WOMEN&MIGRATION

Sharing stories **of resilience**

These eight case studies from around the world cover each stage of the migration process, from the often dangerous journeys women take, to their acceptance or rejection by their destination country and their eventual resettlement or return.

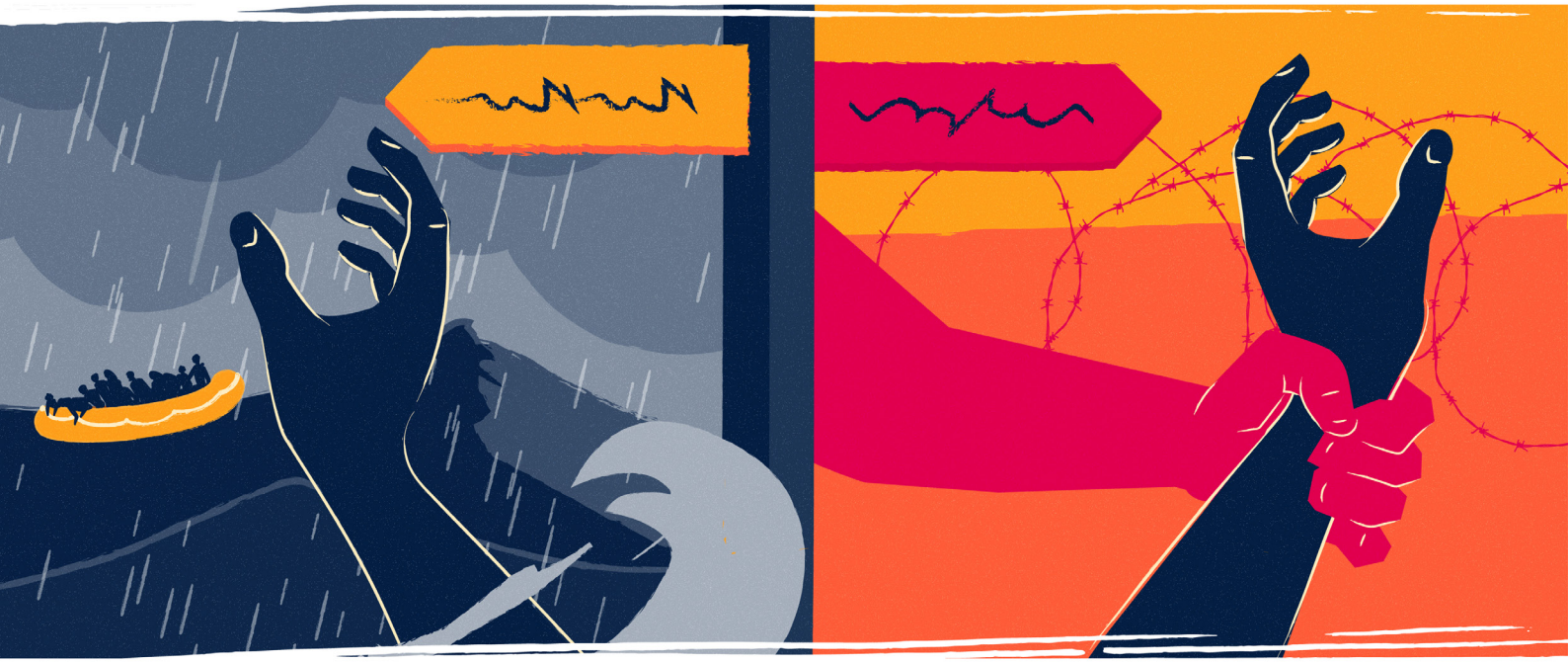
Contents

‘I don’t have any other choice’ – refugee women’s journeys to Europe

We often think of irregular migrants to the EU as young, single men. But a third of those who cross the Mediterranean to seek asylum are women – these are their stories.

Written by Talitha Dubow and Katie Kuschminder, Maastricht University/UNU-MERIT

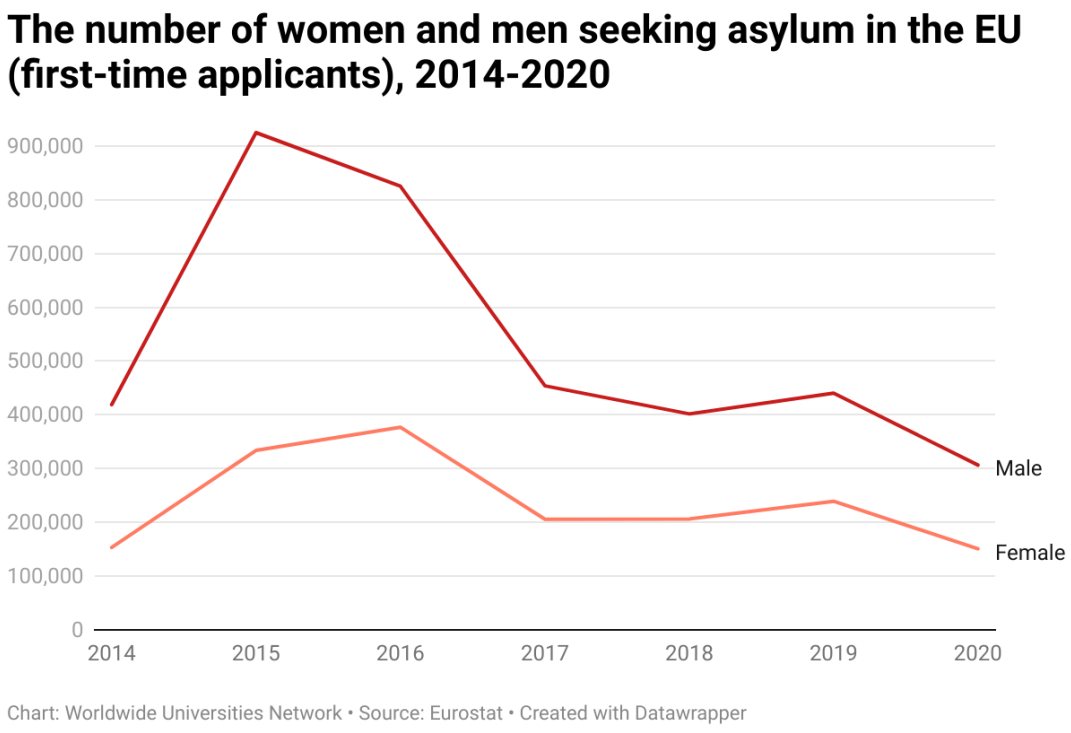
Published 25th November 2021



Refugees aiming to seek asylum in Europe frequently endure long, dangerous land and sea journeys.

The **three main routes to Europe**[1] are across the eastern Mediterranean via Turkey to Greece, across the central Mediterranean via Libya to Italy, and across the western Mediterranean via Tunisia and Morocco to Spain. The central Mediterranean route is the most dangerous, but each of these journeys exposes migrants to extreme hardship.

