

The Challenges of Refugee Women in Accessing Higher Education in the Region Île-de-France.

An action research initiative by UniR Universités & Réfugié.e.s.



To the women who shared their stories and made this research possible.

Written by Andee Brown Gershenberg.
In collaboration with Mégane Ghorbani.
Under the direction of Camila Ríos Armas.
Illustrations by Camil Armas ©.

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UniR Universités & Réfugié.e.s.
Association reconnue d'intérêt général.
N° SIRET : 82041095900036.
Registered address : 69 rue de Wattignies, 75012 Paris.
Office address : Kiwanda, 50 rue de Montreuil, 75011 Paris.
07 67 14 02 63
www.uni-r.org
contact@uni-r.org

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*Learning is
a refuge*

Who is UniR?

UniR is a non-profit organization that supports refugees and asylum seekers in their academic and socio-economic integration in France. Our work is rooted in 3 pillars of action: personalized academic support, academic preparation, and the production and dissemination of knowledge.

1

Personalized
support

Personalized support: We accompany refugees and asylum seekers in the procedures for the resumption of their studies. The academic support program consists of several stages ranging from a diagnosis of needs, to the preparation and submission of university applications. Participants in the program who are accepted into university benefit from additional personalized assistance throughout the registration process. UniR also conducts a post-registration follow up.

Academic preparation: UniR offers various activities and workshops to participants preparing to continue their studies. These programs aim to guide participants in defining academic and professional objectives. Thanks to our academic, institutional, and associative partners, UniR organizes regular professional orientation workshops which serve as meeting spaces between participants and the host community, including interventions by specialists working in a diversity of domains.

We propose a French language program, FLE 2.0, a hybrid program utilizing digital technology to bring innovative learning methods to traditional language courses. The program consists of 36 lessons designed by a pedagogical specialist specifically for refugees and asylum seekers. Technology plays an essential role in FLE 2.0 courses, as it allows us to strengthen language skills through a combination of animated

2

Academic
preparation

videos and audio-visual material. Thanks to our partnership with Frello, our students have access to more than 120 hours of online exercises, in addition to 30 hours of lessons with a professor.

Production and dissemination of knowledge: We participate in advocacy and research in the areas of access to language training and the resumption of studies for refugees and asylum seekers. We propose monthly sociocultural activities serve as an opening to the culture and heritage of the city of Paris for refugees and asylum seekers. The activities aim to create links between participants in the community and local cultural actors.

Our action research initiative is our first published study on the challenges of refugee women in accessing higher education in the region Île-de-France, with support from the region Île-de-France and the Department of Social Cohesion (DDCS) of the City of Paris. The action part of the initiative includes UniR's new mentoring program for women, Intercultur'elles, which promotes the socio-economic integration of refugee women through the sharing of person, professional, and academic skills with local mentors. Within an intercultural context, the mentoring programs helps women define their academic and professional objectives to build the future they desire.

3

Production and
dissemination
of knowledge

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Research plan

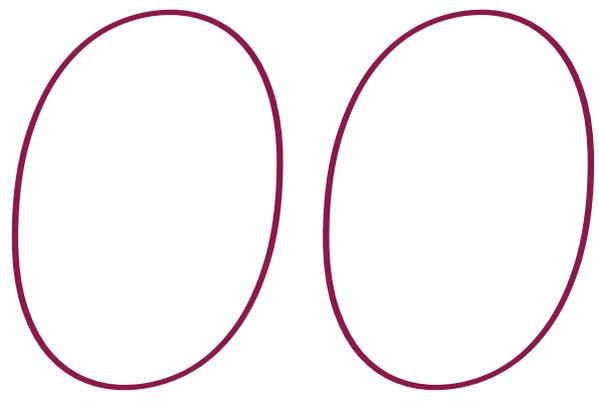
Chapter 1 provides a comprehensive review of relevant literature regarding the current migration situation and access to higher education. As such, the section opens with a definition of key terms and concepts that will be used throughout the research. This is followed by a review of current asylum and immigration law, as well as a discussion on international and domestic policies and infrastructure that ensure the right to education.

Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework in which the research is situated. This is rooted in two main concepts: interculturalism and gender. The section provides a review of both concepts and their role in the analysis of this study.

Chapter 3 focuses on the methodological framework, grounded theory, which served as a guide to the data collection and analytical procedures. This section details all relevant information regarding the early development of the study, the selection of research participants, interview preparation and guidelines, and all relevant participant demographic information.

Chapter 4 reveals the experiences of the 12 research participants in accessing higher education in the region Île-de-France. As the body of the study, this chapter analyzes all the data from the qualitative interviews and synthesizes it into a categorical analysis. Each section of the analysis breaks down one of the four obstacles—the language barrier, administrative challenges, gender inequalities, and lack of access to personal, professional, and academic networks—through providing contextual evidence directly from the interview data. Four case studies are additionally included in effort to provide a closer look into each obstacle as experienced by the participants.

Chapter 5 concludes the study with recommendations for the French state, local collectives, private and public institutions, civil society actors, and the NGO sector based on the research results. As a research-action project, the final chapter additionally includes a presentation of Intercultur'elles, UniR's new mentoring program that validates the journeys of refugee women through the sharing of personal, professional and academics skills with local mentors.



INTRODUCTION



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My degrees are my wings, they make me fly, Mariam said in her interview when discussing the importance of education. For refugee women, education is a source of independence on a multiplicity of levels. It can be carried across borders, providing optimism for a better future. For some, access to education has been a result of a constant battle against social norms and cultural pressures. For others, access to education is an escape from a life of inequalities. For the majority, education is a constant sense of hope.

Based on over 16 hours of qualitative interviews with 12 refugee women from diverse backgrounds, this research highlights the obstacles women have faced in accessing higher education in the region, as well as developing recommendations that directly address such issues. Through an in-depth thematic analysis and four case studies, the research reveals that access to higher education is most often hindered by the language barrier, administrative challenges, gender inequalities, and lack of access to personal, professional, and academic networks.

Access to education is a long-standing issue that particularly affects minority and vulnerable populations. Globally, only 3% of the refugee population have access to higher education compared to 37% of the general population, or 12 times less.¹ Refugee women, specifically, face additional challenges in accessing higher education. It has been reported that only 41% of women are enrolled in the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) higher education scholarship program, while more than half of the women in three quarters of the countries in the world have higher education degrees.² Nonetheless, education for women at all levels benefits the world by breaking the circle of poverty, narrowing disparities in child rearing, and promoting the empowerment of women for better economic inclusion.

1 Tertiary Education: Out of Reach - Stepping Up: Refugee Education in Crisis. UNHCR.

2 Ibid.

Education is a human right, as defined by international law and the fourth UN Sustainable Development Goal.³ In France, the preamble to the Constitution ensures education as a fundamental right. The Constitution both recognizes the ratification of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which includes the right to education, in addition to including the preamble to the 1946 Constitution, which states that, “the Nation guarantees equal access for children and adults to education, professional training, and culture. The organization of free and public education at all levels is the State’s duty”.⁴ The French Code of Education additionally declares, “education is the first national priority,” along with the fostering of equal opportunities.⁵

Since the resurgence of mass migration in 2015, as a result of numerous global conflicts, the French state faces the challenge of addressing the rights and needs of refugees that extend beyond immediate humanitarian assistance and focus on long-term integration. Although local government structures and institutions have made several efforts to address such inequalities, these resources are largely insufficient. In effect, NGOs and civil society organizations play a key role in mending the gap between the public institutions and the rights and needs of refugees. Faced with a growing need to better understand how local actors can tackle these obstacles, while promoting gender equality and access to higher education, UniR developed this research-action project with the financial support of the region Île-de-France and the Direction Départementale de la Cohésion Sociale (DDCS). As one of the few organizations working exclusively in access to higher education for refugees and asylum seekers in the region Île-de-France, UniR’s role within the NGO ecosystem is an essential driving factor for this research; especially considering that the region receives nearly half of all asylum demands

3 “Education.” Sustainable Development Goals, United Nations.

4 “Constitution de la République française.” Préambule de la Constitution du 27 Octobre 1946, Assemblée Nationale.

5 Loi d’orientation sur l’éducation (n°89-486 Du 10 Juillet 1989). Assemblée nationale.

01

LITERATURE REVIEW

“Alongside migration linked to family reunification, we are increasingly observing those linked to studies, in search for work and professional opportunities - especially for female graduates - at the request of the right to asylum”.

OLIVIER NOBLECOURT

Context

Currently, there are over 70 million forcibly displaced persons worldwide, which includes over 25 million refugees.⁶ According to the UNHCR, the European Union is currently host to around 2.3 million refugees, or about 9% of the global refugee population.⁷ In contrast, France is currently host to over 350,000 refugees and the number of asylum demands in that nation is progressively on the rise.⁸ In 2018, the French state saw a 22.7% rise in the number of asylum demands compared to the year before. This is equivalent to over 120,000 asylum demands made in just one year, of which 33.2% are women.⁹

Women make up almost half of the 244 million migrants in the world.¹⁰ On the European level, women account for 45% of refugees.¹¹ In France, 40% of persons under protection by the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons (OFPRA) are women.¹² The main reasons for women seeking asylum is in large majority for situations of divorce (60%) and widowhood (84%).¹³ These reasons vary considerably, however, according to nationality where for example, 78% of refugees from Mali are women.¹⁴ This fits into a more general context with the feminization of the French immigration population, which is to say born abroad, where women make up 52% of immigrant women. The profiles of migrant women have diversified over recent years. The

2014 Ministry of Women’s Rights report, otherwise known as the Noblecourt report, states that: *Alongside migration linked to family reunification, we are increasingly observing those linked to studies, in search for work and professional opportunities - especially for female graduates - at the request of the right to asylum. [...] Their motivations are linked to a desire for emancipation, rejection from family or statutory constraints deemed too rigid, or the search for greater social and professional opportunities than those offered by their countries of origin, in particular for university graduates.*¹⁵

Regarding the profile of migrants in the Paris metropolitan area, the Research Center at the Institute of Demography at the University Paris 1, Panthéon-Sorbonne, and the Samusocial Observatory of Paris conducted a survey with a sample of migrant women in the region Île-de-France. The survey showed that 18% of the participants have an education higher than a baccalaureate, that they are typically between the ages of 19 and 39, and that only 10% of the participants had financial resources over 500 euros per month.¹⁶

Considering that the region Île-de-France receives the highest number of asylum demands in the nation (46% in 2018, which is equivalent to about 42,000 persons), the density of refugees in the region has challenged government structures responsible for the processing of demands and the integration of refugee populations.¹⁷ As a result, other local actors have started to respond to the challenges of access to higher education for refugees in the region.

