

Gender in Waiting: Men and Women Asylum Seekers in European Reception Facilities

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This paper is a product of the staff of The World Bank. The findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this work do not necessarily reflect the views of the World Bank, its Executive Directors or the governments they represent.



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Abstract

This paper explores how men and women experience their time waiting for a response to applications for international protection, in asylum seekers' reception centers in Italy and Greece. The experience of waiting in camps can be characterized as one of extended uncertainty, during which women and men live lives in a new environment, with limited physical and social interactions with local communities. Qualitative data collected in early 2017 reveals that these prolonged waits generate various vulnerabilities, some compounding those already caused by trying journeys, which include gender-specific vulnerabilities. In addition, the paper provides an overview of the aspirations men and women asylum seekers hold as they look at the future. These aspirations are informed by pre-existing gender and social norms, but their development appears to be influenced also by the time in waiting. Specifically, aspirations seem constrained for all by the high levels of uncertainty and duration of the legal process, as well as by limited information, and barriers to interactions with local communities. Thus, men and women miss out on opportunities to qualify or broaden their aspirations, as they wait. Taking into account the different challenges and opportunities men and women asylum seekers face may be helpful in devising more targeted and thus effective policies with regards to asylum seekers during this period in waiting.

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Part I. Introduction

Background

In 2015 and 2016 migration flows in and out of countries bordering the Mediterranean increased dramatically compared to previous years. In 2015 alone, more than one million people arrived in the European Union (EU) irregularly by boat, mostly landing in Greece and Italy.¹ Over 850,000 landed in Greece from Syria, followed by Afghanistan and Iraq. Hundreds of thousands of men, women and children crossed the borders of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYR Macedonia) along the Balkan Route, most often headed to Germany and Northern Europe. The dramatic inflow, fueled by the Syrian crisis, resulted in a temporary suspension of the Dublin Regulation,² an EU law establishing that asylum seekers apply for asylum in the country where they first enter the EU. Asylum seekers were thus temporarily able to travel to Central and Northern Europe and to apply for international protection there. The inflow slowed after March 2016, following the EU-Turkey agreement and the closure of the Western Balkan corridor. According to the joint action plan between the EU and Turkey, the EU committed financial and humanitarian assistance, while returning to Turkey those crossing irregularly to Greece.³ This plan limited the number of arrivals into Greece to 173,000 in 2016 and to small magnitudes in 2017. Over the same period (2015-2016), many people from Sub-Saharan Africa crossed the Mediterranean, mostly from the Libyan shores, to Italy. Over 153,000 landed in Italy in 2015 and over 181,000 in 2016, slowing to about 119,000 in 2017. In 2016, the year arrivals peaked, UNHCR data shows that approximately 71 percent of new arrivals to Italy were adult men and 13 percent adult women. In Greece, women comprised a third of adult arrivals in the same period and men approximately forty percent; together, adult arrivals in Greece accounted for 63 percent of the total arrivals.

Close to all arrivals applied for international protection upon arrival, becoming asylum seekers. They did so either in Italy, Greece or in the EU country of final destination if successful in migrating further north after landing. Amongst them were also asylum seekers eligible to apply for relocation to other European countries, mostly on one of two grounds: family reunification, or the EU relocation program introduced in 2015.⁴ A number of nationalities highly likely to receive international protection were included in this program (e.g. Syrians, Iraqis, Eritreans).

The rapid inflow has tested asylum and reception systems across Europe. Asylum seekers often waited several months and up to two and a half years for a final decision on their claims. In Italy, with the exception of Eritreans, those entering the asylum process in 2015 or 2016 would typically only receive a final response over a year (and often close to two years) later. They waited several months for their interview with Territorial Commission or Sub-commissions for International Protection (CTRPI), and in a majority of cases prepared their appeal after a negative response – a process lasting several months. In Greece, many of those who arrived in

¹ All data presented in this paragraph are from administrative sources, in particular UNHCR (Source: UNHCR <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean?id=356> and <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/53876> accessed in January 2018.

² <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32013R0604&from=EN>

³ For details, see <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/#>

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/20170906_relocation_and_resettlement-sharing_responsibility_and_increasing_legal_pathways_to_europe_en.pdf.

late 2015 or early 2016 and did not manage to make their way through the Balkan route were yet to receive a clear legal status as refugees by the time of this fieldwork in early 2017.

During this prolonged wait, asylum seekers were mostly hosted in reception facilities, which represented the fulcrum of their everyday life. In Italy, they consisted of “centers”, while in Greece accommodation was provided in a mix of makeshift camps and more structured accommodation. Asylum seekers were free to leave and re-enter these reception centers, although their proximity to urban centers and transportation varied. Some of these facilities were hosted in cities, with easy access to local communities and markets; but a large number were set up in more remote areas.

A Gender Lens on Time Waiting in Reception Centers

In any given context, a person’s gender can shape their well-being and opportunities to engage in society and labor markets.⁵ These are in part determined by social norms, and in particular gender norms – the established modes of behavior to which conformity is expected by respective genders, and which are internalized and believed. Gender norms can impact men and women’s role and treatment within their households and communities, as well as the way men and women access and experience labor markets, and civic and state institutions. The latter, in turn, shape the choices and freedoms available to men and women (World Bank Group 2012). As they are internalized, gender norms also affect how men and women think about themselves and their available options. A person’s aspirations – broadly understood as their goals for their future and a desire to achieve that goal – are shaped by social norms and learned behavior (Appadurai 2013).⁶ Thus, it is for example observed in many contexts how men and women self-select into different professions while excluding others. Further, where cultures prescribe a more limited role for women in public life, women may also be less prone to access services. This paper thus adopts the approach outlined in the World Bank report *On Norms and Agency*, in urging attention to how social norms drive men and women’s ability to make meaningful decisions on their lives and act upon them (or agency) (World Bank Group 2012).

The role of gender is particularly salient in the context of migration and forced displacement, at every stage of the process. This is true for migrants of all types, including refugees, starting from the decision and ability to migrate in the first place. Conditions in sending and receiving communities, combined with gender norms, can result in migratory flows being dominated by one gender or another. Some studies have argued that in countries with more patriarchal norms, women are less likely to migrate.⁷ The gender of the migrant can shape familial obligations, and thus goals and behaviors post arrival, for example concerning the urgency of finding work, plans for supporting or bringing family, marriage and return (Jolly and Reeves 2005). Gender can also impact prospects for work. In receiving countries, unskilled female

⁵ This report adopts refers to “gender” to the differences between men and women that are socially constructed, in contrast to “sex”, which refers to those differences between men and women that are biologically determined.

⁶ The concept of “aspirations” is multifaceted and has been defined differently across disciplines. The definition adopted here is the broadly accepted one of orientation towards a future goal and their desires to achieve that goal. In this sense, *aspirations* may be distinguished from *expectations*; what people expect will happen (for further discussion, see Tanguy et al. 2014).

⁷ See for example Massey, Fischer and Capoferro 2006 on patterns of men and women’s migration from Central America.

migrants are more likely to enter less regulated sectors than male migrants, and they are also more likely to gain employment below their qualification levels (O’Neil et al. 2016, Fleury 2016). Women migrants are at greater risk of exploitation and abuse (including sexual exploitation) in host communities as well as en route to destination countries, although male migrants, including young boys, are also vulnerable to violence and exploitation (O’Neil et al. 2016; Hennebry 2017).

The experience of migration can also challenge traditional gender roles, as men and women face new challenges and opportunities. Migration is a process with social consequences, including with regards to gender (Pedraza 1991). Women may take a greater role in their families and access new opportunities for workplace participation (Ghosh 2009). Women who enter societies with more liberal gender norms than those in their home countries, reflected in legal frameworks and more inclusive labor markets, are particularly well-placed to reap these benefits (Fleury 2016). However, migration can sometimes have the opposite effect of reifying traditional gender norms, with migrants seeking to preserve and protect the norms to which they are accustomed. This reification is often reactive, as women and men look for a sense of stability in unfamiliar or uncertain environments. Hence, migrants entering a context with more liberal gender norms may find the experience alienating, and retreat further into the domestic sphere (Brettell 2017; Yeoh et al. 2002). Migrant men may feel the need to re-assert their masculinity when faced with new and uncertain contexts, including through destructive behavior (Jaji 2009). Finally, the effects of gender shifts may not be uniform within households. For example, as migrant women enjoy greater empowerment through workforce participation, men may seek to enforce patriarchal norms within the home (Parrado and Flippen 2005). Indeed, the risk of domestic violence against women can also increase in the context of migration (Brettell 2017).

A host of considerations are raised with regards to how gender plays out in the context of extended waits on asylum outcomes, and especially how men and women approach their futures. The experience of living in centers or camps can be thought of as one of “suspension” or “temporariness”, as asylum seekers live lives physically segregated from host communities while awaiting information on their future (Turner 2016; Malkki 1995). Meanwhile, centers and camps can become the nucleus of asylum seekers’ every-day lives and their first and closest contact with the host country for prolonged periods. People live in close proximity to each other (including countrymen and sometimes men and women from other countries), adjust to a new environment, share information and think about the future. If we accept that social norms and aspirations are informed by one’s environment, then disaggregating the ways that men and women experience arrival and reception in Europe, and think about the future, is warranted.

In addition, the experience of waiting may generate new vulnerabilities, which are gendered in their effects. While camps are sites of humanitarian assistance, their conditions can leave men and women vulnerable on many fronts, especially as they live and socialize with each other. Women, for example, may become more vulnerable to gender-based violence and exploitation in camps (Ferris 2007). Violence may also erupt between men, as power relations are negotiated and established (with knock-on effects for women, including through gender-based violence) (Crisp 2000). Meanwhile, continuing family obligations can be sources of hardship and may negatively affect mental health, particularly for women as they are more likely to be

the emotional caretakers for their families and children (Young and Chan 2015; Kawachi and Berkman 2001). Living with uncertainty about the future, particularly in fear of a possible negative outcome, is also known to raise anxiety and therefore negatively impact mental health (Grupe and Nitschke 2013). Uncertainty about legal status contributes as an additional stressor for migrants and refugees (Kirmayer et al. 2011). Poor physical and mental health can negatively affect migrants' prospects for integration, curtail the productive use of their human capital and thus come to a cost to host societies too (OECD 2016). Thus, the need to address these different challenges extends beyond managing immediate humanitarian needs, to fostering men and women's productive entry into host environments.

