

## Gender and asylum seekers- The case of Greece

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### Abstract

The present paper focuses on the living conditions in temporary accommodation centers during the period of 22/11/2011 till 20/03/2012 and on the nature of the existing social relationship structures, being shaped at such centers, with special emphasis placed on the dimension of gender (single women or mothers). The existence of gender differences among asylum seekers' groups cannot be clearly verified due to great social and economic problems, rendering them indistinguishable, while significant contradictions led to different conclusions in the past. Because of the lack of comparative data this research may contribute to the: a) provision of a clear cut picture of the gender dimension within the asylum seekers context, b) identification of the female asylum seekers population needs and the detection of the problems they encounter, c) the evaluation of the effectiveness of services and structures supporting asylum seekers and d) exploitation of results and findings for policy design.

**Keywords:** Gender; Asylum seekers; Needs; Women; Refugees

### Introduction

An unprecedented 70.8 million people around the world have been forced from home. Women and girls make up an increasing number of those arriving in Greece seeking asylum. While in 2015 most of those arriving from Turkey were young men, since 2016 more and more women – most from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan– are among those seeking international protection in Europe (Amnesty International, 2018).

At the same time, Greece was struggling under the weight of what was perhaps the country's worst economic recession in recent memory. Huge public debt and the government's decision to borrow from the International Monetary Fund and the European Union had changed entirely the economic, political, and social environment of immigration in Greece (Kassimis, 2012).

Greece faced considerable challenges in providing adequate reception conditions and access to asylum procedures for refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants (Amnesty International, 2017). Reception conditions for refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants stranded on the islands were overcrowded and insanitary; they provided inadequate security and people faced uncertainty about their future (Amnesty International, 2017). Greece was found to be in

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breach of the European Convention on Human Rights on account of poor prison conditions and/or lack of effective remedies to challenge such conditions in nine cases concerning prisoners in Larissa, Thessaloniki, Trikala and Komotini (Amnesty International, 2017).

Women and children in particular face many protection risks on their journey to Greece and onwards. In Athens this risk is even higher as women and children stay in squares and parks that are frequented by drug dealers, traffickers and prostitution rings (Save the children international, 2015). In 2020, women living in camps are facing lack of privacy, inadequate lighting and long distance to toilets and showers foster risks of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in the sites. In urban areas, homeless SGBV survivors have increased in the last six months based on a report of UNHCR's partner Diotima. One out of three survivors report to have been raped while being homeless, while attempting to find safety or in Greece. They are often single mothers, have been tortured or have serious medical problems (UNHCR, 2020). Living conditions during January of 2020 remain dangerous on the islands, with congested spaces, sub-standard sanitation and serious incidents. More police officers, including women, are needed as rampant insecurity is having an adverse impact on the well-being and safety of refugees and staff working in the reception centres. Unaccompanied boys and girls, single women and single-headed families are in particularly high risk (UNHCR, 2020).

The focus of the present work is on practices concerning women asylum-seekers, on the grounds that such groups still remain shrouded in obscurity to some extent and their survival is hugely dependent on individual initiatives and occasional assistance received. It presents the problems that have been identified and clearly described and analysed by the refugees. It also presents recommendations from the communities to address some of these concerns.

In Greece, as for the gender based problems facing women, the study of Tsovili and Voutira reveals the maintenance of women's stereotypical roles who do not participate in decision-making and don't have access to higher education and vocational training programs (Tsovili,Voutira, 2004). Besides, according to the same study, women's health needs are only addressed when requested and their employment is not actively encouraged. Previous studies have shown the complexities of providing health care to refugee and migrant women. For example, women who experience communication barriers are less likely to receive adequate counselling and culturally sensitive care ( Lyons et all, 2008).

As for women's poverty is directly related to the absence of economic opportunities and autonomy, lack of access to economic resources, including credit, land ownership and inheritance, lack of access to education and support services and their minimal participation in the decision-making process (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2016). According to research of Kriatsoti unemployment and poverty primarily affect women and single- parent families, led by women, to a greater extent( Kriatsioti,2005). Poverty can increase violence. Particular groups of women, including women and girls living in poverty, face multiple forms of discrimination, and face increased risks of violence as a result (United Nations Women, 2014).

