

Chapter 4

Breathing the Asylum System: Gendering Portugal's Reception Conditions and Integration Practices

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ABSTRACT

Establishing a life in an asylum country presents an exceptionally daunting challenge, particularly for women. In asylum countries, women encounter numerous hurdles like healthcare, language barriers, economic empowerment, childcare, education, cultural adjustment, legal issues, and more. This chapter comprehensively analyzes reception conditions and integration practices in the Portuguese asylum system from a gender perspective, covering seven critical areas: housing, financial support, healthcare, psychological assistance, education, labor market integration, and legal aid. Through 49 interviews (with asylum-seeking women and with professionals working in the Portuguese asylum system), this research unveils deficiencies in support, mainly due to the absence of gender-specific approaches. The chapter aims to promote gender-sensitive policies and practices to aid asylum-seeking women.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a significant increase in asylum seekers' arrivals at various international borders has drawn scholarly and practitioner attention (Borges, 2023; Aliverti, 2020; Aas, 2019; Barker, 2018; Fassin, 2018; Bosworth, 2011). This surge has led to stricter border control measures and biased portrayals of migrants (Aas, 2019; 2011), reinforcing stereotypes of "violent asylum seekers, smuggling, trafficking

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networks, Muslim terrorists, Nigerian and East European prostitutes, and ethnic youth gangs” (Aas, 2013, pp.79). States may use the rhetoric of “there is no alternative” to stifle substantial discussions on how to mitigate systemic harms (Aas, & Bosworth, 2013; Bosworth, & Kaufman, 2011). Consequently, governments frequently resort to repressive and exclusionary tactics within their asylum procedures, with official support services often falling short in mitigating the adverse consequences of these actions (Bosworth, 2008; Bosworth, & Guild, 2008).

Asylum-seeking women face heightened vulnerability to gender-based violence, including physical and psychological harm (Cochrane, 2018; Freedman, 2016b; 2015). Sexual violence is also a prevalent concern, occurring in various contexts (Freedman, Crankshaw & Mutambara, 2020; Sapia, 2018). The vulnerability of asylum-seeking women is further heightened by systemic issues such as inadequate support services, language barriers, and fear of reporting violence due to potential repercussions, perpetuating their vulnerability (Dionis et al. 2016; Sansonetti, 2016). These forms of violence are often interconnected, with one type of violence intensifying the impact of another (Canning, 2020; Kelly, 1998; 2008).

While asylum narratives have often centered on men, failing to encompass the unique and often marginalized experiences of individuals who do not conform to the heteronormative, male-centric refugee stereotype (Kanal & Rottmann, 2021), there is a growing recognition of the need to collect and analyze women’s narratives (Borges & Faria, 2022; Borges, 2023). To enhance the well-being of asylum-seeking women in host countries, a comprehensive approach is essential. This chapter offers insights from 49 interviews with 24 asylum-seeking women residing in Portugal, and with 25 professionals actively involved in the Portuguese asylum system.

This chapter presents valuable insights for the academic community, policymakers, and government authorities, with the aim of improving the well-being and preserving the dignity of asylum-seeking women, both within Portugal and on a global scale. as elucidated in the forthcoming sections.

BACKGROUND

Law no. 27/2008, as amended by Law no. 26/2014 (also known as “The Asylum Act”), defines ‘applicants in need of special procedural guarantees’. While the Act does not provide an exhaustive list of criteria for such individuals, it references factors like age, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, serious illness, mental disorders, torture, rape, or other severe forms of psychological, physical, or sexual violence as potential determinants of special procedural guarantees (Oliveira, 2020). The Asylum Act emphasizes safeguarding individuals targeted for persecution due to gender-based reasons, as specified in subparagraph f of article

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