⁶ *Figures at a Glance*. UNHCR.

⁷ *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2018*. UNHCR, pp. 68.

⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 66.

⁹ *À l’écoute du monde - Activity Report 2018*. OFPRA.

¹⁰ “In Safety and Dignity: Addressing Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants.” *Report of the Secretary-General, United Nations General Assembly*.

¹¹ Liebig, Thomas, and Kristian Rose Tronstad. “Triple Disadvantage? A First Overview of the Integration of Refugee Women.” *Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers*, OECD.

¹² *À l’écoute du monde - Activity Report 2018*. OFPRA.

¹³ *Ibid*.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

¹⁵ Noblecourt, Olivier. *L’Égalité pour les femmes migrantes*. Ministère des Droits des femmes.

¹⁶ Fleury, Marion, et al. “Migration Path, Reported Violence and Self-Perceived Health Status among Migrant Women Accommodated in Emergency Hotels in Île-De-France.” *Bulletin Épidémiologique Hebdomadaire, Dsaffhir*.

¹⁷ *À l’écoute du monde - Activity Report 2018*. OFPRA.

Definition of terms

As the number of asylum demands in France continues to rise as a result of economic poverty, unstable political regimes, and warfare, the country has become highly regarded in terms of the development of sustainable systems for managing migration flows. In 2018, the government initiated an asylum and immigration law reform which redefined the guidelines as to who is welcome in the country, what legal status will be granted, and under what conditions. As defined by international and domestic law, refugees are eligible for several types of state protection depending on their specific situations.

Often the term migrant is used to describe a person who has left their country of habitual residence to reside in another, which effectively becomes their new place of residence.¹⁸ There are several types of migrants: long term, short term, professional, and economic. The term migrant, therefore, encompasses many diverse populations.¹⁹

As defined by the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, a refugee is any person who: “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside their country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear is unwilling to avail himself to the protection of that country”.²⁰ In France, individuals who receive refugee protection are granted a ten-year residency permit and are eligible to apply for nationality.²¹ Throughout the following research, the term refugee will be applied in a broad sense, to describe persons who have forcefully fled their country of origin.

Furthermore, the French Ministry of Interior has outlined three additional status: asylum seeker status,

¹⁸ “Glossaire.” *Immigration, asile, accueil et accompagnement des étrangers en France*, Ministère de l’Intérieur.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, United Nations.

²¹ *Glossaire*. Office français de protection des réfugiés et apatrides.



stateless person status, and subsidiary protection. An asylum seeker is defined as any person residing on French territory who is awaiting the examination of an asylum demand. Applications are first processed by the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons (OFPRA) and all appeals are made to the National Court of Asylum (CNDA). For any asylum seeker whose case is denied following an appeal, they are considered *débouté*, or rejected. If such persons remain on French territory after receiving an order to leave the territory (*Obligation de quitter la France*, OQTF) they are then considered illegal immigrants, unless they pursue alternative options to regularize their situation.

For any persons who do not meet the requirements for a refugee status as defined by the Convention, he or she may be eligible for subsidiary protection if they have “serious and proven reasons to believe that he or she would run the risk of one of the following serious breaches in his or her country of origin: the death penalty or execution; torture and inhumane or degrading treatment; for a civilian, a direct and individual serious threat against his or her life or well-being owing to generalized violence resulting from an internal or international armed conflict”.²²

Persons with no nationality, furthermore, may be eligible for a stateless persons status. As defined by the 1954 New York Convention, a stateless person is considered to be anyone “who is not considered as a national by any state under the operation of its law”.²³

In the case that an asylum applicant has passed through one of the 28 countries concerned by the Dublin III Regulation, the individual may be transferred back to their country of entry for the processing of their demand. The possibility of the application being reviewed in France is only accepted under certain conditions.²⁴

As it stands, the gender dimension is not included in the Refugee Convention. However, in 2002 the United National Higher Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) published Gender-Related Persecution Guidelines which state that: *In order to understand the nature of gender-related persecution, it is essential to define and distinguish between the terms “gender” and “sex”. Gender refers to the relationship between women and men based on socially or culturally constructed and defined identities, status, roles and responsibilities that are assigned to one sex or another, while sex is a biological determination. Gender is not static or innate but acquires socially and culturally constructed meaning over time. Gender-related claims may be brought by either women or men, although due to particular types of persecution, they are more commonly brought by women. In some cases, the claimant’s sex may bear on the claim in significant ways to which the decision-maker will need to be attentive. In other cases, however, the refugee claim of a female asylum-seeker will have nothing to do with her sex. Gender-related claims have typically encompassed, although are by no means limited to, acts of sexual violence, family/domestic violence, coerced family planning, female genital mutilation, punishment*

*for transgression of social mores, and discrimination against homosexuals.*²⁵

In most European countries, gender-based persecution is mainly seen in the context of being a member of a certain social group, as outlined in the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.²⁶ In 2015, it was officially announced that “In Europe, the UNHCR was pleased to note the entry into force of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, which underscores the principle of non-refoulement and recognizes gender-related persecution as grounds for refugee status”.²⁷

In France, OFPRA has expanded the eligibility conditions for demanding asylum, which takes into account gender-related and other additional reasons for persecution that are not outlined in the 1951 Convention. This includes human trafficking (predominantly affecting women and girls), victims of torture, unaccompanied minors, sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as violence against women and girls.²⁸

22 *Guide for Asylum Seekers in France (GAS)*. Ministère de l’Intérieur : Direction générale des étrangers en France, pp. 4.

23 *Ibid.*

24 *Ibid.*, pp. 6.

25 *Guidelines on International Protection : Gender-Related Persecution within the Context of Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention and/or Its 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*. UNHCR.

26 *Gender Related Asylum Claims*. European Parliament : Directorate-General for Internal Policies.

27 “*Note on International Protection*.” Executive Committee of the High Commissioner’s Programme, UNHCR.

28 *À l’écoute du monde - Activity Report 2018*. OFPRA.



Asylum and immigration law

As tens of thousands of asylum demands are made each year, asylum and immigration law makers are challenged with developing infrastructure that addresses the rights of each person crossing into the border. This places the French state in a critical position to develop an asylum system that functions at a rate that is manageable for the state and that ensures “a controlled immigration, an effective right of asylum, and the successful integration” of refugees.²⁹ Due to “a combination of intrastate conflict, poor governance, political instability, environmental change, and resource scarcity,” much displacement today falls outside traditionally defined guidelines, which highlights the need for updated international

and domestic asylum laws.³⁰

In 2018, the French Council of Ministers presented an asylum and immigration law reform (loi du 10 septembre 2018) that aims to respond to the increasing number of asylum demands in the nation.³¹ Authorities claim that the first objective of the reform is to shorten processing times for asylum demands. In recognition of the rights and needs of asylum seekers, this action is a direct effort to reduce certain administrative obstacles that perpetuate precarious living for extended periods of time. Typically, the

²⁹ Loi n° 2018-778 du 10 septembre 2018 pour une immigration maîtrisée, un droit d’asile effectif et une intégration réussie. Légifrance.

³⁰ Besley, Tina, and Michael Peters. “The Refugee Crisis and the Right to Political Asylum.” *Geopolitics, History, and International Relations*, pp. 10.

³¹ “Immigration, asile et intégration.” *Projet de loi de finances pour 2020*, Ministère de l’Action et des Comptes publics.

processing time for asylum demands ranges from six months to several years, but data shows that the average processing time is around 13 months.³²

While the primary aim is to reduce processing times to a maximum of six months, certain contradictory measures have been put in place. In May 2018, the French Office of Immigration and Integration (OFII) set up a call center for all asylum requests in the region Île-de-France to be registered over the phone.³³ Although the aim was to facilitate the processing of demands at first asylum reception structures (SPADA), through the ability to communicate in over a dozen languages and to easily give out appointments, the call center ultimately failed. It was reported that only 10% of calls were actually processed (61,957 calls processed out of a total of 571,115 calls).³⁴ Callers reported being disconnected after holding for over 45 minutes. Such a platform effectively worked contrary to the asylum and immigration law reform in making it almost impossible for asylum seekers to submit their first demand.

The second objective of the reform is to ensure the effective integration of refugees and asylum seekers. In effect, the government aims to ensure access to French courses as an essential right for the integration of foreigners.³⁵ As recognized by the National Strategy for the Reception and Integration of Refugees, language is one of the greatest obstacles to overcome.³⁶ As outlined by law in the Republican Integration Contract (CIR), OFII offers language courses that are offered free of charge to refugee populations and foreigners.³⁷ Which is to say, however that legally these courses are not destined for asylum-seekers, who are technically not yet beneficiaries of state protection.³⁸ This obstacle makes access to language training for asylum seekers significantly more challenging.

Due to an extremely high demand for French courses, such efforts have been largely insufficient. Not only are courses highly saturated, which results in

a lack of quality, but they are only offered at basic conversational levels. When a professional working level of French is necessary for integration into society, finding quality employment, and access to education, this automatically puts refugees at a socio-economic disadvantage.

Today, it has been reported by the Interdepartmental Integration Committee, that 40% of persons who have signed the CIR never actually reach a beginner (A1) level in French.³⁹ As a result, starting in 2019, the French state increased the number of hours for language training required for the integration of refugees and foreigners.⁴⁰ As described in the following, additional hours are also possible at higher levels (A2 and B1) but are outside the requirements of the CIR:

The linguistic program provided for under the Republican Integration Contract offers training for 50, 100 or 200 hours to reach level A1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) [...] Additional hours beyond CIR are also available to reach levels A2 and B1 of the CEFR (100 and 50 additional hours respectively).⁴¹

“The fact that “millions of humans are currently living outside their country of origin as a result of migration, should dramatically challenge the conditions of political life”.

THOMAS NAIL

The third objective of the reform is to effectively fight against irregular and illegal immigration in France.⁴² Due to the influx in refugee flows, it has become increasingly challenging for the government to regulate illegal immigration.⁴³ In effect, the government has worked on strengthening the infrastructure for the removal of persons in an irregular situation. This includes forced removal, provisions for legal aid, increased communication flows with the countries of origin and transit, the use of administrative detention centers (CRA), and the development of reintegration methods.⁴⁴

32 *L'accès aux études supérieures pour les personnes exilées*. RESOME.