It is often assumed that young, single men are the main migrants travelling to Europe in this way, but a significant proportion of women are also making the journey. From 2014-2020, women accounted for **31% of first-time asylum seekers**[2] in the EU on average. In 2021, 30.4% of **irregular migrant arrivals**[3] to the EU have been women and children.



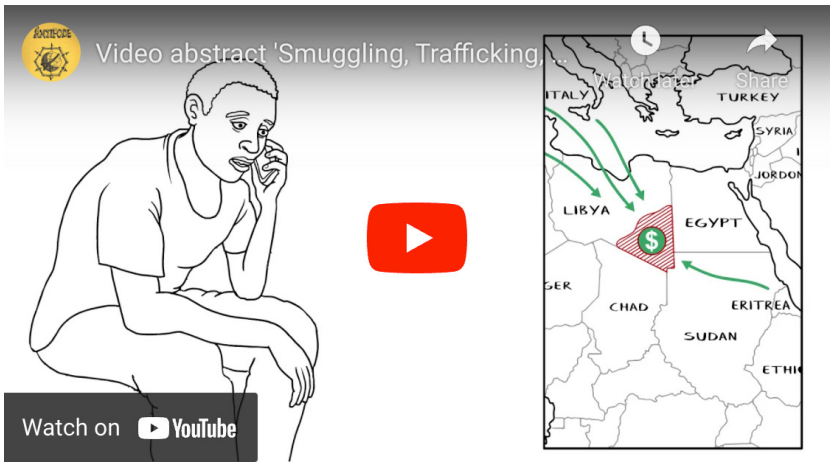
This case study explores the experiences of Afghan, Eritrean and Syrian women as they travel to seek asylum in Europe. It compares experiences along the eastern Mediterranean route (used by Syrian and Afghan women) and the central

Mediterranean route (used by Eritrean women). The 15 Eritrean women were interviewed in 2017, in reception facilities in Italy; the 13 Afghan and Syrian women were interviewed in 2019, in the communities where they lived in Turkey, and in reception facilities in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

'The route seriously tortured us'

The women we interviewed had faced many risks on their journeys to Europe, crossing mountains, desert and sea to reach their destination. They travelled under the constant threat of being caught, detained and deported by police or border guards or being exploited and abused by kidnappers and the people they hired as smugglers. They endured hostile conditions in countries like Sudan, Libya and Turkey where some stayed before moving – or trying to move – onwards.

In Libya, on the central Mediterranean route, an industry of **migrant kidnapping and exploitation has taken hold**[4]. Migrants there are systematically detained in appalling conditions and held to ransom. While they are being held against their will, they are often subjected to extreme violence, including torture and rape.



Visit **youtu.be/vDsj7LcDjWE**[5] to watch video

Migrant women are particularly vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence and exploitation – which was especially clear in the case of one Eritrean women, Abrehet, who was forced to marry and have children with the man who kidnapped her on her way from Sudan to Egypt.

In contrast, it was the violence of European border guards that shocked the Afghan and Syrian women we interviewed the most. As they attempted to reach Croatia on foot, through dangerous mountain passes and in freezing conditions, they were repelled by guards who beat them, confiscated their money, and destroyed their mobile phones.

‘The route seriously tortured us,’ Razan, a young Syrian mother in Bosnia and Herzegovina told us.

‘It’s not like it was for the others’

Many of the women we interviewed were travelling with small children, were pregnant, or had given birth at some point on their journey. Pregnancy and motherhood had a significant impact on their migration experience, by shaping their decisions about when to migrate, whether to take their children with them, and which countries to stay in or move onwards from.

Pregnancy and motherhood also affected the migration experience itself. On one hand, being pregnant increases the risks and difficulty of the route. On the other, women – especially if pregnant or travelling with young children – were sometimes spared some of the abuse and exploitation that their male counterparts suffered as the kidnappers and smugglers took mercy on them as mothers.

‘They beat me a few times, but because I had a child with me it’s not like it was for the others,’ said Abrehet, a young Eritrean mother interviewed in Italy.

‘I made my own decision’

Most of the women we interviewed showed significant resilience and perseverance. This was evident in their decisions to leave their countries of origin and then to travel onwards from countries that they did not consider to be safe places where they could build a future for themselves and their families. Many of the interviewees travelled independently for all or part of their journeys.

‘They didn’t want me to come this way,’ Eden, a young Eritrean woman told us when we interviewed her in Italy. ‘I made my own decision.’

However, it should be recognised that choice does not necessarily mean freedom. The women we interviewed had a very narrow range of options to choose from, all of which carried huge risks.

‘I really must take this risk. I don’t have any other choice.’

Bahar, a young Afghan woman interviewed in Turkey, explained that the UNHCR had recently offered her refugee resettlement in the United States. But the process would take four to five years and at the time, she was receiving threats from her violent ex-husband who had already attacked her family back in Afghanistan. Bahar was therefore making plans to travel irregularly to the EU because, although she would prefer to take the US option, she was fearful of what her ex-husband would do to her and her child if they stayed in Turkey. She knew her onwards journey to the EU could be fatal but, she told us, ‘I really must take this risk. I don’t have any other choice.’

The women we interviewed did not necessarily think of their decisions as real choices. Often, they were simply trying to find the least bad option available to them. In many cases, this was not necessarily the least risky option, but rather the one that offered them some measure of control over their own lives, and some hope for a better future.

‘We are tired here’

The Afghan and Syrian women we interviewed in 2019 were still en route and had not made it to the EU. They faced harsh border controls, **violent pushbacks**[6], and a lack of legal options to travel onwards.

Many of the women we interviewed had already been waiting several months, or

even years, to continue their journeys, and were often living in very poor, precarious conditions. As one Afghan woman, a new mother, told us: ‘Whatever plans we had are destroyed, we just want to go somewhere to have a home. We are tired here.’

With the victory of the Taliban and the ongoing war in Tigray, the situations in Afghanistan, Eritrea and Ethiopia have significantly deteriorated in 2021, suggesting that more women will leave these countries in search of refuge and protection.

It can be expected that they will continue to seek protection in Europe, and will have to continue undertaking these long, hazardous and uncertain journeys due to the lack of options for travelling legally (for example, by air) to countries of asylum. Expanding legal pathways to allow women and their families to resettle in the EU from nearby countries should therefore be an urgent priority, so these dangerous journeys can be avoided.

This article is based on two research projects. The first, conducted in Italy at the European University Institute’s Global Governance Programme, was funded by a Rubicon grant of the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). The second was the ‘Fluctuations in Migration Flows to Europe’ project commissioned by the Research and Documentation Centre (WODC) of the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security.

