

# Addressing the gendered dynamics of asylum seeker and refugee integration provision in Cyprus

## Key findings and recommendations

### Executive Summary

Gender is a system of relations that shapes all aspects of the migration experience. Women face unequal access to resources, property, education, protection, justice, the labour market, and decision-making in both origin and reception countries. Therefore, the conditions of migration and integration become particularly challenging for refugee women who often deal with a triple disadvantage: immigration status, forced migration and gender.

Integration policies are often designed based on an androcentric approach failing to address the specific needs of women, and displaced migrants that do not fit the category of a male heterosexual displaced migrant. As a consequence, a large number of women displaced migrants as well as individuals who do not fit into the traditional binary definition of gender are particularly vulnerable to discrimination and Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV).

In Cyprus, the absence of an ongoing action plan on integration has left many displaced migrants in precarious living conditions. Drawing on the results of five research packages on local and national integration policies conducted within the framework of the Glimer project, we argue that (1) integration policies on a national and local level are inconsistent, sporadically implemented, and often project restrictive. (2) integration processes in Cyprus are not gender mainstreamed and therefore the gendered impact of displaced migration is not addressed. (3) As a result, women displaced migrants face multiple challenges including fewer labour market opportunities, weaker social integration, as well as a higher risk of SGBV, labour exploitation and trafficking. These vulnerabilities are compounded by sexist and discriminatory practices, the absence of childcare and other services, and traditional gender roles and stereotypes that pose additional barriers to the integration of women displaced migrants in Cyprus.

This policy brief presents our research findings and presents policy recommendations to the Republic of Cyprus to improve responses to and address the gendered impact of displaced migration. Given the forthcoming National Action Plan on Integration and the broad expertise within civil society organisations in on gender and integration, we see this as an opportunity to develop synergies among relevant stakeholders to integrate gender equality in migration and integration policy.

### Methods and empirical research

GLIMER is informed by a combination of policy analysis and qualitative research with multiple stakeholders. This policy brief draws on ethnographic fieldwork and 26 in-depth semi-structured interviews with stakeholders from public and local authorities, trade unions, NGOs, academics and community members in Cyprus. We develop theories, concepts, and policy recommendations 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 the gender dimension, as well as how these empirically intersect with other dynamics. This is a research field that is still largely unexplored.

The GLIMER (Governance and the Local Integration of Migrants and Europe's Refugees) Project is jointly funded by JPI Urban Europe and Horizon 2020. Bringing together researchers and practitioners from five lead institutions – the University of Edinburgh, the University of Glasgow, Università della Calabria, Malmö Universitet and the Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies – it researches how issues relating to governance impact displaced peoples' experiences of integration in contemporary Europe

Web-page: [glimer.eu](http://glimer.eu)



This policy brief draws on input from relevant stakeholders who contributed to the research. The analysis and policy recommendations apply a feminist perspective on the results focusing on three GLIMER work packages on integration, which respectively addressed (1) housing, (2) language education, and (3) labour market dynamics.<sup>1</sup>

## Context

Integration policies in Cyprus have been evolving on the legal and policy level since the enactment of the Refugee Law 2000.<sup>2</sup> While many positive steps have been taken, significant gaps and challenges remain, especially concerning the establishment of a long-term, gender-sensitive policy framework for the integration of asylum seekers and refugees in Cyprus.

When it comes to integration policies, our research indicated that the Republic of Cyprus has not been particularly successful in addressing gender-specific needs. Many interviewees felt that integration policies do not cater to the needs of women and girls. While displaced men and boys also face significant challenges in the integration process, women and girls face multiple additional barriers because of their gender.

It is therefore important to understand the gender dynamics that shape inequalities associated with the reception and integration of displaced migrants in the Republic of Cyprus.

### *1. Gender inequality in integration policies mirrors gender inequality at all levels.*

The Republic of Cyprus has a relatively strong legal framework on gender equality. Despite this, laws have not translated into concrete policy measures and, as a result, Cyprus has achieved limited de facto 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. The domain of power is particularly problematic as women are severely underrepresented in political and economic decision making. Therefore, gender blind integration policies reflect

a long tradition of androcentric policies that fail to cater to and address the specific needs of women.