33 *Conditions d'accès au droit d'asile en Île-de-France*. La Cimade.

34 Pascual, Julia. *Le téléphone de la demande d'asile ne répond pas (ou peu)*. Le Monde.

35 *“Immigration, asile et intégration.”* *Projet de loi de finances pour 2020*, Ministère de l'Action et des Comptes publics.

36 *Stratégie nationale pour l'accueil et l'intégration des réfugiés*. Ministère de l'Intérieur, pp. 17.

37 *Le Contrat d'Intégration Républicaine*. OFII.

38 *Stratégie nationale pour l'accueil et l'intégration des réfugiés*. Ministère de l'Intérieur, pp. 16.

39 *“S'investir ensemble.”* *Dossier de presse*, Comité interministériel à l'intégration, pp. 4.

40 *Ibid.*

41 *Stratégie nationale pour l'accueil et l'intégration des réfugiés*. Ministère de l'Intérieur, pp. 17.

42 *“Immigration, asile et intégration.”* *Projet de loi de finances pour 2020*, Ministère de l'Action et des Comptes publics.

43 *Ibid.*

44 *Ibid.*

Other notable measures of the reform include: reducing the window for submitting an asylum demand to 90 days (previously 120), lengthening the time of administrative and judicial detention to up to 90 days (previously 45), conditioning the possibility of appeal for asylum seekers from “safe” countries, increasing and normalizing administrative and judicial hearings by video conference, and conditioning the rights to an asylum seeker allowance (ADA) and housing accommodations.⁴⁵

While proposed on a pretext of creating controlled immigration, the reform provoked great opposition from government workers, asylum and immigration lawyers, local actors, and activists.⁴⁶ Those in opposition to the reform argue that it risks weakening the asylum system and discouraging certain vulnerable populations from applying for asylum. In a statement by Jacques Toubon, the French human rights defender, he expressed concern that “the entire reform is underpinned by a logic of suspicion tending to repressive consideration to the detriment of the most fundamental rights of foreigners”.⁴⁷ Although Toubon’s role does not carry much political weight under an independent administrative authority, his opinions are highly regarded and have a strong influence over public opinion.

Members of the CNDA joined together in protest against the reform, arguing that the changes would be detrimental to the asylum process by pressurizing decision-making procedures.⁴⁸ Notably, the employees, including asylum and immigration lawyers and rapporteurs, held a strike for several months in direct protest to the reform.⁴⁹

The Action and Rights for Exiled and Migrant Women (ADFEM) network also called attention to the new measures which risk violence against women who are foreign parents of French children. As such, the network stressed:

We are concerned about situations in which a foreign mother of a child whose father is French is abandoned or victim of domestic violence and therefore unable to prove father’s participation in the care and education of the child. She will then be faced with a double violence: that of being abandoned or victim of conjugal violence and that of being refused the right to stay in the country despite her status as mother of

a French child whom she is raising. This is a situation that we see relatively often in our practice.⁵⁰

After several hours of debate and reexamination, the reform passed in Parliament.⁵¹ Coming at a time when political tensions in France have polarized, the notion of hospitality is now at a critical pressure point, as there are cracks in the policy and its implementation that threaten the right to asylum.⁵² In the wake of lingering fears of terrorism, as the nation remains in an extended state of emergency, political tensions have segregated those who support the right to refuge and those who fear for the sovereignty of the state.⁵³ The fact that “millions of humans are currently living outside their country of origin as a result of migration, should dramatically challenge the conditions of political life”.⁵⁴ As a result, the government, as well as local actors and institutions are questioning how the asylum and immigration law impacts local infrastructure in order to best address the socio-economic integration of refugees.

45 *Décryptage du projet de loi asile et immigration*. La Cimade.

46 *Genèse de la loi collomb du 10 septembre 2018 pour une immigration maîtrisée, un droit d’asile effectif et une intégration réussie*. GISTI.

47 Toubon, Jacques. *Avis du défenseur des droits n°18-14 relatif au projet de loi pour une immigration maîtrisée, un droit d’asile effectif et une intégration réussie*.

48 *Grève à la CNDA: “Avec la loi asile, nous serons dans l’impossibilité de défendre les gens”*. InfoMigrants.

49 *Ibid.*

50 *Analyse des dispositions relatives aux femmes étrangères victimes de violence: Audition devant la Délégation Droits des Femmes de l’Assemblée nationale*. Femmes de la Terre, la Cimade, le GISTI et les autres associations du réseau ADFEM.

51 *Dossier de presse -projet de loi pour une immigration maîtrisée, un droit d’asile effectif et une intégration réussie*. Ministère de l’Intérieur.

52 Besley, Tina, and Michael Peters. “The Refugee Crisis and the Right to Political Asylum.” *Geopolitics, History, and International Relations*, pp. 13.

53 Nail, Thomas. “A Tale of Two Crises: Migration and Terrorism after the Paris Attacks.” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, pp. 165.

54 *Ibid.*

The right to education



International law has long established a foundation for the right to education. As declared in the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights: *Everyone has the right to education [...] Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.*⁵⁵

The right to education is subsequently addressed in the Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, which states: *All contracting states shall accord to refugee treatment as favorable as possible, and, in any event, not less favorable than that accorded to aliens generally in the same circumstances, with respect to education other than elementary education, and, in particular, as regard access to studies, the recognition of*

*foreign school certificates, diplomas, the remission of fees and the award of scholarship.*⁵⁶

In order for international law to be effective, however, domestic policies must be put in place to develop an infrastructure that guarantees the right to education for all. It is the responsibility of the French state, therefore, to make sure that refugees have access to an equitable education and that they are not at risk of losing the validation of prior academic and professional experiences.

As reported by the UNHCR in 2018, the global refugee population has only a 3% enrollment rate in higher education, compared to a 37% enrollment rate for the general population, thus 12 times less.⁵⁷ While

⁵⁵ Universal Declaration of Human Rights. United Nations.

⁵⁶ Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, United Nations.

⁵⁷ Tertiary Education: Out of Reach - Stepping Up: Refugee Education in Crisis. UNHCR.

“At a moment when Europe is facing important societal challenges—ranging from unemployment and social inequality to migration-related issues and a rise in political polarization, radicalization, and violent extremism—higher education can and must play a decisive role in providing solutions to these issues”.

PARIS COMMUNIQUE

the number has slowly increased over recent years, from 1% to 3%, the large gap calls attention to major issues in access to higher education for the refugee population. Access to higher education, however, for refugee women is even lower. The UNHCR states that only 41% of women are enrolled in the DAFI scholarship program, despite the fact that women account for the majority of persons with university diplomas in three quarters of the countries in the world.⁵⁸

In Europe, a report from the European Commission confirms that there are many more refugee men than refugee women students. “In Germany, the ratio is 78% male to 22% female, and similar trends are observed in the proportions of other countries”.⁵⁹ Data from the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF) states that in 2018-2019, women represented 40% of beneficiaries of the French Reception and Integration of Migrants in Higher Education (AIMES) program.⁶⁰ However, there are no gender-specific statistics (nor by status) on access to higher education for refugees and asylum seekers in France, and in particular the Île-de-France.

In a document put out by the European Commission, The European Memorandum to Lifelong Learning, the international community recognizes that in a day and age where knowledge above all else can lead to cultural, economic, and social success, access to equitable education must be implemented in favor of societal advancement.⁶¹ Although the memorandum does not address the refugee population directly, it supports the development of systems for the Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning (APEL).⁶²

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ *L'intégration des demandeurs d'asile et des réfugiés dans l'enseignement supérieur en Europe*. Publications Office of the European Union.

⁶⁰ AIMES: Poursuite Et Élargissement De Ce Programme Dédié à L'accueil Et L'intégration De Migrants Dans L'Enseignement Supérieur. AUF, 2019.

⁶¹ *A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning*. Commission of the European Communities, pp. 3.

⁶² Ibid, pp. 13.

On a regional level, the French government published the Paris Communique in 2018, which specifically addresses changes in the national demographic and the need to develop systems that address not only the educational and professional integration of refugees, but also to increase sensitization and combat anti-immigrant attitudes.⁶³ The document states: *At a moment when Europe is facing important societal challenges—ranging from unemployment and social inequality to migration-related issues and a rise in political polarization, radicalization, and violent extremism—higher education can and must play a decisive role in providing solutions to these issues. [...] We will work to employ the Council of Europe/UNESCO Lisbon Recognition Convention and its recommendations, in particular on the recognition of qualifications held by refugees.*⁶⁴

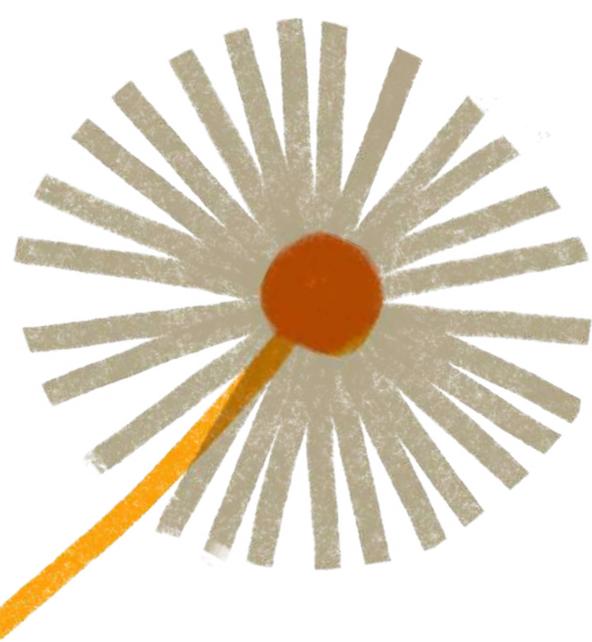
As the national demographic continues to diversify, it is essential to take into consideration such endemic problems. Addressing these issues at a political and institutional level are the first steps in implementing policies that ensure equitable access to higher education.