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‘I never knew the journey was that risky’ – women’s experiences of corruption while migrating to Europe

Many irregular migrants to the European Union are driven out of their country of origin by corruption that makes daily life a struggle. But that corruption follows them en route in the form of bribery, violence and sextortion.

Written by Talitha Dubow and Katie Kuschminder, Maastricht University/UNU-MERIT

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Intuitively, it should not be surprising that corruption plays a significant role in the journeys irregular migrants take to reach their destinations. Yet there is surprisingly little research dedicated to this topic, especially concerning how corruption **affects men and women differently**[11].

The problem is particularly widespread along the central and western Mediterranean **routes**[12] which run through Libya to Italy and through Morocco to Spain, respectively. The types of corruption that can affect migrants differ, from petty corruption to extortion and **sextortion**[13]. The latter is a form of corruption where instead of money or goods, a bribe is paid in the form of a sexual act.

Corruption can be a **push factor**[14] itself, playing a direct or indirect role in someone's **decision to migrate**[15]. It can stand in the way of safe and regular migration choices, especially for women, making it difficult for them to obtain necessary certificates and travel documents via official channels. This drives prospective migrants to choose irregular, and hence riskier, migration routes.

This case study explores how migrants experience corruption during their migration to Europe and how these experiences are shaped by gender. It is based on interviews with ten migrants, mostly from Nigeria, as well as 35 stakeholder interviews. The interviews took place in the summer of 2017.

Borders, checkpoints and transit hubs such as Agadez (Niger), Tamanrasset (Algeria) and Sabha (Libya) are often described by migrants as focal points of corruption. Vulnerability in these situations can vary substantially according to a migrant's disposable income. In cases where they lack the resources to pay bribes to border authorities, many report being beaten or otherwise abused at borders.

As one woman told us:

'When you get to the border, they say stop. You bring money for them and then… If you didn't give them money, they would beat you, they will tell you to sit down in the sun. You will be there until you find something on you or beg someone to just give me some money.'

‘You always pay with sex’

In addition to the risk of being sexually **abused**[16] by their smugglers or traffickers, migrant women face the **risk of sextortion**[17] by authorities along the route. Female migrants often do not have the same access to resources and disposable income and therefore often have to pay bribes through so-called “sexual favours”.

As one male migrant described it:

‘As a man you always pay with your physical things, phone, money, whatever, but as a woman, the kind of corruption is different: you always pay with sex.’

Like other forms of corruption, sextortion is especially prevalent at border crossings. Nigerian women interviewed described having no choice but to comply with the demands of border officials to continue their journey. Border guards were frequently identified as perpetrators of sexual violence.

‘If you didn’t give them money, they would beat you, they will tell you to sit down in the sun. You will be there until you find something on you or beg someone to just to give me some money.’

Even in the rare cases where women had financial resources available, interviewees told me they often had to go through both types of extortion and pay a “double price” of both money and sex.

Women would not only pay for their own journey in this way, but were also used as payment for entire groups of migrants. The same man told us:

‘We travel in pick-ups, and there always needs to be at least two women in each pickup: when there are women in a connection, there are more chances to cross. In Tamanrasset in Algeria, the police [came] and [took] the women and [left] with them, it’s often policemen.’

The heavy toll paid by migrant women travelling across the central and western Mediterranean routes is a direct result of the gender norms that prevail in corrupt environments. Indeed, corruption itself is the result of patriarchal power relations, whereby powerful men exert power over disempowered groups. In transit, patriarchal values can lead to a widespread acceptance that women’s bodies can be treated as commodities.

‘There always needs to be at least two women in each pickup: when there are women in a connection, there are more chances to cross.’

The commodification of migrant women’s bodies and sexuality does not only appear when they are forced into prostitution when they arrive at a destination country. It often starts with the migration process itself, during which women are used as bargaining chips. Traffickers pay officials with the same girls they are trafficking to Europe, to encourage them to turn a blind eye.

These patriarchal norms also categorise men as providers and therefore create the expectation that they can pay corrupt officials. As interviewees reported, non-payment was often followed by extreme physical violence.

‘I wish I knew’

The majority of the women we interviewed agreed that they would not have taken the journey if they had known the kind of abuse and corruption, including sextortion, they were facing.

One woman said: ‘I never knew the journey was that risky … But since I left home, I could not go back, so I just had to take the risk and keep going.’

Lack of knowledge about what to expect, how expensive the journey would be, or even the actual route the women would take only added to this feeling. Another said:

‘A car would just drop me in Germany, that’s what they told me … They didn’t tell me that I would pass through borders and take a boat, they didn’t tell me I would cross a river. They didn’t tell me that. They told me that I would take four days or five days on the road to get to Germany, that’s what they told me. I wish I knew, I wouldn’t have done it.’

Another woman interviewed emphasised the importance of informing those who are thinking about taking the journey to Europe about the dangers:

‘I would beg people in Nigeria to stop. I wish they could stop on the road … Many people died in that sea, many people are dying.’

But she highlighted a difficulty multiple women I spoke to also mentioned: many would-be migrants would not believe them if they told them about the horrors of the journey. ‘They say, “You don’t want me to come.” That is just it.’

This case study is based on data that was collected as part of the project “A Gender Perspective on Corruption Encountered during Forced and Irregular Migration” funded by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zussamenarbeit (GIZ).

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‘The work itself has changed me’ – the experience of (rural) migrant women and girls in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Many teenage girls in Ethiopia flee the strict confines of their rural homes to seek independence and a fresh start in the big city. Life isn’t easy in Addis Ababa, but they find community and resilience in one another.

Written by Marina de Regt, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Published 25th November 2021

Internal migration has been long been part of Ethiopia's history with many people, including children and adolescents, leaving their places of origin to take up seasonal work elsewhere within the country.

In the past decade, an increasing number of adolescent girls have migrated from rural areas to urban centres. This case study explores the experiences, life choices and aspirations of adolescent girls and young women who migrate internally in Ethiopia.

We focused on migrants who worked as domestic workers and sex workers in Addis Ababa, collecting data between March and September 2014. In addition to life story interviews, we held focus group discussions and did a survey of 60 migrant women and girls in the capital.

'Fed up with life at home'

The girls we interviewed had specific, frequently very personal, reasons for leaving their places of origin. Many were leaving extremely precarious economic or political situations, oppressive gender regimes, and difficult or abusive family circumstances.

Girls often felt trapped by a lack of viable economic options, dire educational prospects and constraining gender norms. There was a strong link between the decision to migrate and the negative role of step-parents, aunts and uncles, who abused the girls physically, sexually or psychologically. Rural girls who moved to Addis Ababa also described a situation where restrictive gender norms limited their mobility and their life choices.

'I was so fed up with life at home,' Elsa, 20, from the Amhara region told us.

The stories of abuse and mistreatment girls experienced in their families were shocking, especially among sex workers. This violence often took place in impoverished households, which had been marginalised due to a family crisis or economic circumstances.

