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Governance and the Local Integration  
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# Gender Dynamics across Reception and Integration in Cyprus

Maria Angeli

Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies

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## I. Introduction

Gender is a system of relations that shapes all aspects of the migration experience (Nawyn, 2010). Continuous unequal access for women to resources, property, education, protection, justice, the labour market and decision-making in both origin and reception countries impact women's migration experience differently to that of men's (Council of Europe, 2019). The conditions of migration become particularly challenging for refugee women who often deal with a triple disadvantage: immigration, forced migration and gender. These three challenges mutually reinforce each other (Liebig and Tronstad, 2018).

Although women now constitute 36.8% of first-time asylum applicants<sup>1</sup> (Eurostat 2019), European countries continue to fail in addressing women's different integration and protection needs. While some research has been conducted that has identified the gender gap in asylum policies (Daoust and Folkelius, 1996; European Parliament, 2015), the intersection of gender and migration remains vastly underexplored (Bilgili, Loschmann and Siegel, 2017). This can be interpreted as a form of sexism or an androcentric approach to migration, the underlying assumption being the default gender of the migrant is male (Nawyn, 2010).

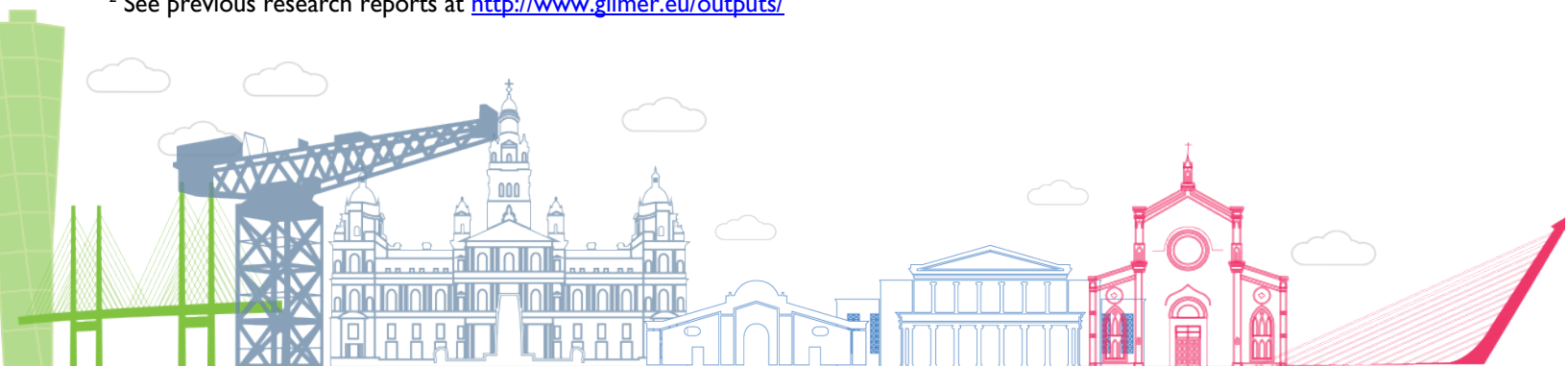
Women are the most vulnerable group of displaced migrants because they face multiple forms of discrimination (UNHCR, 2014). The absence of gender mainstreaming in integration policies makes women, as well as people who do not fit the binary definition of gender, displaced migrants and refugees even more vulnerable to discrimination and abuse. Gender-based violence (GBV) affects this group disproportionately and is often used as a weapon of war and forced displacement. Women who pay smugglers in order to escape from dangerous conditions in their home countries can find themselves in equally precarious situations with the risk of trafficking and sexual violence in the host countries (UNHCR, 2014). Furthermore, the absence of gender-sensitive policies in language training and the labour market reduces opportunities for the integration of women displaced migrants and refugees with negative consequences on their independence, self-esteem, health and well-being.

The aim of this research report is to propose a gender-sensitive approach in integration policies in Cyprus. A feminist perspective is applied on the results of three GLIMER work packages on integration, which respectively addressed (1) housing, (2) language education and (3) labour market dynamics<sup>2</sup>. This report seeks to understand and interpret the intersection of gender and displaced migration in these areas and present some good practices initiated in particular by the third sector.

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<sup>1</sup> The percentage of women in the population of first-time asylum seekers in Europe varies depending on the age group. Among the youngest age group (0–13 years), females accounted for 48.8% of the total number of applicants in 2019. Less parity was observed for asylum applicants who were 14–17 or 18–34 years old, the percentage of female applicants being 32.1% and 31%, respectively. This share rises to 42% for the age group 35–64.

<sup>2</sup> See previous research reports at <http://www.glimer.eu/outputs/>



I employ a binary approach to gender, with the understanding that men and women are neither static nor homogenous. Their needs nevertheless differ and this difference must be addressed. Using this 'strategic essentialism', the gender dynamics of integration policies and their consequences will be explored.

Integration policy ideas, recommendations and measures will be suggested at the end of this report, which recognise and respond to the different needs of displaced migrant women and men in integration and reception processes, with the aim of improving upon those that are already in place.

## 2. The GLIMER Method

GLIMER's qualitative approach is based on face-to-face, audio-recorded interviews that were then transcribed. Once data was extracted, the transcribed interviews were deleted to protect the interviewees' personal data. The research develops theories and concepts about migrant and refugee integration based on empirical data using an inductive approach. This approach is necessary for exploring integration policies and the significance of gender dimensions and how these empirically intersect with other dynamics. The analysis also uses input from stakeholders who contributed to the research.

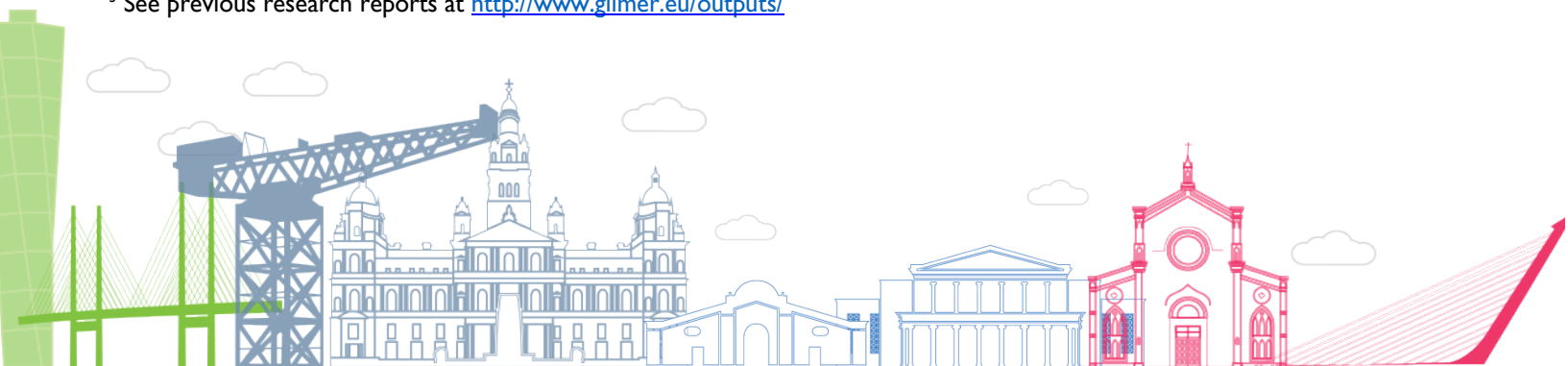
Field notes and transcripts were interpreted using NVivo – a qualitative data analysis software – in order to connect relevant themes and patterns in the data. The coding was developed through inductive reasoning (i.e. looking at the research data in isolation, without drawing from related theories or previous research). Basic analytical categories emerged from concepts consistent throughout the data.

