

Gender and the Continuum of Violence in Forced Migration: Asylum-Seeking Women in the Eastern Mediterranean

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(Summary)

This presentation report focuses on the experiences of gender-based violence against women asylum seekers arriving at the EU external border in Greece in the second decade of the 21st century. The **research aims** to understand gender-based violence in a forced migration context drawing upon theories of gender-based violence (GBV) and vulnerability to it (precarity); the “continuum of violence”; and intersectionality. The **research questions** explored were on the types of violence and the circumstances that rendered the women more vulnerable to them.

Gender-based violence is the violence perpetrated against a person because of their gender. Additionally, it may be systemic or generic violence with gendered consequences.

The **continuum of gender-based violence in a forced migration journey is conceptualized** as:

1. Violence in a non-linear continuum of time/place/legal status stages. This means:
 - a. Various forms of violence are more frequent in certain times, places or stages than others
 - b. Unique forms of GBV that only asylum seeking women experience (e.g. border-crossings; “violence of uncertainty;” “slow violence”)
2. A continuum of seamlessly blending and interconnected forms in each stage, some of which include normalized (and trivialized) everyday incidents in the lives of asylum-seekers (Kelly, 1987); and
3. A continuum of GBV at multiple levels, from the systemic and institutional level to the interpersonal one. The social - ecological model for understanding violence (World Health Organization, 2002; Heise, 1998): uses four levels to understand the range of factors that put people at risk for violence or protect them from experiencing or perpetrating violence. The approach allows us to link structural and interpersonal forms of violence. The levels are: Societal (“macrosystem”), community (“exosystem”), relationship (“microsystem”), individual levels
4. An ongoing, mutually reinforcing “circle” (continuum) of precarity and GBV, with precarity preparing the ground or aggravating GBV and GBV increasing the vulnerability of survivors.

Following Butler we understand **precarity** in a migration context as politically induced vulnerability, i.e. vulnerability generated by EU migration laws and policies but also national bordering and other practices. Speaking about women asylum seekers we also understand the generation of vulnerability by asymmetrical relations of power and inequality.

GBV is understood as **intersectional**, i.e. affecting differently and being impacted by multiple, interacting social memberships and identities beyond gender. It is the intersectionality framework that sheds light on the continuum of violence in forced migration and sets apart the GBV

experiences of asylum-seeking women in the context of differential but always higher vulnerabilities that the forced migration journey entails. Although structurally based unequal gender power, working intersectionally, affects women, men, boys, girls, LGBTQ2, the focus of this research is women as principal victims of GBV (UNHCR, 2020). **Asylum-Seekers:** The definition goes beyond (Convention) refugee claimants to include individuals migrating for survival purposes but also all disadvantaged others on the basis of citizenship and legal residence.

The research deploys a **qualitative methodology** of semi-structured interviews of 20 key informants and 35 asylum-seeking women from among 4 linguistic/ethnic groups. The key informants were individuals in government, policy-making, NGOs, or front-line workers in various governmental and non-governmental organizations. The asylum-seeking women came from Iran, Afghanistan, the DRC, Syria, Cameroon, Iraq, Palestine and Gabon. They were overwhelmingly Muslim, followed by Christians. The majority were married and 80% had children. Most had obtained refugee status or were legally documented, though 31% were asylum seekers.

Previous work (Tastsoglou, Petrinioti, Karagiannopoulou, 2021) based on findings from the key-informant interviews has identified the five “points of interface” between GBV and precarity as: Transit and border crossing; the asylum determination process; living conditions upon arrival; service provision; protection from GBV.