A number of girls also left to avoid arranged marriages. Ethiopia has laws prohibiting

marriage under the age of 18 and social norms about marriage are changing slowly. Even so, especially in rural Ethiopia, girls as young as 12 still face the danger of forced marriage.

‘I don’t want people to beat me’

Most of the girls we spoke to had high expectations of their migration to Addis Ababa. They hoped to change their lives and those of their family members back home. Yet migrating also meant that they were on their own for the first time in their lives, without the protection of immediate relatives, which sometimes led to feelings of anxiety, despair and loneliness.

Today, their daily lives mainly revolve around work as they struggle to earn enough to provide for themselves and sometimes for those left behind. Employment is often exploitative and salaries too low to compensate for the high costs of living in a big city.

Most of the interviewees were disappointed about their new lives in Addis Ababa. Many women and girls found themselves in the unexpected situation of being abused and exploited as domestic workers by brokers, employers or their relatives who had promised to send them to school.

Domestic workers are frequently exposed to sexual harassment, because they work in the privacy of the home. Many domestic workers we spoke to experienced verbal and physical abuse by their employers. Meseret, 24, who migrated to Addis Ababa when she was 15, told us she was raped by her uncle, whose house she worked in. ‘I was very sad and angry,’ she said. ‘I didn’t tell my aunt, fearing that I would disrupt her marriage but also fearing that she would not believe me.’ Meseret eventually decided to run away and became a sex worker.

Sex workers told us in detail about the dangers they faced at work. Those who worked out of hotels were better protected than those on the street, but the dependence on brokers and hotel owners and the harsh working environment were often a reason to shift to working on the street.

‘I didn’t tell my aunt, fearing that I would disrupt her marriage but also fearing that she would not believe me.’

Feven, who is 21 and came to Addis when she was 16, said: ‘Many men beat us when the position and way they want is difficult for us, and I don’t want people to beat me. Most of them want us when they get drunk and they don’t care about us.’

Interviewees told us the police do not support migrant girls when they are the victims crime. Sex workers in particular complained about the lack of respect, discrimination and stigma they face. When their clients are violent, the police often turn a blind eye.

‘It makes you meet people and it makes you free’

One of the main sources of vulnerability of migrant girls and young women is their limited network, especially during the first years after arriving in the city.

Family relations are of utmost importance in Ethiopia and form the main source of an individual’s support, both psychological and financial. Girls who have left, or lost, their parents in their places of origin are therefore extremely vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

Girls who do not have a father or brothers are more vulnerable than girls who have male relatives back home. In Ethiopia, the status and living conditions of women and girls largely depend on the presence of men. Those who have migrated to the city on their own are even more vulnerable, as the fact that they do not conform to the dominant gender order affects their social status.

The limited support from the government, community groups and international or national organisations further marginalises migrant women and girls. While they

are in dire need of support to build up a decent life in the city, most organisations focus on restricting the migration of young people and sending them back to their villages of origin.

When rural migrants can create a safe environment and build up social contacts, their vulnerabilities can be minimised. Mutual support in the form of shared resources, housing, money and food is very important, and connecting with their peers is therefore crucial. Many women and girls told us how important friendships were for them, but not all of them were equally able to build these relationships. Domestic workers were more isolated than sex workers and had fewer opportunities to build their social capital.

For some girls, migration opened the way to more defined and realistic aspirations and new life trajectories. Elsa told us: 'Before, I was not good at approaching people, but now the work itself has changed me, it forces me to communicate with people, it makes you meet people and it makes you free.'

Other girls also mentioned the importance of freedom – they valued their independence, the fact that they were economically self-reliant and could take life decisions regardless of their parents. Migrating to the city had given them maturity, and they were often proud of that.

This research was made possible with the financial support of the Swiss Network of International Studies (SNIS) and Girl Hub Ethiopia.

Visit **https://womenmigration.com/case-study/ethiopia/**[21] for more images

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‘We sleep without eating anything’ – the precarious lives of women labour migrants in South Africa

More and more women are leaving southern African countries like Zimbabwe and Malawi to seek greener pastures in South Africa. But when they arrive, they are faced with xenophobia, violence and a daily struggle to make enough money to live.

Written by Floretta Boonzaier & Ivan Katsere, University of Cape Town

Published 25th November 2021

Migration patterns in Africa have changed dramatically over the past decade. Migrants today tend to be younger people who travel within the continent, and are also more likely to be **women**[25].

In recent years, South Africa has become home to increasing numbers of **labour migrants**[26] from other countries in the region, including Zimbabwe and Malawi. Extreme conditions of poverty in a number of African countries combined with war, political instability, and the continued impacts of colonialism have been some of the conditions that have driven many Africans to seek refuge and economic opportunities in other countries.

For this case study, we spoke to 31 migrant women in Cape Town about their journey to South Africa, and what it is like to live there as a refugee or asylum-seeker. Our aim was to explore the gendered dynamics of the migration journey to South Africa.

‘I got my passport stamped and I paid them money.’

Dee, 30, from Malawi

This is how a migration journey might typically play out for a woman who migrates to Cape Town from a nearby country. She is struggling financially in her home country and having difficulty providing for her family. A friend or family member who is already in South Africa offers her hope by saying that there is an abundance of well-paying jobs there. Trusting this information, she leaves her family, and often young children, to make the long, uncomfortable journey alone to Cape Town through either regular or irregular routes.

With dreams of being able to send money home to her family, she starts looking for work almost immediately upon arrival. Almost just as quickly, she realises how tough it is to find a well-paying, stable job as a refugee or asylum-seeker. Many months, even a year could go by before she finds employment.

At this point in the narrative, her dreams of greener pastures start to shift to feelings of disappointment, disillusionment, frustration and desperation, and the narrative changes from aspiration to daily survival in a life defined by uncertainty and violence. The daily struggle of surviving in Cape Town makes her want to return home, where at least she knew she had guaranteed food and shelter. But without enough money to get there, she remains in Cape Town, caught in the same cycle she has been stuck in for the past few years.

‘You are here to make money’

Experiences of employment and unemployment were central to women’s narratives of their lives in Cape Town. Finding work is usually the sole reason they have made the journey in the first place, and all the women we spoke to told us they left their home countries to seek better opportunities in South Africa. As Irene, one of our interviewees from Zimbabwe, put it: ‘You are here to work, you are here to make money.’

But the available work in South Africa is so transitory and precarious that they will often go from full-time employment on one day to unemployment the next – a situation that is amplified by their status as ‘illegal’ migrants.

And yet, the greener pastures narrative is perpetuated by migrants already in South Africa, who re-circulate stories of better opportunities there, despite the fact that most women labour migrants seem to be disappointed and frustrated with their lives. They experience their new environment as anything but ‘green’.

‘We don’t have any money to pay rent, we don’t have any money to buy food,’ 22-year-old Machinga from Zimbabwe told us. ‘On other days we sleep without eating anything.’