Research Objective and Contribution

The objective of this paper is to explore how men and women hosted in reception centers in Italy and Greece experience the wait on their claim for international protection. The research focuses on two areas where primary qualitative data is available and useful in informing the policy debate: welfare in asylum centers or camps, and aspirations while in asylum centers or camps. The hypothesis is that the experience of waiting produces or deepens gender-specific vulnerabilities. Further, regardless of opportunities and constraints in Europe, asylum seekers' aspirations will continue to be influenced by gender norms affecting how opportunities are perceived and acted on.

The original evidence presented in this paper can be used to inform our understanding of challenges and opportunities for the inclusion of asylum seekers into labor markets and societies. The increased inflows of people claiming asylum in the EU have generated an intense debate both among policy-makers and civil society at large. Initially, this debate was primarily focused on the short-term, humanitarian dimension of the crisis. But, as large numbers of refugees and migrants continued to arrive in the EU, the discussion has shifted to the long-term view. It has started to focus more on the challenges of supporting the economic and social inclusion of those remaining in the EU.

The qualitative research methods adopted here allow insight into these issues. Social relations, norms and aspirations are by their very nature difficult to extract by quantitative survey data alone. They are particularly well-suited to qualitative research methods, in which interviewees are observed in context and given the opportunity to describe their experiences in their own words. At the same time, this paper complements and is strengthened by the findings of the quantitative survey that provided the backbone of the report "Asylum Seekers in the European Union: Building Evidence to inform Policy-Making" (Abdel Jelil et al., 2018). Therefore, the data presented here is contextualized against the broader characteristics and journeys of asylum seekers entering the EU during this time.

The findings of this paper are timely, as policy debates continue around where and how to host asylum seekers and to manage the economic integration of refugees into the EU. The study here utilizes data collected in Italy and Greece in early 2017. However, the findings might have broader application. Following the influx of refugees into Europe in 2015 and 2016, many EU countries were faced with the challenge of hosting asylum seekers and processing asylum claims. These challenges remain relevant today, likely beyond the Italy and Greece context.

Structure of the Paper

The rest of the paper is structured as follows.

Part II presents a brief overview of the methodology and scope of the work. It is complemented by a Methodological Annex.

Part III provides a short overview of the subjects of this analysis, that is the men and women asylum seekers as the field team met them in centers and camps. It also describes the characteristic of the population of asylum seekers in Italy and Greece at large, drawing on administrative data and the quantitative survey accompanying this work (Abdel Jelil et al., 2018).

Part IV presents evidence on experiences of waiting in camps, highlighting gendered vulnerabilities and coping mechanisms among asylum seekers. Patterns emerge between men and women regarding what they viewed as their stressors in waiting, and the impact these may have on their mental health. The section also zooms in on particular stressors affecting those travelling with families.

Part V then examines how, in this context, men and women think about their future. Attention is given to aspiration as described by asylum seekers at the time of waiting in the reception system. The analysis draws comparisons between genders, with specific reference to the social norms and expectations that influence their aspirations.

Part II. Research Design

This study uses a qualitative data set comprising interviews and focus groups with 257 adult asylum seekers (149 men and 108 women).⁸ Research was conducted in 16 centers in the Athens and Thessaloniki areas of Greece and in Latium and Lombardy in Italy. In Italy, participants were from Eritrea and Somalia (East Africa); Nigeria, Senegal, Mali, Guinea, The Gambia and Cote d'Ivoire (West Africa). In Greece, respondents were from the Syrian Arab Republic (some of them Kurdish), Afghanistan and Iraq (including Yazidis). These countries represent the top countries of origin in 2016 reported in administrative data. They continued to represent the largest share of arrivals for most of 2017. Centers and camps were purposefully selected to reflect a variety of current contexts. Sampling ensured variation in size, nationality mix, proximity to urban areas, and in the case of Italy gender composition (two women-only centers were included). Further details on center selection are included in the Methodological Annex.

Participants were selected to ensure diversity in age and marital status, as well as whether the men and women were travelling alone or with others. The selection of respondents in Italy ensured variation in duration of stay in reception facilities (between one month and about two years). Variation in duration of stay in Greece was extremely limited, as almost the entire population in camps on the Greek mainland arrived in winter 2015/16.⁹ A mix of selection from listing (from center's records), random walk and snowballing was used, depending on the specific circumstances of each center. The former method was relatively more common in Italian centers, while the latter two were relatively more common in Greece. Fieldwork was conducted by highly trained staff.

Two main instruments were used in data collection: in-depth individual interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs). A total of 118 in-depth IDIs and 26 FGDs were conducted. While the structure of instruments was similar, they generated different types of information. The private nature of IDIs enabled elicitation of sensitive data often less feasible in FGDs. FGDs, by contrast, allowed observation of group dynamics, information sharing, dissent and cultural biases. They were split by gender and language. In addition to FGDs and IDIs, researchers carried out key informant interviews at each camp visited. These interviews provided information on issues that could help interpret the data and conduct the fieldwork, with a particular focus on the context of the center and trained personnel's observations of community dynamics.

In order to provide a dynamic view, interviewees were purposefully interviewed on their current and past lives, as well as how they assessed their futures. FGDs and IDIs covered the following three modules: (i) the decision to leave home; (ii) the experience of the journey and displacement; (iii) life in the reception system and plans for the future. While the data in this

⁸ This represents a considerable oversampling of women in both countries. While women represent 15 percent of the adult asylum seekers who arrived via sea to Italy 2016, they constitute over one third of our sample for the country. Similarly, although twice as many adult men compared to women arrived in Greece in 2016, they represent half of our sample. See Methodological Annex for further details.

⁹ Those in this sample tried to make their way to northern Europe, but found the border to the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia closing as they arrived there in the 2015/16 winter.

study mainly presents data from module (iii) on the present situation and forward-look, it draws heavily on the first two in the analysis, especially to assess shifts in aspirations.¹⁰

As well as producing interview transcripts, field teams recorded observational data during the course of interviews; particularly emotions, body language and (in the context of FGDs) any dynamics and tensions within the group. A mixture of coding and interpretive analysis was used in producing this paper.

The research was mindful of protection concerns, given the vulnerabilities of the population under study. Fieldwork followed strict protocols to ensure voluntary participation, understanding of the use of the data, and address cases of distress emerging during the discussions. Pseudonyms have been used throughout this report to ensure anonymity.

Further details on the sample, instruments and coding are available in the Methodological Annex.

¹⁰ The first two modules were the focus of a separate background note to the report “Asylum Seekers in the European Union: Building Evidence to inform Policy-Making” (Abdel Jelil et al., 2018) and are thus not analyzed in depth here.

Part III. Men and Women Asylum Seekers in Greece and Italy

Asylum seekers in this sample share the experience of a common environment and legal process at the time of the fieldwork; but they differ in origin, legal prospects and demographics.

Women and Men Asylum Seekers in Greece

Almost all asylum seekers in Greece arrived from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, through Turkey. These are countries affected by conflict and sectarian violence. According to administrative data, over half of those who landed in Greece in 2016 were from Syria (56 percent), followed by Afghanistan (24 percent) and Iraq (10 percent). Over a third were children travelling with their families. They traveled through Turkey, and in the case of Afghans through Iran, for the most part leaving the Turkish coastal town of Izmir to the Greek islands. As noted above, those in this sample tried to make their way to northern Europe but found the border to the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia closing as they arrived there in the 2015/16 winter. Many among them had settled outside of their countries before moving on to Europe. The quantitative survey accompanying this work found that about a third of Afghans and a fourth of Syrians had settled outside their countries before moving on to Europe.¹¹ Most of those Afghans lived in Iran – some were even born there; while Syrians had mostly settled in Turkey.

Box 1: The case of a Married Woman in Greece

Alia is one of the dozens of Syrian women living in large camps for asylum seekers in Greece at the time of this research. She had just fed breakfast to her three sons before she accepted to be interviewed in her trailer. Her neighbors joined, she made coffee and sat for a long and friendly conversation.

Her aspirations are set: she wants to join her husband in Germany. Her children will finally study and grow up peacefully, while life in the camp made them unruly, she shared. She is focused on a simple objective to get the documentation in order and leave – whatever will come later, they'll handle as a family. "The most difficult challenge will be the language. I don't know how [the Germans] will see me and treat me. But we will overcome the challenges as a family. [...] Maybe [my husband's cousin] will help us." Alia refers to help with accommodation and a job for her husband. Prompted to reflect on her own desire to work, she adds "I didn't work in Syria and I don't know if I will work in Germany. Who knows...?". She remains open to the idea, should need arise; just as she'd been while in Turkey for three years, where she had to work for the first time to make ends meet.

Alia is vocal in expressing her disappointment with the prolonged wait in Greece, which had lasted almost a year at the time of the interview, but seems confident about her future. Though implicitly, she appears to blame her husband for leaving Turkey ahead of her and the rest of the family. She believes he encouraged them to follow only too late, as the border from Greece to FYR Macedonia closed. She finds the responsibility of caring for the three kids during the journey and in Greece to be too challenging for a woman alone. She does not hide, however, the heightened sense of "self-confidence" that she claims Europe inspired. "We are used to having the men take all the responsibility. In Syria, I didn't go outside in my garden alone. Now I have to go shopping by myself."

Source: Qualitative in-depth interview with an asylum seeker in Greece.

¹¹ Abdel Jelil et al., 2018.

In Greece, most asylum seekers traveled with family members. Women represented over a third of adults who landed over 2014-2017 and were usually travelling with male family members.¹²

The vast majority of asylum seekers in Greece traveled with family members, including children (who represented 37 percent of arrivals), spouses or extended family.¹³ The quantitative survey complementing this data collection (EASS 2017, in Abdel Jelil et al. 2018) found that as many as 76 percent of married Afghan asylum seekers were in Greece with their spouses; the figures are respectively 69 percent for Iraqis and 63 for Syrians. Of those who were married but not with their spouses in Greece, most were – like Alia – following spouses already in Europe (at a total of 14 percent of married Syrians, 10 percent of married Afghans and 17 percent of married Iraqis, according to Abdel Jelil et al. 2018). Among qualitative survey participants, this tendency to join and travel with family seemed to cut across families with minor and adult children. In this sample, the majority of married interviewees were aged between 25 and 39 with young children. However, the sample also included men and women between the ages of 40 and 60, travelling with or joining adult children.