In fact, the International Center for Pedagogical Studies (CIEP), has developed the European Network of Information Centers – National Academic Recognition Information Centers (ENIC-NARIC), which “implements a set of procedures based on the Lisbon Convention to evaluate foreign qualifications. This enables the center to issue comparability certificates, which are useful for supporting job applications or for continuing studies in a French higher education institution”.⁶⁵ Although the certificates are non binding, ENIC-NARIC has proven to be a widely effective tool for the academic and professional integration of refugees as it directly

⁶³ “Paris Communiqué.” *Conférence ministérielle de l'espace européen de l'enseignement supérieur, The European Higher Education Area (EHEA)*.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ *Recognition of Foreign Qualifications*. CIEP.



supports the validation of prior experiences and socio-economic integration.⁶⁶

In 2019, UniR supported over 120 students in the resumption of their studies, of which 43% received ENIC-NARIC certificates. Almost half of the certificate recipients were accepted into university or professional training programs later that same year. In facilitating access to higher education through the recognition of prior diplomas, ENIC-NARIC is an essential tool for ensuring the equitable integration of refugee populations.

The CIEP has also developed The European Passport for the Qualifications of Refugees (EQPR), which evaluates the qualifications of refugees without documentation through an assessment of professional experiences and academic background.⁶⁷ This permits the skills and qualifications of refugees to be recognized in Europe for the facilitation of future employment and studies.

On an institutional level, the French government and universities have developed several initiatives in support of continuing education for refugee students.⁶⁸ With over 2.5 million students enrolled in higher education in France, 12% of those students are foreigners.⁶⁹ Although there are no public statistics on the percentage of refugee students in France, nor in the region Île-de-France, the significant number of foreigners enrolled in university programs calls attention to the need for infrastructure dedicated to the reception and integration of foreign students. In 2017, the Migrants in Higher Education Network (MEnS) was established to bring together universities, trade-schools, and research institutions, and NGOs

⁶⁶ Booklet Presentation of the CIEP. CIEP.

⁶⁷ Faciliter la reconnaissance des diplômes des réfugiés pour une meilleure intégration. France Éducation International.

⁶⁸ Welcoming Students and Researchers in Exile. Campus France.

⁶⁹ How Higher Education Works in France. Campus France.

working in the sector, in an effort to increase communication and that sharing of information regarding students in exile.⁷⁰ In this context, students in exile are differentiated from other international students as described in the following: “Students in exile refers to anyone who is unable to continue their higher education in their country of origin due to ethnic, political, religious or racial persecution, economic or ecological disaster, sexual orientation, war or conflict, and whose skills and qualifications make it legitimate to claim integration into French higher education”.⁷¹

As such, procedures for the enrollment of students in exile are distinguished from those for other international students. Students in exile are vulnerable to specific obstacles in accessing higher education, making institutional support a valuable tool for academic integration. This often includes a lack of information regarding university administrative procedures, insufficient language training, difficulties in accessing scholarships and financial aid, and additional personal difficulties such as precarious living and psychological instability.⁷² Due to an additional lack of training and sensitization of university professors and administrators regarding the specific procedures for students in exile, this often results in students being misguided and misinformed.

In effort to ensure the inclusion of refugees in higher education, universities have created specific programs for students in exile (DU passerelle – Etudiants en exil).⁷³ This initiative facilitated the development of infrastructure that ensures access to the required level of French, support systems in the resumption of their studies, social aid, and other measures that reduce obstacles in access to higher education for refugee students.⁷⁴

Within this context, university admission criteria typically requires a certified minimum professional level (B1) of French. As outlined by Campus France, “Level B1 or B2 is recommended for studying at the undergraduate and Master’s level, and especially in the humanities and social sciences. Level B2 is required for admission to 1st year in the framework of the DAP (demande d’admission préalable - preliminary request for admission). Some French institutes of higher education may require a higher level, C1 or C2,

⁷⁰ “Migrants in Higher Education”, The Network of French Institutions. Campus France.

⁷¹ L'accès aux études supérieures pour les personnes exilées. RESOME.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Easier Access to CROUS Grants and Housing for Refugee Students. Campus France.

⁷⁴ Les étudiants réfugiés et bénéficiaires de la protection subsidiaire auront accès aux bourses et aux logements du CROUS à la rentrée 2019. Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur, de la Recherche et de l'Innovation.

for specific programs".⁷⁵ As such, universities offer intensive language programs designed for non-French speakers (DU de FLE - Français langue étrangère) who intend on integrating into university programs.⁷⁶

The Minister of Education supports these efforts, as they aim to support and facilitate the academic integration of refugee students enrolled in university programs.⁷⁷ She expressed that: *I wish that we can go even further because one of the major challenges students in exile face is to be able to start or resume their studies in decent conditions, with the real prospect of professional and social integration. By opening access to all support programs offered by the State, we increase their chances of success. I know I can count on the mobilization of the whole higher education community and the researchers for this.*⁷⁸

Students in exile are additionally eligible for certain exceptions and financial aid, including: exemption from tuition costs and campus life fees (CVEC), access to financial scholarships awarded by the Regional Center for Universities and Schools (CROUS), and priority student housing.⁷⁹ Asylum seekers, however, are not eligible for exemption, making access significantly more difficult. While legally educational institutions are not required to verify the administrative status of applicants, applicants requesting exemption are required to provide justification, such as proof of state protection.⁸⁰ Unfortunately, many administrative procedures regarding refugees and asylum seekers are not systematized between institutions and therefore, it is often the decision of the individual institutions to decide whether such applicants are eligible for exemption.

While these types of support programs are helpful in increasing accessibility to higher education, some have argued that these benefits fall into areas of positive discrimination. Although these programs are rightfully aimed at increasing access to equitable education for students in exile, arguments have been made that no student should benefit at the cost of others. Coming at a time when tuition fees are being raised for international students as outlined in the Bienvenue en France strategy for welcoming international students, falling into patterns of

positive discrimination in this regard risks setting a foundation for a future of inequality. These concerns raise many questions as to how the French state and educational institutions can create sustainable programs that are fair and equal for all students.

75 How Higher Education Works in France. Campus France.

76 FLE - Français langue étrangère pour personnes extérieures à l'UPEC. UPEC.

77 Les étudiants réfugiés et bénéficiaires de la protection subsidiaire auront accès aux bourses et aux logements du CROUS à la rentrée 2019. Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur, de la Recherche et de l'Innovation.

78 Ibid.

79 Practical Information and Daily Life of Migrant Students in France. Campus France.

80 UniR Unversités et Réfugié.e.s. "Les droits des réfugiés dans le cadre de la reprise d'études". Memo : Réfugiés et unversité. UniR Unversités et Réfugié.e.s. Paris, France. 2020.

02

THEORY



Our world is in a constant state of evolution: millions of people migrate, cultures and languages mix, and experiences are shared. As the number of migrants around the world continues to rise, major cultural transformations call attention to the need for modern frameworks that call attention the development of policies and pedagogies for managing diversity at all levels.⁸¹ In looking at the experiences of a diverse group of women as they migrated across the globe in search of a better life and equal opportunities, interculturalism and gender are two key concepts that frame this research.

⁸¹ Mansouri, Fethi. *Interculturalism at the Crossroads: Comparative Perspectives on Concepts, Policies and Practices*. UNESCO.

Interculturalism

Interculturalism is a concept that refers to the mutual exchange of cultural norms and ideals, which interact not in competition to one another but rather foster the development of a deep cultural understanding and a mutual value system.⁸² The concept has been established over the past decade as an approach for maintaining a growing cultural diversity and it most often applied in policy development, social work, and pedagogical conception in liberal democratic societies.⁸³

As theorists and policy-makers are increasingly drawn to interculturalism, it has slowly replaced the concept of multiculturalism and assimilation, which in contrast are often criticized for favoring mutual living through group segregation.⁸⁴ In fact, it has been argued that interculturalism has developed in direct criticism to multiculturalism.⁸⁵ From a theoretical perspective these concepts take into account a cosmopolitan line of thinking, where majority-minority dualities play a key role. This is to say that when a majority culture is faced with a minority group, there is an inherent tension and threat to the majority culture, values, language, and national identity.⁸⁶ This is evident, for example, in nationalist parties within Europe in which “the tension underlying this duality can be corrosive and give birth to stereotypes, exclusionary or reactionary behavior, and various forms of discrimination from the majority group”.⁸⁷ In this line of thinking, multiculturalism and assimilation further the theoretical idea of an integrative stress when a majority culture faces a minority.

However, interculturalism is differentiated from these concepts as it rather “takes from assimilation the focus on the individual; it takes from multiculturalism the recognition of cultural diversity. And it adds the new element, critical to integration and social cohesion,

of dialogue and the basis of equal dignity and share values”.⁸⁸ As such, it takes into account the well-being and future of the majority culture and stresses the non-invasive integration of newcomers into a society.

As a concept that originated in francophone Quebec, theorist Gérard Bouchard argues that interculturalism must take into consideration “the respect for an acceptance of the francophone majority culture by immigrants”, which implies the maintenance of

Interculturalism is a concept that refers to the mutual exchange of cultural norms and ideals, which interact not in competition to one another but rather foster the development of a deep cultural understanding and a mutual value system.

language, history, religious and value systems.⁸⁹ Through dialogue and communication, interculturalism can maintain the foundations of a culture through reciprocity or “a search for conciliation” despite ethnic differences.⁹⁰ In this way, reciprocity ensures that both newcomers and members of the host society share the responsibility of upholding a level of mutual respect.⁹¹

Bouchard supports that interculturalism, when put into practice, recognizes therefore the plurality of individual identities (religious, cultural, linguistic, gender, etc.) without questioning the basic foundations of the host society; thus, taking into consideration the future of the host culture and ensuring that all members of society benefit from the same basic rights. Interculturalism, therefore, does not require the imposition of one culture onto another, but rather encourages the combination of values that result in a pluralist mindset and the development of a shared value system through intercultural dialogue.⁹²

82 Schriefer, Paula. *What's the Difference between Multicultural, Intercultural, and Cross-Cultural Communication?* The Spring Institute.

83 Joppke, Christian. “War of Words: Interculturalism v. Multiculturalism.” *Comparative Migration Studies*.

84 *Ibid.*

85 *Ibid.*

86 Bouchard, Gérard. “What Is Interculturalism?” *McGill Law Journal Articles*, pp. 445.

87 *Ibid.*, pp. 446.

88 *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue: “Living Together as Equals in Dignity”*. Council of Europe.