‘We found some people they took us. Instead of to give us the job, they started telling us they want sex.’

Donna, 29, from Malawi

Most women looked for work by standing on a corner with other migrant women and men, waiting for people to collect them for casual jobs such as cleaning and childcare. Common places for such gatherings are the market, shopping centre, petrol station, and McDonald’s in Parklands, a suburb in Cape Town’s west.

This method of job seeking is fraught with anxieties, risks and vulnerabilities. Women do not know the people who pick them up, where they are going, what work they will have to do or whether they will be paid at the end of the day. This set-up leaves the women vulnerable to exploitation, mistreatment and abuse.

Many women we spoke to had been solicited for sex while waiting to find work, in the car on the way to the home, or after they had completed the work. To escape these threatening situations, women explained that they often had to leave work without payment and with no transport back home or to the site where they had been collected.

Despite these risks and uncertainties, many women continue the same job-seeking routine in the hope that, one day, things would be different but also out of the need to survive.

‘If you have money, you just take the money and give it to them.’

Sekai, 43, from Zimbabwe

The women we interviewed experienced various forms of violence on a daily basis. Many attributed this to the fact that they are not South African, even if xenophobic intent was not always explicit. South Africa has a shameful recent history of **xenophobic violence**[27], specifically against migrants from other African countries.

Encounters with ‘skollies’ were recurrent in the women’s stories of living in the informal settlement of Dunoon. ‘Skollies’ is a word the women used to refer to thieves in the community who mug people walking to and from the bus or taxi rank for their cellphones and money. These experiences of constant theft and threat contributed to a general sense of fear and lack of safety within their community.

‘If they see that you are a foreigner, they can just bring a knife they can point a knife to you and then they say … “Money, we want money”,’ Sekai told us of her experience with skollies.

During the muggings, women also experienced verbal threats, assault and sexual abuse.

‘We need our people from here in South Africa’

The women we spoke to also experienced multiple forms of xenophobic violence. Some mentioned instances where they had been verbally harassed while looking for work – being asked by South Africans why they were here ‘stealing’ jobs. Others experienced discrimination when Black South Africans realised they could not speak the local language, as illustrated by 26-year old Memory from Malawi.

‘You see some people, like South African women, when they came to market, they say, “We don’t need amakwere-kwere, like foreigners. We need our people from here in South Africa.”‘

Approximately a third of the women we interviewed told stories of mistreatment by their employers in South Africa. This included being exploited by being paid below minimum wage for a full day’s work; being solicited for sex work; poor working conditions and being unfairly dismissed. This was the case for both women with casual work and those in more permanent forms of employment.

The mistreatment and exploitation of **domestic workers**[28] has a long history in South Africa stemming from colonisation, slavery and apartheid. In the current context, we see the same patterns of exploitation recur in the labour undertaken by labour migrants from other African countries in the homes of middle-class and upper-class South Africans.

The unemployment situation in South Africa has significantly deteriorated over the past year, with the COVID-19 pandemic making the already precarious position of African **migrant women**[29] even more vulnerable.

The research on which this article is based was partially funded by the National Research Foundation of South Africa and the University of Cape Town.

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‘I don’t want them to end up like me’ – the women who return to Albania after seeking asylum in the EU

The vast majority of Albanians who seek asylum in the EU have their claims rejected and must return home. But that doesn’t mean they give up on their dreams of a better life.

Written by Talitha Dubow, Maastricht University/UNU-MERIT

Published 25th November 2021

Return migration is when a migrant goes back to their country of origin, or to a place where they formerly lived or stayed temporarily.

There are different kinds of return migration: it can be undertaken voluntarily, it can be forced, or it can fall somewhere in between. Return migration can be permanent or temporary. For those migrants who do not freely choose to return, the process can be very challenging. This is often the case for asylum-seekers whose applications are rejected, who may be compelled to return even though they strongly wish to remain in the country of migration.

Albanians sought asylum in EU countries in high numbers between 2014 and 2016, largely due to economic pressures that had been aggravated by the 2008 global financial crisis. In 2015, Albanians were one of the largest asylum-seeking groups in Germany, second only to the number of first-time applications submitted by **Syrians**[32].

Albanian asylum-seeking has been characterised as a "**family project":**[33] Albanians have tended to migrate with their families, hoping to find a better life together. But because their reasons for migrating typically do not meet the **EU criteria,**[34] very few Albanian asylum-seekers are offered international protection – **just 3% in 2015 and 2016.**[35]

Asylum seekers whose applications are rejected are usually obliged to leave the EU and return to their country of origin. Very high numbers of rejected Albanian asylum-seekers have therefore had to return.

This case study explores women asylum-seekers' experiences of having to return to Albania, leaving their migration aspirations unfulfilled. It is based on interviews with 45 families who sought asylum in France and Germany, and who subsequently returned. The interviews were carried out in Albania in January 2020.

Both the women and men interviewed for this study discussed their responsibilities and priorities as parents as being central to their migration projects. This was particularly evident in the case of the women who migrated without their husbands, or who initiated the decision to migrate as a family.

'I want them to grow'

Most of the Albanian families we interviewed hoped to stay in the EU indefinitely. They had multiple reasons for wanting to migrate, based on economic, education, and healthcare factors.

Specifically, these parents wanted to give their children a better quality of life, better education, and, in the case of some mothers with sick children or difficult pregnancies, access to better healthcare.

As one mother reflected: 'I don't want them to end up like me. I want them to grow, to have something, to go to school. To have money for everything they need.' In a few cases, family tensions or conflict motivated migration. Another woman, Fatmira, said she could no longer tolerate living with her in-laws who strongly disliked her because of her Egyptian ethnicity. Another fled an abusive ex-husband.

In contrast to **previous research**[36], which has emphasised the male-led nature of migration flows from Albania, what is striking about this more recent pattern of Albanian asylum-seeking is that many of the women had clearly taken a lead role in their family's decision to migrate.

'I told my husband that I was not scared and that I would leave.'

For ten of the 45 families whose experiences were captured in this study, it was the wife or mother who had initiated the decision to migrate. In nine cases, women migrated without their husbands or ex-husbands – most travelled with young children, but a few were supported by adult or older children.

Albana was determined to migrate to Germany to seek treatment for her autistic son. Her husband was reluctant to join her, so she left him behind with her older daughter. 'I told my husband: "You either take our son and go, or I will take our son

and go,"' she said. 'He did not think he could take care of the son on his own so he told me to go if I was not scared. I told my husband that I was not scared and that I would leave.'

Returning to Albania

The families we interviewed did not return to Albania because they wanted to. The majority returned because their asylum applications were rejected, and most preferred to accept official assistance to return to Albania (known as 'assisted voluntary return') rather than stay longer and risk being forcibly deported by the police.