This report is based on qualitative research on integration policies in Cyprus carried out by the GLIMER project between November 2017 and March 2020. It elaborates on a gender perspective approach to integration policies as observed in the project's work packages that examined (1) housing, (2) language education and (3) labour market dynamics<sup>3</sup>.

*Table 1: Qualitative research sample*

Stakeholders	Number of participants
Public authorities	10
Trade unions	2
NGOs	13
Local authorities	2
Academics	1
Total number of participants	28

<sup>3</sup> See previous research reports at <http://www.glimer.eu/outputs/>



Regarding personal data protection, in order to fully adhere to the ethics protocol, the names of participants and institutions have been omitted, as have any references to participants that might make them identifiable. The research was enriched through desk research, specifically a literature review on the gender dynamics of integration, as well as other empirical resources: legal and policy documents, academic journals, media articles, photographs, as well as project leaflets and websites.

### 3. Setting the Scene: Gender Equality and Migration Policies in Cyprus

#### 3.1 Gender and asylum policies in Cyprus

The Republic of Cyprus recognises refugees in accordance with the terms of the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the related 1967 Protocol, which provide the general foundation for the system of protection for refugees. Despite the fact that the Geneva Convention is gender blind<sup>4</sup>, Cyprus interprets this document in a gender-sensitive way, recognising gender as a basis to grant protection. Vulnerable groups that can apply for asylum include victims of gender-based violence (GBV), trafficking and survivors of female genital mutilation (FGM)<sup>5</sup>.

Nevertheless, women and men are not equally integrated and protected under asylum processes. When it comes to integration policies, it seems the country has not been particularly successful in addressing gender-specific needs. A potential reason may be found in the empirical analysis by Emmenegger and Stigwall (2019) that concluded that European countries who have a healthy share of female MPs tend to produce more women-friendly asylum policies and are characterised by more positive attitudes toward immigrants from non-EU countries. In contrast, Cyprus consistently scores among the lowest in the Women-Friendliness in Asylum Index (WFA); the index explores the implementation of women's rights in the framework of asylum recognition and reception. The low WFA score reflects the weaknesses of gender equality and migration policies in Cyprus. I discuss these weaknesses in the following sections.

#### 3.2 Gender equality in Cyprus

Gender equality has been entrenched as a principle in the Republic of Cyprus since its establishment in 1960. According to Article 28 of the Constitution, rights and liberties must be enjoyed without any direct or indirect discrimination based on sex. Following the 2004 accession to the European Union, a number of gender equality laws were introduced into the national legislative framework, as part of harmonisation with the *acquis communautaire*

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<sup>4</sup> Both the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol do not refer to 'sex' or 'gender' or 'sexual orientation' in the definition of a refugee.

<sup>5</sup> For more information, see [http://www.moi.gov.cy/moi/asylum/asylumservice.nsf/0F2309A3D5BC6D33C2258329003060E9/\\$file/INFORMATION%20LEAFLET%20for%20Applicants%20for%20International%20Protection.pdf](http://www.moi.gov.cy/moi/asylum/asylumservice.nsf/0F2309A3D5BC6D33C2258329003060E9/$file/INFORMATION%20LEAFLET%20for%20Applicants%20for%20International%20Protection.pdf)



(Pavlou and Christodoulou, 2012). Gender mainstreaming is largely influenced by EU directives and international conventions for the promotion of gender equality, such as the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action, and the Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention).

There are several policies and laws in place to promote gender equality, including the Equal Treatment of Men and Women in Employment and Vocational Training Law that also addresses discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation; the Equal Pay Between Men and Women for the Same Work or for Work of Equal Value Law; the Maternity Protection Law; the Parental Leave and Leave on Grounds of Force Majeure Law; the Equal Treatment of Men and Women in Professional Social Insurance Schemes Law; the Equal Treatment of Men and Women (Access to and Supply of Goods and Services) Law; the Violence in the Family (Prevention and Protection of Victims) Law; the Combating of Trafficking and Exploitation of Human Beings and the Protection of Victims Law; as well as the Civil Partnership Law that legitimises the union between two individuals, regardless of gender.

Despite the substantial legal framework, Cyprus has achieved limited concrete results in achieving gender equality; multilevel discrimination against women persists to this day. Cyprus currently ranks 20th in the EU on EIGE's Gender Equality Index with 56.3 out of 100 points. Its score is 11.1 points lower than the EU average (EIGE, 2019). While Cyprus scores highly in the domains of health (88.4 points) and money (80.8 points), gender inequality is most pronounced in the domain of power (28.2 points), where it also performs poorly in comparison to other Member States (ranking 24th). Women are severely underrepresented in decision-making. There is only one woman in the eleven-seat Council of Ministers and there are only eleven women MPs out of a total of fifty-six members of the national parliament (80% men MPs, 20% women MPs). In local government, there are only four women mayors out of thirty-nine (10%) and only twenty-two women mayors out of three hundred and forty-eight (6%) in rural areas. Men also dominate the media in Cyprus: in terms of presence in news, women reach only 19%, compared to 81% for men (Angeli, 2015).

Economic equality remains a challenge for women in Cyprus; the gender pay gap, for example, is currently at 13.7% (Eurostat, 2018). The employment market is segregated, with more women found in low-paying sectors such as caregiving, education and domestic work. Additionally, women are severely underrepresented on company boards. Gender inequalities in employment persist despite the fact that more women than men in Cyprus are university graduates. According to recent Eurostat data on tertiary education (2017), a total of 62.1% of women in the age group 30–34 have successfully completed tertiary education in Cyprus, compared to 43.7% of men. With regards to LGBTI people in employment, there have not yet been any persecutions under the relevant anti-discrimination law (Equal Treatment in Employment and Occupation Law, 2004), although the Commissioner for Administration and Human Rights (Ombudsman) has examined complaints which involved elements of discrimination in employment based on gender and sexual orientation.

With regards to violence against women, according to a national study carried out for the Advisory Committee for the Prevention and Combating of Violence in the Family (ACPCFV, 2012), at least 28% of adult women in Cyprus have experienced some form of abuse, with 57% of them reporting that they did not tell anybody about their abuse;





only a third asked for help, and a third had little or no knowledge of available services for the support and protection of victims of domestic violence. Of those who reported their abuse, only 5% used the national domestic violence helpline<sup>6</sup> and only 2% reported the incident to the police. The 2014 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights survey results showed similar data: since the age of 15, 1 in 5 women in Cyprus have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a partner and/or a non-partner, and 31% of Cypriots revealed that they knew a female victim of domestic violence within their circle of friends and family.

### 3.3 History of migration in Cyprus

1990 was the year in which Cyprus opened its borders to economic migrants. The positions that migrants undertook were gender segregated, with migrant men working in the construction industry, agriculture and farming, and migrant women working in the domestic sphere as cleaners and care givers. The immigration policy was shaped by an underlying attitude that persists to this day: migrants are considered temporary guests who are in Cyprus to fill the gaps of a rapidly growing labour market (Christodoulou, 1992). As a result, there is still no driving policy that focuses on the need to integrate migrant populations (Officer and Taki, 2013).

The first formalised effort by the central government to have an integration policy came in the form of the 2010 National Action Plan (NAP) for the Integration of Third-country Nationals Legally Residing in Cyprus. It covered a two-year period and aimed to facilitate the integration of legal migrants, including refugees and those with subsidiary protection (Trimikliniotis and Demetriou, 2015). The NAP was extended for two more years for the period 2013–2015. While a third NAP is currently being drafted, 2015 remains the last year in which a comprehensive policy was put together by central government. It is very difficult to assess the level of success of the two NAPs that were implemented, as they included no indicators or evaluation mechanisms (Trimikliniotis and Demetriou, 2015). In the meantime, in the absence of an ongoing NAP, all integration activities have been restricted to those falling under Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) initiatives.