89 Joppke, Christian. “War of Words: Interculturalism v. Multiculturalism.” *Comparative Migration Studies*.

90 Bouchard, Gérard. “What Is Interculturalism?” *McGill Law Journal Articles*, pp. 446.

91 *Ibid.*, pp. 438.

92 *Ibid.*, pp. 438.

In the 2008 White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue, the Council of Europe mobilizes the concept of interculturalism in the context of migrant integration. The Council promotes interculturalism as a form of cultural mediation, that aims to develop a set of democratically shared values.⁹³ The paper declares, “If there is a European identity to be realized, it will be based on shared fundamental values, respect for common heritage and cultural diversity as well as respect for the equal dignity of every individual”.⁹⁴

The conceptual framework outlined in the document touches on many themes that support the arguments made in this research such as human rights and gender equality, as well as the recognition of language, education, and cultural spaces as effective approaches to the promotion of intercultural dialogue. When addressing the issues of the linguistic integration of newcomers, the Council declares: *The interculturalist approach recognizes the value of languages used by members of minority communities but sees it as essential that minority members acquire the language which predominates in the state, so they can act as full citizens. [...] At the same time, it stressed the value of multilingualism and insists that the protection of languages which enjoy minority usage in a particular state should not be to the detriment of official languages and the need to learn them. Language helps learners to avoid stereotyping individuals, to develop curiosity and openness to others, and to discover other cultures.*⁹⁵

The role of higher education is additionally addressed as a space for fostering intercultural communication. Through educational programs, it can be seen that interculturalism is put into practice through the mixing of cultures and ethnicities within an academic framework. “University thus has great potential to engender intercultural intellectuals who can play an active role in the public sphere,” the Council argues.⁹⁶

As a tool for the integration of refugee populations, interculturalism places the responsibility of both newcomers and the host society to find common ground. The concept is key to this research for the framework it provides in analyzing the experiences of refugee women as they face numerous obstacles in daily integration. In recognizing the plurality of identities, encouraging dialogue and the fostering of relationships, and recognizing higher education as a major factor in overcoming anti-immigrant attitudes, the concept serves as a framework for understanding the complexities of refugee integration.

⁹³ White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue: “Living Together as Equals in Dignity”. Council of Europe.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.



The crossing of gender, migratory status, age, level of education, country of origin, and other related factors are extremely important in understanding the workings of the individual, family, and social relationships experienced by refugee women.

Gender

Gender is a sociological concept, theorized in the early 1970's, which designates everything that socially or culturally constructs the difference between the sexes. It emphasizes the categories of "man" and "woman" as the result of social fabrication which goes beyond biological sex. The concept was introduced by the English sociologist Ann Oakley in 1972. Over the years, the concept has broadened, most notably in the 1980's when power relations (relationships and conflicts) between social categories (male/female, masculine/feminine) were introduced. The concept of gender, as it has been developed today, can be used both as an object of intervention and or as a prism of analysis and is defined as "a system of hierarchical bi-categorization between the sexes (man/woman) and between the values and representations which are associated to them (masculine/feminine)".⁹⁷

Gender can be considered as a mirror of power relations, but when used effectively it can be connected to other social concepts such as race, class, age, sexual orientation, handicap, and religion. In this way, the concept of gender cannot be detached from that of intersectionality, a theory developed by the American academic Kimberlé Crenshaw over 30 years ago. Intersectionality addresses the idea that individuals can live under several social denominations at the same time. In this research, the crossing of gender, migratory status, age, level of education, country of origin, and other related factors are extremely important in understanding the workings of the individual, family, and social relationships experienced by refugee women.

This type of conceptual gender-analysis, thus makes it possible to highlight three issues that

were particularly interesting in understanding the obstacles of refugee women, namely: education, employment, and violence against women.

In identifying obstacles linked to the education of young refugee girls, the UNHCR notes that in addition to the financial cost identified as a barrier for boys and girls, girls are often disadvantaged because of the cost of socio-economic opportunity for families.⁹⁸ Since girls are principally in charge of household chores and taking care of others, their schooling represents an additional burden for families, since they would not carry them out. The UNHCR emphasizes that, "When a refugee family has limited resources and has to choose which children will continue their education, the UNHCR personnel working on community protection find that the priority is often given to boys because they are believed to have a better learning potential".⁹⁹

Furthermore, the weight of social expectations and cultural norms must be taken into account, especially in regions where child marriage and early pregnancy are considered the norms and where certain extremist religious groups punish girls who dare to challenge them by going back to school.¹⁰⁰ In contexts where menstruation remains a sensitive subject and where sanitation facilities are not enforced in schools, menstrual hygienic needs can also prove to be a major obstacle in the education of young girls.

In terms of employment, refugee women take longer than men to enter the European labor market.¹⁰¹ In France, migrant women have lower employment rates

⁹⁸ Her Turn: It's Time to Make Refugee Girls' Education a Priority. UNHCR.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Liebig, Thomas, and Kristian Rose Tronstad. "Triple Disadvantage? A First Overview of the Integration of Refugee Women." *Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers*, OECD.

⁹⁷ Baider, Fabienne. "Laure Bereni, Sébastien Chauvin, Alexandre Jaunait et Anne Revillard, Introduction aux Gender Studies. Manuel des études sur le genre. Bruxelles, Collection « Ouvertures politiques », De Boeck, 2008, 248 p." *Recherches féministes*.

than those of men and non-migrant women.¹⁰² There is a 21% difference in the employment rate between migrant women from non-European countries and the non-migrant women in Europe.¹⁰³ The gap is even greater when looking at the population of women coming from Maghreb, Sahelian Africa, Turkey and Southeast Asia, of whom 31% were unemployed in 2010, compared to a 4.2% unemployment rate for men.¹⁰⁴

In addition to employment obstacles for women, the Noblecourt report published by the Ministry of Women's Rights in 2014 highlights the challenges in accessing childcare for women who work, as well as recognizing the disqualification and the concentration of migrant women working in service industries.¹⁰⁵ It was reported that half of female migrant workers work in personal and domestic services (including hotels and restaurants). Women who work in the sector are often subject to an ethnic and gender bias, poor working conditions, and restricted individual rights.¹⁰⁶ The rapport states that, "The disqualification concerns primarily women with degrees who have encountered difficulties in having their credentials recognized and valued in their country of origin and are forced to accept jobs that require little to no qualifications".¹⁰⁷

Finally, violence against women and girls—including, trafficking and sexual exploitation, domestic violence, sexual violence, forced marriages, and female genital mutilation—constitutes one of the main motifs for seeking asylum in France. In 2017, the High Council for Gender Equality proposed a series of recommendations for administrations to take into account the dimension of violence for asylum seekers, in which professionals are often not sufficiently trained.¹⁰⁸

Violence is not only part of the trajectories of refugee and asylum seeking women through their migratory journeys, but continues also in France. In a study carried out by France terre d'asile, it is shown that refugee and asylum seeking women are exposed to numerous violent situations in France including insults, rejection, harassment based on racism and

sexism, physical and sexual attacks linked to sleeping on the street, rape, sexual exploitation, arranged marriages and forced pregnancies, prostitution as means for survival, domestic violence, discrimination, and persecution linked to sexual orientation.¹⁰⁹

Although all women in France are affected by violence, refugees and asylum seekers are particularly distinguished through a continued exposure due to greater risk factors and a lack of adequate protection. As highlighted in the report published by France terre d'asile, overexposure to violent situations is often due to precarious administrative and economic conditions (particularly in terms of housing accommodations where common showers are shared between men and women), as well as difficulties in adapting to the host country (isolation, language barrier, rejection and racism from the local population, and lack of community). Additionally, these women typically face difficulties in accessing protection in the event that violence occurs. Often, this is a result of fear for losing residency permits or international protection, especially when violence comes from a spouse, but also because there is a belief that reporting violence could have a negative impact on an asylum request.

For these reasons, the integration of a gender approach to the analysis of the obstacles refugee women face in accessing higher education is necessary in order to better understand the different levels in which power relations and marginalization have an effect.

102 Noblecourt, Olivier. *L'Égalité pour les femmes migrantes*. Ministère des Droits des femmes.

103 *Ibid.*

104 *Ibid.*

105 *Ibid.*

106 Feminist studies often reference the care economy to refer to this type of sector.

107 Noblecourt, Olivier. *L'Égalité pour les femmes migrantes*. Ministère des Droits des femmes.

108 Bousquet, Danielle, et al. *Situation des femmes demandeuses d'asile en France après l'adoption de la loi portant réforme du droit d'asile*. Haut Conseil à l'Égalité.

109 *Violence Against Asylum Seeker and Refugee Women in France*. France terre d'asile.

03

METHODOLOGY

Grounded theory

16+

hours of qualitative
interviews

12

research
participants

In studying the experiences of female migrants in accessing higher education in the region Île-de-France, this research is grounded in over 16 hours of qualitative interviews with 12 research participants. Each interview highlights the unique educational backgrounds of the research participants as well as the major obstacles that have hindered their access to higher education. As a qualitative method for the inquiry of lived experience, this research applies grounded theory methodology, which provides an exploratory set of procedures to guide the development of rich data.¹¹⁰ In other words, this research began with (1) individual cases or experiences which form (2) the analytical development of conceptual thematic categories to explain patterns and relationships between the data.¹¹¹ A type of ethnographic journey is developed, highlighting four main obstacles in accessing higher education: the language barrier, administrative challenges, gender inequalities, and lack of access to personal, professional, and academic networks.

As the subject of the research is lived experience, grounded theory provides an inductive nature toward the discovery of meaning, valuing individual context, views, and voice as part of the analysis.¹¹² In other words, the methodology permits the research to situate the analysis within the perspectives of each individual participant. This allows the analysis to stay true to the data and to represent the direct experiences of the participants, revealing a

perspective that is often unattainable.¹¹³ The central aim therefore, is to gather as much information in the form of narratives, episodes, and stories to uncover the underlying themes that reveal obstacles hindering access to higher education. As such, the data is rooted primarily in two questions: What is the experience of the research participants? How do the research participants experience this?

The intent of a grounded theory study is not to prove or disprove a hypothesis, per se, but to facilitate the production of strong data that is reflective of and responsive to the research question in order to draw conclusions that support the development of concrete actions.¹¹⁴ As it becomes increasingly relevant for government structures, educational institutions, and local NGOs to have access to research that looks at individual cases that can be applied to larger populations, grounded theory is an advantageous methodology for researchers working in the field.¹¹⁵ As such, this research is guided by the experiences of the participants in accessing higher education and mobilizes the data through a thematic analysis and four case studies.