Single travelers were much more likely to be male. The EASS suggests that 32 percent of Afghans, 29 percent of Syrians and 27 percent of Iraqis traveled to Greece by themselves – mostly young men under the age of 25. Women travelling on their own (single or married) represented a minority, namely 8 percent of Afghan, 7 percent of Iraqi and 6 percent of Syrian women asylum seekers in Greece. In Greece, less than 2 percent of women were single and traveling alone (Abdel Jelil et al. 2018). Within the qualitative survey, these women tended to comprise separated and widowed women, some of whom described leaving behind difficult family circumstances and ruptured social networks. Married women who were not travelling with their spouses were, by contrast, usually still accompanied by male extended family members, such as brothers and in-laws or adult children.

Gender differences are significant in both education and labor market outcomes for the asylum seeking population in Greece. Married women travelling in this group were more likely to have never worked. Among adult asylum seekers in Greek centers, 29 percent completed secondary education or more. The EASS 2017 finds that primary school completion rates within this population were 74 percent for men and 63 percent for women. It is unsurprising to find women’s participation in the labor market to be also lower: like Alia, only about 28 percent of women from the Syrian Arab Republic, Iraq, and Afghanistan had any jobs before migrating.¹⁴ Prolonged permanence in third countries meant that a number of them had to work in transit. About 6 percent of female asylum seekers in Greece worked during transit. The qualitative survey did not specifically sample for women who had worked during transit, though many shared that they did so during interviews. Women who worked in transit included those with previous work experience and those who had never worked before. This latter group universally claimed they had worked out of economic necessity.

¹² UNHCR data.

¹³ Figures in this paragraph are from the quantitative asylum seeker survey that was conducted between January and May 2017 in Italy and Greece (EASS 2017: European Asylum Seeker Survey). For details, see Abdel Jelil et al 2018.

¹⁴ Abdel Jelil et al. 2018.

The chances to be granted asylum are significantly higher for all three main nationalities present in Greek camps – Syrians, Iraqis and Afghans. Unlike in Italy (except for Eritreans) most of the asylum seekers in Greece awaited relocation to another EU country, be it through the EU relocation mechanism (applicable to Syrians and Iraqis) or family reunification. This added another layer of complication to their asylum procedures and future plans.

Women and Men Asylum Seekers in Italy

Those seeking asylum in Italy at the time of this research were overwhelmingly from Sub-Saharan Africa and traveled through Libya. One-fifth of those landing in Italy were from Nigeria, followed by Eritrea (11 percent), Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire and The Gambia (7 percent each), Senegal and Mali (6 percent each), Sudan (5 percent) and Somalia (4 percent). Almost a fifth of those from West Africa, and about a fourth of those from Eritrea and East Africa had settled elsewhere before coming to Italy (Abdel Jelil et al., 2018). Indeed, not all had originally made plans to travel to Europe; most focused on getting jobs in neighboring countries or Libya. Though describing personalized violence and lack of legal recourse as major reasons for departure, IDIs with West Africans let transpire that hopes for better lives more broadly motivated many to leave. Whether in transit to Europe or settled there, the majority of asylum seekers in Italy traveled through Libya and embarked on the perilous Mediterranean crossing from there.

Box 2: The case of a Single Man in Italy

Mamadou is a 21-year-old Malian man who has been living in an Italian reception center with about 140 other Sub-Saharan African asylum seekers for seven months. He is a bit wary of sharing his story in the beginning, having already “been interviewed by many people”, mostly legal teams. However eventually he becomes comfortable, chatty and happy to speak in his own dialect with the interviewer.

His aspirations are vague, like for most others interviewed in Italy. He’s focused solely on the need to secure documents for a legal permanence in Europe. “I hope I will settle in France some day. I'm still here to get a stay permit. [...] I preferred to stay because I hope to find a job. In France it would be easier because I speak the language. I would also like to go back to school, do some training, start a family in Europe and be integrated in your community, but it will be hard because people here are wary of us migrants. [...] I don't have any preferences about my job, I just want a regular and honest job.”

The same lack of a concrete plan accompanied Mamadou’s decision to leave his village. When Mamadou’s family faced a drought’s impact on their livelihoods, he felt his family blamed him for it; so, he left to show them he could make something of himself and help them financially. The lack of a plan upon departure is a common refrain among asylum seekers in Italy – men and women- who mostly shared discussing with peers options for a better future, and in many cases being told that Libya offered such an opportunity. Few expected the violence and torture that they met in Libya, as Mamadou shares, or the difficulties in getting documents and thus access to work in Europe. He feels relieved to be in Italy and enjoys improved living conditions. He waits to receive a date for the asylum interview. He hopes “to be lucky” and get his permit. In the meantime, he learns Italian and spends time with others in the center.

Source: Qualitative in-depth interview with an asylum seeker in Italy.

In Italy, most asylum seekers traveled alone and were young and unmarried. Women were a distinct minority at 11 percent of arrivals in 2014-2017.¹⁵ The EASS 2017 found that in 2016, 75 percent of arrivals were adult men, most of them under the age of 25.¹⁶ Women comprised approximately 10 percent of arrivals. Like men, they were also mainly under the age of 25. Unlike women in Greece, very few were with spouses or hoping to join spouses. Of all women in Italy, 5 percent were married and with their husbands, 28 percent married but traveling alone and with spouses outside of Europe, and 67 percent unmarried. The qualitative sample broadly reflected this breakdown, and also included separated as well as widowed women within the unmarried category. Eritreans were the only national group of which women comprised a substantial share, at 33 percent of arrivals of their nationality.¹⁷

Very few families traveled together in this population. Where travelers were married, they were more likely to have their spouses in their country of origin. Very few children traveled with their parents to Italy: minors made up 15 percent of arrivals but were mainly unaccompanied. Some of the women interviewed fell pregnant during the journey, sometimes as a result of reported rape, and were living with babies in centers.

Third party reports suggest that a significant number of West African women in Italy are likely trafficked into the sex trade or engaged in sex work in Italy. The IOM estimates that 80 percent of Nigerian women landing in Italy are potential victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation – a phenomenon that has been increasing in recent years.¹⁸ Some of these women appear to have been recruited directly from their home countries, while others are trafficked from third countries in Africa (including Libya) after they leave home. Centre staff confided suspicions that a number of female residents were involved in local prostitution, even though in most cases they struggled to establish this concretely.

Gender gaps in education and previous labor market experience are more moderate among asylum seekers in Italy relative to those in Greece. Among asylum seekers in Italy, about a third report completing at least secondary education – the same share for both men and women.¹⁹ It appears, however, that the concentration of women among the better educated Nigerian and Eritrean nationalities make asylum seeking women in Italy seem relatively more educated on average.²⁰ The EASS survey found that 46 percent of women asylum seekers in Italy had worked prior to leaving. Many more picked up work during the journey. Despite a significant gap with men from the same countries, the share of women who had previously worked is remarkable compared to the one for the Greece-based population: it is almost twice as high. This is even though, as the asylum seeking population in Italy is much younger, many may not yet have had the opportunity to enter the workforce. In qualitative interviews, women in Italy were far more likely than women in Greece to share that they had contributed financially to their households. Indeed, female labor force participation rates in Sub-Saharan Africa are high compared to Syria, Afghanistan or Iraq.

¹⁵ UNHCR.

¹⁶ UNHCR.

¹⁷ All quantitative information in these paragraphs comes from EASS 2017 in Abdel et al. 2018.

¹⁸ IOM, “Human trafficking through the Central Mediterranean route: Data, stories and information collected by the International organization for migration.” Accessed on 21 July 2018.

¹⁹ All figures in this paragraph are from the quantitative survey EASS 2017, reported in Abdel Jelil et al. 2018.

²⁰ Abdel Jelil et al. 2018.

Chances of gaining international protection are low for many of the nationalities surveyed in Italy, in particular for West Africans. Asylum seekers from Eritrea, Somalia and Sudan, instead, are among those with high international protection recognition rates based on historical data. Mandatory conscription and human rights violations are reportedly at the heart of Eritrean men and women's decision to leave, resulting in high shares of asylum claims to be accepted.

Part IV. Gendered Vulnerabilities of Waiting

This section examines the vulnerabilities asylum seekers experience while in waiting. The spatial layout of camps, including their relative segregation from local communities, presented different challenges for men and women. Further, the psychological and emotional burden of waiting without employment and certainty over papers, and in uncomfortable conditions, could generate different effects based on gender. Finally, for those travelling with families or with families at home, strains on – or feelings of not living up to – traditional gender roles emerged as sources of distress. These experiences risk exacerbating existing vulnerabilities linked to asylum seekers' displacement experience.

Common Struggles in Europe

Notwithstanding their different migration trajectories and the varied reception contexts across Italy and Greece, in several key aspects, men and women experienced common challenges while waiting for their asylum claim to be processed.

Interviewees struggled with indeterminate waiting times on their asylum applications, and in many cases unknown outcomes. Their situation could be described as one of uncertainty. Regardless of the merits of an asylum claim, waiting times on responses are often long and uncertain, up to two years or slightly more for many in Italy. In both Italy and Greece, men and women described varying levels of shock and unpreparedness over the complexity of the asylum process and the uncertainty it generated over their right to remain in Europe. "I did not know anything about asylum" shared Fartun from Sudan when asked how Europe compared to her expectations. Like Fartun, many claimed that they only learned of the asylum processes' existence upon arrival. For those hoping to travel quickly further north after landing (i.e. most of the population in Greece) the application of the Dublin Agreement was a particular source of disappointment.

The situation was exacerbated by a piecemeal understanding of the asylum process. Notwithstanding the impact of the asylum system on their lives, asylum seekers often showed patchy awareness of their prospects for asylum or relocation, or the mechanisms that underpinned these legal processes. In interviews, many struggled to explain what stage they were at or the meaning of administrative steps already taken. This was especially true in Greece, where applicants dealt with the additional complexity of relocation, i.e. whether and where they would be relocated outside of Greece. Afghans seemed to understand that Syrians fared better chances of relocation, but struggled to understand why. In Italy, by contrast, applicants were singularly focused on their interviews with the CTRPI. While they also claimed to suffer from uncertain waits, they were more easily able to identify stages in their applications. Some variances in how interviewees understood the process might be attributed to education; however, interviewees also complained of lack of good information and legal support (especially in Greece).

