

# HumMingBird



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# Journey of resilience

MIGRANT WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES IN TRANSIT, REFUGEE  
CAMPS/CENTRES, AND HOST COUNTRIES OF SPAIN, ITALY,  
BELGIUM, FRANCE, AND GERMANY  
DELIVERABLE 9.1

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<http://www.hummingbird-H2020.eu>

## Abstract

This report is part of Work Package 9 of the HumMingBird project, with a primary focus on exploring the gender aspect of migration. Our main objective in this report is to look at into the specific challenges faced by migrant women, aiming to contribute to a better understanding of their experiences. The selected countries for this study are Spain, Italy, Belgium, Germany, and Calais in northern France. Spain, Italy, Belgium, and the north of France are regions that receive high numbers of migrants and serve as transit countries. Germany, on the other hand, has a history of welcoming migrants, making it a preferred destination for many migrants. The report intends to raise awareness of the vulnerabilities experienced by migrant women and provide valuable insights that can inform policymakers, organisations, and advocates in their efforts to enhance support systems and develop effective policies for migrants.

*This report constitutes Deliverable 9.1, for Work Package 9 of the HumMingBird project.*

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## List of acronyms

CAS	Centri di accoglienza straordinaria
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against women
EASO	European Asylum Support Office
ECRE	European Council on Refugee and Exile
ENoMW	European Network of Migrant Women
EU	European Union
EUAA	European Union Agency for Asylum
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SAI	Sistema di Accoglienza e Integrazione
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Scope of the study

The HumMingBird research aims to improve understanding of the changing nature of migration flows and the drivers of migration. It seeks to analyse patterns, motivations, and new geographies related to migration, as well as calculate population estimates and determine emerging and future trends. By examining enhanced migration measures from a multidimensional perspective, the project aims to identify possible future implications of current policy decisions.

The report<sup>1</sup> takes a migrant-women-centric approach and is dedicated to conducting research aimed at understanding the perception of migrant women. The objective is to explore and understand the perspectives, challenges, and experiences of migrant women throughout their migration journey, from initial migration to settlement in an EU country.

The report specifically focuses on the sexed and gendered aspects of migration and aims to provide deeper insights into the experiences of migrant women in various contexts, including regular, irregular, and transit migration. The research methodology includes conducting interviews, focus groups, participant observations, and field visits.

The countries included in this study are Spain, Italy, Belgium, France, and Germany.

## 1.2 Research rationale

According to Eurostat data, at the beginning of 2021, there were 23.7 million third-country nationals residing in EU Member States, 45% of whom were women (Eurostat Statistics Explained). Migrant women and girls exhibit a wide range of backgrounds, migration trajectories, and experiences. According to the OECD report from 2017, there has been a notable rise in women's participation in the labour market compared to previous years (OECD, 2017). This can be attributed to a significant increase in the educational attainment of migrant women when compared to the past. Surprisingly, despite more than 30% of migrant women in Europe being overqualified, they continue to face challenges in fully engaging in the labour market, particularly in male-dominated sectors such as engineering, science, technology, and medicine (Bolzani, 2021). The significance of education and access to the labour market is emphasised in this report as both factors can profoundly impact women's independence, autonomy, and resilience. Throughout our interviews and focus groups, women frequently expressed views about issues such as education, employment, housing, health and social justice.

Migrant women also face numerous obstacles, challenges, and threats that often exceed their expectations. This report sheds light on the unique difficulties encountered by migrant women, including dependency on men, sex-based discrimination, violence, and exploitation. These challenges are prevalent in their country of origin, during their journey, and in the country of settlement.

One of the significant factors contributing to the vulnerability of migrant women is the lack of awareness about their rights as migrant women and their access to available services in Europe. Language barriers can further limit migrant women's ability to navigate their lives as they desire. This lack of knowledge often places these women in precarious situations, making it difficult for them to seek the necessary help and support when needed.

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<sup>1</sup> The report is part of work package 9, Deliverable 9.1. of the HumMingBird project.

Since the start of the HumMingBird project, a series of significant events including the COVID-19 pandemic, the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan, and Russia's aggression in Ukraine have happened. These events have had an impact on both migration to Europe and our study. The enforcement of COVID-19-related travel restrictions between 2019 and 2021 had resulted in a decrease in migration flows towards EU countries. Furthermore, due to COVID-19 lockdown measures, many migrants have faced challenges in renewing their documents (i.e. visas, job permits), resulting in an increase in undocumented women. Asylum seekers have also experienced delays in their asylum applications being processed during this period (Poya, 2023; EMN OECD umbrella Inform, 2021).

With the takeover of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the war initiated by Russia in Ukraine, the European Union (EU) has opened its humanitarian corridors to Afghan and Ukrainian refugees. Between August 2021-2022, approximately 36,000 Afghans have resettled in the EU.<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, following the start of the conflict in Ukraine in February 2022, more than 8 million Ukrainian refugees have been registered in the European Union, with the overwhelming majority being women and children (Statista, 2023). As a result, the European Union has implemented the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) specifically for Ukrainian refugees. This directive ensures that refugees from Ukraine have access to essential services, including accommodation, healthcare, education, and employment, similar to European citizens (ECRE, 2023).

Therefore, ENoMW tried to incorporate these events in its HumMingBird research by publishing a briefing paper in January 2023 on the impact of COVID on undocumented migrant women,<sup>3</sup> and to include insights from resettled women from Afghanistan and Ukraine in this report. This particular comprehensive report addresses both irregular and regular migrant women, covering various categories such as students, individuals seeking family reunification, undocumented migrants, and women awaiting their asylum decisions. Moreover, the research investigates the experiences of women in refugee camps and reception centres based on the insights shared by women themselves and experts working closely with them.

### 1.3 Report outline

The report is divided into three main sections with subsections. The section on theoretical background gives a general overview of the attempts made by migrants en route to Europe, along with some statistics. The methods section, which is divided into five subsections, covers the demography of participants, the methodology used to gather primary information, the sources of data, overarching research questions, ethical considerations, anonymity, and the research limitations.

The main section of the report is **findings and analysis**, which is divided into two main parts: (1) Refugee centres, camps, and hubs, and (2) Accessing services: similarities and differences. Both parts are further divided into smaller sections, each covering different aspects of the study. Part one covers the analysis of field visits in Madrid (Spain), Venice (Italy), Brussels (Belgium), and Grand-Synthe (North of France), as well as the analysis of expert interviews and one-to-one interviews with migrant women. This section addresses topics such as smuggling, sexual violence and abuse of women and girls in transit, border crossing, and pushbacks by border authorities. Part two covers the focus group interviews in Spain, Belgium, and Italy, including the newly arrived Afghan women and Ukrainian women, along with one-to-one interviews conducted in mentioned countries, including Germany and Sweden, addressing challenges and obstacles faced by migrant women in their final destination.

The report concludes with a summary of the main findings and analysis, followed by general recommendations resulting from the research.

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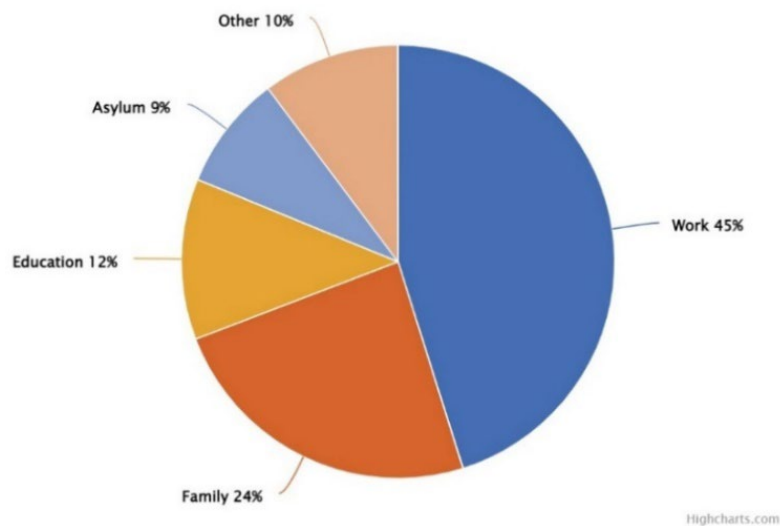
<sup>2</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/questions/reponses\\_qe/2022/001707/P9\\_RE\(2022\)001707\(ANN01\)\\_XL.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/questions/reponses_qe/2022/001707/P9_RE(2022)001707(ANN01)_XL.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> ENoMW also published a comprehensive report on the impact of COVID on migrant women and their fundamental rights in EU (Salimi *et al.*, 2022).

## 2. Theoretical background

In recent decades, the notion of (im)migration in Europe has been increasingly portrayed as a negative phenomenon by many politicians and the media distorting the general public's view of the positive aspects of (im)migration in Europe (Wike *et al.*, 2016). Nonetheless, immigrants are important for Europe because they bring valuable skills, expertise, knowledge, and experience from which Europe can benefit (Annan, 2004).

**Figure 1. First time residence permit to immigrants in the EU**



Source Eurostat (2021)

In 2021, the European Union (EU) witnessed the arrival of 2.26 million immigrants. The EU issued 2.93 million first-time residence permits. Most of these permits, (refer to Figure 1) were granted for job-related purposes. Other categories for which residence permits were issued include education, family reunification, and asylum (Eurostat, 2021). According to the European Council, there has been a significant decline in the number of asylum claims compared to 2015/16, with a decrease of 33.5% (European Council Infography, 2023). By the end of 2020, European Member States received 82,305 asylum applications, and among them, 29% were submitted by women.

Refugees flee their country of origin for various reasons, including political persecution, war, violence, and natural disasters. They can seek asylum in a safe country under the Refugee Convention of 1951. In addition, refugee women, who are fleeing for the aforementioned reasons, often escape specific forms of gendered violence, such as forced marriage, female genital mutilation, domestic violence, sexual exploitation, and sexual violence. Moreover, in certain countries, women may face persecution at the state level as a group, systematically deprived of their human rights in areas such as employment, education, and freedom of movement. The recent case of Afghanistan has been recognised by the EASO (country report on Afghanistan 2022) as a clear example of such sex-based persecution.