110 Leavy, Patricia, and Sharlene Nagy. *Hesse-Biber. Approaches to Qualitative Research: a Reader on Theory and Practice*. Oxford University Press, pp. 496.

111 *Ibid.*

112 Charmaz, Kathy. "Constructionism and the Grounded Theory Method." *Handbook of Constructionist Research*. The Guilford Press, pp. 402.

113 Charmaz, Kathy. *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*. Sage Publications, pp. 14.

114 Douglass, Bruce G., and Clark Moustakas. "Heuristic Inquiry." *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*.

115 Noblecourt, Olivier. *L'Égalité pour les femmes migrantes*. Ministère des Droits des femmes.

Data collection

In order to obtain a rich data set, this research goes straight to the population in question. The data, therefore, is composed of qualitative interviews with 12 migrant women who are actively engaging in steps towards the resumption of their studies, who are currently enrolled in a university program or professional training program, or who are pursuing the validation or prior academic and professional experiences in order to continue their education and integrate into the workforce. Each of the 12 participants come from diverse backgrounds in terms of country of origin, age, migratory path, educational background, and professional experience. All of the women who participated in the research arrived in France with a high school diploma or higher, are over 18 years of age, benefit from state protection or

are in the process of obtaining it, and are currently continuing or pursuing the continuation of their education.

The data collection process began with a search for participants. The researcher first contacted the women who are part of the UniR community, of whom four accepted to participate in the study. Additional outreach efforts were made toward other NGOs working in the sector, where three more women agreed to participate in the study. The following five research participants were referred to UniR by women who had already agreed to participate. Research participants were initially contacted by email or by telephone and were provided with a detailed description of the project as well as what their participation would



Table 1. Demographics of research participants: country of origin.

PSEUDONYM	AGE	COUNTRY OF ORIGIN	LANGUAGE OF INTERVIEW	STATUS	LEVEL OF EDUCATION*
Alecia	29	Uganda	English	Refugee	Bachelor's degree
Ana	30	Algeria	French	Refugee	Master's degree
Arielle	38	Democratic Republic of Congo	French	Refugee	Bachelor's degree
Cecile	24	Burundi	French	Refugee	Master's degree
Constance	43	Democratic Republic of Congo	French	Asylum denied	Certificate of Professional Competence (CAP)
Maya	39	Saudi Arabia (Yemeni nationality)	English	Asylum seeker	High school degree
Kaylie	31	Kenya	English	Asylum seeker	High school degree
Lorelle	33	Nigeria	English	Asylum seeker	High school degree
Mariam	32	Pakistan (Afghan nationality)	English	Asylum seeker	Master's degree
Rana	28	Bangladesh	English	Refugee	Master's degree
Raphaëlle	19	Ivory Coast	French	Asylum seeker	High school degree
Monique	Not disclosed (ND)	ND	French	Refugee	ND

Table 2. Demographics of research participants: pseudonym, age, country of origin, language of interview(s), legal status, level of education at time of first interview*.

entail. They were individually invited for an interview at the Mediatheque Françoise Sagan in Paris where an office space was made available to UniR for the purposes of this research.

An interview guide was developed in order to ensure both consistency throughout the interviews, as well as creating space for the individuality of the participants. The guide served as a method of identification of key questions and themes that were essential to the research. It contained about 40 questions that were organized into thematic categories: early education, higher education, migratory journey, and the future. Not all questions were posed during the interview, as the main purpose was to gently guide the narrative. Many questions were open-ended in an effort to encourage storytelling and to ensure fluidity within

the interview conversation. The goal was not only to focus on the educational hardships the research participants have experienced since arriving in France, but to additionally explore the contexts in which each participant was educated and how this played a key role in their lives and migratory journeys.

Interviews lasted around 45 minutes to one hour. They were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy during the analysis. Research participants were given the option to be interviewed either in French or in English, depending on their preference and the linguistic capabilities of the UniR team. Overall, six interviews were conducted in French and six were conducted in English. Interviews were transcribed in the language they were conducted, and only the quotations used in the following analysis

were translated for consistency. In order to ensure the confidentiality of the research participants, each of the women have been given a pseudonym and complete interview transcripts are not included in this research report. All participants agreed to these terms and signed an informed consent, except for one participant who declined being audio recorded or disclosing personal demographic information. Alternatively, detailed handwritten notes were taken. The interview content was considered when analyzing the group as a whole, however no quotes were included in the following analysis.

As relationships were built with many of the participants through their continued participation in UniR programs, certain aspects of their experiences were revealed over time. This called attention to the evolution of obstacles the women experienced and overcame. As such, UniR made the methodological decision to transform this research into a longitudinal study, where the participants were asked to engage in a second interview, six months following the first.

The research methodology, therefore, incorporates methods of longitudinal qualitative interviewing (LQI). As a longitudinal study, this research incorporates an analytical framework for measuring processes of change, especially through a transitional period of time. Expanding the data in this way opened up an exploratory path towards many new questions that are representative of long-term integration methods, such as: What obstacles increase or emerge over time? What obstacles are overcome throughout time? What is idiosyncratic over time? What changes interrelate over time? And, how can government, educational, and or social structures be informed by these comparisons?

Considering that the number of participants in the data set is relatively small, the issue of participant retention was particularly challenging. Of the 12 research participants, five agreed to participate in the second interview. Three participants declined to participate, and the following were contacted several times with no response. As participants' personal situations changed over time, there was no way to ensure a continued interest in the study.

While every methodology has its limitations, the second set of interviews were extremely valuable additions to the research data, despite a lack of full participation. The longitudinal aspect of this research, however, provides the project not only with a detailed characterization of the participants, but adds a secondary level analysis through an extended inquiry into the research question. The major benefit of a longitudinal study is its ability to reveal the longevity of obstacles in accessing higher education, as well as

revealing participants methods for overcoming such challenges through first-hand narratives. This type of quality data could not have been obtained otherwise.

A second interview guide was developed to ensure a general consistency between interviews. Context from the first interviews were largely relied upon as a base for follow-up questions. The guide was organized into three categories: higher education, integration (obstacles and opportunities), and personal reflections. Many questions were repeated from the first interview, serving as a tool for measuring change over time. An updated informed consent was provided to each participant, explaining that this was the second of two interviews that would be used in comparison to one another. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed in comparison to the participants first interview, as well as to the data set as a whole.

The analysis to follow looks into the four major obstacles—the language barrier, administrative challenges, gender inequalities, and lack of access to personal, professional, and academic networks—experienced by the research participants in accessing higher education, taking into consideration changes over time and self-employed methods for overcoming such challenges in order to reach a goal. Following the natural development of these four core overarching themes, the interviews are brought together in an analytical conversation with one another and are utilized for the development of suggestions and potential solutions that can be mobilized by local actors working in the field.

04

ANALYSIS



Through over 16 hours of interviews with 12 research participants from diverse backgrounds, the following analysis provides an in-depth look into the obstacles in accessing higher education for refugee women in the region Île-de-France. Over a period of one year, qualitative interviews were conducted in effort to gain a deeper understanding of the obstacles women face in accessing higher education. Throughout the data collection process, UniR identified four main obstacles consistent through the interviews, which includes the language barrier, administrative challenges, gender inequalities, and lack of access to personal, professional, and academic networks. It was observed that each obstacle was influenced by a multiplicity of factors that were not only political and social, but intercultural. As a dynamic method for analysis, case studies are included in each section of the analysis to

provide contextual and detailed evidence based on the experiences of the research participants. A type of ethnographic journey is developed as the case studies follow the participants' migratory journeys and educational experiences. In highlighting the major obstacles expressed throughout the data, the research concludes with a presentation of potential solutions and recommendations, with the aim of serving as a stepping stone for making higher education more equitably accessible to refugee women.

Language barrier

Through the process of migration, refugees face many natural obstacles that hinder integration into a host society. Considering that language is one of the core systems of communication that defines a person's ability to adapt to the surrounding environment, language barriers often result in direct social exclusion. The UNHCR supports this in a report that identifies language as one of the major obstacles hindering refugee access to higher education.¹¹⁶ In another supporting report by France terre d'asile, it is recognized that, "Mastery of the language, thus appears to be strongly linked to other areas of integration (employment, housing, citizenship) which in turn, highlights the need to develop a comprehensive approach to policies aimed at the integration of refugees".¹¹⁷ Learning the local language, therefore, is a necessary first step toward socio-economic integration.

As the demographic of research participants was quite diverse, the language barrier was only an obstacle for part of the group, considering that 6 of the 12 women are francophone. Although language was not an issue for this part of the group, additional cultural barriers often took precedence. Despite the lack of unanimity, the language barrier posed a significant challenge for the other six participants, making it one of the four major obstacles addressed in this research.

When the shock of living in a new country is challenging enough, the language barrier additionally affects nearly every aspect of refugee integration. As tens of thousands of refugees face the challenge of learning the French language together, difficulties are often rooted in the saturation of institutions responsible for linguistic integration, limited quality of government courses, difficulties in finding courses that continue from a beginner to advanced level, and other personal challenges linked to migration.

Difficulties in accessing language courses as a result can be seen through the experiences of Maya, an asylum seeker from Saudi Arabia. She explained, "I requested in the mairie [city hall], but

they didn't accept me". As language courses are in high demand and are typically reserved for refugees, access for asylum seekers is more challenging. As discussed earlier in the literature review, the National Strategy for the Reception and Integration of Refugees recognizes language as one of the greatest obstacles, yet by law courses are only offered to refugees and foreigners (persons who have signed the Republican Integration Contract).¹¹⁸ Thus, government structures exclude asylum seekers from their responsibility to address the linguistic integration of newcomers in society. This is particularly problematic considering an asylum seeker spends on average 13 months waiting for a decision on their demand.¹¹⁹

In the case of Mariam, an asylum seeker from Pakistan, she expressed that the course she enrolled in was not intensive enough for her eventual academic integration at a doctoral level. She explained, "I've taken some classes for 2 or 3 months, but it was not a serious class, [...] I have some A level, but it's not strong because I need more serious classes". This is a common issue for those who aim to study and enter into the workforce, as many programs are offered at beginner levels to provide only a linguistic foundation for daily life. As supported by France terre d'asile, "There is a methodological problem: the courses currently offered aim only at a basic level and are not adapted to the heterogeneous profiles of newcomers".¹²⁰

Within this context, many of the research participants expressed feeling pressure to learn the language quickly, as to not lose too much time away from their studies and careers. Although learning the language

When the shock of living in a new country is challenging enough, the language barrier additionally affects nearly every aspect of refugee integration.

can significantly slow the resumption of academic and professional pursuits, each of the women ultimately

116 Tertiary Education: Out of Reach - Stepping Up: Refugee Education in Crisis. UNHCR.

117 "La lettre de l'asile et de l'intégration." Lettre de France terre d'asile N°82, France terre d'asile.