In a few cases, interviewees returned to Albania before receiving a decision on their asylum claim. Mostly, this was due to family ties and obligations. Fatmira and her family had to return to Albania when her mother-in-law died. They had spent six months in France, where they sought asylum after being rejected by Germany.

Albana said she would have preferred to stay longer in Germany to allow her son to continue benefitting from specialist support. But she felt compelled to return to Albania after 16 months to relieve her older daughter of the domestic duties she had assumed in Albana's absence, which were preventing her from pursuing her own studies. In this case, Albana and her son's premature return (and the end of his medical treatment) was determined by patriarchal gender norms which meant that Albana's husband didn't take on the housework himself.

Whether they came back via deportation or assisted voluntary return, the women I interviewed described their return to Albania as highly distressing. Fatmira described the frustration she felt when her children had to adjust to a much lower quality of life:

'When we came back here, the first days were so difficult because the children had adapted to the [way of] life there,' she said. 'We did not have a toilet where the children could go, and the first child said, "Mum, where can I go to the toilet?" '

Returned families described the challenges they faced in making ends meet,

accessing healthcare services, and supporting their children's reintegration into the Albanian school system. Finding a decent job was often considered the biggest problem, and mothers found it particularly difficult to work because of a lack of childcare services.

'We did not have a toilet where the children could go, and the first child said, "Mum, where can I go to the toilet?"'

Despite their acute disappointment and frustration that they had not been able to give their children a better future in the EU, some women demonstrated considerable efforts to improve their children's quality of life and prospects back in Albania.

Fatmira explained that she had started work in a factory despite the extremely low pay and poor working conditions, because she was determined to 'do something for my children' rather than stay at home with 'nothing'.

Another interviewee, Emina, moved with her children from her hometown in northern Albania to the capital city of Tirana after returning from Germany to allow her daughter to pursue a degree – leaving her husband behind.

These women had to trust in their own capacities to create a better future for their families, despite the challenges. But their aspirations for future migration remained high. Even where they were doing their best to create a better life in Albania, the majority continued to hope for an opportunity to migrate again.

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‘He beat me when I was pregnant’ – Vietnamese marriage migrants and domestic violence in Taiwan

Taiwan’s “New Immigrant Women” are particularly vulnerable to abuse in the home. With their immigration status tied to their marriages, many have no choice but to stay silent.

Written by Su-in Yu, National Cheng Kung University, Taiwan

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In recent decades, marriage migration has been an emerging trend in Taiwan. About 400,000 Chinese and Southeast Asian women have migrated to Taiwan by virtue of marriage since the mid-1980s, according to the country's interior ministry. In 2008, one in every seven newly registered marriages was between a transnational couple.

Marriage migration to Taiwan reached its peak in 2003, with ministry figures showing 31% of marriages that year involved a non-Taiwanese citizen. Although this phenomenon has been in a gradual decline since then, foreign spouses still constitute a significant group on the island, totalling 559,638 people in February 2020.

Often referred to in public and political discourse as "the fifth ethnic group", the marriage migrant population is mainly composed of women from mainland China, Vietnam and Indonesia. These "New Immigrant Women" – a term coined by the Taiwanese government – now constitute about 1.7% of the entire population of Taiwan.

This case study analyses the domestic violence suffered by Vietnamese marriage immigrants in Taiwan. It examines the stories of 16 Vietnamese women who endured abuse within their relationships.

'My parents-in-law knew it, but they did not help'

Most marriage migrants decide to marry Taiwanese men because they hope to escape poverty and turbulence in their home countries. Marriage migrants **mainly marry**[41] farmers and working-class men. However, after they join their husbands' family, these women often feel **disappointed and disempowered**[42] due to their stressful economic situations, lack of social networks and support, and discrimination.

‘About 400,000 Chinese and Southeast Asian women have migrated to Taiwan by virtue of marriage since the mid-1980s, according to the country’s interior ministry.’

Many marriage migrants also experience domestic violence, which usually begins in the first or second year after women arrive in Taiwan. These women suffer from a heavy burden of domestic work, quarrels with in-laws, psychological and physical abuse from their husbands, and sexual harassment by other male family members in some cases.

In Taiwan, domestic violence is often seen as a problem to be kept behind closed doors. New immigrant women are also often unaware of their rights and protections under the law, making them reluctant to report abuse.

One woman recalled her experience:

‘Sometimes he came home around two or three o’clock in the morning and quarrelled with me. He started to beat me around the third month of my pregnancy. He beat me when I was pregnant. My parents-in-law knew it, but they did not help me.’

Immigration status as a means of control

Because all marital immigrants to Taiwan enter the country as “kin dependents,” their legal standing prior to naturalisation is tied to the continuation of their marriage and the assistance of their guarantor, who is typically their spouse or his family. If the Taiwanese spouse or his family members refuse to participate in this process, the new immigrant woman may find herself unable to progress to acquire citizenship or, worse, saddled with expired documents that put her at risk of deportation.

‘Sometimes he came home around two or three o’clock in the morning and quarrelled with me. He started to beat me around the third month of my pregnancy.’

Research has shown that abusive husbands use their wives’ dependence on them as a **means of control**[43], and prevent them from applying for Taiwanese citizenship. Violent husbands and their families were found to hold the woman’s passport or Taiwanese ID for the purpose of preventing her from leaving or applying for citizenship

Gendered expectations

When a Vietnamese woman migrates to Taiwan, she faces a totally different set of gendered expectations than she may have been used to in Vietnam. She is expected to be a subservient wife, a servile daughter-in-law, and a mother, specifically to a son. Such rigid gender ideologies prohibit marriage migrants from exercising their individual agency.

Many marriage migrants from Southeast Asia cannot speak or read Mandarin Chinese or the other languages commonly used in Taiwan. This language barrier makes it even more difficult for them to build new social networks in their new home. Thus, they have very little knowledge of services and opportunities that exist beyond their immediate social group. In rural parts of the country, there may be few opportunities to meet other members of their ethnic community.

Some marriage migrants face hostility and discrimination from local Taiwanese communities. Widespread stereotypes about Vietnamese women fuel this discrimination. Their narratives show that they are often perceived as individuals who were poor, who could be purchased, who came to Taiwan solely for monetary reasons, who could not understand Chinese, and who did not know how to teach their children.

Tackling domestic violence

There is urgent need for researchers and services to establish reliable data about domestic violence in these contexts – but it must be acknowledged that the marginalised status of migrant women makes such research challenging. In a positive development, volunteer organisations led by marriage migrants themselves are becoming more common and immigrant women who have experienced abuse have begun to influence the design and delivery of services.

But there is much more to be done to tackle this problem.

To start with, women need more secure immigration status in Taiwan, to avoid being trapped in violent relationships. For those who are seeking help, the national hotline for family violence in Taiwan employs interpreters for those who do not speak Mandarin, but much work needs to be done to train interpreters to serve the language needs of the increasingly diverse population of marriage migrants.

