to experiences of GBV. Clearly reporting SGBV in any circumstances is very difficult, and various research reports stigma, shame and fear of reprisals among other barriers to women’s reporting.<sup>27</sup> In the case of refugees, there are additional barriers such as not knowing the language, not knowing who to report to, and fear of officials and of being stopped by police or deported.<sup>28–30</sup> In the current refugee crisis, women’s fear of being delayed on their onward journeys is yet another barrier. One feature of the crisis has been the constant modification of migration routes as various EU and bordering countries close their borders and thus force refugees to find new routes to reach their destination country. This means that refugees are

pushed into a state of panic where the need to move onwards as quickly as possible is paramount. Thus, women who have been victims of GBV are reluctant to stop and talk to medical, psychological or legal support services, even where these do exist, for fear that this will delay their journeys. In order to encourage women to report violence, and to ensure that they receive the help and support that they need if they are victims, as well as to bring perpetrators to account, the EU must ensure legal and regular routes of entry for those who are fleeing.

### Conclusion

It is unlikely that the flow of refugees to the European Union will diminish significantly in the near future. Ongoing conflict and persecution in various countries will continue to augment these flows. If the EU is genuine about its commitment to protect refugees and to protect women from gender-based violence, including sexual violence, then Member States need to do more to tackle the various causes of vulnerability to violence for refugee women, and to provide adequate medical, psychological and social support for those with experience of such violence. One way to start would be to ensure safe and legal routes for refugees to enter Europe, in order to circumvent the

need for dangerous journeys and recourse to the use of smugglers who may be a source of violence.

The issue of SGBV against refugee women also needs to be taken seriously once these women arrive in an EU Member State. The European Commission's recast directive on reception conditions for those seeking internal protection states that material reception conditions and medical and psychological care should be guaranteed in order to ensure 'a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of the applicants and their families'.<sup>19</sup> These standards are not being met at present, exposing women to further risks. Finally, EU member states must take seriously the duty to protect victims of GBV under the terms of the 1951 Refugee Convention. Although discrimination and gender inequality is not named as a grounds for claiming asylum within the Convention, subsequent guidelines from the UNHCR<sup>31,32</sup> as well as the EU's own Qualification Directive,<sup>18</sup> have specified that gender-related persecutions must be considered as legitimate grounds for granting refugee status. However, as research has shown, this is still not always respected in many countries.<sup>33–35</sup> It can be argued that until member states start taking the issue of GBV against women asylum seekers and refugees seriously, they will fail in their duty to protect these women, and to ensure the realisation of their human rights.



GEORGIOS MAKKAS, PANNOS PICTURES

Ramia Sabbagh from Aleppo, Syria, at Idomeni railway station, on the Greece/Macedonia border



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### Résumé

La « crise » actuelle des réfugiés en Europe a créé de multiples formes de vulnérabilité et d'insécurité pour les réfugiées, notamment plusieurs formes de violence sexuelle et sexiste. Les femmes, seules ou avec leur famille, sont de plus en plus nombreuses à tenter de parvenir en Europe pour y chercher protection, mais elles sont soumises à la violence pendant le voyage et/ou à l'arrivée dans un pays de destination. Le manque de logements adéquats ou d'installations d'accueil pour les réfugiés et les migrants en Europe, ainsi que la fermeture des frontières qui a augmenté la nécessité d'avoir recours à des passeurs pour atteindre l'Europe, exacerbent la violence et l'insécurité.

### Resumen

La “crisis” actual de refugiados en Europa ha creado múltiples formas de vulnerabilidad e inseguridad para mujeres refugiadas, incluidas diversas formas de violencia sexual y de género. Crecientes números de mujeres, solas o con familia, están intentando llegar a Europa para buscar protección pero estas mujeres son sujetas a violencia durante su viaje y/o al llegar al país de destino. La violencia e inseguridad son exacerbadas por la falta de instalaciones adecuadas para alojar o recibir a refugiados y migrantes en Europa, así como el cierre de fronteras que ha incrementado la necesidad de las refugiadas de recurrir a contrabandistas para que las ayuden a llegar a Europa.