### 3.4 Entry points to the Republic of Cyprus

Displaced migrants mainly enter Cyprus either via the sea or via the so-called Green Line that is a buffer zone controlled by the UN. The Green Line divides Cyprus into the Republic of Cyprus, a part of the European Union, and the occupied northern part has declared itself the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), which is only recognised by Turkey.



<sup>6</sup> The Association for the Prevention and Handling of Violence in the Family (SPAVO) runs a 24/7 helpline. More information can be found at <https://domviolence.org.cy/en/1440-2/>



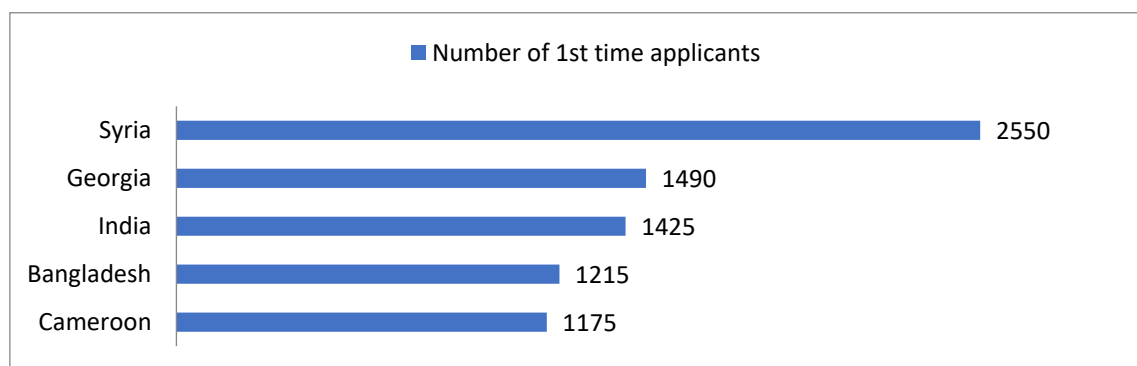
Two out of three migrants who apply for asylum in the Republic of Cyprus arrive by crossing the Green Line from the north. Smugglers promise to help displaced migrants enter the Republic of Cyprus, an EU country. They first help them enter the non-recognised TRNC and then they illegally cross the border through the buffer zone to enter the Republic of Cyprus. Smugglers often present themselves as agents for private universities in Turkish-controlled Cyprus, and are often those suggesting the route to potential asylum seekers, without explaining the intricacies of the political situation on the island. This leaves migrants and especially women at risk of trafficking and sexual exploitation.

### 3.5 Migration flows in Cyprus

The Republic of Cyprus has recently seen a huge increase in the number of first-time asylum applicants. 1,480 applications were submitted in 2014; in the four years that followed, the number of applicants rose four times higher, reaching 7,713 in 2018, a 70% increase in asylum applications (UNHCR, 2019). The number of first-time applicants continues to grow; in the first six months of 2019, Cyprus received 6,554 applications (UNHCR, 2019). According to a Eurostat report, Cyprus had the highest number of registered first-time asylum applicants in Europe relative to population in 2019<sup>7</sup>. The Cyprus government recently announced it is processing 33,000 asylum applications; the number corresponds to 3.8% of Cyprus population<sup>8</sup>.

Most people currently seeking asylum in Cyprus come from Syria (Eurostat, 2019). Some GLIMER interviewees mentioned the reportedly common phenomenon of asylum seekers coming to Cyprus as guest workers and applying for asylum when their visa lapses. This seemingly odd route can be explained by the fact that the process is mired by bureaucracy and can take two to five years: the applicant can in the meantime continue working in Cyprus while their application is under review.

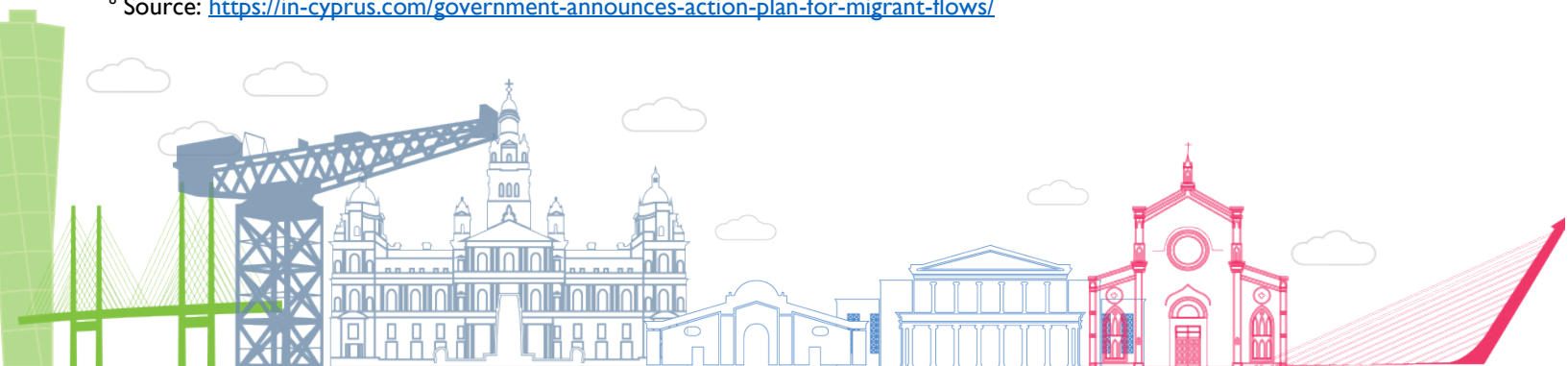
*Graph 1: Five main citizenships of (non-EU) asylum applicants, 2019*



*Men make up the majority of asylum seekers in Cyprus, 62.9% (Eurostat, 2019)*

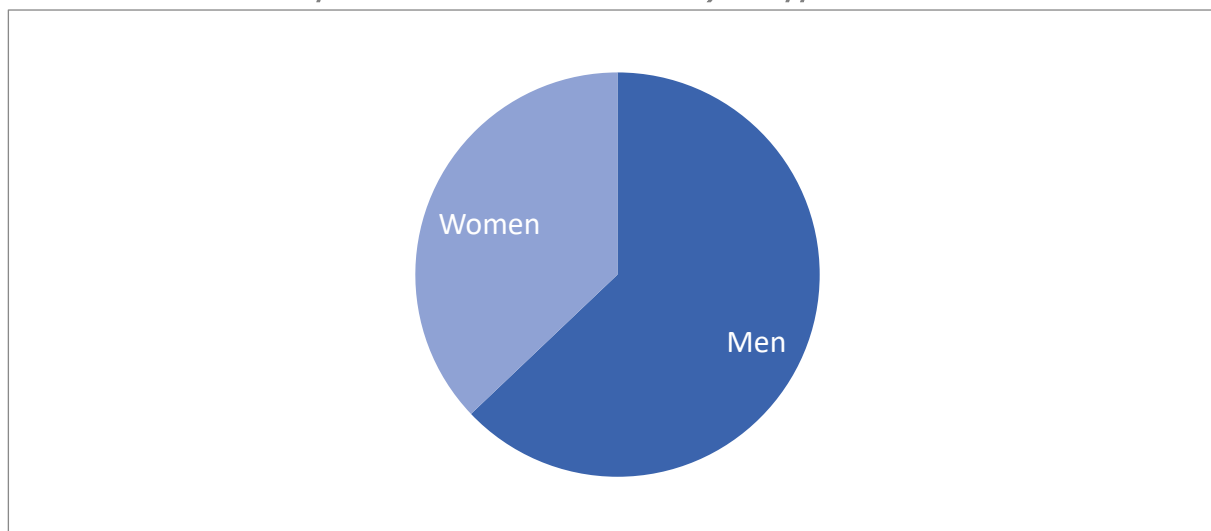
<sup>7</sup> Source: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/pdfscache/13562.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Source: <https://in-cyprus.com/government-announces-action-plan-for-migrant-flows/>





*Graph 2: Distribution of first-time asylum applicants, 2019*



Following lobbying from the Cyprus government, in September 2019 an agreement was signed between Cyprus and the European Asylum Support Office (EASO)<sup>9</sup> to host a representation of the latter in Cyprus. The EASO's mandate is to help the Cyprus government speed up the processing of asylum applications. As the EASO opened its offices across Cyprus only over the course of this year Iqs, we are not yet able to assess its impact.