The research conducted in 2012 by the writer of the present paper has indicated that social exclusion and its consequences, religious discrimination, and problems related to legalization documents, are common concerns for both females and males. Nonetheless, female asylum seekers live in conditions of strong hierarchical positions because of their sex and nationality.



Further, violence against women has recently been given prominence to as an emerging social problem when legislation on domestic violence and sexual harassment was only enacted in 2006. The migration process and the existing conditions in the host country exacerbate the occurrence of sexual and domestic violence phenomena ( Kriatsioti, 2005) .

The progress achieved to guarantee gender equality has moved forward positively over the last few years in the European Union. Pursuant to Gender Equality Index 2020 Greece, has moved towards gender equality at a slower rate than the EU's score (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2020).

It's worth mentioning that in 2018 Greece deposited the instrument of ratification of the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence and in 2019 a new law (4604/2019) was passed for promoting substantive Gender Equality and preventing and combating Gender-Based Violence but has not yet been implemented ( General Secretariat for Gender Equality, 2019).

## **Methodology**

The methodological approach followed comprises a set of research tools, both quantitative and qualitative ones.

To better address the aims of the present article, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, involving research in libraries and archives, fieldwork, collection of quantitative and qualitative data and carrying out structured interviews involving questionnaire completion. The interviews conducted before the research also significantly contributed to the preparation of the questionnaires, which had to get restated in alignment with the particularities of the population in question.

## **Study participants**

The study population consisted of both females and males, aged 18-46 years or older, residing in Temporary Accommodation Centers for asylum seekers in Lavrion, in the Doctors of the World hostel, under the Roof of the NGO Praxis program, in the Refugee NGO Arsis shelter and in the E.K.Po.S.P.O Nostos hostel. It should be noted that random sampling has not been plausible; consequently, the research results are not generalizable to the entire asylum-seeking population. Our sample comprises 207 applicants, 89 females and 118 males, coming from countries, such as Turkey, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Syria participating in the research. This study concerns the specific accommodation centers and their guests. It should be noted that a simple random sampling that could potentially prompt totally generalizable results as regards this vulnerable, and fraught with communicative difficulties, population, has not been plausible; still, the evidence gathered is fairly enlightening.

## **Ethical considerations**

Prior to the interviews, details about the study such as aim, confidentiality and the voluntary nature of participants were explained verbally and through a written information sheet. Verbal consent was obtained from all the participants.

## **Data collection and analysis**

Permission to conduct interviews at the centers was sought through e-mails sent to the administration of the centers. The interviews conducted before the research also significantly contributed to the preparation of a structured questionnaire on 22 questions all closed except the last, which had to get restated in alignment with the particularities of the population in question.

Three research hypotheses have been proposed within the context of this paper: a. There are gender differences and discrimination in finding employment, accessing education, in the concepts of security/protection and in asylum seekers accessing health care, b. women asylum seekers are faced with more financial and psychological problems due to poor living conditions, lengthy bureaucratic asylum recognition, occasional and deprived of insurance benefits employment. In addition, they are faced with risks (i.e. sexual abuse) when forced out of their country of origin as opposed to their male counterparts, c. women's access to benefits derived from childcare services, their being kept updated on health and hygiene issues, a fair distribution of personal sanitation items, the promotion of their work issues is exceptionally limited, even if such elements are mostly needed by female asylum seekers rather than by male ones. However, no problems are presented to accessing provisions including the prediction of specific, female gynecological needs, the freedom of movement and the freedom for both sexes to exercise their religious duties.

The data were anonymously collected and analysed by the SPSS statistic program and came from 207 questionnaires completed by adult asylum seekers, 89 females and 118 males at the Lavrion center, at the Doctors of the World, Nostos, Praxis and Arsis NGOs.