Interviewees from various demographics volunteered that they were experiencing mental health problems in camps. While much of this distress is likely due to experiences pre-departure and en route, qualitative interviews encourage attention to the mental health effects of waiting. In the quantitative survey, both male and female asylum seekers in Italy and Greece were identified

as having elevated levels of mental distress including anxiety and depression.²¹ These scores were linked to the legacy effects of the journey as well as experiences prior to departure. The survey was not able to measure specifically the mental health effects of waiting in camps, due to the low variance in time spent there amongst the sample. However, in the course of qualitative interviews with asylum seekers men and women in both Italy and Greece claimed, unprompted, that waiting was having an adverse effect on their mental health, subjectively defined. In Greece, where quantitative surveys show mental health to be markedly poorer, various interviewees shared anxieties over remaining 'stuck' in Greece or being allocated a country other than their first choice (see Box 3). More generally, interviewees relayed several fears about their futures, such as having their asylum claims rejected, outcomes of relocation, anxieties about integration and prospects for reunification. Research suggests that uncertainty, or rather anticipation of a possible negative event in the future, is positively correlated to emotional distress and anxiety (Grupe and Nitschke 2013), and that uncertainty about legal status contributes to the poor mental health migrants and refugees (Kirmayer et al. 2011).

Box 3: In the Words of a Syrian Asylum Seeker: How Uncertainty Affects Mental Health

Explicit statements about the links between uncertainty and mental health were made unprompted, and often in response to questions related to their lives in camps or hopes for the future. This was the case for Firas, who arrived in Greece with hopes of travelling immediately to Germany. As a Syrian, Firas had relatively good chances of relocation compared with other nationalities. But he shared, "I have hope, but waiting for a year is very hard. I have a lot of thoughts in my mind, and too many thoughts are not good for your health."

Source: Qualitative in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with asylum seekers in Greece and Italy.

These vulnerabilities come on top of existing ones: many were still recovering from traumatic pre-flight experiences as well as shocks endured along the journey. Men and women related physically and emotionally straining journeys, full of dangers and high cost. Most in Italy had passed through Libya, universally described as the most difficult and traumatic experience they had had. Here, there were high levels of reported violence, including rape and Gender Based Violence (GBV), which was primarily reported by women. But virtually all men in qualitative interviews also related experiencing or at the very least witnessing violence – from beatings to torture. These men and women's accounts are consistent with third party reports on the matter.²² As a consequence of the journey and previous traumas like conflict, death of relatives and others, asylum seekers found themselves dealing, often unaided, with mental health issues. Abdel Jelil et al. (2018) present a more detailed report on the journey's challenges and mental health, also based on this qualitative dataset.

Children asylum seekers were not interviewed in this study. However, parents within the asylum seekers population raised concerns about the effects of the journey and waiting in camps on their children, especially as regards to structure and education. These worries are described as additional stressors for parents. In Italy, most children accompanied by parents were very young and not yet of schooling age. In Greece, education for children at the time of the

²¹ See Abdel Jelil et al., 2018, for results and methodology.

²² See Amnesty International 2015. "Libya is full of Cruelty": Stories of Abduction, Sexual Violence and Abuse from Migrants and Refugees."

fieldwork was not mainstreamed: arrangements to provide schooling to children of families seeking asylum had started in some centers at the time of fieldwork, including tailored classes in the local schools, and took different forms in each locality. As well as worrying about education opportunities, adult asylum seekers were concerned about the lack of structure in their children's daily lives and ensuing behavioral problems, such as anger outbursts, increased violent fighting amongst siblings and other children in the camp, and speaking back to parents. Asylum seeking parents in Greece also reported behavior associated with trauma in children, such as crying, being withdrawn and bed wetting, often with reference to journeys to Europe. "My children have gone through a lot and my youngest is traumatized by the experience," shared Mina from Syria. "I try to cheer them up and make them look towards the future and look forward to arriving to Germany." In addition to these issues, parents in camps suggested they took out the stresses of their situations on their children or – as suggested by the Afghan man above – that arguments between spouses were adversely affecting children.

Interviews suggested high levels of reliance on camp services, coupled with feelings of disconnect with the outside world. For most, life was centered around camps – whether for receipt of services, information, recreational activities, learning or social interactions. In both Italy and Greece, asylum seekers were based in open centers from which they could move freely, and many in fact described doing so for specific purposes such as visiting doctors or shopping. In practice, however, most claimed that they spent much of their time within centers or camps. When probed, reports of socializing or friendships with persons outside of migrant communities or camp staff were limited. Many factors might have affected this state of affairs. In particular, the vast majority of asylum seekers interviewed were not working and had low levels of local language skills or other languages in common with the local population (e.g. English), which limited pathways for interaction outside of migrant communities.

Centers appear to provide a perception of safety and the opportunity to interact with people from similar background and experiences. Some, especially men, also suggested that discrimination resulted in limited opportunities to interact with locals – or even active avoidance of such interactions. Emos, a man from Ghana shared, "I have no problem [with the local people], but sometimes I feel discriminated. Sometimes when I sit on the bus some people don't want to sit beside me. They prefer standing." Similarly, a Nigerian woman explains her uneasiness at leaving the center, linking it to her perception of being profiled: "Sometimes I feel bad being a black woman in Italy. It's like everyone presumes you are a prostitute."

Gendered Encounters in Centers and Local Communities

Life in camps presented a new form of living for many of the men and women interviewed, both in terms of proximity to other asylum seekers, and in terms of interaction with local communities. Disaggregation of data shows how these new interactions produced gender-specific challenges, despite seemingly similar contexts.

In both Italy and Greece, asylum seeking men and women lived for the most part in mix-gendered camps. Mix-gendered living was a source of concern for women in Greece, on both normative and safety grounds. Some women described limiting their movements within camps, including to use amenities. In Italy, where travelers tended to be single, centers could more easily segregate men and women; and some centers were women-only. In Greece, families and single

men tended to live side by side in trailers or tents. Women in Greece alluded to the challenges of this type of mix-gendered living. Some voiced concern about 'signaling' the wrong type of attention from men, causing rumors that could affect their reputation or even encourage sexual harassment. Some asylum seeking mothers, for example, described limiting the activities of their daughters purposefully. Women travelling on their own showed particularly high levels of concern for their own safety and reputation. One such woman, also Syrian, shared: "I don't go outside the trailer...you know I am a woman without her husband and I don't want people to talk about me." These statements illustrate a continuation of existing gender norms; for many segments of Syrian, Afghan and Iraqi societies spatial segregation of unrelated men and women is valued, and a moral imperative for women (Anderson 1982, El Guindi 1999). Upholding these standards was a source of strain in the close-quartered and mix-gendered context of camps, though women's primary concern seemed to be the reaction of other asylum seekers with whom these norms held social capital. Illustrating this, one woman explained why she wouldn't let her daughter leave their trailer unaccompanied: "For me we are still in Syria because we are surrounded by Arabs here and Arab men...".

Sexual violence was alluded to as a concern throughout the Greece asylum seekers' sample, but few explicit examples were given. Cultural biases and situational factors appeared to influence the ways this information was reported or suppressed. The data here is unable to test whether there was a greater risk of sexual violence to women in camps than in home countries. Third party reports concur that sexual harassment is prevalent in Greece's camps, against women and young men and boys, and is likely to be underreported.²³ In interviews, sexual harassment was alluded to but only with regards to women, and even then, very few concrete examples were given in the absence of targeted probing. Women may have faced several barriers to reporting GBV. For victims of sexual violence among the main nationalities represented in Greece (Syrian, Afghan, and Iraqi), there is considerable social shame in revealing oneself as a victim or in identifying someone as a perpetrator (OHCHR 2018, UNAMA 2009, ICESCR 2015). Further, research on GBV reporting suggests that people are less likely to report sexual violence within communities or people they know, even though perpetration by non-strangers is more likely (Williams 1984). This was evident in the dynamics of camp life and in the FGD interactions. As well as potentially inviting social sanction from other asylum seekers, reporting GBV could also result in extraction from the only social networks asylum seekers had. In one of the few instances of sexual harassment explicitly reported in Greece, an Afghan woman shared in a focus group, "Some Arabs attacked my daughter, so they moved us from the camp to an apartment. But I was so lonely there that I returned to the camp. I need to talk to people." As her words suggest, indeed, in Greece, where the asylum seeking population was comprised mainly of families, asylum seekers displayed high levels of sociality with each other, especially within national communities.

Asylum seeking women in Italy generally described feeling safe in their camps, sometimes drawing a direct contrast to their experiences in Libya. "I am really happy now," described Doris from Nigeria, "because if I am walking on the road, I don't have to run if I see the police. When I saw police in Libya I had to run, they would have arrested me for no reason." Doris had told the interviewer at length about her fears of imprisonment and rape in Libya. Like many of the women who had spent time in Libya, this fear ultimately materialized for Doris; she shared that

²³ See for example Digidiki and Bhabha (2017) on the abuse of child migrants in Greece.

she was raped in Libya on two separate occasions (see Abdel Jelil 2018). Compared to Greece, many of the camps and centers in Italy were more centrally located. For this and cultural factors, female asylum seekers in Italy – while often claiming that their main social circles were within other migrant communities – described leaving the camps on a more frequent basis including for recreational purposes.

However, camp staff raised concerns about risk of sex work in local communities. While figures from IOM and statements from camp staff suggested that the number of women involved in sex work was high, none of the asylum seeking women interviewed volunteered they engaged in sex work. Box 4 provides insights on how observational data and triangulation of responses can however provide insights on such sensitive issues. As sites of humanitarian assistance, centers might be particularly well-placed to identify and assist these vulnerable women if equipped with the right resources. This includes mitigating the risk that women are groomed for sex work from centers or camps (Rigon and Erikson 2016). Data collected in one-on-one interviews was suggestive of the ways in which the needs of asylum seeking women made them particularly open to the help of strangers. Mary from Nigeria for example spoke of a male friend she had serendipitously made outside her camp. Their new friendship was based entirely on his provision of assistance: “...he started to help me, to give me clothes, shoes...he does things for God not to have sex with me, he can buy me some food.” Most of the West African women interviewed were travelling alone without husbands or other family members to help them financially or emotionally. Similar narratives accompany these women’s explanation on their decision to leave and how the opportunity arose: a stranger they happened to meet wanted to help them and financed their journey.²⁴ Virtually all of them came from contexts of vulnerability and weak social networks. They all ended up exploited for sex in Libya – and it would seem many run a similar risk once in Europe.

Box 4: The Importance of Listening to Silences: Talking about the Sex Trade

In analyzing interview data, it is important to pay attention to what people chose to talk about even unprompted as well as the topics they chose to remain silent on. In interviews with asylum seekers in Italy, one such topic was local sex work.