In 2016, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) recommended that the authorities develop a new integration plan for non-nationals, including foreign domestic workers, refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection and other migrants. The recommendation also stipulated a close cooperation with the UNHCR, relevant NGOs and migrant associations, as well as an awareness-raising campaign to inform the public, employers and financial institutions about the rights of beneficiaries of international protection. While it is unclear whether it was these recommendations that spurred action, or the increasing number of displaced migrants arriving at the borders, the Cyprus government eventually announced an open call in 2018 to invite participants to draft a new two-year NAP that would come into force in 2020. In February 2019 the Civil Registry and Migration Department put together a consortium consisting of an NGO, the University of Cyprus and a foreign private consultancy. Preparatory actions aside, the ECRI does not, to date, consider its recommendation as having been implemented.

### 3.6 The approach of Cyprus to migration

Political rhetoric skews towards and reveals an overall desire to decrease the number of asylum seekers. In what is an especially revealing trend, when the government approves applications from asylum seekers, they are far more

<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.moi.gov.cy/moi/moi.nsf/All/B5FF4571EA6C3729C225847A002D0071?OpenDocument>. Last accessed 13 November 2019



likely to award the lesser status of subsidiary protection, rather than refugee status (Table 2). According to Asylum Service statistics published in 2019<sup>10</sup>, only 2.5% of asylum seekers were awarded refugee status in 2018, compared to 13% who received subsidiary protection.

*Table 2: Statistical data on asylum applications in 2018*

Applications	Rejections	Refugee status	Subsidiary protection	Pending
7761	1260	191	1011	8502

*I have noticed that the government gives subsidiary protection status more frequently than refugee status. It really does not make sense because it gives this status to Syrians whose country will need many years to recover from the war so most probably they will not have the chance to go back.*

Natasha, public servant

The following sections look at the current protection and integration policies with regards to housing, labour market and language training, as well as material assistance – a key protection policy that affects integration – from a gender perspective.

#### 4. The Gender Dimension of Material Assistance

Article 91A(1) of the Refugee Law indicates that the Republic of Cyprus should ensure ‘economic support for everyday expenses and the provision of housing, food and clothing [...] in order to secure an adequate standard of living capable of ensuring the subsistence and physical and mental health’. Asylum seekers living in private accommodation receive food and clothing vouchers and further financial help to cover the cost of utilities such as electricity, water and other expenses. Their rent allowance is payable directly to their landlord.

Significantly, allowances are determined politically, not legally. The Refugee Law allows the level of material assistance to be determined by the Council of Ministers (the executive). As a result, the financial support received by asylum seekers is wholly dependent on the political party that is in power at any given time. With the post-recession rise in right-wing political parties, this is a clear and imminent threat to displaced migrants’ ability to

<sup>10</sup> Asylum statistics are available through the Cyprus government portal:  
[http://www.moi.gov.cy/moi/asylum/asylumservice.nsf/asylumservice18\\_en/asylumservice18\\_en?OpenDocument](http://www.moi.gov.cy/moi/asylum/asylumservice.nsf/asylumservice18_en/asylumservice18_en?OpenDocument)



survive the immigration process. The level of assistance provided to asylum seekers currently stands at €320 per month for single asylum seekers.

The detailed breakdown of the amounts granted to asylum seekers are as follows<sup>11</sup>:

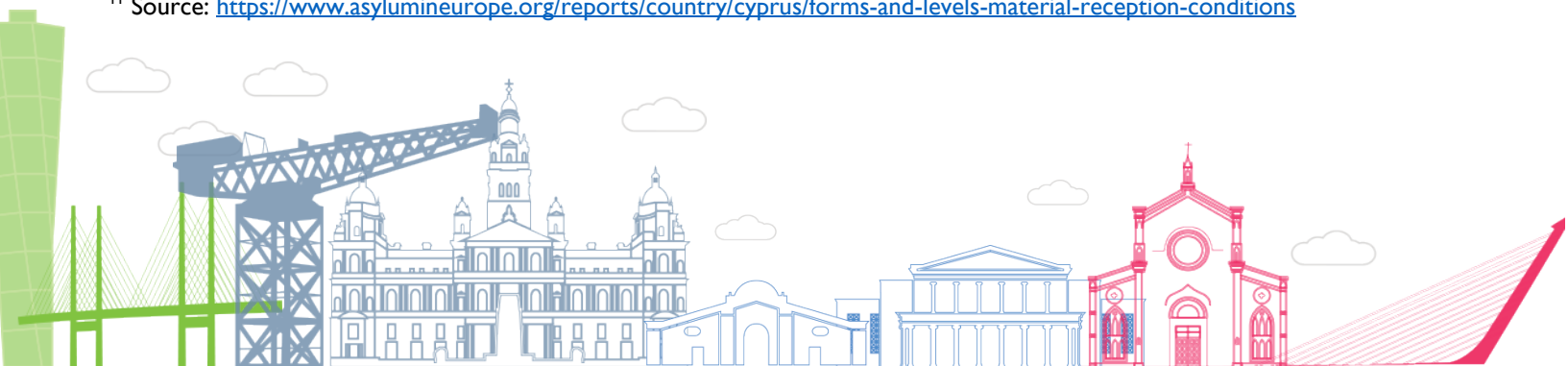
Number of persons in the family	Food, clothing and footwear (in vouchers)	Rent allowance	Allowance for electricity, water and minor expenses	Total amount of assistance granted
1	€150.00	€100.00	€70.00	€320.00
2	€225.00	€100.00	€95.00	€420.00
3	€300.00	€150.00	€130.00	€580.00
4+	€375.00	€200.00	€160.00	€735.00

The EU directive on reception stipulates that material assistance must ‘ensure a standard of living adequate for the health of applicants and sufficient to ensure their subsistence’. The amounts indicated above fail to cover the basic needs to asylum seekers, leaving them, in short, below the poverty line. It is worth mentioning that the allowance per person is significantly lower than the Guaranteed Minimum Income that is provided to Cypriot and European citizens: €480 in cash, compared to €320 in cash and vouchers for asylum seekers.

While the material assistance policy is problematic for all asylum seekers, we’ve seen that it has a more adverse effect on women. The asylum application tends to be formally submitted by the male ‘head of the family’ – with his partner and other members of the family considered as dependents – and it is he who receives and manages the cash or vouchers. By treating women as non-subjects or secondary beneficiaries who are not eligible for direct funding, the practice thus reinforces patriarchal structures.

