

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.*

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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.¹ 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.² 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.³ 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 2016,⁴ 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,⁵ 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.⁵

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.⁴ 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.⁶ 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.⁷

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[†] 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

[†]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.

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