Of the 60 female asylum seekers interviewed in Italy across IDIs and FGDs, only two raised the topic of sex work in Italy. They did so only to make the unprompted claim that they were not working as prostitutes themselves. One of these two women claimed she knew of others in the center who were working as “prostitutes”. These two women spoke in the privacy of IDIs. In FGDs, where women answered questions in the presence of each other, nobody raised the topic of prostitution in Italy. In fact, FGDs with Nigerian women, the nationality most vulnerable to fall victim to sex trafficking, proved particularly difficult to facilitate and elicit information from on most topics. High levels of distrust among participants were visible. Some key informants working in the centers confirmed distrust or tensions between these women arising from engagement versus non-engagement in those activities.

By contrast, in both FGDs and IDIs female respondents volunteered experiences of sex trafficking and prostitution in Libya, even if they found the details difficult or traumatic to relay. Their accounts corroborate third-party reports within Libya (IOM 2017, Amnesty International 2015). This experience was widely shared and widely known, so nobody seemed uncomfortable admitting their

²⁴ Background note to Abdel Jelil et al., 2018.

exposure to such trauma in front of others. Interviewers however did not see signs of talking about it with a view of seeking comfort from others or from interviewers. There was a sense among interviewers that these narrations had been shared several times before, possibly in the context of preparing their case for international protection. No woman claimed that they had left their home countries with the intention to work in the sex trade in Libya. Instead, they usually described being pushed into or directly trafficked into the industry locally.

The above is illustrative of the sensitivities of getting asylum seeking women to talk about involvement in the sex trade, especially where doing so in conditions of exploitation by criminal organizations could jeopardize their physical safety, income or, in some countries, immigration status. Yet, professionals should be able to identify such cases and vulnerabilities arising from it without much difficulty.

Source: Qualitative in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with asylum seekers in Italy.

Male asylum seekers were far more likely than women to say they felt discriminated against by locals, usually claiming that locals were scared or mistrustful of them. Research within Europe has also shown that while both men and women migrants are vulnerable to discrimination, male migrants are particularly prone to discrimination that labels them as threats (Birchall 2016; Jolly and Reeves 2005). In this sample, the most commonly perceived grounds for discrimination in Greece was fear of Muslims and Arabs; and in Italy, mistrust of black Africans. A Syrian man raised his perception of discrimination: “Many think refugees are beasts, that Syrians like war and are terrorists. We are not, we are normal. If I am a Muslim, it does not mean I am a terrorist!”.

Significantly, interviewees usually raised discrimination to explain why their interactions with locals remained limited. This can be seen in the case of Drisa from Mali, for example, who contrasts his friendship with other migrants to discrimination from Italians. He told us: “People here [in Italy] are wary of migrants...When I go out and meet Italians, I can feel they don't like me and this makes me sad. [...] I stay only with other migrants, especially the ones living at the center, we all get on well together.” In Italy and Greece, asylum seekers described little opportunity to interact with locals outside of the humanitarian context of camps – for example socially or in the context of employment, education or otherwise. While its precise incidence is difficult to measure, discrimination is recognized as key obstacle to immigrants’ full integration, including in labor markets (OECD 2013). Perceptions of discrimination among migrants and asylum seekers can stagger their efforts at social inclusion.

Rupture and Continuation in Gender Roles

In camps, asylum seeking men and women found themselves living lives quite different from those they had left behind, with many of their usual resources for emotional support absent and their expected roles challenged. For those travelling with spouses, most common in Greece, the spouse could be a considerable source of emotional support, but life in camps and the stress of migration could pose strains on family life as well.

Male asylum seekers were particularly vocal about their struggles with boredom and unemployment while waiting in camps. These struggles extended beyond financial concerns into broader feelings of failure. Men linked unemployment to feeling useless and lacking purpose.

Comments like, “we do nothing here” (Malian man), “my life is nothing here” (Eritrean man) or “there is nothing to do here” (Afghan man) were scattered across the sample. Young men with no previous work experience had arrived with big hopes of “starting their lives” in Europe and expressed disappointment of delayed or (especially in the case of Greece) dashed dreams. (See more on aspirations in Part V below). It is not uncommon for asylum seekers to face unemployment in host countries. However, for male migrants, unemployment can be felt as a substantial loss of status and a rupture with pre-conceived notions of masculinity, as they are more likely to identify as providers or potential providers (Jolly and Reeves 2005; World Bank 2012). Studies suggest that – unlike women – male migrants are more likely to cut down contact with spouses still in countries of origin, in cases of unemployment (Brettell 2017). Some husbands travelling alone ahead of their spouses explicitly described doing this, possibly adding to their emotional isolation. James from Nigeria for example, stated that he didn’t “like” to contact his family because he was not in a position to “help” them. These revelations were more common in the privacy of IDIs, although in some FGDs men raised the topic and even comforted each other.

The frustrations male asylum seekers felt over their situation in general seemed to spill over to others in camps, sometimes in the form of physical violence. Both men and women in the sample talked about problems experienced at the hands of men. But women also describe tensions between each other, especially as they stood in food lines and argued over the fairness in distribution of resources. In Greece and Italy, camp staff and interviewees described gaslighting and in-fighting between young male asylum seekers.

Veiled reports of husband-on-wife domestic violence, commonly blamed by interviewees on the stress of displacement, emerged among asylum seekers in Greece. Reports of domestic violence between spouses were not as forthcoming, and only alluded to as “fights” between spouses or spoken about in relation to “others”. Shahnaz from Afghanistan shared for example, “Thank God I don’t have problems with my husband. But there are many couples in the camp that are having problems. There are cases of physical abuse that they had to call the police.” To the extent it exists, it cannot be excluded that, for many families, domestic violence was a pre-existing issue and not one that emerged in the migration process. Tellingly, in focus groups and interviews, Syrian, Somali, Ivorian and Afghan women made positive comments about laws protecting women against domestic violence in Europe, or – in one case – even asked facilitators to corroborate the existence of these laws. As such, domestic violence is a welfare issue to be addressed in its own right, and with sensitivity to the dynamics of different migrant communities. However, the stresses of life in camps are likely to exacerbate the frequency of domestic violence and put women at risk. Indeed, domestic violence exerted by husbands on their wives in Greek camps has elsewhere also been linked to men’s desires to preserve status (Brettell 2017).

Box 5: Young Male Asylum Seekers on their Own

In Italy the majority of asylum seekers are young single men. The average age of the West African population, mostly male, is 24 (Abdel Jelil et al., 2018). In Greece, according to the same source, single men represented 16 percent of the asylum seeking population, and they come mostly from Afghanistan and Syria. Most single men had spent their lives pre-departure living in their family homes and many had never worked. At the time of the interview, they were living alone for the first time and in a foreign country. Especially during IDIs, some young asylum seeking men became visibly

emotional when talking about their current lives in Europe, or of how they missed their families. Some suddenly broke down crying, displayed strong anger or other signs of stress such as shaking or distraction. The source of their distress seemed to extend far beyond loneliness, to feeling a sudden weight of responsibility. As one Ivorian man shared in an FGD to the agreement of the other participants, “we have to make all our decisions on our own now.”

Young asylum seeking men drew on several resources to help them through this time, such as recreational activities or the friendship and practical support of other men in the camp. However, second-hand reports suggest that some young men also channeled their frustration in destructive ways. There were reports of fights between young male asylum seekers in particular, especially along ethnic lines, as well as reports of young men falling victim to drugs. Where migration destabilizes pre-conceived notions of masculinity, it is not unusual for men to seek out alternative constructions of masculinity, for example by engaging in new and destructive behaviors (Jaji 2009; Crisp 2000).

Source: Qualitative in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with asylum seekers in Greece and Italy.

Asylum seeking men reacted positively to opportunities for learning and recreational activities. Where available, men seemed to react positively to learning and skills-based activities in camps, which could be a productive way to channel their time and build self-esteem. These activities seemed to be relatively better received – and desired – by younger asylum seeking men.

Female asylum seekers with families shared the difficulties of continuing domestic roles in camps, especially in Greece, citing this as a source of stress. Social ties can be a source of stress for women in particular, as they are more likely to occupy roles of emotional caretakers for their husbands and children (Kawachi and Berkman 2001; Young and Chan 2015). Based on observational data in Greece, asylum seeking women were frequently busy standing in food lines or collecting supplies such as toiletries or accompanying their children in the long walks to the toilet. Interviews had to be carefully planned so as not to interfere with these activities, while for men this was far less of an issue. “We have wasted one year in food lines” shared Shazia, echoing statements of other women in the camps.

However, probing and observational data suggests that female asylum seekers also derived comfort in continuing these roles where there were means to do so. Travelling with family can be one source of resilience and emotional support. As much as being a source of stress, it appeared that some female asylum seekers found emotional comfort in domestic roles. Continuation of such roles appears to represent a welcomed source of certainty to hold on to at a time of otherwise heightened uncertainty. A lack of suitable cooking facilities in camps, where women could prepare meals for themselves and their families, was cited as an issue by asylum seeking women more than men. While these complaints stemmed in part from perceptions about the poor quality of food in camps, clearly for some women preparing and cooking food was a source of comfort. Joyce from Nigeria for example – who had traveled with her husband – shared her envy of women from her camp who had been selected to live in accommodation where they were granted their own cooking facilities. She shared, “They are very happy now, they cook for themselves [...] I feel a bit jealous. I hope my husband and I will have an opportunity like this.” Some women even went to great lengths to establish normalcy for themselves and their families, for example by decorating their trailers or preparing

homemade condiments to accompany camp-administered food.²⁵ Mothers among asylum seekers in the Italy sample spoke in relatively favorable terms of their family lives in Italy, citing calm and assistance especially in centers designed for vulnerable women or families, or in other centers where facilities for children were provided.

In contrast, male asylum seekers linked unemployment to a decreased role in their families. Married men travelling with their families were concentrated in Greece. These families of asylum seekers tended to describe traditional breadwinner models, where wives stayed at home and men worked. They were also more likely to describe men as the de facto decision-makers in the migration decision, possibly increasing men’s moral responsibility over migration outcomes. Alia’s story above is one example of how, indeed, wives may attribute their spouse’s responsibility of the choices that led them to a state of limbo in Greece (see Box 1). Some husbands in Greek camps shared feelings of shame about not yet being able to meet their family’s daily needs. Men travelling with families spoke of shame at not being able to provide for their wives and children, sometimes citing the difficulties of seeing their families rely on humanitarian assistance. One Afghan man, for example, spoke of how difficult he found watching his daughter accept sweets or treats from camp staff; “It hurts my pride. In that moment I become shattered with shame”. These feelings seemed to be broadly acknowledged by male and female asylum seekers alike.