In terms of the more practical implications, GLIMER research conducted by Christodoulou and Michael (2018) revealed examples, including one interviewee speaking about an asylum case:

<sup>11</sup> Source: <https://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/cyprus/forms-and-levels-material-reception-conditions>



*The couple had separated and when the woman was called to the immigration office they insisted on seeing her husband as well, even though she tried to explain that their files had been separated.*

The fact that the state looks to provide material assistance to the male ‘head of the family’ could be interpreted as institutional sexism. Refugee women lose their individual agency, a deeply problematic consequence when it comes to those who are victims of domestic violence. As reported by an interviewee:

*I saw one woman beneficiary, she had bruises on her hands. I asked her what had happened. She refused to explain, and she used her clothes to hide them. My colleague saw the bruises too and we both knew this was due to domestic violence. She won't report it. She would be crazy to report it. She knows she won't be believed; she knows she does not have the option to leave him as she will be out on the street.*

## 5. The Gender Dynamics of Housing Policies

Housing is directly related to the health and security of asylum seekers. When asylum seekers come to the Republic of Cyprus, they apply either for material assistance and seek private accommodation, or for accommodation at the Kofinou Reception Centre.

### 5.1 Private housing

Finding private accommodation in Cyprus is a very difficult task due to the relatively high cost of rent and the low availability of housing units. Much like the rest of Europe, Cypriot landlords often exhibit prejudices based on race, ethnic origin, gender and economic means (European Parliament, 2016). As mentioned, asylum seekers' rent allowance is paid directly by the Cyprus government to landlords; bureaucratic procedures often cause delays in payment, further disincentivising landlords from renting their premises to asylum seekers. These difficulties push asylum seekers towards homelessness, or low-quality/precarious housing situations. Asylum seekers often live in shared accommodation or community homes. One research participant, who works at an NGO, gave details of an instance where:

*A woman was sleeping in a community space (provided by the church) with 10 men and she was reluctant to bathe due to her fear of sexual harassment or assault.*

### 5.2 Housing for victims of trafficking

Asylum seekers who are trafficked for sexual exploitation are primarily women. 66% of detected victims were trafficked for sexual exploitation from Western and Southern Europe and 70% from Central and South-Eastern Europe. Women and girls make up 94% of victims trafficked for sexual exploitation globally and 35% of those trafficked for forced labour (Council of Europe, 2019).



In Cyprus, according to Article 47 of the Prevention, Fighting against Trafficking in and Exploitation of Human Beings and Protection of Victims Law, victims of trafficking are eligible for material assistance and rent (again paid directly to landlords), or they can stay at a shelter for trafficking victims. According to one of our interviewees, the shelter tends to be consistently at capacity, forcing social welfare officers to place women victims of trafficking wherever they can manage to find accommodation. Alternative housing arrangements are often made with no sensitivity or consideration towards the victims of trafficking:

*We once had a beneficiary who told us that she was placed at [name] Hotel. This is a cheap hotel that basically works as a brothel, you know. Men were knocking on her door basically asking for sex and this accommodation was supposed to make her feel safe.*

Inappropriate housing can be re-traumatising for women who have already experienced GBV. When they seek private accommodation, they are faced with the same difficulties as those we described above (challenge of finding good/secure accommodation, inadequate financial support, etc.).

### 5.3 The Kofinou Reception Centre

The Kofinou centre was initially designed as a place of temporary residence for asylum seekers, until they find more suitable and long-term accommodation. Up until 2017, asylum seekers were allowed to stay for three months, which was then extended to six. In a TV interview (November 2019)<sup>12</sup>, the centre's director confirmed that many asylum seekers stay much longer, sometimes up to one and a half years, due to unemployment and their inability to find affordable accommodation.

According to our interviewees, the reception centre has segregated rooms for single men and single women. Single men stay near the entrance of the reception centre complex, families in the middle and single women towards the back. Single men and women have separate toilets/bathrooms in three detached buildings (Drousiotou and Mathioudakis, 2015).

The separation of spaces for men and women is the only differentiation among asylum seekers in the reception centre (Spaneas et al, 2018). Even though the Refugee Law foresees gender-specific provisions, the centre does not seem to have any such measures or policies in place. For example, 'appropriate measures to prevent assault and gender-based violence, including sexual assault and harassment, within the premises and accommodation centres' have not been taken.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with AlphaNews Live. 21 November 2019. Available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YigQmVAhhhE&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YigQmVAhhhE&feature=emb_logo)







*The Kofinou Reception Centre. Source: in-cyprus.com*

According to our interviewees, many incidents of violence against women either go unreported or are suppressed by the authorities:

*There is a woman who has attempted to commit suicide three times. I know her husband is violent towards her. She lives in the centre with her husband and kids. She is a displaced migrant. The allowance is very low and it is given to him. Her life is in danger if she goes back to her country, it is in danger if she remains in the centre with him. She is trapped, she has nowhere to go, no one to talk to.*

Some interviewees confirmed that poverty has pushed these women to turn to survival sex<sup>13</sup>. In the centre, their basic needs are often not covered as the benefit is only €100 per month, plus €50 for each child. According to one of our interviewees, some women who stayed in the reception centre protested this issue:

*There were women who threw themselves in front of the wheels of cars protesting that they were being forced into survival sex with elderly men from the area.*

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<sup>13</sup> Survival sex is a term used to describe the engagement of people in prostitution to cover basic needs.





One of our interviewees also reported a case of someone experiencing harassment based on his gender identity at Kofinou. Neither the women's nor men's section of the reception centre accepted him. LGBTQ organisations came together to offer him a safe space in a private apartment.

#### 5.4 The unaccompanied minors' shelters

Unaccompanied minors who arrive in the Republic of Cyprus fall under the legal guardianship of the Director of the Social Welfare Services (Refugee Law, 2000). There are four governmental shelters for unaccompanied minors run by the Social Welfare Services (SWS). Hope For Children, a local NGO, runs two more private children's shelters for the accommodation and support of unaccompanied children. The shelters are run with the approval of the SWS, who allocated funds from the European Funds Unit of the Ministry of Interior to Hope for Children for this purpose.

Alarming, displaced migrants who come as unaccompanied minors can only stay at these shelters until they are 18 years old. In a conference organised by UNCHR in December 2019, several refugees pointed out that this is an unfair policy as the shelter does not prepare them for the outside world. As per one of participants: 'One day I was a minor, the next day on my 18th birthday I was not a minor and I had to face the outside world and try to find my own accommodation'.

Another interviewee also spoke of the problematic nature of this policy, highlighting the extremely vulnerable situation 18-year-old refugees find themselves in once they are forced to leave the shelter. There was a case of a 19-year-old girl who soon became pregnant and did not know the father.

*They were kicked out of the shelter once they turned 18. They were looking for someone to protect them, to give them a roof over their head, this is how you become vulnerable.*

The Commissioner for Children's Rights published a report on unaccompanied minors in 2018 that revealed unaccompanied minors experience stress and anxiety about the outcome of their applications (asylum and/or family reunification). They do not receive sufficient information about their applications or their rights in general. They also don't receive sufficient information about what will happen to them when they reach legal adulthood, which exacerbates their feelings of anxiety and insecurity.

### 6. The Gender Dynamics of Language Training for Adults

Adult language training for asylum seekers and refugees has historically been offered by the state as well as the third sector. It should be noted that language courses are not aimed at asylum seekers and refugees specifically. Instead, these groups can take advantage of the general adult language classes designed for non-native speakers and third country nationals. There are three public institutions that provide this type of training: Adult Education Centres (AECs), State Institutes for Further Education (SIFEs) and the University of Cyprus (UCY). Adult language training



offered by the third sector for migrants and asylum seekers is mostly undertaken by EU-funded projects under the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF).

Adolescents who enter the state educational system can attend transitional classes for non-Greek speakers<sup>14</sup>. If they are over 15 years of age, they can also attend language training courses offered at AECs. As language is considered key to the integration of third country nationals into Cypriot society, over recent years relevant training has been provided via partnerships between organisations from the public, third and private sectors.