118 Stratégie nationale pour l'accueil et l'intégration des réfugiés. Ministère de l'Intérieur.

119 L'accès aux études supérieures pour les personnes exilées. RESOME.

120 "La lettre de l'asile et de l'intégration." Lettre de France terre d'asile N°82, France terre d'asile.

increased their potential of future success as they advanced linguistically. It was observed throughout the interviews that many of the women combined formal and informal learning methods, which helped to advance more quickly.

In an interview with Kaylie, an asylum seeker from Kenya, she expressed that a course she had enrolled in only had a place for her for one year. She said, “Within one year I had to improve my French very fast, so that when it came to an end, I could find something else to do to advance”. The lack of continuity between courses, in this way, was a challenge for her as she had to find new programs with each level she progressed. To supplement her formal language training, Kaylie put her skills to practice at her job as a server in a local Parisian cafe. She explained that, “it’s a good thing because I am learning a lot about the people, learning a lot about French, the culture, and how they behave”. Through conversing with customers on a daily basis, Kaylie was not only able to progress linguistically when formal courses were not accessible, but was also able to learn about French society.

Considering that many refugees are housed outside the Paris metropolitan area, where a large quantity of French courses are held, some of the research participants found that online resources were key in supporting linguistic development.

In the case of Rana, a refugee from Bangladesh, she relied on online resources when she was unable to attend courses due to her pregnancy at the time. She explained, “at home, I slowly began to develop my French. I started on YouTube and did some courses there. I would read a book and read articles on Google”. During a time when she was unable to commute long distances to attend courses, the internet became an important tool. For Rana, and some of the other participants, the internet allowed them to maintain a working level of French in order to navigate daily life, when formal courses were inaccessible.

In fact, online language courses are becoming increasingly prevalent in policy plans for the linguistic integration of refugees. The National Strategy for the Reception and Integration of Refugees specifically includes a section regarding the development of online support. The Strategy reads, “the integration of digital technology, in particular e-learning, into the teaching and learning of languages constitutes a useful and necessary complement to classroom pedagogy in

order to meet the needs of a diverse audience”.¹²¹ In this way, online resources are designed to reinforce linguistic integration in an interactive and accessible format.¹²²

For example, in 2018, UniR developed FLE 2.0, a hybrid learning program conceptualized in 2016 but whose launch was delayed due to lack of funding. The program uses digital technology to provide flexibility to the learning process as well as strengthening the autonomy of students, while additionally having classroom support from teachers. In direct response to the growing demand for the integration of technology in language programs, FLE 2.0 focuses specifically on necessary language skills to meet academic requirements, as well as facilitating transitions into the job market. Since the launch of the program almost 30% of participants are women. In ensuring the inclusivity of refugee women, the aim of the program is to have a demographic of participants which is reflective of the national gender ratio, of which women account for 40% of persons under OFPRA protection.¹²³

Additional technological initiatives have been developed with the support of public government institutions to facilitate the linguistic integration of migrants through flexible and accessible platforms. For example, the mobile applications Happy FLE¹²⁴ and J’apprends¹²⁵

specifically support the linguistic integration of migrants with no level of French (A0) and illiterate adults, respectively.

Furthermore, In taking into consideration the specific challenges for refugee women in overcoming the language barrier, often access to language courses was hindered by security concerns and financial limitations. For those living outside the city, they often shared concerns for their safety as women commuting long distances. Affording the cost of public transportation was also a common issue, as longer commutes are typically more expensive. Taking the example of Mariam, she expressed, “[The course] ends in the nighttime and sometimes trains are not going

In taking into consideration the specific challenges for refugee women in overcoming the language barrier, often access to language courses was hindered by security concerns and financial limitations.

121 *Stratégie nationale pour l'accueil et l'intégration des réfugiés.* Ministère de l'Intérieur.

122 *Apprendre la langue du pays d'accueil à l'heure du numérique : l'innovation au rendez-vous.* *Defi métiers.*

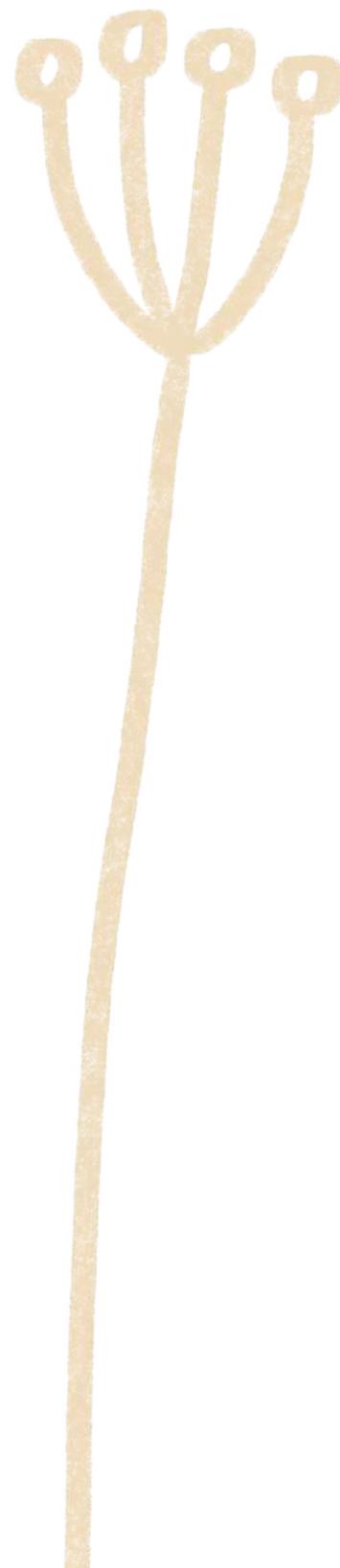
123 *À l'écoute du monde - Activity Report 2018.* OFPRA.

124 *Happy FLE.* Ministère de l'Intérieur.

125 *Dossier de presse.* *J'apprends.*

[back home] [...] sometimes we stay at the station until 10 o'clock at night [...] and even it's very difficult to buy train tickets because where we are living it's like one and a half hours from Paris". For some of the women, such insecurities and limitations strongly impacted both linguistic and social integration.

While the dedication and time required to learn a new language often tested the patience of the research participants, each of them remained motivated in order to continue their education. When education had often been denied in the past or was a constant struggle against social norms and societal pressures, language was not going to stop them from continuing their studies. As each of the women transitioned away from their cultures, languages, social and cultural norms, learning the French language largely impacted their integration in France on a multiplicity of levels. In this way, language served as an opening toward the local society and allowed them to become more comfortable in their new environment. These challenges and transitions can particularly be observed through the experiences of one participant, Alecia, a refugee from Uganda, as she learned the language and developed a long-term plan for the resumption of her studies.



Alecia

*“Education never stops,
there is still a lot to learn”*



Case study

Language barrier

This research looks a step further at the obstacles faced in overcoming the language barrier through the experiences of one participant, Alecia, a refugee from Uganda who migrated to France in 2017. As a long-term obstacle that requires effort and dedication, Alecia faces the challenge of learning French in order to pursue a more specialized education and to further her professional career. While the language barrier has been an ongoing challenge throughout Alecia's integration in France, she has developed a network of resources that have supported her through this transitional time. This case was selected specifically in effort to highlight both the challenges the language barrier can create, as well as possible methods for overcoming them. As a result of Alecia's participation in both interviews, this case is able to compare the effect language has had on her life personally, professionally, and academically over time.

At an early age, Alecia developed a certain curiosity for the world outside her own. European schoolteachers brought an international influence to her rural living, leaving a lasting effect on her interest in education and motivation to see outside her immediate environment. As a teenager, Alecia moved to a nearby city where she received an international education and was exposed to city life. These experiences taught her that in pursuing a quality education, she would be able to ensure a place for herself in society as a woman. In her first interview, she expressed feeling lucky to have parents who supported the education of their children because "at least if you have a little bit of education, you stand strong". With a bachelor's degree in tourism and multiple years of work experience, Alecia developed her service industry skills and learned how to manage different personality types. As a consultant for tourist agencies, working often with expats, NGOs, and embassies, Alecia's career required a certain level of communication skills and cultural competencies that later became useful in developing methods for integrating into French society. She effectively built a successful life that allowed her to be exposed to a diversity of cultures. As a result of instabilities in Uganda, however, Alecia migrated to France in 2017 in search of a better life and equal opportunities.

At the time of her first interview, it had been almost one year and a half since Alecia arrived in France. She expressed that throughout this time, language had been one of the first major obstacles she faced. "I am almost like one year and a half here and I understand better, but my communication is not so good". The language barrier became a source of many challenges in Alecia's life. She often struggled with feelings of social isolation and experienced instances where she was insulted for not speaking the language. "Sometimes I have had insults, especially because of the language barrier, where I have gone to some offices, and they talk to me badly because I don't understand what they are saying". At a time when complex administrative procedures were a part of her daily life, Alecia expressed that "sometimes this just breaks you down". Although asylum seekers have the right to have an interpreter for free during their interviews with OFPRA and or the CNDA,¹²⁶ in the early steps of an asylum demand "asylum seekers do not benefit from an interpreter to carry out the procedures required at this phase (answers to questions about arrival in France, verification of elements regarding their civil status, etc.)."¹²⁷ There exists, therefore, a certain lack of consideration for the linguistic capabilities of newcomers within administrative structures.