## **Results**

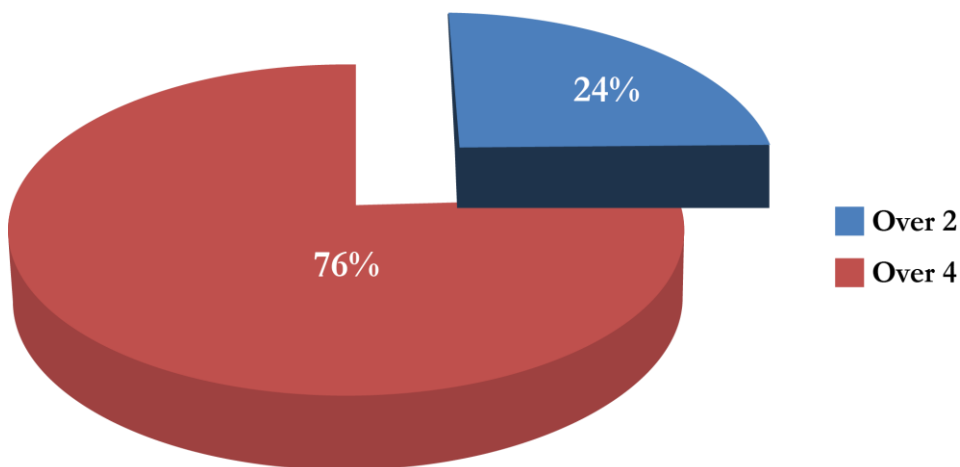
The themes developed, difficulties and problems facing the guests of the accommodation centers, the integration of women asylum seekers and their special needs about safety, child care and education on their perspective reveal interesting findings and are presented in this section accompanied by statistical data.

### **Cohabitation in accommodation centers**

As regards accommodation, the highest percentage bespeaks of cohabitation with more than 4 people in temporary accommodation centers. The highest percentage, arguing cohabitation with more than 2 people, is provided by women while the greatest percentage indicating cohabitation with more than 4 people comes from men (Table 1).

Along these lines, overcrowding in temporary accommodation centers is confirmed and bearing in mind that people can be kept at such centers for several months, or even years, physical conditions can cast a decisive effect on residents' quality of life. When these conditions cannot be adapted to the residents' needs or deteriorate, they may damage personal or family relationships and create or exacerbate vulnerability situations due to problems such as lack of privacy, violence and so on.



**Table 1.** Number of persons in the same room**Title: Number of persons in a room**

### Employment

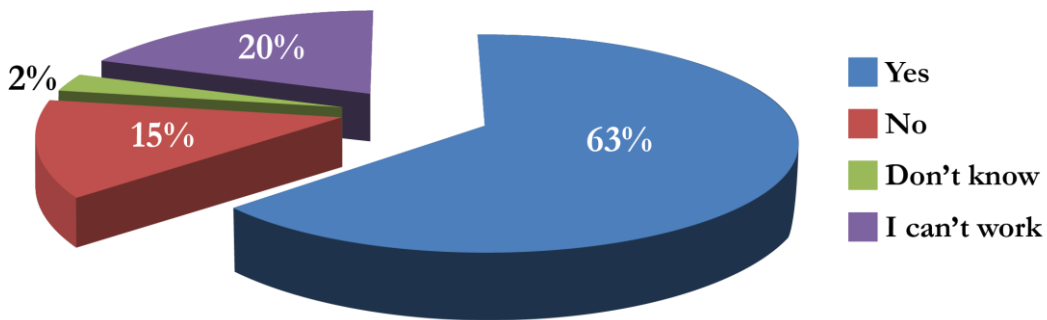
With reference to the issue of employment, the question of whether they would like to work was posed to women only and especially to those who do not work. The majority of answers obtained were positive while some responded that they are not sure and that they cannot work because of health problems and children who demand their constant attention as a result of being part of small age groups. Specifically, five Afghan women from the Nostos centre and one from the Doctors of the World centre explained that, although they want to work, they prefer their husband to find a job because their children are in need of their attention.

On the one hand, women's strong desire to work in order to contribute to the family budget is evident, while, on the other hand, the difficulty, as these women claim, to find work as opposed to men, due to lack of childcare services for their children (Table 2), is also apparent. In the course of the research, there has only been a creative play program for infants and a language support program for children conducted by educators at the NGO Arsis centre, which could possibly be considered as a solution for working mothers.