With regards to gender, according to prior GLIMER research conducted by the author (Angeli, 2019), most language training programmes in Cyprus, whether they are national or third sector initiatives, are gender blind. Language training in Cyprus broadly overlooks migrant women's double role as family providers and caregivers, and the impact this role has on their availability to attend language classes. For babies and infants until the age of three, which is when pre-primary education starts, parents face the challenge of a lack of childcare facilities. The cost of both municipal and private childcare is between €200–350. For context, that is the total amount of material assistance given to asylum seekers, most of which is not even given as cash, but rather in the form of coupons and rent allowance. When local families experience difficulties in paying for childcare, they tend to fall back on their familial support network, mainly grandparents. As refugees usually do not have this kind of support in Cyprus, mothers have no choice but to stay at home taking care of young children. Even when the children are no longer infants, women still find it difficult to attend classes, which usually take place in the afternoon. Our research found the main barrier for women to be the fact that afternoon classes clash with their schedule, specifically, caring for their children after school. One interviewee confirmed this finding:

*We need to design projects that cater to the needs of women. We need to take into account the fact that women are mothers and the main caregivers in their families.*

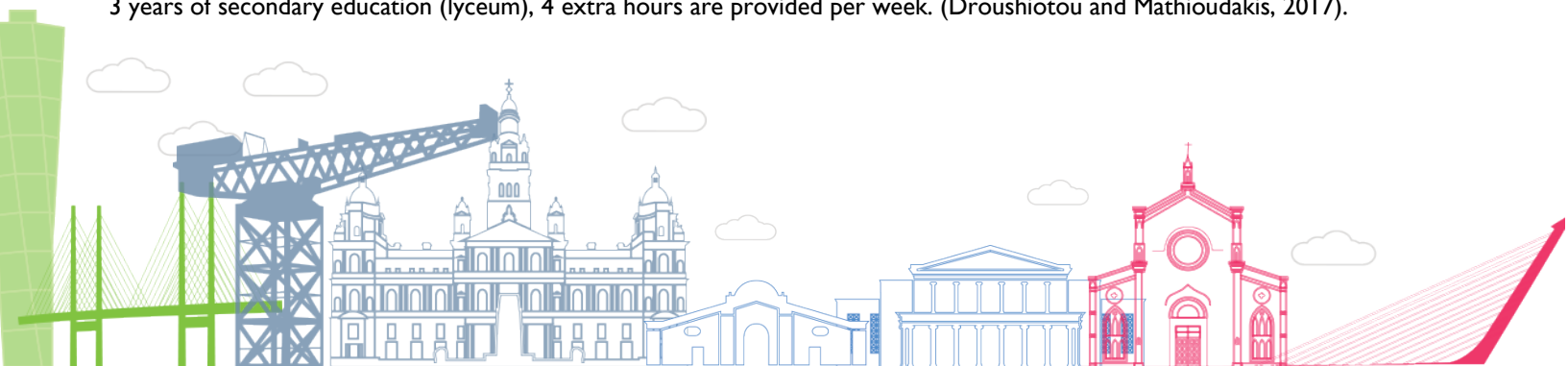
Only one of our interviewees – an NGO representative – had taken steps to address the issue by designing a language training programme that would make things easier for primary caregivers:

*It is easier for women to attend morning classes. Unfortunately, too many women are out of the labour market. Especially refugee women. In order to encourage the participation of women, we have incorporated morning classes in our future language training courses. The bulk of the courses will still be in the afternoons though.*

The provision of training for refugee women can also be hindered by lack of attendance. Some feel that this is due to the stereotypical attitudes of male members of refugee households. For example, a public servant who was asked about the lower rate of participation of women in language courses provided by his institution, said:

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<sup>14</sup> In the first 3 years of secondary education (gymnasium), 18 hours of Greek language classes are provided per week. In the final 3 years of secondary education (lyceum), 4 extra hours are provided per week. (Droushiotou and Mathioudakis, 2017).



*Husbands do not let their wives attend the classes, because they are possessive and afraid of other men looking at their wives. Muslim culture, you know...*

The research, however, has indicated that low attendance is far more likely to be due to practical considerations. Furthermore, women are in fact eager to learn the local language, one reason being to be able to help their children with their schoolwork.

Gender-blind language training policies not only have an impact on women's everyday lives but also on their access to justice. According to the CEDAW's 2018 observations on the Cyprus report, migrant, asylum seeking and refugee women face language barriers when claiming their rights. If women do not speak the language they are not able to represent and express themselves in front of the court, the police or a relevant authority. While provisions are in place to offer women victims of VAW an interpreter in court or at police stations, in practice, this is not always guaranteed. According to the same report (CEDAW, 2018) women, especially disadvantaged groups, such as migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, have limited access to free legal aid. Their lack of language skills can also limit the extent to which they are informed about protection policies and mechanisms that are available to them.

## 7. The Gender Dynamics of Labour Market Integration

Displaced migrants' access to the local labour market depends on their status. Recognised refugees and persons with subsidiary protection status must receive equal treatment as citizens of the Republic regarding paid employment; they are not restricted from working in any sector. Asylum seekers also have legal access to the labour market, but crucially, this is restricted to a small number of professions, mostly in agriculture, fishery, manufacturing, waste management, hospitality and wholesale trades and repairs. The starting point is to register at the Labour Office of the Ministry of Labour one month after they submit their application. The job-seeking process is as follows: The Labour Office sends the asylum seeker to a potential employer for an interview. Once the interview has been conducted, the potential employer fills in a feedback form, which we note does not include space for the interviewee to provide their own feedback on the meeting. The interviewee then has to report back to the Labour Office no matter the outcome of the interview. Not only are asylum seekers limited by law to low-skilled and low-paid jobs, they also face particular challenges in obtaining recognition of their educational and professional qualifications.

Although gender-segregated data on the employment rates of displaced migrants in Cyprus has yet to be collected, the OECD reported in 2016 that the employment rate of refugee women in Europe is 17% lower than that of refugee men, despite the fact that, among the arrivals in the last 10 years, they tend to be better qualified than their male counterparts. Refugee women also have a significantly lower rate of employment compared to EU women (OECD, 2016). Women refugees themselves seem to recognise the double disadvantage they have in accessing the labour market. A survey among refugees in Cyprus conducted in 2013 showed that women refugees felt that their gender was a barrier in accessing the labour market. On the contrary, refugee men did not feel that their gender is an additional obstacle in accessing the labour market (Officer and Taki, 2013).



Our research package on integration through the labour market has indicated that initiatives tailored for women's integration are still limited in Cyprus, despite evidence that such initiatives bring better results than gender-neutral ones (Bertelsmann, 2016a; Barslund et al, 2019). The research data has also indicated that integration policies remain gender blind, in that they do not cater to the specific needs of women displaced migrants in Cyprus. This is very problematic as fewer labour market opportunities lead to weaker social integration. As mentioned, Syrian migrants make up the highest percentage by nationality coming to Cyprus to seek asylum. At the same time, the economic activity rate of Syrian women stands at less than 15% in their country of origin. One study (Bertelsmann, 2016) points out that, in order to successfully integrate women in the labour market, host countries must consider the cultural background of displaced migrants. The lack of dedicated programmes for women means the state fails to take into consideration whether the migrant women – who are now expected to take up any work available to them – had been active in the labour market in their country of origin.