Social workers should also be given cultural competence training before they enter professions supporting women in cross-border marriages, while marriage migrant integration policy should involve husbands and in-laws, rather than just the migrants themselves.

Last but not least, promoting more flexible gender role ideologies and women-friendly social policies in Taiwan will increase the wellbeing of marriage migrants overall.

The research for this case study was funded by the University Advancement Grant at NCKU.

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‘They consider us as guests’ – Burmese and Iraqi refugee women’s experiences in Australia

Australia has a dedicated resettlement programme for refugees. But settling into a new community still presents challenges for women on humanitarian visas.

Written by Farida Fozdar, The University Western Australia

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Despite its harsh treatment of irregular migrants who arrive by sea, Australia has a comprehensive resettlement program for UNHCR-approved refugees – those identified by the United Nations to be eligible for visas to settle there. Australia accepts between 13,000 and 20,000 humanitarian entrants per year. Around equal proportions of men and women are granted visas, with some 2,500 migrants arriving under the "women at risk" category.

The resettlement experiences of these women vary depending on a range of factors including country of origin, level of English literacy, level of education, stage in life, family situation and more. This case study explores the experiences of resettlement for 15 women migrants from Myanmar and Iraq who came to Australia under its humanitarian programme. We asked them about their experiences of education, training, employment, learning English, health, housing, belonging, integration, citizenship and social networks.

Australia offers a range of **settlement services**[47] to refugees, providing material, social and emotional support as well as some programmes that target belonging and integration. Initial settlement assistance includes dedicated reception and assistance on arrival, housing services, cultural orientation, free English language tuition and trauma counselling in the first six to 12 months. Refugees are settled in the community rather than in hostels.

The definition of "successful" settlement includes self-sufficiency and participation in the **social and economic life of the community**.[48] But **research**[49] indicates refugees often do not settle as easily as other migrants. **My own research**[50] shows that there are **many reasons**[51] for this, from language barriers to education, differences in values, family issues including domestic violence, inter-generational conflict, changing gender roles and discrimination.

'We must belong here in Australia'

The women we spoke to said the support provided by paid case workers, family members, religious leaders, and for some, neighbours, was vital to settlement. But there was also a lack of understanding of the service provision system, relevant organisations, personnel changes and so on.

'I would like to thank the government and all the services which have supported our family so we are all living a peaceful life,' said one woman from the Karen minority in Myanmar, who had been in Australia for two-and-a-half years.

Some of the women we spoke to, generally those from Myanmar, made strong claims of belonging in Australia. It is unclear whether this was a result of the interview situation, where they may have felt obliged to articulate a strong sense of identity and allegiance, or whether it was a result of genuine attachment based on positive experiences of settlement.

'Currently we are living here in Australia,' another Karen refugee from Myanmar said. 'We must belong here in Australia.'

The appreciation for services appeared to be linked to a sense of civic belonging, although it often wasn't sufficient on its own, as the following exchange with an Iraqi woman shows:

Intervewee: I feel that I belong to Australia because I have the same support that the Australian people get from the government such as the social security, Medicare etc.

Interviewer: Do you think that white Australian people feel you belong here?

Interviewee: Some of them yes but I always feel that I am strange in this society. Also, the Australian people don't do anything to make you feel that you belong to Australia. Instead of that they try to avoid you sometimes.

When asked what their strongest identity was, most Myanmar participants said it is was Australian; although one woman from the Chin minority, who had been in Australia for nearly four years, told us:

'It is impossible to forget my home country where I was born … I believe I belong to my Chin land.'

This participant described herself as a refugee, saying, ‘How can I be anything other than a refugee?’ She said she didn’t know what her strongest identity was: ‘I am who I am,’ and described being integrated as ‘a kind of happiness and feeling comfortable in living with others.’

One Iraqi woman said she would not feel integrated into Australian society until she has an ‘effective’ and ‘correct’ role in society. This is not, she was quick to emphasise, because of any experience of discrimination due to wearing the veil, something she had anticipated before arrival. It was more to do with having a job that she felt contributed to society.

‘If I could speak English very well, nothing would be difficult’

Participants identified language learning as a problem that affected a range of other aspects of settlement, including developing friendships, finding a job, dealing with bureaucracy, understanding the local culture and obtaining formal citizenship.

The situation for those from Myanmar was the most pressing, with the simple need to communicate a real challenge for the first year or two. Many had come from rural farming backgrounds, with limited literacy in their own language. For many women, the challenges of health and childcare meant they could not necessarily access their 510 hours of free language tuition, leaving many vulnerable to long-term language difficulties.

‘The biggest challenge that I have faced while being in Australia was spoken English language,’ a Karen woman in her third year of settlement told us. ‘If I could speak English very well, nothing would be difficult.’

Almost all the Iraqi women had some English on arrival, and they sought higher level language skills, technical language skills and vernacular necessary for transitioning to professional employment. This need for more advanced learning was not met by the services available.

‘Hi, bye and see you!’

Participants spoke of difficulties in meeting non-migrant Australians, but relationships with other refugees through English language classes, and with people of their own ethnic background, were generally strong.

For the Burmese refugees, friendships often developed from English language classes and at church, which most attended weekly and provided an important source of material, psychological and spiritual support. Some had friendly relationships with their neighbours.

However, deep friendships were missing for some. Many talked about knowing people but not considering them friends. Some attributed this to communication issues. ‘Sometimes if I met with the people who were English people, it was very hard to communicate with them,’ a young woman from the Karen minority who had been in Australia for over a year said. ‘If I met with people from my country, it is easy.’

In relation to the development of relationships with non-migrant Australians, an Iraqi woman told us: ‘Actually, not strong relationship, only “Hi, bye and see you!” Because Australian people don’t want to create any deep relationships with migrants and they just consider us as guests in Australia.’

‘I applied for jobs many times’

There were differences between the two communities regarding employment. For women from Myanmar, most were not in paid employment but studying English, and most had home duties. For those from Iraq, most were pursuing some form of education beyond English language classes and trying to upgrade their tertiary qualifications. Some experienced barriers to using their existing knowledge and skills.

‘I feel that I belong to Australia because I have the same support that the Australian people get from the government such as the social security, Medicare etc.’

One Iraqi woman in her 40s had studied management at Baghdad University. She was critical of settlement service providers for failing to offer relevant assistance. ‘I had more than 15 years’ experience in accounting, and I was an auditor and deputy head of an internal auditor department. Nowadays, I am a uni student … I applied for jobs many times, I failed, nobody accepted me.’

Another Iraqi woman said that if her qualifications could not be recognised and used in a suitable job, she would consider returning to Iraq, as she did not want to remain on welfare.