Refugees, asylum seekers, and individuals arriving through humanitarian corridors (who fall under the refugee category) are initially accommodated in reception centres or camps before being relocated to more permanent housing. The conditions of these reception centres and camps vary across different EU Member States and regions. In countries of southern Europe and the Balkans, which receive a high number of migrants, these facilities are often treated as transit centres (European Insights).

It is important to note that over 70% of asylum seekers in Europe are men (AUAA annual overview report, 2021), which results in the refugee centres predominantly catering to the needs of men, with limited consideration given to the specific requirements of women and girls and their safety. However, under Article 21 of the Reception Directive 2013/33/EU, Member States are required to consider and implement the needs of vulnerable groups such as ‘pregnant women, single parents with minor children, victims of human trafficking, persons with serious illnesses, persons with mental disorders and persons who have been subjected to torture, rape or other serious forms of psychological, physical or sexual violence, such as victims of female genital mutilation’ (Reception Directive, 2013).

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Sources of data

The study incorporates focus groups, semi-structured interviews with migrant women, and experts from NGOs working with migrant women, as well as field and participant observations and informal dialogue with women in reception centres and refugee camps. By collecting qualitative data, the aim is to gain an understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and behaviours of the migrant women participating in the study.

Through our collaboration with migrant and refugee women's organisations and members of ENoMW (European Network of Migrant Women), we established connections with individuals who were potential contributors to the research. These connections allowed us to conduct interviews and organise focus groups with participants who had relevant experiences and insights.

Additionally, by engaging with expert participants who had experience working in migrant reception centres or camps, we were able to arrange visits to these facilities. These visits provided an opportunity to observe and gather firsthand information about the conditions, challenges, and dynamics within the reception centres or camps. By physically being present in these settings, we aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of migrant women and the contexts in which they find themselves.

### 3.2 Research question

The study aims to explore and answer one overarching question:

- What challenges do migrant women in Europe encounter during their migration journey to Europe, and what obstacles do they face once settled in host countries?

Implicit within this research question are the following sub-questions:

1. What are the main challenges faced by migrant women during their journey to Europe, including transit countries and border crossings?
2. What are women's experiences in the reception/welcome centres and hubs?
3. What are the social and cultural integration challenges experienced by migrant women upon arrival in host countries in Europe?
4. What are the key barriers and difficulties encountered by migrant women in accessing education, healthcare, housing, and employment in host countries?
5. What forms of discrimination, violence, and exploitation do migrant women experience during their migration journey and in host countries?
6. What support systems and resources are available to assist migrant women in Europe, and what are the gaps or limitations in these support systems?

### 3.3 Participant demography

The study conducted a total of 10 semi-structured interviews with migrant women, as shown in Table 1. Additionally, three focus groups were organised, involving a total of 29 women, as indicated in Table 2. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 60 years old. The researcher visited various locations, including the Grande-Synthe hub in Calais and the Refugee Day-Hub in Brussels. Further-

more, interviews were conducted with five experts from different organisations that work with refugees and asylum seekers in Belgium, Italy, and Spain, respectively.

All the interviews and focus groups were conducted in languages that participants felt comfortable with. The focus group with Ukrainian women was conducted in Ukrainian, the mixed focus group was conducted in French, the focus group in Spain was conducted in Spanish, and the focus group with Afghan women was conducted online in Dari. An interpreter was present in all the focus groups to facilitate communication. The duration of each focus group ranged from 1.5 to 2 hours and the discussions were recorded with the permission of participants present in the discussions. Aside from the focus group involving Afghan women in Italy, which included participants from various regions in Italy, the focus groups held in Belgium and Spain only represent perspectives on services and experiences in Brussels and Madrid, respectively. These viewpoints may not necessarily encompass the diversity of opinions in other regions of Spain and Belgium, where variations could exist.

**Table 1. Semi-structure interviews with migrant women**

Country of residence	Country of origin	Type of entry to EU
Spain	Morocco	Family reunification
Belgium	Thailand	Family reunification
Belgium	Afghanistan	Family reunification
Sweden	Sudan	Student
Germany/Sweden	Mexico	Student
Belgium	Iran	Family reunification
Germany	Afghanistan	Resettlement visa
UK	Iran	Irregular
Belgium	Iran	Irregular
Germany	Afghanistan	Irregular

**Table 2. Focus groups**

Number of interviewees	Country – city	Country of origin
5	Spain – Madrid	Mix (3 Afghans, 1 Venezuela, 1 Syrian)
7	Belgium	Mix (2 Latin Americans, 2 Ukrainians, 2 Syrians, 1 Moroccans)
9	Belgium	Ukrainians
8	Italy	Afghans

**Table 3. Visit to refugee camps/reception centres**

Country	NGO	Nature of interaction
Belgium	Sister's house in Brussels (shelter only for irregular/transit migrant women)	Interview with expert
Belgium	Brussels Day Hub (for irregular/transit migrants)	Field visit and interview with expert
Spain	Accem in Madrid (NGO works with migrants from arrival for 18 months)	Field visit and interview with expert
Italy	Pari Passo in Valencia (NGO works with migrants from arrival until they get documents)	Interview with expert
France	Grand-Synthe forest in Calais, with the support of Women Centre in France	Field visit

### **3.4 Ethical consideration**

When conducting research with vulnerable migrant groups, especially refugee and asylum-seeking women, it is crucial to prioritise ethical considerations. In addition to the experiences of war, displacement, and significant political changes that many refugees go through, refugee women also endure sexual exploitation, violence, and abuse during their journey and in their country of origin. These experiences can result in feelings of mistrust towards individuals seeking access to their lives. To address these concerns, it is crucial to be clear about the research objectives and provide sufficient information to the participants, increasing the likelihood of obtaining their data. Building rapport and allowing participants enough time to consider the information shared can result in gaining more meaningful insights into their personal stories.

To ensure ethical standards, the General information sheet developed as part of the ethical Hum-MingBird document was presented to all participants (appendix 1). Additionally, at the beginning of each interview, participants received a verbal introduction about the project and information about the researcher conducting the interview.

Some interviews were recorded with permission, while others were handwritten if the participant did not grant recording consent. The same ethical processes were followed when interviewing experts from NGOs and focus groups.

For field observations in refugee hubs and reception centres, an information sheet was sent in advance to the contacts. Additionally, prior to visiting the hubs, the contacts were briefed about the project via online meetings or phone calls. This step aimed to ensure that they understood the purpose of the visit and to establish rapport with them in advance.

To ensure confidentiality, when quoting, pseudonyms are used for all participants in this report.

### **3.5 Limitations**

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, field visits to refugee camps and reception centres were interrupted. Even in the post-COVID period, many of these centres are reluctant to allow outside visitors, including professionals and researchers. Despite reaching out to higher authorities in Spain and Italy, access to refugee reception centres and camps was denied. In Belgium, access to the Brussels Day-hub was granted, but access to Sister's House, a shelter and reception centre for women, was denied for security reasons and to protect the shelter's location. In Calais, we were supported to visit the Calais Jungles with the Refugee Women Centre, an NGO based in Calais that supports and helps women in transit.

It is understandable that NGOs responsible for these centres prioritise the security and well-being of refugees and asylum seekers. However, it is also crucial to document and present the living conditions of women and girls in these centres and camps. This information can help inform appropriate policies at the national and EU levels.

## 4. Findings and analysis

### 4.1 Refugee camps and reception centres

#### 4.1.1 Introduction

Given the significance of ongoing debates on migrant integration in the European Union, it is crucial to prioritise the consideration of migrant reception/welcome centres and camps in both policy and research arenas. These facilities serve as the primary or initial point of entry into the European integration system for refugees and asylum seekers. Reception centres and camps *'go further than simply providing housing for asylum seekers. It includes providing applicants with information about their rights, a path to a residency permit, freedom of movement and access to healthcare, education, and work'* (European Insight).

In 2013, to address the need for standardised services, the European Parliament and the Council of Europe adopted the Reception Directive. The directive aimed to harmonise reception centres across all European Member States and ensure the provision of adequate services to asylum seekers. According to this directive, any third-country national or stateless person who has applied for asylum and international protection and is awaiting a decision from the state is entitled to receive 'housing, food, clothing provided in kind, or as financial allowances, or in vouchers, or a combination of [the] three, and a daily expenses allowance' (Reception Directive, 2013).

However, some Member States fail to meet these obligations due to factors such as the high volume of asylum seekers, the socioeconomic situation of the country, and challenges in implementing the reception directive within national policies and regulations.

During the period 2015-2016, often referred to in the public discourse as 'the refugee crisis', countries in Southern Europe and the Western Balkans faced significant challenges in managing reception centres and accommodating the large number of refugees and asylum seekers (European Council). These countries were also considered transit countries for migrants heading towards Northern Europe. In response, the European Union introduced 'Hotspot' locations, which are specific areas at the EU's external borders that face 'disproportionate migratory pressure. Most migrants enter the EU at these hotspots and, according to the European Commission, it is here that the EU needs to provide operational support to ensure arriving migrants are registered and channelled, as appropriate, into the relevant national follow-up procedures' (Rózsa, 2017).

Camps such as the Moria refugee camp in Greece) and the Sardinia camp in Italy (were established in and around these hotspot locations (MacGregor, 2021 & Hotspots Italy country report, 2023). More recently, Spain has been experiencing a significant increase in migration flows in the Canary Islands and is in the process of creating refugee camps in hotspots like Gran Canarias.