Gender-blind labour market integration policies in Cyprus also overlook migrant women's double role as family providers and caregivers. This has an impact not only on their access to the labour market but also, in the case of asylum seekers, on their access to material assistance. Several interviewees reported that women asylum seekers sometimes refuse job offers because these clash with their roles as mothers and caregivers, resulting in a loss of material assistance. According to one trade union representative:

*What happens when the labour office sends a woman to a farm? She can't really go. We had a case where an asylum seeker had her material assistance cut off because she refused to work on a farm. It's crazy you know. They offered her a job in a field to harvest fruit, it was far away, in a village outside Nicosia, so she refused to go because she lived in Nicosia with her two babies and had no car.*

As mentioned in section 6 of this report, women's exclusion is greatly exacerbated by the lack of public childcare services. Asylum seekers who are mothers are therefore severely limited in the work they can take on, at least until their children are of school age.

The support system also sometimes fails them due to a lack of interdepartmental coordination. According to some interviewees there have been incidents where the Labour Office did not register mothers who admitted to not being able to work because of the lack of childcare. The unfortunate knock-on effect is that the Social Welfare Service can only provide material assistance to those registered at the Labour Office as job seekers. Here we note that both the Social Welfare Services and the Labour Office are in the same ministry.

Childcare is not the only restriction women asylum seekers face in integrating into the labour market. Women face multiple forms of discrimination, including gender and religion. For example, women wearing hijabs have reported discriminatory incidents. A Syrian woman living in Cyprus said in a newspaper interview (*Cyprus Mail*, 2019):

*Employers say if you want the job, take your hijab off and you will get it, and that's not fair to us. They don't respect us so we don't get the job.*





As women *and* refugees, these migrants are at an acute disadvantage, highlighting the need to integrate female migrants who are not active in the EU labour market. As one NGO worker commented:

*We hate to admit it, but we look at the world in gendered terms. Women have got all the migrant problems, they've got all the gender problems, they've got all the cultural problems, then they have the childcare problem.*

### 7.1 A good practice on integrating refugee women in the labour market in Cyprus

The Dignity Centre is a drop-in space and women's cooperative for refugee and asylum seekers, run by Refugee Support Europe, an EU-wide volunteer organisation. Based in the old city of Nicosia, the centre offers a place to make clothes and fashion accessories, and also provides sewing classes three times a week, which are open to asylum seekers and refugees. The products are made available in the online shop<sup>15</sup>. Each product comes with a brief biography about the refugee maker. Makers get 80% of the shop's earnings and the remaining 20% goes to maintenance costs. The maker receives their share of the agreed fair trade price as soon as the item is put up for sale, even before a purchase is made. The initiative is very interesting and innovative as it not only helps refugee women gain a life skill, but also contributes to their socialisation and economic empowerment in a safe space.



Images source: [refumade.org](https://refumade.org)

<sup>15</sup> <https://refumade.org/>



## 8. Violence against Displaced Migrant Women

*Women refugees and asylum seekers are often subjected to multiple forms of discrimination and are more vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence in their countries of origin, transit and destination; whereas unaccompanied women and girls, women heads of household, pregnant women, people with disabilities and the elderly are particularly vulnerable.*

European Parliament, 2016

Violence against women (VAW) is a global phenomenon of pandemic proportions across private and public spaces; it affects all women regardless of class, ethnic origin and migration status (UN Women, 2020). Migrant and refugee women are particularly vulnerable to experiencing violence<sup>16</sup>. The UNHCR, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Women's Refugee Commission recently assessed the risks for displaced migrants on their journey to Greece and onwards in Europe. They found that the women and girls, especially those travelling alone, face a particularly high risk of certain forms of violence in transit and destination countries, such as sexual violence by smugglers, as well as by criminal groups and individuals.

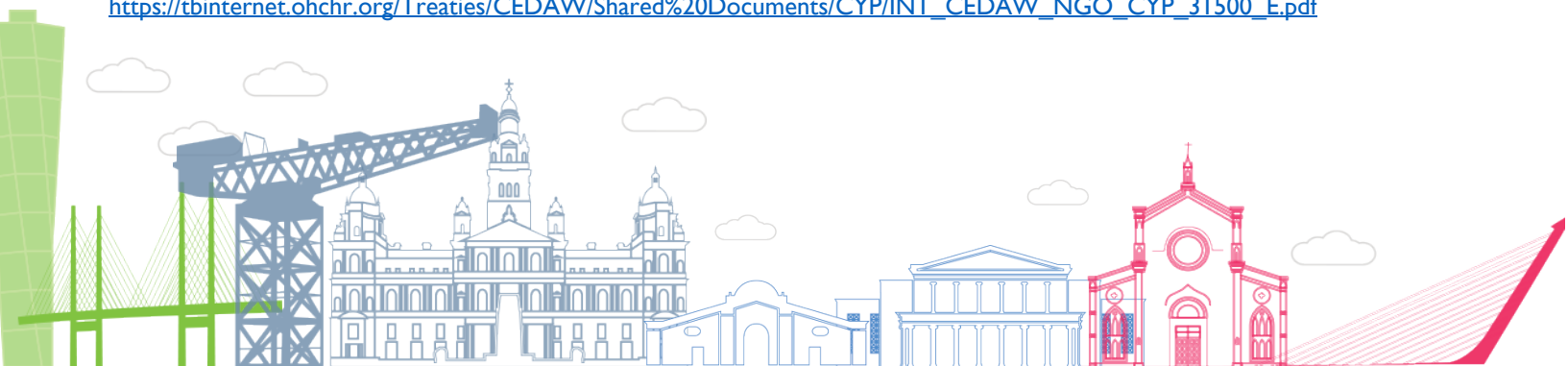
Despite the well-grounded evidence that refugee women are particularly vulnerable to violence, monitoring reports by the Council of Europe's Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) on the implementation of relevant provisions of the Istanbul Convention point to a lack of gender-sensitive migration and asylum policies and procedures across Europe (Gender Equality Commission, 2019). Cyprus, for example, has placed a reservation on Article 59 of the Istanbul Convention, which states that survivors whose residence status depends on that of a violent spouse or partner have the right to apply for a separate residence permit. According to the Ministry of Interior, the reason behind this reservation is the government's wariness that migrant women will claim being victims of violence in order access residence permits in Cyprus<sup>17</sup>. Pavlou and Christodoulou (2018) have refuted this claim, indicating that it is rooted in racist and sexist attitudes towards migrant women.

Violence experienced by displaced migrant women is often ignored due to the androcentric approach to migration and the low visibility of migrant women in host countries. Research throughout the GLIMER work streams have indicated a prevalence of VAW, with incidents ranging from sexual harassment upon arrival and during migration journeys; physical, sexual and psychological violence; intimate partner violence; to trafficking for sexual exploitation. Cases of VAW remain largely unreported, and even if they are reported, we often see that the authorities often turn a blind eye (Christodoulou and Michael, 2018).

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<sup>16</sup> The term vulnerability is used here to emphasise the social structures around migration, reception and integration that put women in vulnerable positions.

<sup>17</sup> See Cyprus Women's Lobby Cyprus Shadow Report 2018. Available at [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/CYP/INT\\_CEDAW\\_NGO\\_CYP\\_31500\\_E.pdf](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/CYP/INT_CEDAW_NGO_CYP_31500_E.pdf)





## 8.1 Good practices to combat violence against migrant and refugee women in Cyprus

This report provides an overview on the ways in which national integration policies are largely not gender mainstreamed, with a resulting negative impact on preventing and combating violence against refugee women. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that there are some initiatives and good practices, particularly from the third sector, that combat VAW.