Box 6: In Asylum Seekers’ Own Words: The Effects of Migration on Men and Women Travelling with Spouses

Below are extracts of FGDs conducted with married Afghan men and women whose spouses were in the same camp. It is telling of the strain migration poses on family relations. Interviewees were responding to the question, “Do you think this experience has affected relationships in your family? How so?”. Participants were probed to consider the question in relation to individual members of their families.

Female Asylum seekers

Woman 1: It is very hard for men.

Woman 2: Men made the decision to come. No woman would have made this decision. So, they feel responsible for our situation.

Woman 3: They help us wash the clothes. They help us with the housework. But they have no work. This is very hard for them.

Male Asylum seekers

Man 1: It is hardest for the women. We men spend our time together in this trailer, but they take care of the children.

Man 2: It is hard for women because they see the effects on their children.

Man 3: When I’m sad, my wife is sad. We get angry. And our kids see the sadness in us and our arguments.

Source: Focus group discussions with asylum seekers in Greece.

²⁵ Not all of the camps visited in Greece had cooking facilities or permitted cooking, and so residents were dependent on food administered by camps. All centers visited in Italy provided food directly, with no cooking facilities.

Part V. Gender Norms and Aspirations while Waiting

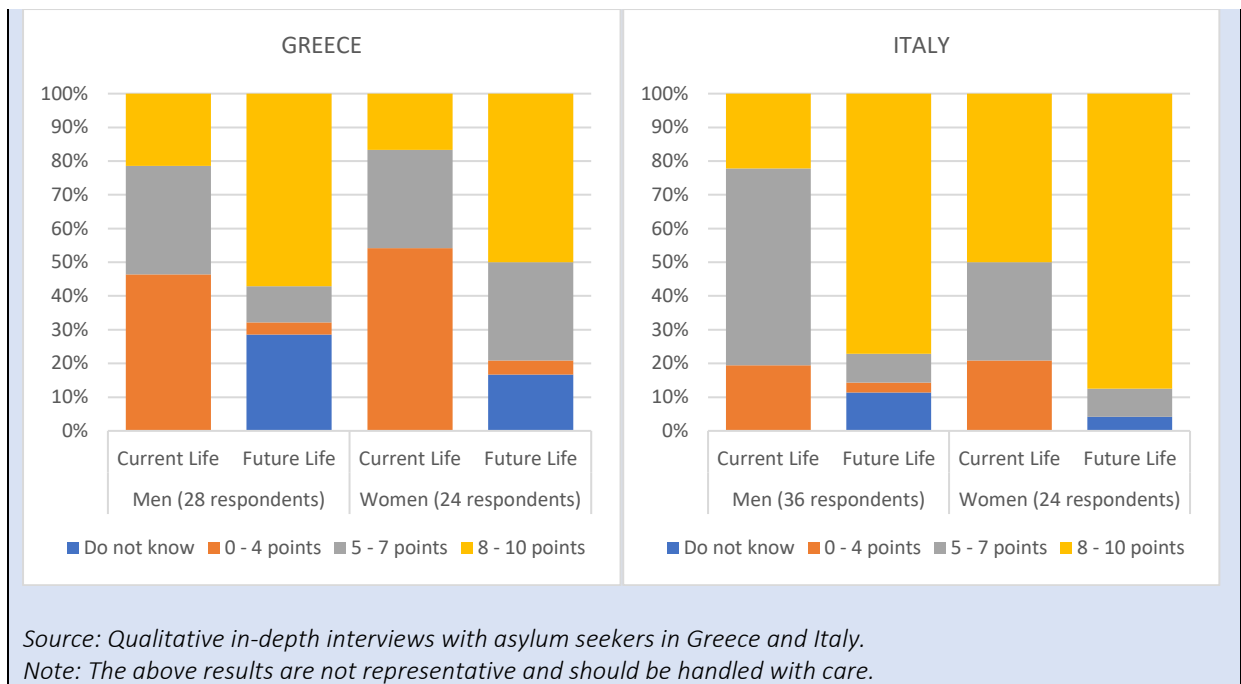
Notwithstanding the difficulties of waiting, asylum seekers interviewed for this study shared faith in the availability of work, education, economic and physical security in Europe. The main hurdles to realizing these goals were viewed as bureaucratic: receiving papers, leaving camps and (where relevant) securing relocation to a country of choice. In in-depth interviews, we asked male and female asylum seekers to score their *perceived* well-being from 0-10 at various stages of their lives: before they took the decision to migrate, just as they were leaving their home countries, during the journey (en route in major transit countries), at present and two years into the future. Interviewees were also invited to share the reasons behind their scores. Regardless of the declared reasons for leaving their home countries, and regardless of how easy or difficult they found waiting in reception centers, respondents almost unanimously assessed that their lives would improve within the next two years. This expectation was often caveated with successful completion of the asylum process, obtaining work permits, moving out of camps and (where applicable) reunification with family and relocation to other European countries. However, in response to the considerable uncertainty they foresaw in these domains, some struggled or refused to score their futures all together (see Box 7).²⁶

Box 7: Perceptions of Well-being at Present and in the Future

In Greece, almost half of the men and over half of the women seeking asylum scored their current lives in camps poorly (0-4 points). They linked this low score to uncertainty over timing and destination of relocation and conditions in camps. Those who graded their current lives poorly were more likely to not score their futures. All those who did score their futures, however, believed their wellbeing would improve over the next two years, stressing that this was conditional on relocation from Greece.

In Italy, asylum seekers were more positive about their current lives, citing care they received from centers' staff and relief at being in Europe and, for many explicitly, not in Libya. Far fewer asylum seekers here shared concerns over relocation or final destination common in the Greece sample. A large share of women declared they reached the maximum possible level of wellbeing in reception centers, and they expected it to continue in the future. However, securing work permits was a major source of concern. Improvements were anticipated upon receiving such documentation, especially among asylum seeking men.

²⁶ Respondents were not presented with the option of not scoring their futures. Significantly, refusal of scoring was an alternative that interviewees insisted on in interview.



Gendered Horizons

As asylum seekers spoke about their futures, different patterns emerged on what men and women hoped their lives would look like. The fact that these differences exist is not surprising: gender norms not only affect behavior overtly, for example through social customs or laws, but by being internalized. Accordingly, they can affect the extent to which men and women imagine, or allow themselves to imagine alternative futures or, in other words, their “capacities to aspire” (Appadurai 2013; see also Carling and Collins 2018).

During interviews, asylum seeking men and women were asked to share their hopes and aspirations for the future: while men were singularly focused on securing work opportunities in both Italy and Greece, women’s aspirations were more stratified depending on nationality, marital status and age. Work was a top priority for women traveling to Italy, who were overwhelmingly single travelers or women with families back home. Among asylum seekers in Greece, instead, it was more common to meet women who had never worked and who had no intention of working. This contrast reflects the difference in female labor force participation rates for women in countries of origin: well below 20 percent for the nationalities found in Greece, namely Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis, but 45 to 79 percent for those in Italy.²⁷ It also reflects the nature of migration to Greece as opposed to Italy. In Greece, where most women had accompanied husbands or other male relatives, qualitative interviews suggest that they had taken the migration decision with these men or on their orders. Regardless of their desire to work, none of the men or women interviewed were in formal employment or full-time education.²⁸

²⁷ See World Development Indicators (participation rate 15+ years old, ILO modelled).

²⁸ The 1951 Geneva Convention and 1967 Protocol give working rights to asylum seekers (and refugees) while their applications are being reviewed. However, bureaucratic hurdles, lack of appropriate skills, limited work opportunities and information barriers about jobs can hinder this in practice.

The way asylum seeking men spoke about work in particular suggests a high degree of openness as to possibilities for the future, combined with a lack of knowledge about available opportunities. Male asylum seekers were more likely to raise finding a job as a top priority when asked about their hopes for the future, albeit after they got their papers. However, when probed for more details, they revealed not knowing what type of work they would like to do. Even where specific goals were articulated, respondents would qualify their answers with the need to ‘wait and see’ what was available. This apparent non-commitment may have been a strategy of navigating an uncertain environment, particularly as knowledge of available opportunities seemed low. Only few men in Greece, and even fewer in Italy, raised prospects of specific work through familial or other diaspora contacts.

Aspirations seemed to be particularly high, but at the same time ill defined, amongst young asylum seeking men (those aged between 18 and 25). In talking about their migration decision, young men in Italy and also in Greece (though especially from Afghanistan) described frustrations starting lives in their home countries and contrasted this with positive perceptions of life in Europe, particularly the prospect for work and education. These ideas were, however, described in vague terms. In Italy and Greece, asylum seekers’ strong perception of work and education opportunities in Europe seemed to continue largely unqualified also after arrival.²⁹ These young men’s aspirations could be at once well-articulated but shifting. Many expressed thoughts similar to this Nigerian man for example, who helped in his family’s shop prior to his migration: “Gardening is ok, but I also want to learn law, I need to speak a good Italian, and go back to university to continue my study. But today I thought also I could become a heater technician.” Like him, some expressed desires for further education but with no consideration of whether and how their qualifications from home would convert locally. These statements point to high aspirations for work combined with information gaps on work opportunities and skills match. More subtly, while waiting in camps men displayed limited opportunity to qualify or test the feasibility of their aspirations, or to build skills.

Some male asylum seekers were explicitly critical of the lack of opportunities to build skills in camps. For example, Jean a 23-year-old man from Senegal shared, “I would like Italians give more integration means to migrants, for instance more Italian classes, vocational training.” More subtly, while waiting in camps men gave no indication that they had received opportunities to qualify or test the feasibility of their aspirations, or to build skills. Overall, statements about the quality of language classes were more positive in Italy than in Greece. However, asylum seekers in Italy (and mainly the men) expressed dismay that there was little to do outside of these classes.

