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By Andrea D. Martin

Gender-based violence (GBV) constitutes one a grave violations of human rights and poses a significant barrier to the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Migrant and refugee women are particularly at risk, yet their experiences often remain invisible in both research and policy debates. Between 2019 and 2023, the “Violence against Women Migrants and Refugees: Analyzing Causes and Effective Policy Response” (GBV-MIG) international project—a collaboration of seven national teams funded by the EU Gender-Net Plus Consortium and the national agencies of the respective countries—set out to explore how GBV unfolds across diverse migration trajectories and to identify policy responses capable of reducing women’s vulnerability. Drawing on feminist, intersectional, and contextual lenses, the project sought to balance global commonalities in GBV with the specific historical, legal, and social contexts of Austria, the Czech Republic, France, Ireland, Norway, Canada, and Israel.

The project addressed two interrelated questions: first, what global and context-specific dynamics produce and perpetuate GBV against migrant and refugee women; and second, how can policy-making and service provision be improved to prevent violence and support survivors? To answer these questions, the GBV-MIG project employed a mixed-qualitative design across seven countries. Each national team began with comprehensive literature reviews and policy analyses to map existing frameworks on gender, migration, and violence. Key informant interviews with policymakers, NGO staff, health-care providers, and other stakeholders provided meso-level insights into institutional practices and service gaps. In-depth semi-structured interviews with migrant and refugee women captured micro-level experiences of violence, survival strategies, and interactions with authorities. Ethical safeguards—co-developed across teams and in interaction with local, institutional ethics boards—ensured participant safety and minimized re-traumatization, while thematic coding and cross-case comparison enabled the identification of both common structural drivers and context-specific variations in GBV.

The GBV-MIG project produced several findings. First, GBV in migration contexts exhibits a dual character: it is rooted in global structures of gendered and racialized inequality yet manifests differently in each national setting. Structural drivers—such as restrictive immigration laws, securitized borders, and underfunded support services—create conditions of precarity that expose women to violence at every stage of migration. Second, women face heightened risks during the journey itself: limited legal pathways force many to rely on smugglers or endure informal border crossings, where physical, sexual, and emotional violence by traffickers, border guards, or fellow migrants is commonplace. Third, upon arrival, ambiguous or dependent legal statuses reinforce women’s fear of deportation or family separation, trapping survivors in abusive relationships. For example, in Canada, sponsored spouses reported threats of withdrawal of sponsorship, while in France, recognition of spousal abuse as grounds for independent residency varied widely across prefectures.

Intersectionality was used as a critical lens for understanding differential vulnerabilities. Migrant women's experiences intersect with race, class, nationality, age, sexual orientation, and gender identity to shape both the forms of violence they endure and their ability to access help. Racialized women fleeing conflict zones, for example, often encountered culturalist stereotypes that framed GBV as a "foreign" problem, diverting attention from systemic policy failures. In Israel, asylum-seeking women lacked translation services when filing police complaints, while in Norway, prolonged family-reunification waiting periods compounded survivors' legal and economic marginalization.

Finally, institutional gaps and structural violence underpin interpersonal abuse. Many national systems exclude undocumented or precariously documented women from social assistance, health care, and legal aid. Across countries, siloed services and a lack of trauma-informed, multilingual support mean that women frequently find no safe route to report violence. The project's comparative analysis revealed that even well-intentioned policies—such as shelter referrals or emergency housing—can have unintended gendered effects when implementation lacks coordination or cultural competency.

The GBV-MIG findings underscore the need for holistic, intersectional policy frameworks that address both macro-level structures and individual needs. Governments must broaden legal definitions of GBV to encompass the full spectrum of violence encountered by migrant and refugee women. Additionally, residency protections should be decoupled from abusive relationships. And finally, social services must adopt trauma-informed, multilingual models that coordinate across immigration, health, justice, and social welfare sectors.

The GBV-MIG project affirms that GBV against migrant and refugee women is neither inevitable nor only the result of individual actors; it is deeply embedded in global migration governance, legal regimes, and intersecting systems of inequality. Effective prevention and redress require systemic change—laws that protect rather than punish, inclusive services that empower rather than marginalize, and policies co-produced with those most affected. By illuminating both shared structural roots and context-specific diversities, the GBV-MIG project offers a roadmap for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers committed to gender justice in migration.

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