The present paper focuses on the forms and continuity of violence experienced in each of those stages as well as the circumstances that render the women more vulnerable to GBV, that is the continuous interface of GBV with precarity. What follows is a brief presentation and discussion of findings for each of the five stages:

1. Transit and border crossing: When asked what they would like to share about their migration experience, many women shared the traumatic situations they faced both in their home country as a reason for why they left, and their experiences throughout their migration journey. A common occurrence was the multiple attempts it took to reach Greece as many women did not make it on their first attempt. Here, the violence stems from the institutional level, the asylum laws and regulations and bordering practices, not directed against the individual woman because of her gender but certainly with gender consequences. From the point of view of asylum seekers, this violence is expected, even routinized, “we will succeed next time”.

The seventh time, it is when I fell in the water. I stayed 45 minutes in the water; I was 6 months pregnant. I was totally afraid, I was shaking, I drank water, I was only crying. I did not know how to swim [sigh]. It took time, 45 minutes in the water, they did everything to get me out of the water.... After that, I said that I would not try anymore but I was with people that told me “no, next time we will pass.” And on the 8th attempt, I entered Greece (Emma, from Gabon, crossing from Turkey).

2. Asylum determination process: Asylum seekers spend a long time in conditions of “permanent transience” (Pickering, 2011), or suspension in “a constant state of arrival” (Gerard and Pickering, 2012) waiting for various outcomes on their protection / status applications. This

interminable “wait” is institutional violence for already traumatized individuals, the “violence of uncertainty” (Grace, 2018):

I manage. When I started to work, I was cleaning, it was helping me a lot, I had more. Now my salary has decreased to 270 euros. For example, last week the children were sick, so I missed my work shift, they will reduce my salary. But still, I am trying to manage myself with that... I am trying to put money aside, I have to take it on my own hands. That is the reason why I am asking for a few more days of work to increase my savings and be prepared if I get another rejection, I will be able to take care of myself (Emma, from Gabon)

3.Living Conditions: Accessible accommodation in the city is scarce. Sexual blackmail is one expression of GBV:

Last Friday a woman with a baby came just before we were about to close and said she had nowhere to go. She stayed in the trafficker's place, but he was throwing her and the baby out in the morning and when she was returning in the evening – having nowhere to go-, he demanded to rape her. (Nadina, key informant)

4.Service Provision: Inadequacy or plain denial of services. With respect to interpretation services.

It is not that the interpreter does not understand, it is because the woman feels ashamed to speak to him...that the interpreter will try to cover things up in some way. To cover up based on traditional values...so that he does not function as an interpreter at the moment, he functions as a member of that society....” (Julia, sociologist working with refugees in a Greek NGO).

5.Protection from GBV: Our interviewees here refer to the absence of the state from protection (systemic violence by omission). The state abandoning migrants and refugees constitutes “slow violence” (Schindel, 2019) that develops and continues over time. This is everyday life violence, with systemic roots. It is attritional, not commonly perceived as violence, incremental and cumulative. Over time it results in increased physiological and psychological harm. The “missing role of the state”: In 2017 UNHCR received reports from 622 survivors of SGBV on the Greek Aegean islands, out of which at least 28 per cent experienced SGBV after arriving in Greece.

“We can say it is ultimately the state's indifference that does not want to help out in a certain situation.” (Trifonas).

Some Conclusions

- The normalized forms of GBV for asylum seeking women encompass GBV acts that are either non-existing or with a much lower frequency for native-born women (survival sex).
- On one end of the continuum, the incidence of asylum seeking women's death in the midst of the violence of the journey is an extreme though by no means rare occurrence as the more extreme forms of GBV among the general native-born populations are.

- There are unique forms of GBV affecting this population, such as “slow violence” and the “violence of uncertainty.”
- There are direct links between systemic / structural / institutional forms of violence (at the EU and state levels), community and interpersonal ones (physical, sexual, psychological, financial).
- Different stages of the forced migration journey are characterized by different forms of precarity and, consequently, by certain forms of GBV being more prevalent than others. Any understanding of precarity and GBV during these stages has to be contextual.
- Finally, to understand the unique forms of GBV but also the GBV experiences of women asylum-seekers across the continuum an intersectional analysis is necessary.

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