The primary purpose of these camps is to provide temporary accommodation for migrants before dispersing them to other locations for permanent or longer-term arrangements. However, these camps have faced criticism for being overcrowded, lacking proper living conditions, and resembling detention centres. Migrants often find themselves in a state of limbo, unable to move freely and spending months or even years in these facilities (ECRE Study, 2016). A woman participant in this study told us:

*'Imagine that during the past six days before I arrived in the shores of Italy, I was in the boat unable to use the toilet because I had taken a pill which helps you stop peeing. Finally, after they kept us in one camp for few days, they took us to another camp where we stayed for almost one week. This camp, like the first one, was horribly dirty. It is indescribable how terrible it was. It was full of insects, bugs and there were ruins everywhere. So, the situation was terrible there.'* (Venus, ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

The experiences described by the women interviewed in this project regarding the camps and reception centres are deeply concerning. In Greece, migrants are required to wait for days in reception centres/camps for registration. Once registered, they are given a document with a limited validity period, typically one month, during which they must either apply for asylum or leave the country. This situation can create significant uncertainty and stress for the migrants, especially considering the challenges they may face in accessing necessary services and support. One woman interviewee revealed:

*'When we arrived in Greece, the police took us to a nearby camp and they gave us a tent and gave us clothes. We rested for a while and there was long line to register. There were more than three thousand refugees in that camp, and it would take more than two to three days for your turn in line. Two or three people sit in a room to register; they inspect the documents and ask where you came from and why you came and what is the reason, and they would give us a document dated for one month. After a month, you could either request an asylum or leave the country.'* (Bahar; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

In Italy, women and families are placed with single men in large rooms resembling prison-like conditions until their fingerprints are taken. This arrangement raises serious concerns about the safety and well-being of women and vulnerable individuals in such overcrowded environments. An interviewee expressed herself:

*'When we arrived in Italy, upon our arrival we were taken into a room like a prison with one toilet and no beds. They put us all [the 120 people] in one room and locked the room on us. After spending five nights in the basement of small boat with no food, toilet or beds, we spend two nights in very similar situation.'* (Mahtab; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

Furthermore, the treatment of migrants passing through the Balkans, especially when apprehended by Balkan police, has been widely reported as inhumane. It is deeply concerning that the primary objective of authorities in Balkan countries seems to be forcefully pushing back migrants through the use of severe physical violence (Oxfam International, April 2017), which goes against human rights regulations. These mistreatments are particularly alarming considering that migrants often lack the power to voice their concerns or file complaints with any authority (Amnesty International, 2015).

These migrants, who have already paid substantial amounts of money to smugglers, are seeking safety and refuge as they attempt to reach Europe. Despite the European Union's commitment to human rights and dignity, it appears contradictory that they endorse the forceful rejection of migrants at their borders.

One striking example of this situation is the ongoing crisis at the Belarus-Poland border, where the treatment of migrants is inconceivable (The Associated Press, 2021). Among these migrants are women and children who are being repeatedly pushed back and forth between the two borders without any consideration for their safety, well-being, or human dignity (Ptak & Baczynska, 2021). One of the interviewee in the study revealed:

*'In Serbia there was an area where smuggler worked and took money from you and transported you on walk to Germany. We used to sleep in the forests, the weather was cold, and we didn't have a backpack with us, the only thing we could carry was food, we got dates and dry bread, cheese, and we slept in the desert for 4 or 5 days, and we walked for about 18 or 19 hours during the days. As we reached the border the police stopped us and arrested us. They took us to the police station and separated families and singles. The situation was bad, they search people, the*

*searched the whole body even inside our private parts. They made us to take off all our clothes and ask us to sit down and stand up, in case we have hidden something inside our genitals. If you had money, they would take the money and if you had good phone, they take that too.'* (Bahar; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

#### 4.1.2 Asylum care in Spain and Italy

Based on our primary findings derived from field observations and interviews, along with secondary literature such as Asylum in Europe country reports (Conditions in reception centres; Spain & Italy), it is evident that in Italy and Spain, the management of the majority of refugee reception centres, which involve the reception and integration of asylum seekers and refugees, is delegated to private cooperations and national NGOs. These organisations are subcontracted by the national governments to assume full responsibility for the care of refugees until their asylum cases are approved by the government. In Spain, NGOs such as Accem, Red Cross, CEAR, Provivienda, Andalucía Acoge, Málaga Acoge, MPDL, and APIP-ACAM are contracted by the government to provide assistance to refugees and asylum seekers. Similarly, in Italy, organisations such as Arcie, Sant'Egidio, Casa Colori, Il Mondo Nella Città, Progetto Verona Solidale, On the Road Cooperativa Sociale, Une Casa per l'Uomo, La Comunila per Minori Stranieri non Accompagnati de Eos Trieste, and Pari Passo have been given the responsibility of asylum seekers by the government until the decision is made.

Italy follows the SAI (Sistema di Accoglienza e Integrazione)<sup>4</sup> and CAS (Centri di accoglienza straordinaria)<sup>5</sup> system, which is a hospitality and integration system financed by the Ministry of the Interior.<sup>6</sup> Under the SAI system, national NGOs like Pari Passo (an NGO visited as part of this study) are entrusted with full responsibility for the well-being of asylum seekers including their integration processes. When there is an increase in the number of asylum seekers they are accommodated in CAS (Centri di accoglienza straordinaria), which are temporary reception centres established to address the emergency needs of asylum seekers. Some asylum seekers and refugees have been under the care of Pari Passo for over five years, either because their asylum applications have been rejected or are still under review.

The specific rules and regulations for managing the asylum seekers and refugees are determined by the individual NGOs themselves. Each NGO has the autonomy to decide how asylum seeking and refugee women are accommodated, whether they are placed in shared or individual rooms. The NGOs also determine the type of support provided for food, such as cash allowances, food vouchers, or cooked meals. For instance, in cases where a refugee woman does not receive an individual allowance that she can use as she determines is best for her, she is accompanied by a social worker to the supermarket, and her expenses are covered by the social worker.

Some women under the care of NGOs in Italy have expressed frustration regarding the services provided by these organisations and their perceived lack of effectiveness. These women feel that the NGOs are not adequately utilising the funds allocated by the government for their support. A group of women in our focus group discussion said:

*'There are some groups/organisations who are using migrants by taking projects and making profit in the name of migrants. They are taking funding over hundred thousand euros in the name of training, accommodating and integrating migrants but do not do any of this at all. They ask us to sign in a piece of paper and then do nothing else. There should be some kind of serious monitoring and overlooking of these projects. The Italian government should*

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<sup>4</sup> Reception and integration system in Italy.

<sup>5</sup> Extraordinary reception centres.

<sup>6</sup> 'In terms of the reception and integration of asylum seekers, there are two parallel systems. The first is the SAI system (formerly SPRAR/SIPROIMI), managed by municipalities and NGOs, and the second comprises of the Extraordinary Reception Centres (CAS), coordinated by prefectures (the local branches of the ministry of interior). Created in 2001 through Law no. 189 of 30 July 2002, the SAI system is based on the voluntary participation of local institutions in a network of reception and integration projects. Initially conceived as a temporary solution to deal with the increased numbers of migrant arrivals in 2011, the extraordinary reception centres (CAS) became essential additional support for the main reception system as the number of new arrivals continued to rise.' (European Commission website on Governance of migrant integration in Italy).

*take responsibility rather than giving the finance to external NGOs.* (Focus-group Italy; ENoMW; Hum-MingBird, 2023).

For example, in Italy, organisations like *Pari Passo* provide a daily allowance of 2.50 euros per adult. The women hosted by *Pari Passo* share accommodation, including sharing a room. They are accompanied by a social worker to the supermarket, where they can select their own food, and the social worker covers the cost of their purchases. The availability of language classes for migrants depends on the integration policies of the respective NGOs.

Similar to Italy, migrants in Spain are also managed by private NGOs that receive funding from the Spanish government. These NGOs play a significant role in handling and providing assistance to migrants. Additionally, it's worth noting that both the Spanish and Italian governments directly manage some temporary emergency camps located in various regions and cities across the country. These camps are established to address immediate and urgent needs in response to the sudden high rise in the number of migrants.

The integration processes, including providing job training and job placement, can vary depending on the NGO responsible for the care of migrants. In Italy, there is typically a 24-month integration period during which immigrants receive social assistance and support. However, in Spain, the integration period is 18 months, during which immigrants receive social and financial assistance. After this period, they are expected to find employment, secure their own accommodation, and become fully independent. It is important to note that this applies specifically to refugees who have legal documents and whose asylum cases have been accepted.

#### **4.1.3 Calais jungles**

Although the number of asylum seekers entering the European Union has significantly decreased since 2016, there are still persistent measures such as deportations of asylum-seekers, border pushbacks, and general harsh treatment of refugees. The region of Calais and Dunkirk in northern France is an important border area where migrants often attempt to reach the United Kingdom but frequently face severe pushbacks by the French and British authorities.

In 2016, the French government forcefully closed the 'Jungle' camp in Calais. While the closure was welcomed by the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), it was highlighted by the UNHCR representatives that the individuals living in the camp were enduring 'appalling' conditions and needed to be relocated to suitable alternative accommodations in a planned and organised manner (Refugee and Migration, 2016).

Unfortunately, even after seven years, the situation in Calais remains concerning as the region continues to receive transit migrants who are attempting to reach the UK. Many of these individuals, including young unaccompanied girls, elderly women, women with disabilities, and women with children, find themselves living in dire conditions with limited access to basic services, shelter, and sanitation facilities.

Various NGOs operate in the jungle, such as the Refugee Women Centre, Calais4Calais, Project Play, Oxfam, Doctors Without Borders, and many more. These NGOs provide assistance within specific areas of expertise and operate between specific hours, typically from Monday to Saturday afternoons. Additionally, some private cars deliver tents, clothes, blankets, and other basic needs items.

In our field trip to the Grand-Synthe in Northern France women waiting to cross the channel give us the reasons of why they wanted to go to the UK:

1. language: English is widely spoken, and many migrant women already have some knowledge of the language. They believe that by going to the UK, they can integrate more easily due to their familiarity with English;



2. proximity to family members: Some women have relatives or family members in the UK. Being closer to their family provides a support network and can facilitate the integration process;
3. perception of a better system: Some migrant women believe that, compared to other European countries, the UK has a more favourable and efficient system, including asylum processing, social support, and overall living conditions. This perception drives their desire to seek asylum or settle in the UK;
4. rejection in other EU countries: Some women have faced rejection in other European countries where their asylum applications were not accepted, leaving them in a prolonged period of living without legal documentation. They may see the UK as a place where they can have better living conditions and opportunities for themselves and their children.