For lower skilled female asylum seekers looking for immediate entry into the job market, mention of work in low-skilled, typically ‘feminized’ sectors, was relatively high. In this sample, such profile fit most West African women. Mentions of professions such as domestic work, low-skilled services such as cleaning or kitchen work, or care work were virtually absent among male asylum seekers. Women’s self-selection into these gendered professions so early in the migration process – prior to receipt of work permits and, in most cases, less than a year after arrival – is in striking contrast to the more open attitudes displayed by men above. Further investigations would be needed to understand what drives lower and seemingly more informed

²⁹ Although those in Greece tended to associate these opportunities with northern European countries.

aspirations on work opportunities among these women. Available literature suggests this may be linked to higher risk aversion amongst women relative to men, persisting gender norms, or a greater need for safety – among others.³⁰ Few seemed to have considered other opportunities. In fact, some seemed to explicitly exclude job search beyond these sectors, such as Georgette from Ghana, who shared “For us blacks, we don’t have access to any office job. We will have to do any job...Maybe I will work in a hotel, a restaurant, cleaning...”. In practical terms, sectors such as domestic work can provide female migrant workers with quick avenues to employment, and indeed most migrant domestic workers are women (ILO 2015). By its nature however domestic work can relegate female migrants and refugees to a lower socio-economic status in host countries and underutilize their existing skills and qualifications (Fleury 2016; Ghosh 2009). Domestic labor is in fact less well-paid and less regulated than other sectors in many countries (including across Europe). This puts women at physical and financial risk, with potential to affect their welfare for the long term. Such vulnerabilities can also weaken or sustain a lower level of agency within the household (Jolly and Reeves 2005). Indeed, even highly skilled female migrants risk being employed in lower skill jobs (O’Neil et al. 2016).

Women traveling on their own indeed overwhelmingly described desires to work, but also shared vulnerability profiles. As mentioned in Part III, the majority of women who traveled on their own were in Italy rather than Greece. Many of these asylum seeking women described backgrounds where they had either worked or had been compelled to fend for themselves, such as through the death of parents, divorce, single motherhood, or being widowed. Fali, a 22-year-old woman from the Gambia, for example, had held two part-time jobs as a hairdresser and waitress while she lived alone and took care of her son from a previous relationship. Patterns observed in this dataset suggest that West African women in precarious work and with limited social networks upon departure were particularly vulnerable to sex trafficking (see also IOM 2015). Promises of easy employment and immediate gains, typically extended by strangers at a time of need, appear to have lured them to leave. Faced with difficulties in securing good jobs, they may fall victims of exploitation by similar criminal networks. Though difficult, time in centers offers a unique opportunity to shape aspirations of these and other asylum seeking women, preventing negative labor market outcomes. For further discussion, see also Part IV above.

When asked about their hopes for the future, it was not uncommon for female asylum seekers to raise marriage and domestic lives as an aspiration – whether married or not. Women who had been homemakers in their country of origin spoke exclusively in these terms, even if they had worked in transit. Female asylum seekers talked about their hopes for a return to a peaceful family life, to see their children grow up and gain education in Europe, and to leave their camps and have their own homes. A large share of women in Greece aspired to join older sons, or even husbands, living in other countries Europe and had put in applications for relocation. It was not unusual for these women to immediately raise reunification with their families as a primary hope for their futures.

³⁰ Within the behavioral sciences there is broad agreement that women are more risk averse than men (see Borghans et al. 2009). The sample here is unable to speak to this finding. However, even if this is true, cross-cultural attitudes to risk are to be expected (see Boholm 2003).

Prospects for Change

Some asylum seeking women were explicit in their perception of a more equitable environment for women in Europe, for example with regards to workforce participation or personal rights. Further studies will be required to map how gender norms shift for men and women from these communities over time. Data here suggests that when female asylum seekers did question gender roles – for example by considering different professions or prospects for workplace entry – this was often on the basis of hearsay and information sharing between themselves, rather than being formally introduced to the topic in camps and centers. This points to missed opportunities in formally introducing women to the full range of their options.

Box 7: Hopes for Daughters

During interviews, asylum seekers were asked to share their hopes and aspirations for their children or – if they were travelling without children – of children they might have one day. The answers were often revealing of deeper gender norms, and the new opportunities asylum seekers felt would be available for their children in Europe.

Several female asylum seekers began reflecting explicitly on prescriptive gender norms or laws in their home countries while considering opportunities for their daughters in Europe. Such reflections usually referenced asylum seeking women’s own experiences and were usually shared *before* the women had been asked to consider different responses for their sons and daughters. The primary concern revolved around forgoing education and the effects of enforced or early marriage. In one focus group with Afghan asylum seekers, the women began crying and comforting each other as they described their arranged marriages, while under the age of 13. One said, “I came here so my daughter wouldn’t be like me” while another added, “[By coming here] we wanted to create a situation in which our daughters could flourish.” This sentiment – that Afghanistan was not good for girls – was echoed by many of the Afghan asylum seeking women we spoke to, who complained of the lack of educational opportunities and forced marriage. Ivoirians were another group concerned with the effects of forced marriage on their daughters. Where they were traveling with daughters, these same populations reacted positively to education opportunities available in camps, where available. Although they were also mindful of the challenges of bringing up daughters in camps (see Part IV).

Among both male and female asylum seekers, marriage and family were more likely to be raised as specific aspirations for daughters even if alongside education. Boubou a man from Senegal shared, “One day, if I have a daughter I would wish she has a good marriage and is loyal with everybody. If it was a boy I would wish he succeeds and does not have to suffer like me.” Just as Boubou ascribed ‘loyalty’ as one desirable attribute for girls, others were also more morally prescriptive when it came to their daughters over their sons. For example, one Syrian Kurdish woman – also a mother of sons – expressed her hopes for her daughter as such: “I will not let my daughter come back home at 4 am like German girls. We have our traditions.” She did not express similar concerns for her sons.

Source: Qualitative in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with asylum seekers in Greece and Italy.

None of the asylum seeking women who had previously been homemakers raised the possibility of their own labor market entry unless probed by interviewers. When probed on whether they planned on working in Europe, these women rarely responded in the affirmative; they either refused or said they were open to the possibility. Some were forthright in saying that they had no intention of working. Where female asylum seekers did seem open to the idea of working, their responses were often caveated. For example, in one focus group with Syrian women all

of whom were homemakers, the women emphatically agreed that they would work if they “had to”, suggestive of the view that working would be outside the norm for them or not ideal. Reticence over work is indicative of internalized restriction as opposed to external restriction, so of broader norms or learned action. Only a minority of husbands in the Greece asylum seekers’ sample also told us matter-of-factly that their wives were not going to work. “I don’t know if my husband will let me work or make me stay at home when I get to Germany,” said one Kurdish-Syrian woman in a focus group discussion.

Some of the homemakers among the interviewed asylum seekers had worked for the first time in transit. These experiences did not obviously translate into a desire to work in the future. This first-time workplace experience in Turkey was commonly framed as an aberration from the norm – borne out of necessity – rather than an opportunity. Few framed the experience positively. Indeed, consistent with other research, most women described working in manual or low-skilled jobs in Turkey.³¹ Like many others, Hayat from Syria had spent some months living in Turkey prior to her arrival in Greece. During this time, she took up work in a factory, her first paid job. With this experience behind her, when asked about her hopes for her future in Europe, Hayat spoke of her family life and her desire for her husband to start working again so that their lives could return to ‘normal’.

Where homemakers among the interviewed asylum seekers did consider the idea of entering the workforce in Europe, they linked the possibility to government facilitation. Hayat from Syria, had described her husband working as a ‘normal’ state of affairs, but when probed on whether she would like to work too she stated, “I heard that [the German government] will find me a job and in that case why not, I will work and of course, my husband will work too.” Other married female asylum seekers seemed to be curious about the new possibilities women had for work in Europe. In one focus group of Syrian women for example, there was a break out discussion after which a woman shared a story of a Syrian friend in Germany who had “many opportunities opened up for her and now she works and makes money like her husband.” The hearsay and piecemeal nature of this information reflects in part the limited information channels women seemed to have about work in Europe. References to government facilitation could be read as a strategy of navigating an uncertain job market – asylum seeking men in Greece too shared awareness of government programs in Germany that would assist them in finding work. For asylum seeking women who had never worked before however, government facilitation also seemed to instill confidence in the prospect of work all together, especially as they were teamed with positive examples of other women who had taken this step.

The Difficulty of Imagining the Future

Despite sharing these aspirations, many struggled to imagine their future in concrete terms, or describe steps to realizing their aims beyond the completion of the asylum process. After interviewees shared their plans and aspirations for the future, they were asked if they foresaw any challenges in achieving their goals. Learning the language and cultural adaptation were the most commonly raised challenges among asylum seekers. Far fewer questioned the feasibility of finding a job or a home, although more did so in Italy. Interviewers then probed around a series of structured prompts: how would interviewees go about achieving the aspirations they

³¹ This finding is reported for example in World Bank internal background note on refugees in Turkey, 2017.

had set out; what steps had they already taken; who, if anyone, did they think could help them? Observational data suggests that asylum seekers thought hard before they formulated their responses to these probes – suggestive of the fact that they had not considered the issue in detail yet. In some cases, the question was reversed to the interviewer. In other cases, the validity of the question itself was challenged. As one group of asylum seeking women told us in Italy, “Come on, we know Europe is a rich country.” Given their situation, many suggested that planning was either premature or that it was impossible to plan much further.

Where interviewees had researched or had already begun taking steps towards their chosen career paths, they usually referenced either diaspora contacts or the assistance of NGOs with whom they had made contact through their camps. All of these channels are based on personal contact and reflective of limitations asylum seeking men and women had in researching and finding opportunities. Where tighter social connections are built in camps, especially among people from the same nationality in Greece, asylum seekers in FGDs were often seen exchanging and comparing information on opportunities laying ahead. Interviewers could however verify that, despite a high level of information sharing, the level and accuracy of such information was rather low.

Profound uncertainty among asylum seekers seemed to confound the difficulties of thinking about the future. Responses as “It is too difficult now to think about my future”, “I don’t know”, “I don’t think about the future” were common in Italy and in Greece. In Greece, where interviewees hoped on relocation or reunification outside of Greece, another layer of uncertainty was added. Planning for the future became even more difficult, and for some seemed all the more futile. Such uncertainty was compounded by confusion over the asylum process, and lack of information.

Part VI. Conclusions

The findings presented in this paper revealed some of the different challenges and opportunities faced by asylum seeking men and women while in reception centers in the EU. They encourage further attention to the implications of prolonged waits in reception centers for men and women. For asylum seekers, reception centers represent the first and most important point of socialization and contact with local institutions. For the same reason, life in centers and camps can influence asylum seekers' aspirations and potential for productive inclusion in the economy and society later on. Vulnerabilities can also be generated during this period of waiting, including gendered vulnerabilities. It is thus important that the time asylum seekers spend in this context does not result in missed opportunities or even a source of deepening vulnerabilities.