### *2. Absence of migrant women's organizations*

The voices of refugee women are absent from policy processes in relation to migration and integration policy. Rather, the needs of refugees are communicated to the central government either by NGOs or self-declared community representatives who are usually men.

### *3. Existing expertise is not utilized by the state*

GLIMER research has indicated that there is a high level of expertise among local NGOs who have been taking on the burden of integration of asylum seekers and refugees in the absence of a comprehensive policy framework on integration. However, most NGOs operate with limited funding and deliver programmes on a project basis limiting their capacity to develop a common platform to interact, learn from each other and inform government policy in a meaningful way.

### *4. Fragmented policy implementation*

Although there is robust evidence to support the intersection of displaced migration and gender, this area has been vastly unexplored on a policy level. There are two main challenges in addressing this issue: a. The lack of a comprehensive policy framework on integration. b. The lack of gender mainstreaming in all policy fields in Cyprus. Both integration policies and gender mainstreaming are implemented sporadically and in an uncoordinated manner with no real impact on the ground. This fragmented approach to policy implementation poses significant challenges in designing, implementing, and evaluating gender sensitive integration policies.

## Findings

GLIMER research findings can be categorised into four key themes. Below, we summarise key points of interaction between processes related to integration and gender inequality.

### **1. Material Assistance**

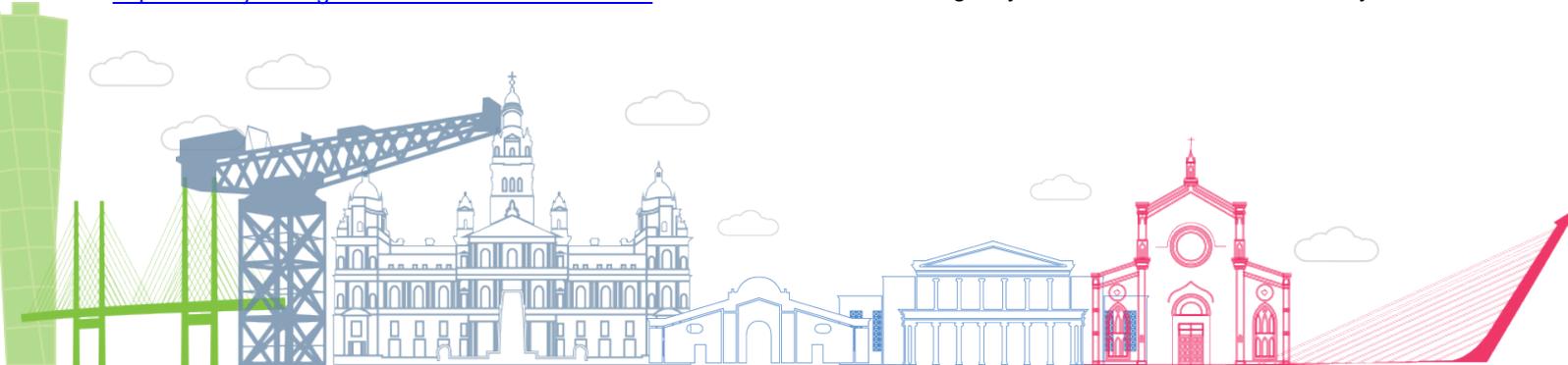
The asylum application tends to be formally submitted by the male 'head of the family', with his partner and other members of the family considered as dependents. Thus, he receives and manages the material assistance provided by the state. Thus, married refugee women lose their individual agency and become invisible in the system. This

<sup>1</sup> See previous research reports here:

<http://www.glimer.eu/outputs/>

<sup>2</sup> Refugee Law 2000 (6(I)/2000)

[http://www.cylaw.org/nomoi/indexes/2000\\_1\\_6.html](http://www.cylaw.org/nomoi/indexes/2000_1_6.html)



reinforces institutional sexism and is deeply problematic when it comes to women victims of domestic abuse, as they are financially dependent on their spouse limiting their options for leaving the violent relationship.