These reasons, combined with the perception of the UK as a multicultural society with less discrimination towards minorities, contribute to the motivations of women seeking the UK as their preferred destination. A woman waiting to cross the channel said:

*'Germany only looks good from outside, but there is a lot of racism once you are inside Germany.'* (Rahima; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

#### 4.1.4 Belgium as transit country

Belgium serves as a transit or connecting country between Calais/Dunkirk and other transit countries in Europe. The E40 highway in Belgium has become a popular route for migrants attempting to reach the UK through France. Additionally, cities in Belgium, including Brussels, act as hubs where migrants often stay temporarily before continuing their journey towards the UK.

In 2018, the Brussels Hub was established as a day centre with the purpose of providing care and assistance to transit migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers, upon their arrival in Brussels. This initiative plays a crucial role in supporting asylum seekers who do not have access to shelter.

The Brussels Hub operates through a partnership between six main organisations: the Red Cross, Doctors of the World, Doctors Without Borders, SOS Gen (focused on unaccompanied minors), and Sister House (women only shelter). These organisations collaborate to offer a wide range of essential services and support to those in need.

The services provided at the Brussels Hub are comprehensive, aiming to meet the basic needs of refugees. These services include access to legal advice, medical treatment, two daily meals (lunch and dinner), clothing, and facilities such as showers.

Women who are at risk of sex-based discrimination and violence are referred to the Sister House. Initially, the Sister House offered short-term shelter to women in transit, particularly those with the goal of reaching the UK. This initiative was designed as a women-cantered space where women could feel safe and supported by other women.

Over time, the Sister House has evolved into a shelter that caters to the needs of asylum-seeking and undocumented women. Recognising the heightened vulnerabilities faced by these women, the Sister House provides a secure and supportive environment tailored to their specific needs. This includes support and assistance in addressing sex-based violence, ensuring access to essential services, and promoting empowerment and self-reliance.

#### 4.1.5 Smugglers

Smugglers play a significant role in the lives of irregular migrants. They are readily available and often recommended by family, friends, or other migrants within the community. They operate through kinship networks, strong social and ethnic ties, and local histories, making their services accessible to those seeking to migrate irregularly (Augutova, 2023, p. 672). These smugglers may be part of formal

or informal networks that engage in activities such as producing false documents, bribing officials, and facilitating complex logistical travel across vast distances.

According to the Migration Data Portal the business of smuggling migrants from Africa to Europe and from South to North America generates approximately \$6.75 billion annually (Migration Data Portal, 2021). Despite migrants' lack of trust in smugglers, they often take the risk and pay substantial amounts of money to reach Western countries in Europe, the United States, Canada, or Australia. Migrants frequently encounter and pay different smugglers at various points along their journeys.

For example, the women interviewed in the study reported paying up to \$10,000 to reach destinations like Italy or Greece. Additionally, once in southern Europe or Balkan countries, they may pay between \$700 and \$1,000 to different smugglers at multiple stages to reach specific northern Europe countries. These payments to smugglers occur multiple times as migrants progress through their journeys.

*From Greece to Germany, the cost of smuggler was 900 euros, and the cost of each smuggler is different. We paid two or three times and was caught by police and returned. The smugglers didn't give us the money back. We stayed in the desert in Balkans for five months trying to reach Germany, but we never arrived in Germany. Police came with tanks and crushed the tents and destroyed everything. The police forced us to go back to Greece.'* (Bahar; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

Another woman in the study told us:

*For "air game"<sup>7</sup> there was a smuggler who stole almost 5,000 dollars from me and left me with nothing. After that one I tried for the ships with another smuggler which cost me 9,000 euro to go from Turkey to Italy. There are some people who had paid 10,000- 11,000 euro for the ship.'* (Venus; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

A participant currently residing in Northern Europe revealed:

*We contacted the smugglers. My father made sure he gathered money through any means, including borrowing money, so we can pay to a better smuggler to come to Europe. We had our children with us, so we wanted something better. We found a smuggler who promised us a VIP option. We each paid 10,000 dollars from Turkey to Italy. However, through our journey we gathered there was nothing VIP, we were 120 people in a boat which could accommodate less than 50 people. The only VIP [aspect] was that it had a toilet and free water for four days.'* (Mahtab; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

Another woman in north of France who was waiting to cross the channel into the UK said:

*I paid 2,000 to pass the English Channel by boat. The price for the truck was 5,000 to 6,000; so that they put you in one of the trucks and carry you.'* (Venus; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

Women in this research spoke of smugglers as dangerous individuals 'not to be messed with'. Women who took boats from Turkey to Italy or Greece, as well as those traveling from Calais to the UK, mentioned that smugglers carried guns to intimidate others and ensure compliance. The presence of firearms made them seem powerful and authoritative, instilling fear and leaving the women with a sense of vulnerability and dependency on the smugglers.

*Smugglers in Dunkirk carry arms with them, and they are very dangerous because they could start fighting to get asylum seekers. They are exactly like a gang.'* (Bushra; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

An interviewee also reported of the so called 'captains' of the boats armed and dangerous.

*The behaviours of captains were very bad with us. They were armed, and so we couldn't say or do anything.'* (Mahtab; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

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<sup>7</sup> For definition of what game/gaming means for migrants crossing boarder irregularly refer to section 4.1.7 in this report.

#### 4.1.6 Pushed back in the sea

On 14 June 2023, 80 people tragically lost their lives while attempting to cross the sea from Libya to Greece. News reports (DW news, 12 July 2023; CNN news, 19 June 2023; BBC news, 13 July 2023) indicate that this incident occurred while the coast guards were in close proximity to the sinking ship, yet they did not provide assistance until the ship was already sinking. This highlights a distressing lack of timely aid and response.

Between January 2021 and October 2022, IOM's missing migrant project reported 5,000 deaths on migration routes to and within Europe (IOM News-Global, 2022). Despite the European Union investing millions in funding European agencies such as the European Agency for Asylum (EUAA) and Frontex, aimed at training, safeguarding, and ensuring the well-being of irregular migrants crossing borders, the EU continues to witness deadly incidents and mistreatment of migrants.

The women participants in the study also shared worrying accounts of similar situations at sea, where migrants would request assistance from the coast guards while stranded in the middle of the sea, only to being ignored or receiving inadequate response. One of the interviewees who had crossed the sea to Italy said:

*'We were in the sea for 6 days. After 2-3 days all the toilets were out of use, it was a catastrophic situation, and everyone had turned crazy and uncontrollable. Once a drone came and stood above our ship and the police saw us, but I don't know why they took no action. We had run out of water (we ran out of water on the 4th day).*

*On the fourth night the sea was wavy, and I was so scared. I came to the conclusion that I have to sleep. Then I took sleeping pills thinking that either wake up in the morning or I would die when sleeping. I woke up in the morning, it's easier to see the storm during the day, in the night it is very dark, and nothing can be seen. We could see Italy's land and called the Italian police; they could see us from far away, but they were not coming for a very long time. Our ship by the time had stopped working. They didn't take us inside their own ship but instead they came into our boat to drive us to the Italian territory. They were driving very slowly to the extent that it took extra 4-5 hours to reach the Italian lands and it was unbearable. Our situation was terrible. Just imagine that we had been in such circumstance for 6 days, so it wasn't really a normal situation. Finally, when we arrived in Italy, they kept us under the sunlight for very long time.'* (Nora; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

Another participant recounted an event involving the French coast guards, who left a floating boat in the water for 13 hours with passengers on board, depriving them of food and water. The boat had run out of petrol, leaving it stranded and unable to move.

*'We were just about to exit the French territorial water and enter international waters when the French police caught us. Our petrol had run out, so I begged them for petrol, as it was my fifth time attempting to cross the channel and I was very tired, but they never gave us petrol. So basically from 7 am until 8 pm they kept us in the water. I got migraine, so I had a terrible headache, and my blood pressure was very low because, I was starving, and I had cried for a long time. I asked several times for something to eat but they gave us nothing, our clothes were wet they gave us nothing to protect us from cold. Finally, they returned us back to France and left us at the middle of somewhere. Police simply left me and went away, while it was already dark at night and I had no money at all but they refused to help and told me it's my own responsibility.'* (Venus; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023)

When women embark on this journey, they are aware of the dangers and challenges involved to some extent. They have an understanding that the journey will be difficult and that there are risks involved. However, the true extent of the hardships and dangers of the journey is often experienced only once they are en route. It is during the journey itself that they directly face the harsh realities, including the physical and emotional toll, the precariousness of their circumstances, and the various obstacles they encounter along the way. Despite their initial awareness, the actual experience can be far more challenging and overwhelming than they had anticipated.

*'When we left for this journey, we kind of knew that we may die, so we had said our goodbyes to our families. We knew it was a dangerous route, but until we started the journey, we did not know how dangerous it was. We didn't*

*know how long we would be in the boat. we did not know that there was no toilet, no water and nothing to eat. We did not know that there will be 120 people in a boat that can accommodate less than 20 people. There were single women, older women, children and pregnant women with us. We were in the boat for five nights.’* (Mahtab; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

#### 4.1.7 Gaming

Migrants attempting to cross borders, whether by land or water, often must make multiple attempts, a practice referred to as ‘game’ or ‘gaming’. This term signifies the repetitive nature of their efforts to reach their desired destination and a language that is used by the smugglers. For instance, to reach countries like Italy or Greece, migrants may have to engage in gaming and make at least eight attempts at border crossings. Similarly, in the case of traveling from the Balkans to Germany, the process of gaming can require five or more attempts.

One of the interviewees in the North of France shared their experience of attempting to cross the sea multiple times between Turkey and Italy. They recounted an incident where their boat broke in half. During the interview, they mentioned that they were currently waiting to cross the English Channel to reach the UK.

*We tried three times to game when crossing between Turkey and Italy. The last time our boat broke in the middle of sea, and we were rescued. I had my children and was very scared. Now we are in Calais for past two weeks and tried to ‘game’ twice so far, we are hoping we are successful this time.’* (Zainab; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

Another interviewee said:

*‘... it’s worth mentioning that we ‘gamed’ for about ten times before reaching Greece.’* (Bahar; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

Moreover, those aiming to reach the UK from Calais often need to try crossing the English Channel at least eight times, typically using small floating boats. These numbers highlight the challenges and risks migrants face during their journeys, as well as the persistence and determination required to overcome border restrictions and reach their intended destinations.