‘Don’t look at us and think we are stupid’

Refugee women from Myanmar and Iraq appear to be settling successfully in Australia, although employment, language, relationships and a sense of belonging are areas where service provision could be improved. The services they receive are appreciated, but require tailoring to a range of needs.

Language and orientation classes should address the specifics of each student, and greater flexibility in terms of qualification recognition is also necessary. Beyond service provision, it was suggested that non-migrant Australians could do more to welcome newcomers:

Interviewer: Do you have any suggestions for improving support for refugees to integrate into Australian society? What do you think the important issues are?

Interviewee: To give more consideration and don’t look at us and think we are

stupid, and we don’t know anything, especially when we do something wrong. They have to put themselves in our position, with a new country, new language, and different culture.

Clearly more needs to be done to raise awareness among the general population about the value of cultural diversity, the potential contributions of those of refugee backgrounds, and the need to work at building an inclusive society.

The research for this case study was funded by Lotterywest and undertaken in collaboration with the Metropolitan Migrant Resource Centre, Western Australia.

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‘If I have land, I feed my family’ – refugee resettlement through community gardening in Seattle

How do refugees find community in their new home? For Mien migrants in Seattle, the answer lies in growing food from their former lives in Laos at the city’s communal gardens.

Written by Elizabeth Brabec, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

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Resettlement communities offer varying levels of aid, support, and programmes to refugees when they arrive in their new homes. But those programmes and the assistance they provide disappear quickly after the initial resettlement phase, leaving former refugees to search for home, community and cultural heritage in other ways.

Community gardens often serve as a hub of support for newly settled refugees, assisting them in coming to terms with their new social, cultural and physical environment. The structure of the gardens, where anyone can apply for a gardening plot, provides new residents with a sense of ownership and agency in creating a tangible space to inhabit that is also reflective of their lost home.

In the 1970s and 80s, refugees from the Mien community in Laos came to the US via refugee camps in Thailand after fleeing civil war. Their agrarian heritage made their lives inseparable from the act of growing food.

Over the past 40 years, Mien families have created gardens rich with heritage in three abandoned plots of Seattle. The unique landscapes they created reflect Mien cultural attitudes, needs, and beliefs. Three gardens – Snoqalmie, Thistle, and Maa Nyei Lai Ndeic (“My Mother’s Garden”) – provide the basis for this case study, which analyses the long-term effects of resettlement and the continuing desire of resettled communities to feel at home.

We used in-person interviews, archival data and a random sampling of plants in community garden plots to gain insight into the significance of garden spaces to the Mien community in Seattle. We spoke to 12 men and women from the Mien, Khmu and Hmong ethnicities about their experiences with the community gardens. All participants were born in Laos, and all had spent time living in Thai refugee camps for periods that ranged from a few months to 12 years.

The gardens reflect a desire to reconstruct a remembered and longed-for home. At the same time, they support cross-cultural interactions that provide broader lessons for planning and resettlement policy.

‘I want to eat something that I can grow’

When asked why they garden, all participants gave reasons relating to food production, with a few explicitly citing their family, including children and grandchildren. Others described gardening as being important for financial reasons due to the comparatively high cost of groceries.

Four participants said they gardened for reasons related to continuity or familiarity in their past lives. One woman in her 60s stated, ‘I want to eat something that I can grow. I want to get my habit back.’ A couple in their 50s wanted to ‘garden like old culture…like what we had before.’

> **‘I want to expand my life and reduce my worrying.’**

One Mien gardener said she would grow more if she had the space. She came from a long line of farmers in Laos.

‘We have a little plot here. But when we grow our food and fruit, we are proud and feel good because we can grow with our own hands,’ she said. ‘If people were able to garden in the [refugee] camps, it would be very good.’

In the same garden, a Mien woman in her seventies had had a plot for 27 years, and had never missed a season. She told us she suffers from depression. But, she said, ‘if I have land, I feed my family… bring home food for my family. I want to expand my life and reduce my worrying.’ With younger generations increasingly unable to speak her language, she said the garden also gives her a purpose within her family.

Amaranth, beans and corn

The gardeners have adapted to their new home in Seattle and its different environmental conditions and growing season. The annual potluck dinner occurs in the last weekend in February, the beginning of the garden season in Seattle.

Self-sufficiency and self-determination were clear motivations for gardening. All of those interviewed cited food security and control over that food as primary motivators for gardening. The proof is in the plants they grow: Mien gardeners devoted about 80% of their gardens to vegetables, 10-20% to herbs and 10-20% to flowers or ornamental plants.

‘We have a little plot here. But when we grow our food and fruit, we are proud and feel good because we can grow with our own hands.’

While Seattle’s community garden standards do not allow for permanent overhead structures, all the gardeners in Maa Nyei Lai Ndeic and the majority in Thistle built elaborate trellises to support the vining plants that are integral to the Mien. Chayote (adapted from Meso-America), several varieties of vining beans and tree flowers predominate.

Most of the plots grow a significant amount of a variety of corn that is starchy and sticky. Flowering amaranth plants were common around the edges of the gardens, and gardeners spoke about the symbolic importance of the bright red flowers. Amaranth is a particularly significant indicator of the Mien culture: it is pressed into cooking oil in Laos.

Culture clashes

In Laos, purple beans are grown together with rice for support, but in Seattle, rice is not viable so beans must be trellised. The overhead structures produce considerable conflict with other gardeners and the community surrounding the garden. Perceived as “messy” and “trashy,” the overhead trellises were removed at one point, traumatising the elderly women who called the gardens their home.

The Mien gardeners, meanwhile, often criticise other gardeners for not being serious enough, causing more friction. These are indicators of clashes of culture that exist long after refugees have been resettled and new communities have been established and stabilised.

It is clear from our results that supportive policies that allow everyone to garden within their own cultural norms are vital, as well as programs to support inter-cultural meeting and discussions.

Regular pot-luck garden events are popular ways for the resettlement communities to carry on cultural traditions, and to engage with other communities in dialogue and understanding.

Sean O'Donnell assisted in conducting the interviews and collecting the data for this case study.

Visit **https://womenmigration.com/case-study/gardens/** [57] for more images

Suggested further reading

Cheung, S. & Phillimore, J. (2017). **Gender and refugee integration: A quantitative analysis of integration and social policy outcomes.**[58] *Journal of Social Policy, 46*(2), 211-230.

Hartwig, K.A. & Mason, M. (2016). **Community gardens for refugee and immigrant communities as a means of health promotion.**[59] J Community Health, 41, 1153–1159.

Phillimore, J., Morrice, L., Kabe, K., Hashimoto, N., Hassan, S. & Reyes, M. (2021). **Economic self-reliance or social relations? What works in refugee integration? Learning from resettlement programmes in Japan and the UK.**[60] *CMS, 9*(17).

Links

57. **https://womenmigration.com/case-study/gardens**
58. **https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279416000775**
59. **https://rdcu.be/cA59p**
60. **https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-021-00223-7**

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