The evidence points to the opportunity to better leverage the time asylum seekers spend in waiting on their asylum outcomes, especially in reception centers. The period asylum seekers spend waiting for the decision on their status offers a unique opportunity to both identify and address vulnerabilities faced by those arriving in the EU. These can be helpful considerations in devising policy interventions. Some examples are summarized here:

- **Leveraging opportunity for first-time inclusion of women of working age in the labor force.** The experience of migration and life in reception centers can be empowering for many women and challenge restrictive gender norms around work. In addition, some women had to work for the first time to help families make ends meet during transit. While some homemakers among the asylum seekers were nevertheless clear that they did not wish to work in Europe, others expressed curiosity over work-place opportunities. There is therefore an opening for policies to encourage and support asylum seeking homemakers' entry into the labor market.
- **Leveraging desires to acquire skills and engage in productive activities.** Asylum seekers, especially but not only men, expressed a strong motivation to learn and acquire vocational skills – partly as an alternative to idleness and strain on their psychological wellbeing in reception centers, and partly as a useful investment for future labor market engagement. Continued investment in vocational training (even when work is not possible), can help build skills in preparation for job market entry; and will be especially useful for nationalities with high chances to remain. Investment in language classes, including better quality Italian classes, or other European languages (especially in the case of Greece), could also be beneficial.
- **Providing basic information on labor markets regulations, needs and resources.** Few asylum seekers interviewed displayed a well-rounded understanding of labor markets regulations, needs and qualifications requirements for jobs, irrespective of the length of their stay in Europe. More systematic dissemination of information on qualification pathways, including transferability of foreign qualifications, can help promote realistic views on work-place participation amongst young men and prepare them to access available work opportunities in the future. For women asylum seekers who will remain in Europe, especially those low-skilled ones considering only a narrow range of options, increased information may encourage consideration of a broader range of career

options – or at least safer options. Awareness of working rights and clear information on procedures to pursue them can help asylum seekers and refugees not only prepare for employment opportunities in the future but also to avoid vulnerable forms of work.

- **Supporting asylum seekers, especially women, at risk of entering high-risk, unregulated work.** Women from Sub-Saharan Africa in Italy appear particularly vulnerable to falling victim to sex trafficking and exploitation. Adequate identification, support and referral mechanisms in reception centers could play a role in mitigating these risks and their potential consequences. Domestic work, a field dominated by migrant women, is also often carried out in unregulated and unprotected conditions. Information and awareness of working rights and regulations could be promoted already at the time of permanence in reception centers.
- **Addressing the different emotional stressors that the migration process generates for men and women, and their spill-over effects.** Interventions should be mindful of the age and family situations of men and women. Basic services and amenities, such as those that support women in their domestic roles or that allow men to use their time productively, can help asylum seekers maintain a sense of purpose and certainty in an uncertain context, and thus be a powerful resource to prevent frustrations and tensions. They can also help those who are struggling with changed roles within the household while in camps, which can itself have negative effects on spouses and children. Recreational activities, training and peer support may help mitigate the specific vulnerabilities faced by young men travelling alone.
- **Preventing and addressing gendered vulnerabilities that can emerge not only due to pre-arrival experiences but also by waiting in camps and centers.** The evidence points to the need for focused investigation on how life in centers, often in isolation from local communities but in close contact with other asylum seekers, affects individuals and groups. Further, identification mechanisms and resources tailored to the special circumstances of GBV victims in camps and centers are needed. While it is generally accepted that GBV is underreported by women, pathways for reporting could be better tailored to the sensitivities within and across ethnic communities.

This paper reveals areas for additional investigation to gather a complete picture of the male and female asylum seekers in the EU, their needs and prospects for inclusion in labor markets.

- Research in countries of origin. A broader knowledge of gender and social norms in countries of origin could help deepen our understanding of what shapes expectations, aspirations and perceptions of those arriving in the EU.
- More focused research on current work while in centers and camps. Understanding involvement in informal work could shed light on how these experiences shape aspirations for labor market inclusion and generate additional vulnerabilities among asylum seekers.
- Focus on young asylum seeking men and women, minors and other vulnerable categories.

Methodological Annex

This annex provides information to complement that provided in the main text.

Sites selection. Fieldwork sites were purposefully selected to reflect a variety of current contexts in both countries. Centers differed in terms of proximities to urban centers, size, composition (by nationality), management and typology (CARA and CAS)³² as well as amenities and recreational activities on offer. Most centers were mix-gender, but the study also included one women-only center and two families and single women centers in Italy. Mostly, female asylum seekers are allocated on a random basis, unless there are particular vulnerabilities that warrant close medical or psychological support. For example, pregnant women tend to be hosted mostly in women-only or family-targeted centers.

FGD composition. In the main, FGDs were split by nationality of asylum seekers too but with some exceptions in Italy. Here, some FGDs grouped Malian, Ivorian and Senegalese participants in French-speaking FGDs; and Gambian and Nigerian in English speaking men FGDs. Logistical considerations led the decision to merge nationalities according to the language spoken; pilots confirmed that there was enough homogeneity and comfort among participants to lead to meaningful conversations. However, Nigerian women were not mixed with other English-speaking women due to the specific challenges they faced, emerged during the pilot phase.

Questions. Both instruments (FGD and IDI) were semi-structured: open-ended questions were posed, and field teams were trained in probing responses as relevant.

Instruments and sample*. Participants were selected to ensure diversity in age and marital status, as well as whether asylum seekers were travelling alone or with others. Women were purposefully oversampled for this study. While women represent 15 percent of the adult asylum seekers who arrived via sea to Italy in 2016, they constitute over one-third of our sample for the country. Similarly, although twice as many adult men compared to women arrived in Greece in 2016, they represent half of our sample. A mix of selection from listing (from center’s records), random walk and snowballing was used, depending on the specific circumstances of each center. See details of full sample in the table below.

Table 1: Sample of asylum seekers in qualitative survey.

	Greece		Italy	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Focus Group Discussions	- 4 Afghanistan - 1 Syria - 1 Iraq	- 3 Afghanistan - 3 Syria	- 1 Eritrea - 1 English-speaking mixed nationalities (Sub-Saharan Africa) - 2 Nigeria	- 1 Eritrea - 1 English-speaking mixed nationalities (Sub-Saharan Africa) - 1 Nigeria

³² Centri di Accoglienza per Richiedenti Asilo (CARA) are under direct control of the Ministry of Interior. Centri di Accoglienza Straordinaria (CAS) are privately owned centers originally envisaged as temporary centers to respond to increased inflows – they later evolved to become fully fledged centers for long-term stay; they tend to be smaller and not under direct Ministerial control.

			- 4 French-speaking mixed nationalities (Sub-Saharan Africa)	- 1 Cote d'Ivoire
In-Depth Interview	- 19 Syria - 9 Afghanistan - 1 Iraq - 2 Iran	- 15 Syria - 6 Afghanistan - 2 Iraq - 1 Iran	- 7 Nigeria - 6 Eritrea - 4 Senegal - 4 Guinea - 4 Cote d'Ivoire - 3 Gambia - 3 Mali - 3 Somalia - 1 Ghana	- 10 Nigeria - 4 Cote d'Ivoire - 3 Eritrea - 2 Somalia - 1 Gambia - 1 Guinea - 1 Cameroon
Key Informant Interview	6 interviews with center staff		10 interviews with center staff	

*In addition, during pilots four Syrian asylum seekers (two men and two women) were interviewed in Italy. Syrians were not included in the roll-out phase in Italy, due to the changed composition of the asylum seeking population by the end of 2016. Given this paper presents data on the main nationalities of asylum seekers in Greece and Italy respectively, these observations were excluded from the sample despite the comparability in questionnaires.

Coding. The data was gathered in the form of annotated transcripts, including wherever possible participants' statements *verbatim*. When not possible, statements were slightly summarized or paraphrased, without losing the original spirit of the statement. Annotated transcripts included annotations by interviewers on their observations. Audio recordings were rarely possible, due to protection concerns and, based on the pilots, the observation of smoother and more open conversation when participants were not being recorded. Findings were coded using a two-stage process. Firstly, using predetermined codes designed to test pre-existing hypotheses of the issues men and women faced; and secondly, inductively, in order to establish patterns generated by the data set itself. In addition, analysis utilizes basic discourse analysis, including for a deeper understanding of the way asylum seekers see their future options and describe their aspirations.

Research Limitations

Qualitative methods and generalizations. Non-random sampling was used in this study. Purposive sampling is an appropriate methodology for the issues studied here and a common technique for qualitative data collection. Although it identifies patterns across the sample, its findings cannot be generalized.

Topics covered. The fieldwork relied mostly on semi-structured questionnaires to elicit predetermined topics of relevance. Interviews were however often fluid, with some groups or individual respondents raising additional and unexpected themes. Some of the issues included in this analysis were thus generated spontaneously by only some interviewees, with other interviewees remaining silent on the same topic. Various factors can determine why some people remain silent on topics while others choose to raise them, including feelings of shame and fear of stigma. Therefore, it cannot be concluded that issues raised by some are not experienced or observed by those not mentioning them.

Camps and centers. This study does not seek to monitor and evaluate either service provision in asylum seekers' centers or camps, or the administration of the asylum process. As such, no detailed audit of camp services was conducted as part of this study. However, there is sufficient diversity in the camps visited to enable high-level comparison of how different asylum seekers responded to different types of centers, based on their personal circumstances.

Bias. Self-reported responses and open discussions are likely to be subject to bias, which cannot be excluded here. In this case, it is particularly associated with possible expectations that the discussions may have an impact on the asylum claim. To mitigate this risk, interviewers clarified explicitly and repeatedly the confidential nature of the conversations and the independent nature of the research in relation to local authorities, center management and the commission for the examination of the asylum claim. In the analysis, triangulation of information and observations obtained during the interviews helped to identify and handle some of the potential bias.

Excluded populations. Finally, this paper limits itself to the study of adult male and female asylum seekers. It does not extend to the following vulnerable groups of asylum seekers: LGBTQ, boys and girls (defined here as persons under the age of 18), disabled or the elderly. Some aspects of minors' vulnerabilities emerge as reported by adults.

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