*I tried ‘gaming’ five times and the 5th time I crossed the sea and arrived to the UK.’* (Venus; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

#### 4.1.8 Sexual violence, including sexual exploitation, of migrant women in transit

Research and interviews conducted as part of this study indicate that women in transit, especially young single women, face an extreme risk of sexual exploitation, sexual abuse and rape. Asylum-seeking and refugee women reported becoming victims of sexual abuse during their journey by the men they know closely, such as smugglers, border guards, local police, armed group members (if they come from conflict zones), and other migrant men traveling with them, and/or with whom they shared cells in the refugee camps (Kuschminder, 2022). In the following quotes, women shared their experiences of sexual exploitation during their journey and while residing in refugee camps after arriving in Europe. Two female participants in this study, who had experience living in an Italian camp, revealed:

*I have been very strong and so many of the boys who were with us during the trip turned to my enemies because I refused to have sex with them when we were in camp! Like in the beginning they treated me very friendly and offered me help, but in the end they all hated me because I never accepted to sleep with them. They expected something else from me during the night, because we used to sleep at the same place, all together.’* (Nora; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

*When we reached Italy and was taken to a camp, there was technically four to five woman and almost one thousand men which was an uncomfortable situation especially for me because I was alone. My friend was with her partner and I was the only woman who was alone so everyone who approached me had some sort of bad intention and I felt really insecure.’ (Venus; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).*

A single woman, who reached Europe, recounted her experience of the migratory journey, especially in Turkey:

*‘In Turkey I just faced bad people with evil intention, no one would help me in Turkey, and everyone wanted to abuse you specially as soon as they noticed that you are a girl alone there. Turkey is hell for a single girl and it’s impossible to survive as a single woman, I deeply felt it in my two months stay in Turkey and I would say for sure that if a girl lives in Turkey for one year she would end up in bad things. Turkey is not a proper country for living as a single girl.’ (Bahar; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).*

Even after women reach their final destination, they continue to face the risk of sexual abuse, which may come from men in positions of ‘authority or professionals such as reception centre staff, lawyers, police, and security guards’ (Keygnaert, 2012, p. 510). The ‘perpetrators of migrant GBV [Gender Based Violence] tend to be those that hold some form of authority over the victim, showing the involvement of unequal power dynamics’ (Kuschminder, 2022, p. 8). One participant, who sought asylum in a European country, recounted her experience of facing sexual advances from a man in authority while she was in the refugee detention centre:

*‘In the centre I am placed now one day a social worker came to my room at 8 o’clock in the morning. He knocked the door and woke me up. He told me that you need to go and have your breakfast immediately. I told him that I was about to leave and am going for a walk and he asked me if he can join! While I really didn’t want him to walk with me, but I couldn’t refuse it, because of cultural upbringing, in my culture we don’t say no to person in authority. So, he came with me and on the road, I offered him some cookie which I was carrying, and he took one and tried to put it in my mouth which was an abnormal act, I refused and he took back the cookie. After 5 minutes, he put his hand on my shoulder, I told him that I feel very uncomfortable. He made excuses pretending like it was just a mistake and took his hand away. You know, I am in a situation that before my asylum is being accepted and I have all the rights even if someone hit me, I wouldn’t speak up.’ (Sabrina; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).*

Another interviewee who is a single woman and travelled alone to reach Europe said:

*‘I lived in Athens in a centre for two years. I was not safe. The building was full of men, and I was the only woman there. Men wanted to rape me several times. I always lived in fear and trembling.’ (Bahar; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).*

An interviewee, who began her journey from the Middle East to the North of France, shared her experience in an asylum centre in France:

*‘When I arrived in France, I went to this asylum centre alone, I saw other people there. They gave me a room which couldn’t get locked while I was the only woman there and it was full of men. So I was very scared and I told the officers but they ignored it telling me that it’s the only option we got.’ (Venus; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).*

An NGO aid worker in Calais informed us about cases of sexual exploitation and abuse of women and girls in the Calais jungles, Calais city, and surrounding areas. Women who are targeted by traffickers and pimps never reach the UK but disappear, reportedly coerced into prostitution. Calais receives girls as young as 14 to 15 years old intending to reach the UK shores. Although initially they may join groups from the same countries, there is no guarantee or option for group arrival to the UK, as a result of which these young and often highly vulnerable girls are left behind without proper protection, putting them at an immediate risk of sexual exploitation and abuse.

These findings underline the alarming reality that even after reaching their intended destination, women still encounter dangers and situations of extreme vulnerabilities, with those in positions of authority or power contributing to their victimisation, as well as re-victimisation.

## 4.2 Accessing services: differences and similarities

### 4.2.1 Introduction

The experiences of irregular migrant women during their journey, including the mental, emotional, and physical aspects, can significantly impact their integration processes and future lives as EU citizens. Upon arrival in the EU, both regular and irregular migrant women often encounter similar challenges, difficulties, and barriers. Through interviews, focus group discussions, and ongoing work with various groups of migrant women, including those from Afghanistan and Ukraine, students, women joining their partners through family reunification, and undocumented women, it has been observed in this study, that certain challenges, such as access to housing, health, education, and employment, are common among all migrants.

It is important to note that national migration and integration policies and access to services can vary between EU Member States and even within different regions within a Member State. This variation can further impact the experiences of and opportunities available to migrant women. According to the ‘Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion, 2021’, 25.9% of young migrant women are ‘neither in employment nor in education and training’ (Action Plan on Integration & Inclusion, 2020).

### 4.2.2 Housing

The accounts from the respondents highlight the discrimination faced by migrants when trying to secure rental accommodations. Despite providing proof of legal residency within the EU, private landlords frequently refuse to rent to migrants. This rejection is often accompanied by a clear indication that the landlords do not trust migrants, particularly those with small children, without any attempt to conceal their prejudices. A newly resettled Afghan woman in Germany told us:

*‘We looked for a place to rent but because we have two very young children, people are refusing to rent their place to us. One time the person agreed to rent us their house, everything was agreed, but at the last minute he refused and said he is not renting it to us because we have small children.’* (Zuhal; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

Another Afghan woman provided an account of her feelings regarding how migrants are treated in Germany:

*‘It’s a fact that they do not rent their places to migrants easily and this is a very big problem. And it’s very depressing. With migration you always have the stamp of being second class citizen in your forehead. Even if you integrate, find job, get socially connected, you are still seen as migrant, and you are still discriminated against in some parts.’* (Yalda; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

One of the interviewees, who came to Belgium as a student, shared her experiences and the challenges she encountered while searching for a place to rent.

*‘It’s not that straight forward to rent a place. Sometimes they ask for your nationality over the phone and sometimes you make the appointment, all is okay until they see you and when they see you are not Belgian and European, that is another obstacle. In Brussels it’s better, because I think in Brussels in general there are more expats and migrant and it’s normal for people to have non-Belgian tenants, but in Hasselt it was not easy. I remember in Hasselt we visited 20 apartments and only 2 of them accepted us but in Brussels it was much easier.’* (Hoda; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

Through the interviews, it has become evident that some differences exist in the way Different groups of migrants and refugees are perceived and treated, resulting in different degrees and experiences of discrimination. For example, in many EU states Ukrainian refugees were provided the use of public transport free of charge and allowed to travel freely between EU Member States. There is a consensus that they were generally welcomed by residents (De Coninck, 2022). The interviews from Afghan, Syrian, and other refugee women in this research who arrived under humanitarian also indicate this. They were placed in temporary reception centres for durations of six months or longer, and they had limited or no control over their preferred city of residence when being transferred.

Afghan women respondents in this report, who have resettled in Italy, Spain, and Germany since 2021, have expressed that they were relocated to isolated villages situated several kilometres away from major cities, without any opportunity to choose or receive information about their destination. Consequently, they are required to travel long distances to attend language classes or access healthcare services.

*'For families who have been transferred to remote villages in Italy, the children need to wait for a long time in the waiting list. And for adult education there are 25-30 students in one class, and you must wait for a long time even for these courses.'* (Focus-group Italy; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

Nevertheless, it is important to note that when it came to securing private rental accommodation, the process appeared to be similar across all migrants, including Ukrainian women. The Ukrainian respondents in the focus group of Ukrainian women said:

*'Renting an apartment is the biggest problem. It's a problem for refugees. The renters have very high conditions. They want two- or three-months deposits, there are a lot of women with children, and we have to solve this problem by getting everything together (resources, money), we need help with all these things, it's not easy.'* (Focus-group Belgium; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

Spain has an 18-month integration procedure for migrants whose asylum cases have been accepted. During this period, between 12 and 18 months, migrants are required to find a job and secure their own accommodation. However, even when they manage to secure employment, migrant women often report difficulties in finding accommodation due to prejudice against them. Below are the accounts revealed by migrant women in a focus group in Spain regarding renting an accommodation:

*'Our biggest problem is job and finding house, it is 18 months that we are here we are searching for a house, but we cannot find one.'* (Focus-group Spain; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

*'Finding a house is not easy even with a job contract. One of my friends, both husband and wife have job but because of having another origin and not Spanish they cannot find house to rent. 90% of Spanish people have blacklist for refugees because they think that refugees are getting government help and they are not working.'* (Focus-group Spain; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

#### 4.2.3 Education

ENoMW's ongoing work with migrant women and literature in the field of women and migration indicates that learning the language of the host country is crucial for the integration and mental well-being of migrants, particularly for migrant women, who often play a vital role in their families (Kilbride, 2009). In a study with Iranian women in Australia, Maryam Jamarani (2012) highlighted the importance of knowing the language to better integrate into the host society. Similar to our findings in this study, Jamarani emphasises that *'Lack of English language proficiency contributes to lower self-confidence and self-esteem among immigrant Iranian women in Australia, ... English language proficiency further highlights an important element in hindering or facilitating women's engagement in the wider society.'* (Jamarani, 2012) Without knowledge of the language, immigrants, especially immigrant women, encounter difficulties

in finding employment, accessing higher education, obtaining local information, communicating with schools regarding their children, and interacting with healthcare professionals. Hamida<sup>8</sup> who lives in Belgium and was interviewed in this study told us:

*'To be honest if you don't know the language you are lost in the system. You do not know where to go and what to do.'* (Hamida; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

A resettled Afghan woman in Germany indicated:

*'Learning [the local] language is a challenge for a migrant. There are also people who have low education and do not know the roles in here and they have problem if they do not learn the language.'* (Yalda; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

Another woman in Spain in her interview told us:

*'At first I did not see language as problem, but then when I started to look for a job, and when my daughter started school, that's when I started to encounter challenges. For example, I didn't know what the schoolteachers and parents were saying to me. I often found my girl crying because she was beaten and bullied by other children in school and I just didn't know what to do, where to ask for help because I didn't speak the language. I had a horrible shame, and it was very hard for me.'* (Sarah; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

Many women in the study reported facing various obstacles, such as long waiting times to enrol in a course, lack of childcare options, difficulties in finding information about available courses, concerns about the teaching methods employed, and the additional financial burden for women who are seeking family reunification and have to pay for language courses. A woman from Middle East in our focus group discussion in Belgium revealed:

*'I came with family reunification visa to join my husband. In fact, I have no right, my husband is in charge of me. I want to learn the language, but he must agree. You depend on your husband; you are not independent. And I found it difficult. For me, the first problem is language. Because I want to have a job, in here I don't, I cannot, because I don't speak French or English well. It's very depressing and sad.'* (Focus-group Belgium; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

Another resettled Afghan woman in Germany gave her account of events regarding attending language classes in Germany as follows:

*'The problem migrants have in Germany is that until they receive their documents and their asylums being accepted, it's very hard for them to study. It's very difficult, if you want to start your study before, then you need to pay the fees yourself. Also finding work is very difficult, because if you don't know the language you cannot find job, therefore it's a challenge and a huge obstacle for them. My problem personally was entering a language course. They were not allowing me because I didn't still have my documents and I really wanted to learn the language.'* (Zuhal; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

An undocumented migrant woman in Belgium told us:

*'I have been living in Belgium for two years but because I do not have document, I cannot attend language courses. There are no language classes available for women without documents.'* (Liza; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

Afghan women who have recently resettled in Italy have shared their experiences regarding language courses. They mentioned that there is a distinction between public and private language courses in terms of qualifications. The government organises public language courses that provide certificates upon completion. These certificates are generally accepted by employers or for further educational purposes. On the other hand, private language courses focus solely on language learning without

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<sup>8</sup> As mentioned in the method section, all the names and identities of women in the study are pseudonymised; hence, 'Hamida' (including all the names in the quotes) is not the real name of the interviewee.



offering any formal qualifications. While these courses may help individuals acquire language skills, they may not hold the same level of recognition as the certificates obtained from public courses.

*'In Italy learning language is an issue. There are two kind of language courses, one is public language course, where they issue a recognised certificate. And there is another language course organised by organisations, and do not issue a recognised certificate and if you don't know the system you attend these language courses. After one year you realise your attendance had no value because they cannot give you recognised certificate if you find a job or continue with your education.'* (Focus-group Italy; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

For most migrant women, and migrant families in general, the education of their children is of particular importance. Many families leave their country of origin in search of better opportunities, safety, and quality education for their children. For newcomers who face numerous integration challenges, the process of integrating their children into the education system can be an additional source of stress. In this study, it was observed that for many women, their children's enrolment in educational institutions and their own inability to attend language classes to learn the language of the host country often go hand in hand. In certain countries, the waiting time for school and kindergarten placements can be long and highly stressful. Furthermore, the differences between educational systems in different European states, as well as the regional differences in services provision for language learning within the same country, create an additional layer of obstacles.

Two women participants residing in Germany highlighted the difficulty of balancing study and child-care as follows:

*'I came to Germany a year ago and have been waiting to find a place for my daughters in the kindergarten, but we are told the waiting list is long and when a place is free, we will be informed. Because of this problem, I also couldn't attend the language classes.'* (Zuhail; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

*'We searched for a kindergarten for my daughter since our arrival to Germany, we couldn't find one because all the kindergartens were full. We went to three to four places in the city they told us, there is no place this year but there will be a place next year.'* (Yalda; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

Women from Ukraine in our focus groups in Brussels highlighted their concern regarding accessing the language courses:

*'There are women who come to Belgium in the middle of the year and its difficult to get into a language course, so they have to wait for a long time.'* (Focus-group Belgium; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

The Ukrainian women residing in Brussels also expressed their concerns regarding the different education systems in various schools, their children's adaptation to new curricula and learning methods, and the perceived lack of emphasis on language instruction, leading to slower language acquisition.

*'In Brussels some of the children are a part of beneficiary of the bridging programme. They have thorough French classes and try to bring the level of all children to the same level, and other cases they are children who do not have this programme - the bridge classes - so they are just dropped in the class, whichever level, and they are expected to speak and to read as the native speaker.'* (Focus-group Belgium; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

They also highlighted their frustration due to the lack of support and communication with teachers in schools. Some women mentioned that their children attend both Belgian schools and online Ukrainian schools, as they do not want their children to miss out on anything in case they return to Ukraine. This dual education approach has placed significant pressure on the children and their overall well-being.

Two women participants highlighted their concern about the slow learning of French by their children in the Belgian schools.

*I had to change the school of my children. My children ask me why they don't teach us French. My children are in school for 7 months, 8 hours a day and I am here 3 hours a day, and they speak zero French and I speak better than them. My kids are not stupid, in fact they are very intelligent. They keep asking me, why they don't learn French, they don't do anything in French.'* (Focus-group Belgium; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

*My daughter stays in school from morning to evening and there is no progress. She has no improvement in French, and she has forgotten her native language, she reads like 5 years old. Her classmates in Ukraine have progressed in maths and other subjects, it's very stressful for me as mother. The first problem is language, the second is communication, and the third is managing both Belgian and Ukrainian schools at the same time.'* (Focus-group Belgium; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

Another mother from Ukraine expressed her concern about the flexibility in Belgian schools and communication barriers with school professionals.

*I feel Belgian system is not flexible at all. There is only one option and no other choice, its very difficult. This is also very stressful, because I do not know how to manage it. We asked for an appointment in the school and discussed it with the teacher and the teacher told us that my daughter can manage with maths and with the rest of the test, we will see. For us we are here because of our children, they are the main reason, and we would like to support them and help them to integrate in the system. But now it's one of the most painful things.'* (Focus-group Belgium; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

Some Afghan women in our focus group in Italy experienced the same challenges as they had to endure a lengthy waiting period before their children could attend school.

*My daughter couldn't go to school for 3-4 months and was very depressed. She was asking me "when will I go to school?" until finally she was lucky to get into a private school and an organisation agreed to pay for her fees. But now I face problem of not having money to pay for her books and school materials.'* (Focus-group Italy; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

#### 4.2.4 Employment

In 2022, the employment gap between native and third-country national women was as high as 17% (European Parliament Briefing, 2023). Additionally, factors such as childcare responsibilities, cultural and religious restrictions within the community, dependency on men (financially and emotionally), lack of work permits, and lack of documentation contribute to women falling behind in terms of integration and language learning, resulting in a slower transition rate in obtaining their first employment compared to migrant men. According to a study, 22% of migrant men secured their first job after 24 months of entry, while the corresponding figure for women was only 6% (Hamedanian, 2022, p. 959).

Furthermore, migrant women are particularly at high risk of being overqualified for their jobs, which can result in the devaluation of their skills (Action Plan for Integration and Inclusion, 2020). This reality was echoed by several respondents in this study, specifically Ukrainian women and newly resettled Afghan women who left their countries under emergency circumstances without prior knowledge or preparation. These women reported having professional backgrounds as judges, university lecturers, bank managers, journalists, and scientists. In Europe, they found themselves expected to work in the domestic sector, cleaning, and in restaurants.

Women from Ukraine in the focus group in Belgium said:

*Most of us have degrees and high-profile job in Ukraine and we are not ready to get a job in cleaning, cooking, baby sitting. We are interested to get interesting and good job. We understand that we need to speak in the local languages*

*and now we give all our energies in learning the language.*' (Focus-group Belgium; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

In the focus group discussion, Afghan women who arrived in Italy through humanitarian corridors highlighted their concerns:

*'Afghan women who were resettled in Europe are professionals. They are doctors, lawyers, but it seems Italy has already foreseen jobs such as waiting and cleaning. The organisations facilitating the families use their language problems to do any kind of low skilled job that is available. For people who had left their country suddenly within hours and had no choice, it's not easy to settle here and we are all in deep depression.'* (Focus-group Italy; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

One of the Afghan women who also arrived through humanitarian corridors to Spain, in the Spanish focus group, said:

*'It's not easy to find a job here in Spain. My husband was a lecturer and worked in a prominent position in Afghanistan, here he is sending his CV everywhere, even for waitressing job in the restaurant, but has not been able to find a job. I have finished Spanish language classes and found a job for two hours in as canteen supervisor. In Afghanistan I was a teacher.'* (Focus-group Spain; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

Migrant women who enter Europe through family reunification channels also often find themselves unable to progress in their careers and are left dependent on their husbands. They face challenges such as having to pay for language learning courses or waiting for their residence cards in order to secure employment. This situation is particularly difficult and frustrating for women who are eager to go back to employment and achieve independence as soon as possible.

*'My husband got a fully-paid scholarship to Belgium and after few months I joined him with family reunification visa. I was taking intensive language courses and searching for job every day. I started looking for jobs, and because I did not have European and Belgian residency and work permit, I did not get any job, and few of which did not need the permit was voluntary work. I was going crazy; I was searching everywhere in every organisation.'* (Hoda; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

Based on our interviews we learned that international students who wish to remain in Europe after completing their studies and enter the labour market often face significant challenges due to job permit requirements. They find it extremely difficult to access the labour market because they are required to obtain a work permit from potential employers. However, to obtain a work permit, they must secure a job that pays above a certain threshold, which creates a vicious circle and perpetuates an impossibility to be employed, for many migrant women.