With reference to Afghan women, who do not appear to be willing to work and expect their husbands to financially support their families, thus perpetuating the patriarchal family structure stereotypes, it could be argued that their way of thinking is only the result of their culture.

**Table 2.** Willingness to work

**Willingness to work**



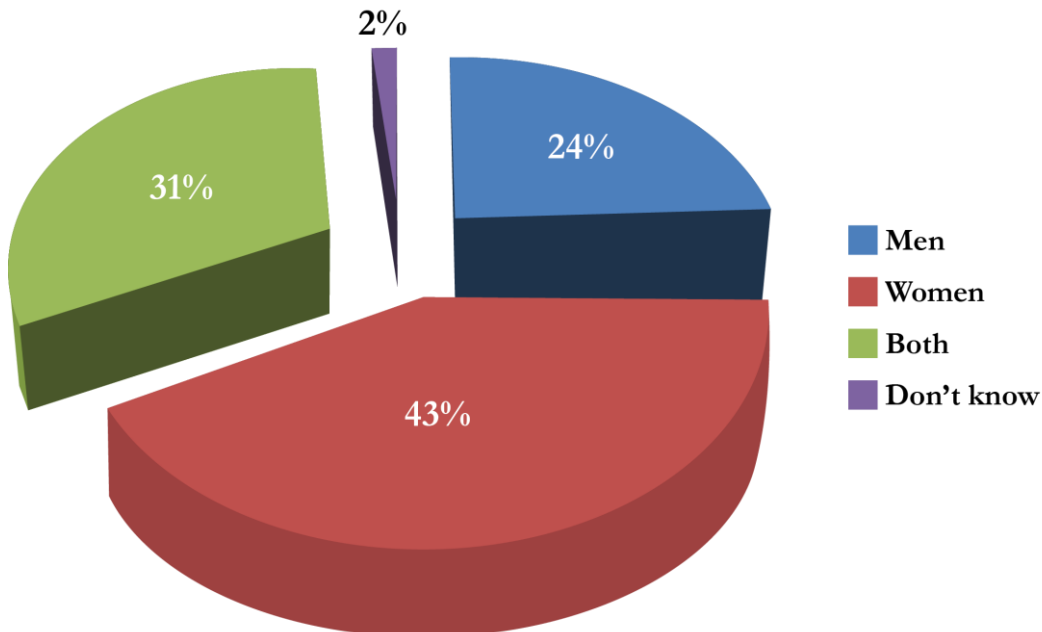
**The dimension of gender on facing problems**

Within the context of comparing problems with a gender perspective in mind, a question was posed to both men and women concerning their beliefs as to whom they consider to be faced with more problems. Three options emerged for the respondents' answers, which were qualitatively processed, that is to say, men, women or both as regards the problems they are faced with.

In particular, the majority of responses obtained are consistent with the belief that women face more problems (Table 3).

**Table 3.** The dimension of gender on facing problems

**Title: Who faces most problems?**



The greatest percentage answering that men experience more problems is recorded in men. Out of the men responding that women have more problems and justifying their response, it is indicated that single women or single women with children have to cope with more difficulties. Out of the men responding that men experience more problems, it is reported that these men are mainly the ones who are single and have no family support. Out of the women mentioning that women have more problems, it is suggested that single women with children and generally women with a family are principally affected as the responsibilities are plenty.

Female and male respondents answered that women in charge of single-parent families face security problems and often become victims of sexual exploitation and trafficking, thus confirming the hypothesis that women and children constitute the majority of trafficked victims since they constitute the most vulnerable part of any population by nature. Women are more vulnerable to all kinds of exploitation in their attempt to find a way to leave their country and then settle into a new one (physical violence, sexual harassment, and rape attempts or threats to life etc.). This is a rather common phenomenon when traveling unaccompanied by a man (Save the children international report (2015); FRA(2014).

## Discussion

The gender stereotypes contribute to the development and perpetuation of the differences between men and women by leading people to treat men and women differently (Ellemers, 2018). However, even if our initial research hypothesis involved the existence of gender differences among asylum seekers' groups, this cannot be clearly verified due to great social and economic problems, rendering them indistinguishable, while significant contradictions led to different conclusions in the past.