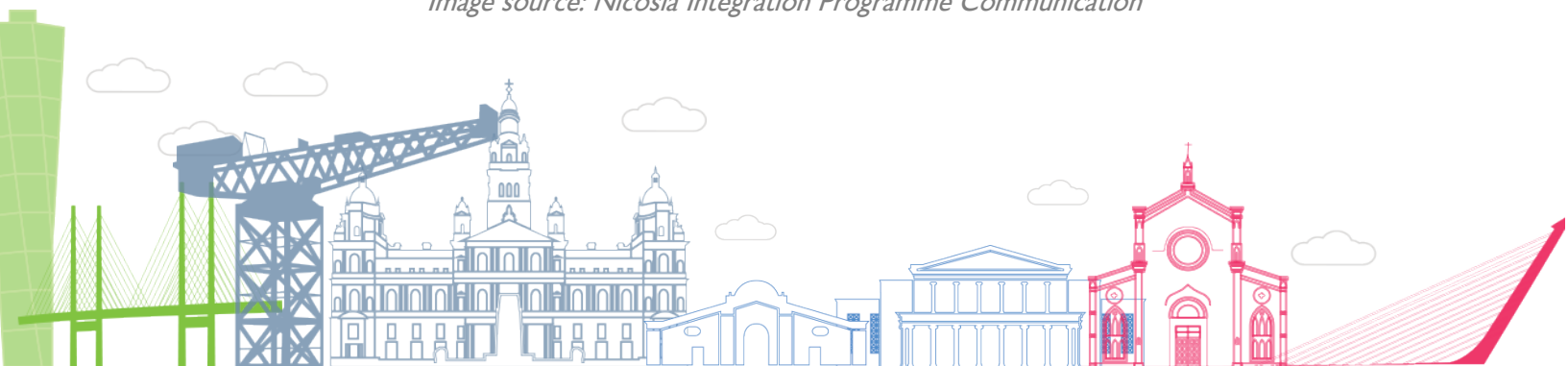
### 8.1.1 Sexual harassment training for third country nationals

Two training seminars entitled ‘Harassment and sexual harassment: Legal framework and ways to identify and handle such incidents’ were offered to third country nationals in March 2020, organised by Nicosia Municipal Multifunctional Foundation and a local consultancy firm. The training seminars were conducted within the framework of [New Channels for Integration of Third Country Nationals in the Local Community](#), a project funded by the Asylum Migration and Integration Fund and the Local Community.

The seminars were particularly timely, as participants reported regularly facing sexual harassment, for example being asked to sell sex in public places such as roads, bus stops and social gathering places. They also reported a low awareness of public services that they could turn to, relying instead on NGOs for protection and support.



*Training seminar on sexual harassment for third country nationals.  
Image source: Nicosia Integration Programme Communication*



### 8.1.2 Encouraging reporting of GBV against refugee women

[Embrace Your Rights!](#) is a project implemented by the Cyprus Refugee Council that aims to inform, support and encourage refugee women victims of GBV to report incidents. The project has produced a handbook aimed at professionals working with asylum seeking and refugee women, specifically on counselling victims of GBV. The project also offered training to improve professional capacity around recognising and dealing with GBV in the refugee context.

### 8.1.3 Combating female genital mutilation in Europe

The Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies (MIGS) actively lobbies local policymakers on FGM, including efforts to gender mainstream the European Asylum Support Office. It is also part of the pan-European movement to combat FGM both in countries of origin and in Europe. Among the ambassadors of the anti-FGM movement are asylum seekers and refugees who come from countries that practice FGM. In 2017, in collaboration with the Technological University in Cyprus, MIGS launched the UEFGM platform<sup>18</sup>. The UEFGM platform is designed as a practical tool to improve the knowledge and skills of professionals in Europe who are likely to come into contact with women and girls affected by FGM.



*Launch of the UEFGM platform in Nicosia, 2017.  
Image source: House of the EP in Cyprus*

<sup>18</sup> [www.uefgm.org](http://www.uefgm.org)



## 9. Conclusion

The lack of a solid and ongoing integration policy in Cyprus has left many migrant and refugee women and men struggling to find gainful employment, while also exposing them to much higher rates of homelessness and exploitation. Women also face multiple forms of discrimination, significantly fewer opportunities to integrate into host societies and a higher risk of experiencing violence. Research conducted by the GLIMER project has confirmed that, while displaced men and boy migrants face several challenges, women and girls face additional challenges that are based on their gender. GBV, sexism, childcare responsibilities, traditional gender roles and gender stereotypes are factors that put extra barriers to the integration of women displaced migrants in Cyprus.

We have provided evidence with this research that integration and protection policies in the Republic of Cyprus do not meet the needs of displaced migrant women and girls. This research revealed cases of VAW, homelessness and trafficking for sexual exploitation. Many interviewees felt that integration policies through language training, employment and vocational training do not cater to the needs of women. Most integration policies are gender neutral and therefore tend to be gender blind. Below, we outline some gender-specific recommendations that are in line with the needs and gaps we have identified throughout our research.

- **Mainstreaming gender equality across integration policies** in order to ensure that migrant women and men are benefiting equally and that the protection and integration needs of women displaced migrants are met.
- **Immediate lifting of the reservation on Article 59 of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention).** Article 59 is crucial as it provides for the protection of refugee women who are victims of violence against women and domestic violence as well as victims of forced marriage. The article specifically ensures that ‘victims may obtain the suspension of expulsion proceedings initiated in relation to a residence status dependent on that of the spouse or partner as recognised by internal law to enable them to apply for an autonomous residence permit’.
- **Extend protection policies for unaccompanied girls as they enter adulthood and exit child protection institutions.** Girls who leave the shelters for unaccompanied minors at the age of 18 find themselves highly vulnerable. Protection policies must be extended so as to mitigate the high risk of sexual exploitation or sexual abuse.
- **Psychological support for refugee and asylum seeking women and girls who have been through trafficking and/or gender-based violence.** All forms of GBV such as rape, harassment, female genital mutilation, domestic violence and trafficking cause severe pain, suffering and chronic trauma. Psychological support that is provided sporadically by a handful of Cyprus NGOs must be extended and integrated within wider national policy.
- **Establish refugee women’s rights organisations.** Our research has shown that the voices of refugee women are not heard when drafting integration policies. The needs of refugees are communicated to the central government either by NGOs or self-declared community representatives who are usually men. The facilitation of refugee





women-led organisations will contribute to a power shift, enabling refugee women to speak and lobby for themselves.

- **Inform women and men asylum seekers about their rights and integration policies.** Asylum seekers must be better informed on integration programmes available to them at any given time, particularly those offering language training or improving their chances at labour market integration.
- **Lift barriers for women accessing the labour market.** Child care and negative stereotypes are the main barriers identified in our research regarding women accessing labour market. Measures should be put in place to combat negative stereotypes in the workplace (e.g. diversity charters). Childcare for pre-school aged children must also be made available so that women can attend classes in the afternoons.
- **Provision of material assistance on an individual basis.** Material assistance provided collectively to the male head of the family can be particularly problematic for women who are victims of domestic abuse. As such, alternative ways of providing material assistance on an individual basis, even to family units, must be offered.
- **Awareness-raising to combat persistent racism and sexism** through national campaigns and educational programmes.
- **Support and funding for quantitative and qualitative research looking at gender-segregated data on the integration of displaced migrants and on violence against refugee women.** Our research has clearly shown cases of policies resulting in unequal integration and incidents of VAW. Future research needs to go deeper in analysing both the extent of these phenomena, as well as the relevant protection and integration needs of displaced migrant women.

## Disclaimer

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For more information, contact:

Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies  
 Makedonitissas Ave. 46, T.K. 24995, 1703 Nicosia Cyprus  
 Email: [info@medinstgenderstudies.org](mailto:info@medinstgenderstudies.org)  
 Website: [www.medinstgenderstudies.org](http://www.medinstgenderstudies.org)



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