Consequently, this situation creates a circular predicament for many migrant women, placing them in highly stressful and difficult circumstances that can have a negative impact on their mental well-being. This is particularly important for individuals coming from war-torn or economically disadvantaged countries, as student entry was their legal pathway to enter the EU and pursue legal residence and employment.

*'After my studies, I applied for a job visa. It costs the same as the student visa and the requirements include demonstrating that one's completed the studies. The requirements are hard because one must finish the thesis in a small period with no delays and if you have a health issue (physical or mental) it doesn't matter because you must deliver. Not delivering means not only not having your degree but also, and more importantly, the expiration of visa and returning to one's home country. Being a migrant and unemployed takes a toll on one's mental health and increases my feelings of failure, anxiety, and stress, which affects my physical health. I know migrating is a big challenge, it is hard, there's a lot of racism and discrimination. Sometimes I ask myself how much I want to stay in Europe and how awful it would be to go back. In Europe I feel safer but unsafe in different ways.'* (Belen; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

#### 4.2.5 Health

Migrants in Europe often encounter obstacles and discrimination when attempting to access health services, particularly women and girls. Research conducted in seven European countries has shown that migrant women are more likely to face difficulties in accessing the healthcare system compared to migrant men (Gil-Salmeron, E 2021). Additionally, 'Migrant women face additional challenges as they tend to have lower proficiency in the host country language, weaker social networks, and greater responsibilities for childcare and family' (Action Plan for Integration and Inclusion; 2020).

The participants in the Ukrainian focus group indicated:

*'Unfortunately, we have a language barrier, we do not speak English fluently, we do not speak Flemish or French at all, doctors in most cases speak bad English too.'* (Focus-group Belgium; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

Empirical research conducted with migrant and refugee communities indicates the presence of systematic discrimination and inequality in health services, as well as mistreatment by healthcare professionals towards migrants and refugees, particularly migrant women (Pollock, Mangrio & Fross, 2017). For example, a study conducted in Canada revealed that 'immigrant women reported instances of healthcare providers becoming frustrated or angry when asked to acknowledge or respect religious or cultural beliefs and needs, such as a preference for female providers or for privacy (Pollock *et al.*, 2012). One of the women participating in this study highlighted her experience:

*'Yesterday I was at my GP and I was waiting for a long time, after a while I asked the receptionist why no one calls me while I have been here for more than half an hour. She told me we called you several times and you didn't hear. She spoke to a nurse who was working there, and the nurse said we called her five times and waited for her, but she didn't come. After a while they told me that I should have gone upstairs, but no one had told me this. I had to wait for 2 hours just for a blood test. Finally, while I am very scared of injection, the nurse pushed the needle so hard into my skin that I started crying and it was only because she had called me, and I hadn't answered. But I didn't speak up even though I had waited for 2 hours but I could do nothing, and I left the place crying and I felt helpless.'* (Venus; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

Ukrainian women spoke of having difficulty transitioning from the healthcare system in Ukraine to Belgium. In Ukraine, they were accustomed to having direct access to healthcare professionals and receiving necessary medications without significant waiting times. However, there was a difference in Belgium, where they experienced longer waiting times or encountered a more complex healthcare system. Women in our focus groups expressed themselves:

*'The biggest problem is the medicine. For example if you need something urgent, a service, you see it's a completely different system in Belgium. In Belgium, it is difficult to get something in an emergency if you need it at that moment.'* (Focus-group Belgium; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

*'In Ukraine we have the possibility to call a doctor home or call the emergency - it's not very expensive - or we can go to a clinic and receive services from every specialist (general, or dentist for example), we must pay of course. But it's not 500 euros, its only 50 euros, this is not expensive, and we can do it at any time, morning, evening, and there is not huge que. You do not wait for hours if you have pain or something like this.'* (Focus-group Belgium; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

Afghan women in Italy, particularly those who have been relocated to remote countryside areas, have also expressed challenges related to accessing healthcare services. These challenges include traveling long distances to see a doctor or a specialist and difficulty obtaining over-the-counter medicines. Additionally, they have mentioned experiencing long waiting times before being seen by a healthcare professional.

*I have been sick for 5 months, after 4 months and 20 days I could get access to the doctor. This is not only my story but many Afghan families who have been dispersed to remote places in Italy. And even then, it takes 1 month to do the examination. When we go to pharmacies they are not giving any kind of medication without prescription.'* (Focus-group Italy; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

Two Afghan women in the Italian focus group highlighted the limitation of availability and accessibility to healthcare facilities as below:

*'Where I and my family are placed right now, it takes us hours to reach to hospital or doctors.'* (Focus-group Italy; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

*I have little brother who is diagnosed with a brain problem, he is 10 years old, and he was diagnosed in 2021 and now its 2023 and he has not even seen a doctor since. We are told that his diagnosis is done in a place which is seventeen hours travel from where we live.'* (Focus-group Italy; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

Irregular migrant women and girls, who have taken risky and dangerous routes to reach Europe and lack proper documentation or are awaiting asylum processing, often face significant barriers in accessing healthcare services. Their access to healthcare is often extremely limited or non-existent.

One woman who came to Europe through family reunification, but due to violence from her husband, had to seek refuge in a shelter, told us:

*I am in a shelter with no documents. When I get sick, I ask the social worker and she brings me medication from the counter. It's not easy to see a doctor in here, and I cannot go to any health care services because, first I do not have document, second because of my safety.'* (Hamida; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

Another woman who sought asylum with her family in Germany and is waiting in a refugee camp said:

*'Here in Germany, we are in the camp, we can't buy medicine and we are not allowed to see the doctor.'* (Mahtab; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

#### **4.2.6 Sex-based discrimination and male violence against women**

Statistics indicate that one in three women has experienced some form of male violence in their lifetime, often perpetrated by an intimate partner (UN Women Policy Brief). This violence can manifest in various forms, including sexual, verbal, physical, and mental abuse, and it can have profound and long-lasting effects on women's mental and physical well-being.

Afghan women in Italy spoke of the rise of violence in the families of newly resettled Afghans in Italy due to many issues such as not knowing the language, employment, and housing, which concerns their lives in immigration.

*'The violence amongst Afghan families in Italy have risen very high but women cannot report it because they do not know how to and where to go. They are in deep depression.'* (Focus-group Italy; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

In the context of migrant and refugee women, the risk of being subjected to male violence is often heightened due to additional factors. The fear of seeking help or leaving an abusive relationship can be particularly pronounced for migrant and refugee women, as they may face additional barriers and consequences due to their immigration status, as well as language barriers, unfamiliarity with the system, lack of access to information, fear of deportation in the absence of proper documentation, concerns about the impact on their asylum cases, fear of losing custody of their children, and uncertainty about where to seek help. All these factors contribute to the vulnerability of these women.

These challenges can leave them feeling trapped and without the necessary support to escape the abusive situation.

An irregular migrant woman told us:

*'When I was kicked out of the camp, because my asylum application was rejected, the only person I knew was this man I met in the camp. His asylum was accepted and within 4-6 months he bought a car and a house. He told me to come and marry him. At the time if this man had not said this, I had some money and I could have gone to England. After 5-6 months living together, the guy started fighting with me. He hit me and disrespected me. He knew I had no place to go. He was often beating me and kicking me out of the house. A few times I was on the street at 12 midnight. He broke my arm once. I was calling Caritas and other organisations I knew, with proof of video and documents and begging them to find me a place to stay, but unfortunately nobody helped and every time I had to go back to this man again.'* (Bahar; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

Women who have joined their partners/husbands through the family reunification scheme may choose to stay in an abusive relationship due to the fear of being sent back to their country of origin and having their children taken away. According to Article 15(1) of the 'Family Reunification Directive,' women who join their husbands as part of family reunification are required to live with their spouse for a period of five years before being eligible for an EU residence permit and the rights associated with being an EU citizen (Family Reunification Directive, 2003). In some European countries, the national laws differ; for example, in Spain,<sup>9</sup> if you are married for three years, you can maintain your residency after divorce, while in Belgium and Germany, the five-year rule applies.

It is important to note that under this directive, Member States have the discretion to limit the granting of the residence permit to the spouse or unmarried partner in cases where the family relationship has broken down (Family Reunification Directive, 2003). This means that many women are compelled to endure living with an abusive and violent husband for five years, or else face the risk of being sent back to their country of origin. This situation highlights the vulnerability of migrant women who are trapped in abusive relationships due to their immigration status and the limitations imposed by family reunification policies.

A woman who came to Europe via family reunification and was interviewed as part of this study told us:

*'The abuse started from first day of my arrival. He will make problem if the food wasn't right or the house wasn't clean. One night after he came back home very late and I only asked him where he was and if he was with his girlfriend, he beat me up and locked me outside the apartment. With no money, no phone and in my pyjamas, I didn't know where to go at that time of the night, I did not know anyone or knew the language. I just stayed behind the door, until he opened the door in the morning.'* (Hamida; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

An expert who works with women victims of sex-based violence, particularly with women who have come to Belgium as part of family reunification, said:

*'A lot of women will stay in the abusive relationship because they have no help. They fear of being killed and deported back, because legally you must stay with your husband and prove that you are in good relationship before you can have documents. She fears being on the street and be exploited.'* (Tanya; ENoMW; HumMingBird, 2023).

