

# **“Everyone Wants to Protect Their Borders. Us Refugees, Where Are We Supposed to Go?” Negotiating Forced Migration Between Overlapping Asylum and Border Regimes: Women Asylum Seekers in the Eastern Mediterranean.**

Sandy Petrinioti, Saint Mary’s University

(Summary)

The aim of this presentation is to present findings of a field research project on the Precarity and Gender Based Violence (GBV) nexus among women asylum seekers on the Eastern Mediterranean route entering Greece in the late 2010s. The paper intentionally “gives voice” to the women themselves and attempts to link “lived experiences” to border management and migration governance as practiced by Greece and the EU.

By focusing on **one segment of their journey** - the stay in a “third, transit country”, the decision to travel onward to Europe, and the actual experience of the crossing - the paper pinpoints and interprets factors contributing to the precarization of their journeys and their exposure to GBV. The thesis is that GBV affects people on the forced migration journey intersectionally according to various identities (race, nationality, class, stage in the life cycle) while structural factors (the border and asylum regimes and practices) account for the dangerousness and violence of the journeys.

The analysis is based on 35 interviews with women asylum seekers from four linguistic families: Arabic, Dari, Farsi, and French. The women, speaking in their native language to four interviewers from a trustworthy migrant women’s grassroots NGO in Athens, Melissa, related their experiences in Turkey and their passage to Europe.

Their narratives are organized in two sections: 1. Life in the transit country (Turkey) and 2. Border crossing and arrival in Greece.

## **1. Life in a Transit country**

The experience of sexual violence, destitution and slave-like conditions of work seems ubiquitous especially for African women. Minors were not exempt from labour exploitation. Even women who had not fallen prey to prostitution rings, told of experiences of “everyday” sexual harassment. They were most vulnerable when they sought shelter. Under the guise of providing a room and a meal, native or migrant rings exploited them.

A notable characteristic of the African women’s journeys is that they traveled alone or with children. Muslim women travelled in family arrangements or with distant relatives or neighbors. The dangers of transiting for women seem exacerbated if they travel alone, outside the “protection” of the patriarchal family.

While African women were the most forthcoming in relating sexual and gender based violence and exploitation, other refugees from other origins and diverse cultural traditions also said that living conditions in Turkey had become intolerable and hopelessness had set in.

## **2. The decision to move on - Border crossing and arrival in Greece**

The unsettledness of living in refugee camps or urban ghettos in conjunction with the protracted nature of the conflicts that they were fleeing from, pushed them to take up the challenging task of finding a smuggler and taking a chance in crossing the borders between Turkey and Greece.

Some related that the smugglers found them.

Is the arrival and stay in Turkey a preplanned stage of a longer journey to proceed to Europe or is it an impromptu decision? African women seemed to fit the second type but others from Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq appeared to be actively seeking passage to Europe, many because they hoped to join family already there.

### **Defining characteristics of sea border crossing**

Border crossings to a European country cannot be made without the use of smugglers and their boats while border crossing attempts were made repeatedly from locations on the Turkish coast (the Turkish Coast Guard and Turkish police appear to have acted as Europe's "gatekeeper" after March 2016 and the EU-Turkey Statement).

Re-routing (finding other starting points or other routes) is also common.

Finally, the women encountered dangers and violence. Their journeys present a "continuum of violence" in life experiences in the transit country and in the repeated attempts at border crossing, a particularly risky time because the women's "illegality" was exposed and their vulnerability to smugglers, border guards, police, and other travelers became acute.

### **Asylum and border regimes and practices and the precarization of mobility**

Border regimes are the systems of laws, institutions and practices which regulate the crossing of international borders for people, capital, and goods. Asylum regimes are the systems of laws and regulations, the institutions and the practices of officials who determine who qualifies to be granted international protection. These overlapping regimes create a web of administrative, financial and physical obstacles to entry for unwanted "aliens".

Prevention, interdiction, rejections, and returns are the guiding norms of the EU policies applied during the so-called European refugee crisis. It falls on the border apparatus to manage the first two and the asylum regime to bring about the third and fourth. Without legal pathways to sanctuary these restrictive policies precarized mobility and emboldened interpersonal acts of GVB. Thus, transit countries and the maritime border itself, become sites of humanitarian crisis with distinct gender expressions.