Women experience more problems as regards their culture and religion, such as being examined by a male doctor which is prohibitive for them, as opposed to men, or the difficulty they find in cooperating with male interpreters at the structures, rendering communication and the gratification of their needs impossible. The demand for female interpreters is explicitly expressed by women in temporary accommodation centers, except for those residing at the Temporary Accommodation Centre for Asylum Seekers in Lavrion, where both interpreters are female.

The combination of the female asylum seekers' status and the very essence of being a woman, leads women of this social group to an awkward position. They appear to be trapped in domestic work, they do not participate in education as often as men do and despite needing work they do not manage to get one due to a shortage of care services for children and a lack of qualifications. Our research reveals that Afghan women's view that their husbands should be employed and not themselves, is indicative of perceptions flourishing in their own country.

The phenomenon of domestic violence remains concealed by female asylum seekers, considering that 45% of the women questioned support that their husband had never had any violent outbursts, hence providing evidence that substantiate the number of domestic violence victims (Artinopoulou, 2006). The dark number of violence as it is called the phenomenon of underreporting of violent incidents although is assumed to be large number and exists around the globe (Malsch, Smeenk, 2017).

While conducting the research in 2011-2012, the problem of unemployment infesting both sexes is more vivid and, as already mentioned, employment issues are not actively promoted at most centers, a phenomenon that can be justified within the context of the general economic crisis. The hypothesis (Vitsilaki, Fokiali, 2007) that women suffer from higher rates of unemployment and poverty, at least at the time the research was conducted, as well as the hypothesis that men and women work at percentages of 53.3% and 46.7% respectively, are refuted as revealed in the research.

The 43% of the men and women questioned, support that females face more problems than male asylum seekers, especially single women with children, for they can be easily victimized by men, as stated in the research of the UNHCR and the Amnesty International (i.e. sexual exploitation and trafficking) (Tsovili, Voutira, 2004; Amnesty International, 2018).

Despite the above, distinct gender differences in the given time period do not seem to exist, as the economic and social crisis has affected the lives of asylum seekers. According to studies the general and impressive collapse of employment in Greece has affected both sexes (Pérvier, 2014). The living conditions of the Greeks and of the immigrant groups, comprising asylum seekers, have changed to the worse, thereby bringing about a change in the roles within the family construct and society, creating xenophobic tendencies while sexes are, in fact, appearing to have lost their engendered differences, due to sharing a common understanding of things and concerns.

## **Conclusions**

Delving deeper into the structures accommodating asylum seekers for the period between November 2011 and March 2012 has led to several interesting conclusions about the gender dimension in exploring asylum seekers' needs. At this point it should be noted that a simple random sampling that could potentially prompt totally generalizable results as regards this vulnerable, and fraught with communicative difficulties, population, has not been plausible; still, the evidence gathered is fairly enlightening.

In brief, it could be argued that asylum seekers face problems that are not related to their sex, such as overcrowding in structures and poor living conditions, the language barrier, unemployment and psychological problems, sleep and health disorders induced by uncertainty about the future. Asylum seekers' fervent desire for legalization documents is also revealed within this paper.

Conclusively, a series of recommendations should be proposed to the structures and the Greek state in order to assist the adoption of appropriate measures and policies. In particular:

- Take the minimum standards for asylum seekers' reception into consideration and turn them into international law along the lines of the EU Directive on the minimum asylum seekers' reception standards applying for Member States.
- Ensure compliance with international instruments for the protection of human rights. To further ensure the provision of statutory benefits such as the right to food, medical care, legal aid and access to interpretation services for all asylum seekers.
- Adopt an approach focusing more on sex and age, during evaluation procedures and the provision of services for all asylum seekers, as well as on the principle of





participation while exercising needs' assessment. Gender and age considerations should be taken into account when accommodating applicants for international protection.

- The empowerment of forcibly displaced and returnee women and girls is improved when gender roles and relations within a population of concern are well understood and inequalities addressed. One of the first steps in developing empowerment strategies is to consider differing experiences, profiles, resources and needs within a population of concern.
- Adopt a participatory approach regardless of gender. Engage women in decision-making in order to promote gender equality and prevent social exclusion.

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