

FRANCE

Policy responses to gender-based violence in the context of migration



Country context

There is generally little public awareness of gender-based violence in the context of migration.

The media report on some incidents, such as the police dismantling unofficial migrant camps. However, the camps are usually portrayed as holding only male refugees, and women are typically “invisibilised” in these stories.

This is partly because women choose more discrete and hidden places when they are sleeping on the street in order to reduce the risk of violence. There is generally no real public or media discourse or awareness of the violence faced by women asylum seekers/refugees and the difficulties they encounter in finding accommodation and support.

There is a mixed response among NGOs. Some of the larger NGOs work with the government to provide accommodation for asylum seekers. Others have protested about this problem. The issue has also engaged civil society actors not previously involved in migration/asylum issues, e.g., midwives who have been faced with refugee women who give birth and are then forced to sleep on the street with their babies. This has led to the formation of new organisations specifically focused on supporting these women.

NGOs have also protested about the hypocrisy shown by the government response to Ukrainian refugees, who have been offered housing in contrast to the situation of others. This has highlighted the colonialist/racist underpinnings of French asylum policies.

Good practices identified

Good policy examples came generally from small, women-run organisations set up in response to the challenges faced by asylum seeking/refugee women. For example, an ecological collective which offered housing to women asylum seekers/refugees in a collective. This is very small-scale but it offered a non-judgemental cooperative setting where women lived together and could benefit from a reasonably stable and safe space.

Some midwives and other health-care practitioners are offering not only health care, but also housing and social support, which were not provided by other state services.

The emergency housing centre for women and families set up in the Paris region showed good practice by incorporating health and psychological support, but this was limited by the lack of space and the relocation of women and families within a short period of time.

Some NGOs are setting up special services for migrant women who have experienced Gender-Based Violence (GBV), including legal support, social support, and psychological support.

More good practice responses are required that are:

- Based on needs expressed by asylum seeking/refugee women themselves.
- Run on the basis of cooperation. That is, moving away from “charity” or “humanitarian” models, which carry risk of stigmatizing women as “victims”.
- Accepting of women regardless of their official status; that is, whether or not they have a successful asylum claim.

Migrant women’s experiences

“Being on the street when I arrived was a shock – it is part of my hardest story.”

This quote or one similar was a frequent feature of our interviews with refugee women in France.

Lack of accommodation for women arriving in France to seek asylum is a major GBV risk factor. The majority of the women we met, even those who were in “vulnerable” situations, e.g., pregnant or with young children, had spent at least some time sleeping on the streets, in railway stations, etc. This leaves them at risk of sexual and physical violence.

There are reports of a network of men who offer accommodation to homeless refugee women in return for sexual relations, leading to other forms of exploitation and violence.

Some women reported trying to stay in hospital after giving birth to avoid having to sleep on the street with their newly born child.

Some of the accommodation women eventually secure is very inadequate – no security, dirty, no cooking facilities. This also puts them at risk of violence.

Policy changes required

Create more accommodation places for newly arrived asylum seekers and provide sufficient information for these arrivals.

Make sure that there are always safe spaces for women and that they are informed of these and able to access them.

Stop the policy of relocation for those who are vulnerable to, or have been victims of, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) so that they can stay in long-term accommodation and access the types of medical, psychological, social and legal support that they need.

Project Title: VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES: ANALYZING CAUSES AND EFFECTIVE POLICY RESPONSE

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Policy deficits

Government failure to provide an adequate number of accommodation places.

La Cimade, one of the main NGOs working with asylum seekers and refugees, states in its annual report that only two-fifths of asylum seekers get a place in any kind of accommodation centre. This means that around 70,000 people are trying to find accommodation with only the €7.40 daily allowance they are given as asylum seekers to cover accommodation expenses. A further 30,000 people have no accommodation and receive no financial benefits at all.

The emergency accommodation service is overwhelmed. There is a phone number for people who cannot find accommodation – but it is often hard to get through and it can take hours to speak to someone. Even then there are usually no place available. Women are often sent across the city for one night’s accommodation, and then have to start calling again the next day.

The specific needs of women and the risks of violence that they face do not receive enough attention. Few reception or accommodation centres offer secure housing to women. When women who are already in accommodation centres experience Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV), there are no possibilities to rehouse them in a safer place.

Other deficits include:

- Failure to consider women’s experiences of SGBV seriously at borders. This leads to return (refoulement) of those seeking to enter to claim asylum.
- Disbelief or mistrust of women’s stories of SGBV recounted during the refugee status determination procedures. Officials, judges etc. frequently deny or refuse to believe these accounts, leading to refusal of the asylum claim.
- Non-assistance for migrant/refugee women victims of domestic/partner violence. There is little or no support for women in this situation; they are often afraid to report a violent partner and are not supported to do so. Accommodation providers do not have adequate solutions, e.g., safe spaces for women or the exclusion of violent partners.

The State response

Reforms of the asylum system require asylum seekers to wait for a place to become available in a recognised shelter. However, it is clear there are not enough places.

The Paris municipal authority created an emergency shelter for single women and families. But this cannot accommodate all those who need places. Women and families are not allowed to stay in these facilities long-term and are relocated to other places across France. This can mean a loss of important contacts, being isolated, and not having access to proper health services, including psychological support for victims of violence.

When the government does address issues of GBV against migrant/refugee women, it frequently adopts a “culturalist” response that focuses disproportionately on issues such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) or forced marriage.

Some health providers report that refugee women are sometimes pushed into FGM reconstruction processes because this is the only “solution” that they are offered even though they have faced multiple forms of violence.