## **2. Housing**

a. The emergency reception centre in Kofinou has segregated rooms for single men and single women. They have separate toilets/bathrooms in three detached buildings for single men, families and single women. Although gender segregated areas are considered a good practice there are no policies to prevent or mitigate the risk of SGBV by other displaced migrants who live in the centre or by local men who often harass the women. Also, there are no policies to prevent violence against LGBTI displaced migrants living in the centre who are at risk of physical and/or psychological violence.

b. Private accommodation to rent in Cyprus is relatively high cost and there is a low availability of housing units. Asylum seekers' rent allowance is paid directly by the Cyprus government to landlords; however, bureaucratic procedures often cause delays in payment, further discouraging 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. Asylum seeking women also find themselves at risk of sexual harassment and/or exploitation by landlords, and living in community housing puts them further at risk of SGBV.

c. Victims of trafficking are eligible for material assistance and rent (again paid directly to landlords), or are accommodated in the government shelter for victims of trafficking. The shelter tends to be consistently at capacity, resulting in social welfare officers placing women victims of trafficking in alternative housing. However, alternative housing arrangements are often made with no sensitivity or consideration towards the particular needs and vulnerabilities of victims of trafficking. Inappropriate housing can be re-traumatising for women who have already experienced SGBV. When seeking private accommodation, they are faced with the same difficulties as those described above (challenge of finding good/secure

accommodation, inadequate financial support, etc.).

d. Displaced girls who are forced to leave the shelters for unaccompanied minors at the age of 18 find themselves highly vulnerable as no assistance is provided in transitioning to adult life outside the shelter.

## **3. Language training**

a. 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 training courses. Classes take place mostly in the afternoons, which clashes with their children's school timetables and no child care is available.

b. Gendered dynamics in the classroom may adversely impact refugee women's ability to attend language classes as well as learning outcomes. Refugee women's groups have reported that women were more likely to access, progress and feel safe in language classes if they had access to single-sex provision.

## **4. Labour market integration**

GLIMER research data indicates that labour market integration policies do not cater to the specific needs of women displaced migrants in Cyprus. This not only impacts their economic independence and social integration, but also their emotional and psychological wellbeing.

a. Gender blind labour market integration policies in Cyprus overlook migrant women's double role as family providers and caregivers. Women's exclusion is greatly exacerbated by the lack of access to affordable or accessible childcare. 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. As a consequence, women asylum seekers often refuse job opportunities because of their role as mothers and caregivers.

b. The support system sometimes fails women who are caregivers due to the lack of interdepartmental coordination. There have been reported cases 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 of this is that the Social Welfare Services 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 belong to the same Ministry.

c. The state fails to take into account whether refugee women - who are now expected to take up any work available to them - had actually been active in the labour

market in their country of origin. Women with no working experience in their home countries need integration programmes that are not available to them.

d. Women face multiple forms of discrimination in the workplace including based on gender and religion. For example, women wearing hijabs have reported discriminatory incidents.

## Recommendations

- **Mainstreaming gender equality across integration policies** in order to ensure that migrant women and men benefit 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 SGBV, including domestic abuse and forced marriage. Article 59 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 and boys as they enter adulthood and exit child protection institutions.**
- **Offer safe women-only spaces for the accommodation of displaced migrants who are victims of or at risk of SGBV.**
- **Psychological support for refugee and asylum seeking women and girls who are victims**
- **of SGBV, including trafficking.** All forms of SGBV such as rape, harassment, female genital mutilation, domestic abuse, and trafficking cause severe long-term health consequences and suffering. Psychological support that is provided sporadically by a handful of Cyprus NGOs must be extended and integrated within wider national policy.
- **Enable the establishment of refugee women's rights organisations.** 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 available integration policies and programmes.** 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.** Childcare and negative gender stereotypes are the main barriers identified in our research regarding displaced women accessing the labour market. Measures should be put in place to enable women's access to decent employment, and combat racist and sexist stereotypes.

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*This policy brief is supported by our full report into labour market integration in Cyprus, available at: [glimer.eu/outputs](http://glimer.eu/outputs). | Further enquires: [michaelagh.broadbent@ed.ac.uk](mailto:michaelagh.broadbent@ed.ac.uk)*