Tanya also highlighted:

*'70 to 80% of Thai women come to Belgium with married visa. Thailand is a tourist destination country, and majority of men come to Thailand as tourist, in reality they want to find a woman. And many of the women getting married to these men comes from rural area with low socio-economic and low education background. And those who have high skilled and high qualifications will not be able to get the high skilled job in here. Most of them come to*

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.expatica.com/es/moving/visas/spain-family-visa-109279/>

*totally new environment with no language and no cultural awareness. Even if they get abused and violated, they stay in the relationship.'*

It's important to note these issues persist, despite the existence of significant binding instruments such as CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women) and the Istanbul Convention which are designed to ensure the protection of women in situations of sexual violence and sexual discrimination. CEDAW General Recommendation 19, and, in particular, the Specific Recommendation 24(b) in the General Recommendation 19 and the updated General Recommendation 35 (CEDAW General Recommendation No. 19 & 35), is most applicable to women with family reunification and undocumented women who want to escape violent relationships. Chapter VII of the Istanbul Convention is most relevant to women who feel unable to protect themselves due to their documentation and residence permit rights in Europe, which includes women with family reunification who want to leave a violent relationship. Article 59 of the Istanbul Convention clearly states that: *'Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that victims whose residence status depends on that of the spouse or partner as recognised by internal law, in the event of the dissolution of the marriage or the relationship, are granted an autonomous residence permit irrespective of the duration of the marriage or the relationship, in the event of particularly difficult circumstances, upon application.'* (Istanbul Convention, 2011). These conventions' provisions are applicable to all countries that have signed and ratified them, yet the interviews in this study shows that these conventions are not respected and applied at all.

## 5. Conclusions

The findings presented in this report provide compelling evidence of the numerous obstacles, challenges, and difficulties experienced by migrant women and girls, regardless of whether they are irregular or regular migrants settled in European countries. However, women who enter the EU through legal pathways do not face the same level of risk of abuse and exploitation during their migration journeys compared to those who travel irregularly. Migrant women, especially those traveling alone, often endure sexual abuse in the hands of smugglers, armed soldiers, male peers in reception centres and refugee camps, and even authorities and border guards. Reporting such abuse or violence poses significant challenges for these women. Factors such as not knowing where to report the abuse, being accompanied by the perpetrators (in cases of trafficking or domestic violence), facing abuse from authorities themselves, or feeling compelled to continue their journey hinder their ability to seek help and protection.

Consequently, policies such as screening at the borders upon arrival as proposed in the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum (EU Pact, 2020), may inadvertently make it more difficult for women who have been victimised en route and prior by being subjected to such forms of male violence as sexual abuse or harassment, physical and psychological violence from male authorities and peers, or trafficking, to disclose the abuse and file comprehensive asylum applications. The process of discussing violence and abuse requires time and trusted experienced professionals to build rapport and trust with the victims, impossible to ensure when screening women on arrival in the borders. Additionally, in the experience of the European Network of Migrant Women and its wide membership, the very understanding of the fact that abuse has taken place and it does not constitute a ‘normal’ or ‘ordinary’ experience of a refugee women, is something that many women arrive to gradually, and, only after a period in which they can disassociate themselves both from the perpetrators and the circumstances in which the abuse took place.

In addition to the conditions at borders that do not facilitate women’s reporting but often further perpetuate abuse and traumatisation, reception centres and refugee camps often lack specialised support for women, leading to inadequate accommodation arrangements. Women are often compelled to share intimate spaces, such as bedrooms, toilets, and bathrooms, with men. Despite the EU Reception Directive (Reception Directive, 2013) emphasising the importance of protecting vulnerable individuals, including pregnant women and survivors of violence, the directive is not duly implemented.

A significant majority of the women participating in this research expressed confusion regarding where to seek information about services and support when needed. They lacked awareness of the different systems and access to services in various regions and cities within EU Member States. Their concerns emphasised the need for better information provision, awareness of rights, and knowledge of available support systems.

Discrimination in the housing sector against migrants by landlords is evident. Even with a job, income, or social system support, migrant women in this study reported feeling mistrusted by the host community, making it challenging for them to find suitable accommodation. Those with children faced even more discrimination and struggled to secure housing.

Respondents in this report highlighted difficulties accessing the healthcare system and communicating with healthcare professionals. These challenges were attributed to language barriers and a lack of understanding of the healthcare system in their respective countries. Long waiting times for



healthcare consultations were commonly reported, particularly by newly resettled Afghan women who faced additional challenges due to the distance between their allocated housing and medical facilities.

Learning the language of the host country is considered a priority for integration and understanding different systems. However, it is crucial for host countries to provide efficient, effective, and free language courses to all migrants, regardless of their migration status. Respondents also mentioned barriers such as lengthy waiting times for kindergarten placements, lack of childcare options, absence of harmonised language education in schools, difficulties in communication with teachers and educators, and a lack of language courses for undocumented women.

The findings of this report shed light on the institutional inequality and discrimination faced by women in employment, particularly third-country national women. While the Charter of Fundamental Rights in the European Union (2016/C 202/02), Article 23 prohibits discrimination between men and women by employers (Charter of Fundamental Rights in the EU, 2016), challenges persist in practice. Despite the standards set by this directive, there is a need for effective implementation to ensure equal treatment and opportunities for all women in the workplace. CEDAW provides crucial international guidance, especially through Article 11 and accompanying it with General Recommendation 26 on women migrant workers, to eliminate discrimination against women in employment. To create a more inclusive job market by giving opportunities to migrant women into the labour market, countries must uphold CEDAW and take further steps to remove barriers and biases, ensuring that women, regardless of their nationality, can access employment without facing discriminatory practices or limitations related to work and residence permits.

## 6. General recommendations

- It is crucial to design and provide single-sex women-only spaces in refugee reception centres and refugee camps.
- Information and awareness about services and legal rights should be readily available to women upon their arrival in the EU.
- Reports of violence, abuse, and exploitation experienced by women should be taken seriously by NGOs, organisations working with refugees and asylum seekers, and authorities, with immediate assistance provided.
- Legally binding instruments such as CEDAW (Article 11 on employment, Article 12 on health, and Article 10 on education, along with the General Recommendation 26 on Migrant Women Workers and General Recommendation 35 on Gender Based Violence, which are most relevant to this report), and the Istanbul Convention should be considered and upheld by all Member States who has signed and ratified these treaties.
- Establishing more women-only shelters for individuals escaping violence is crucial, ensuring they have unrestricted access to essential services such as legal and healthcare, with no waiting times and at no cost.
- It is important to prioritise the objectives of ‘affordable housing’ and ‘combating discrimination in the housing market while reducing residential segregation’ (Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion) outlined in the EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027. These objectives should be firmly integrated into the national policies of EU Member States.
- Minimal or no waiting time should be ensured for children to register and access schools and kindergartens.
- Access to language classes should be available to all migrant women, regardless of their documentation status.
- Urgent measures are required to address the safety of migrants during dangerous journeys and at borders. Efforts should be made to improve conditions, enhance protection, and prioritise preserving human lives with allocated funds.

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# appendix 1

## Consent Form

Interviews & Focus group discussion

I agree to participate in a Focus Group Meeting for Work Package 9 ‘Qualitative scenarios: Listening to the migrants’ of the Horizon2020 research project ‘HumMingBird – Enhanced Migration Measures from a Multidimensional Perspective’, Grant Agreement No 870661.

I assure that I am participating voluntarily. I understand that I can stop the interview or change any part of the interview at any time. I understand that I can withdraw my consent for the interview at any time.

I agree that the interview can be used for the HumMingBird research project or for future publications of European Network of Migrant women (ENoMW). The interviews will be accessed by members of the HumMingBird research team only.

I hereby agree that the interview is recorded

- YES  
 NO

I hereby allow direct quotations from the interviews under full anonymity

- YES, I agree that parts of the interviews are quoted directly  
 NO, I only agree on the use of processed information

I understand that for any question or concern about the project or my participation, I can contact the local researcher Frohar Poya under the following mail-address [frohar@migrantwomennetwork.org](mailto:frohar@migrantwomennetwork.org).

In order to be informed about the results of the project I am providing here my contact details:

Place, Date

Interviewee’s signature

Place, Date

Facilitator’s signature



**HumMingBird**

## ABOUT HUMMINGBIRD (2019-2023)

### Enhanced migration measures from a multidimensional perspective

Migration has become a matter of significant social, political and broader public concern. It has therefore shifted very high on the agenda of national and EU authorities. Well-informed, evidence-based migration policies should be based on reliable evidence, beginning with a thorough understanding of existing data as well as the demographic, economic, environmental and political drivers of migration. There is a need for tools to forecast migration flows in order to minimise shocks and tensions and to foster good governance. HumMingBird's objectives can be summarised as follows:

- to assess the quality and comparability of existing statistical concepts and data (stocks as well as flows) relating to migration in the EU;
- to explore and validate the use of alternative data sources – including various types of big data (such as social media or telecommunication);
- to understand the changing nature of migration flows and the drivers of migration; to analyse patterns, motivations and new geographies; to hear the voices of migrants in various 'hubs' around Europe;
- to nowcast short-term flows and forecast longer-term patterns of migration, while identifying uncertainties;
- to examine the interactions between migration flows and policies, and
- to estimate the potential impact of alternative policy scenarios.

In order to fulfil these objectives, the HumMingBird consortium (consisting of 16 partners from 10 countries) brings together research centres, private companies, NGOs and a European Research Infrastructure Consortium (ERIC). The consortium combines a wide range of scientific disciplines (from anthropology and political sciences to statistics, telecom engineering and computer sciences). Partnerships between academic researchers and civil society organisations working with migrants will carry out qualitative research to enrich, interpret and supplement the statistical analyses. Sixteen partners from 10 countries (including European expert centres) are involved, and many of the participating researchers have a migration background.

## COORDINATOR

HIVA - Research Institute for Work and Society, KU Leuven (BE)

## PARTNERS

University of Utrecht, Department of Information and Computing Sciences (NL) • University of Salamanca, Faculty of Social Sciences (ES) • Otto-Friedrich-University of Bamberg, Geographic Migration and Transition Studies (DE) • CESSDA ERIC (NO) • EKKE - National Centre for Social Research (GR) • IEN - Institute of Economic Sciences, Data Center Serbia for Social Sciences (RS) • Malmö University, Malmö Institute for Studies of Migration, Diversity and Welfare (SE) • Turkcell Technology (TR) • GMV NSL Limited (UK) • MPG - Migration Policy Group (BE) • ENoMW - European Network of Migrant Women (BE) • White Research (BE) • University of Pisa, Department of Computer Science (IT) • CNR - National Research Council (IT) • VUB - Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Interface Demography, Department of Sociology (BE) • University of Zurich, Department of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies (CH) • CILD - Italian Coalition for Civil Liberties and Rights (IT) • Caritas International (BE)

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