As a result, Alecia remained within a community of other Ugandans. She explained how on one hand, remaining within a community of familiar people helped her gain a valuable perspective on her shifting cultural identity. However, on the other hand, this community perpetuated certain

126 Makooi, Bahar. *Asile : La difficile traduction des entretiens à l'Ofpra et à la CNDA*. InfoMigrants.

127 Le rôle clé de l'interprétariat dans la procédure d'asile. *Forum réfugiés - Cosi*.

conflicting social norms and mentalities that she had experienced in her country of origin. Over time, she realized these connections also did not support her linguistic integration. She observed that, “the problem has been that I am meeting wrong people, not the wrong people, but people that speak English with me, so somehow I still think I am not progressing”. With the hopes of pursuing both her academic and professional career, Alecia began reaching outside her comfort zone in effort to create connections with locals in order to further her linguistic capabilities.

In Alecia’s experience, the NGO ecosystem played a key role in her sociolinguistic development. As an active participant in a diversity of programs offered by local organizations, such as a mentoring program, cooking classes, and theater workshops, Alecia found this helped her feel part of a community. She shared how such activities facilitated her understanding of “the way of living, maybe the food, or the jokes, the norms, those different things”. This was also an opportunity for Alecia to build relationships with other refugees facing the same obstacles. She expressed that within these environments, “at least you know you are [with] different refugees, from different backgrounds, and we are all learning about the French culture together”. Civil society actors, therefore, play a key role in fostering welcoming and accepting environments through activities that allow refugees and locals to connect with one another. As Alecia described, these experiences are “where the basics I would say come from the hosts”.

Through identifying with both a familiar group of Ugandans and with groups of other refugees and locals through NGO structures, Alecia’s experiences can be analyzed from an intercultural perspective. Interactions with a multiplicity of social groups, in this way, has allowed Alecia to explore her shifting identity within a new cultural context and through her interpersonal relationship to others.¹²⁸

When Alecia sat down with UniR six months later for a second interview, her feelings about the language barrier shifted as her profession and academic goals progressed. While her first interview set a foundation for her educational background and experiences, the second interview focused more on her development and integration in France. She expressed how she “decided to go into the job world first because I felt I could associate more with people. I could learn the French language first, the life in France, and then be able to come back to do my studies or to further my education. So, that’s how I chose to tackle my obstacles”. From a thoughtful and methodological perspective, Alecia reflected on how to best overcome the obstacles she continues to face and developed a realistic set of long-term objectives.

Through continued engagement in local NGO programs, Alecia participated in a mentoring program that opened up a door to professional opportunities. She explained, “I got a buddy to help me get into the field that I want to be in, which is tourism, so she happened to be working in a hotel group, so things started working out in my field, like the direction I wanted to be in”. Alecia expressed how important it was for her to gain access to such a vast network of professionals in her domain. For refugee and migrant populations, mentoring programs have proven to be particularly effective “in terms of not only knowledge acquisition but facilitating integration as well as encouraging persistence”.¹²⁹ Therefore, the effectiveness of such programs can be observed and highlighted through Alecia’s experiences.

At the time, Alecia was looking to start as a receptionist in hotels. She explained, “from there I would maybe get management positions, and from tourism I would understand the hotels, how it works, so that is what I would want to do ideally. I would also have to do some course, a master’s or something”. With only a basic level (A2) of French at the time, Alecia feared that this would hinder her chances of finding a job. To her surprise, however, she realized that in her domain “people in France, they are always looking for people who are speaking English, thinking that you already know French”. This placed her in a unique position where her fluency in English allowed her to overcome the linguistic obstacle in terms of professional integration.

Through the support of her mentor, Alecia landed a job as a receptionist in a Paris hotel. With a

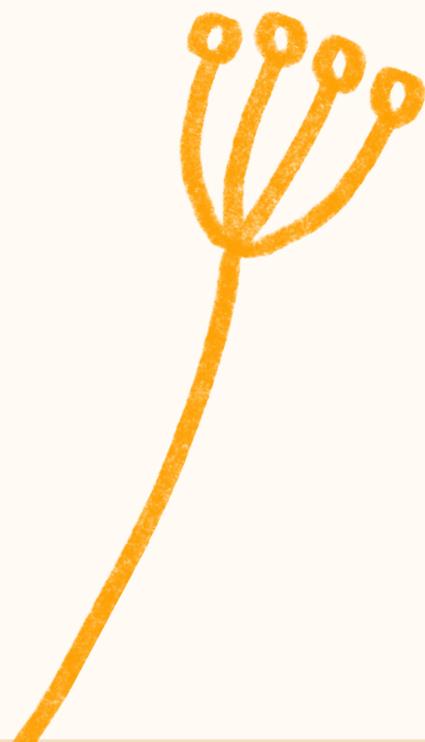
128 *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters*. Council of Europe : Language Policy Division.

129 Reeves, Roxanne B. “Inter-Cultural Mentoring for Newcomer Immigrants: Mentor Perspectives and Better Practices.” *The SAGE Handbook of Mentoring*.

schedule that often required working long hours into the night, Alecia was unable to continue the French courses she was taking at the time. Although her diverse team of colleagues often supported her linguistic development, she continued to feel that language was a barrier for her professional growth. She explained that there were some colleagues “who are not comfortable with me being around. [...] like you hardly speak French, you are giving us extra work”. Although such experiences made Alecia feel uncomfortable at times, she continued working toward building the vocabulary to work efficiently.

Although the language barrier is a challenge Alecia is “still experiencing daily,” she explained how using French daily has allowed her to comprehend customers more easily and feel confident in making mistakes. “I hear more and then I know the work vocabulary,” she explained, “like how to explain to clients how to get to their rooms or what time breakfast is served. That’s like overcoming the little obstacles”. During a period of transition in her life, Alecia’s methodological approach to her integration helped her build the confidence to tackle one small obstacle at a time. Alecia has since been offered a full-time position and is currently working with UniR toward the resumption of her French studies. Through her experiences professionally, Alecia expressed how she feels ready to come back to French courses as she has had the time to progress in the workplace and has developed a stronger understanding of French culture and society.

Feeling more stable in life, Alecia shared feelings of confidence that continuing on this path will naturally lead her back to university. In her words, “I am going to continue my education definitely [in hospitality management and marketing]”. Higher education for Alecia is a way of ensuring the successful development of her career. She feels that her experiences are not only part of a journey toward improving her quality of professionalism, but also a stepping-stone for personal growth. She expressed how she imagines herself at the bottom, because “education never stops, there is still a lot to learn”. Alecia’s motivations are rooted within this understanding that she is in a constant state of growth and progression with much to learn as a woman, as a refugee, as a professional, and as a student.



Administrative challenges

During a time of uncertainty for the future, administrative obstacles and consequences thereof are some of the most stressful experiences during the participants' migratory journeys. In this section of the analysis, the research takes a look at administrative obstacles from two perspectives: administrative challenges related to the asylum system and those related to the resumption of higher education. This analysis will look at both in comparison to one another to provide a deeper understanding of effects asylum procedures have on access to education.

Throughout the interviews it was observed that each of the women faced some type of administrative challenges linked to the asylum system and the procedures that accompany it. Considering that each case is extremely unique, administrative obstacles were difficult to generalize for the group as a whole. For those who were asylum seekers at the time of the interview, they were often hesitant to discuss their reasons for seeking asylum and details surrounding the process. However, those who had already received state protection were typically more comfortable discussing such sensitive information.

In taking the example of Raphaëlle, a refugee from the Ivory Coast, her experiences stood out from the group as she learned about the asylum system post-migration. She explained in her interview that she fled her country as a result of a forced marriage that was going to lead her into a life of motherhood at the age of 18. When she arrived in France, she found emergency housing, which was where an employee explained that she needs to demand asylum. She explained, "I didn't know. At home, they talked to me about asylum but I thought it was a crazy asylum. For me it was a house. This is where I learned.

[...] So I said to myself, what is asylum? Because for me it's for the crazy. It's a madhouse, so I said to myself, I don't want to go to the asylum, I'm not crazy, it's just that I have a problem, but I'm not crazy". In this case, it is essential to recognize that not everyone is aware of their rights, and for some the right to asylum is an entirely new concept learned post-migration. It is extremely important, therefore, in experiences like Raphaëlle's, that professionals are properly trained and have reliable information regarding the asylum

system and the rights of asylum seekers.

In the case of Ana, a refugee from Algeria, she expressed how challenging it was going through the asylum process because it required her to recount personal experiences several times to numerous government workers. With the support of an NGO that provides legal and administrative assistance, some of Ana's concerns were addressed as she prepared her asylum demand with a professional. She expressed that: *When I arrived I was in contact with an association that helped me, because in fact it is a bit complicated. They ask us to write our story, where we have to be really detailed, not exceed four pages, talk about everything, the problems, and I think it is quite difficult for someone who fled to have to relive all these things and write them. [...] In fact, for the preparation for the interview with OFPRA, it's hard to find yourself in front of a person whom you don't know, who is perhaps not open enough to understand why you are there.*

Ana, as well as many of the other women, faced traumatic pasts with strong psychological impacts that led them to seek refuge in France. As described by a clinical psychologist, "For many, this injunction to testify generates an internal conflict. Requirements arise in terms contrary to his or her own psyche: to respond to the imperative of the State while being protected from having to testify".¹³⁰ In a general

"For the preparation for the interview with OFPRA, it's hard to find yourself in front of a person whom you don't know, who is perhaps not open enough to understand why you are there."

ANA

sense, therefore, the asylum process can be a highly traumatic experience itself as it requires reliving the traumas asylum seekers are trying to protect themselves from.

Although Ana in this case is francophone, it is also important to note that most applicants communicate with government workers at this stage through the support of interpreters. Within this context, the

¹³⁰ Pestre, Elise. *La vie psychique des réfugiés*. Payot & Rivages, pp. 113.

Refugee Forum emphasizes that, “interpreting is of particular importance during the interview with the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons (OFPRA), which is the most important step in the asylum procedure. [...] Interpreters play a decisive role in the communication during the interview, and the communication of the asylum seeker’s words as the questions of the protection officer rests on them”.¹³¹ Thus, asylum seekers must trust in a stranger to relay the realities of their experiences clearly and accurately.

Despite the diversity of the group, the consistent factor uniting their experiences is education. Throughout the interviews, it was observed that the underlying values behind the importance of education were most often formed at a young age. As one of the first, most immersive institutional experiences outside the family, all the research participants had a strong recollection of their education as a child and reflected on how this influenced their investment in education today. For the few who faced a lack of access to higher education in their countries of origin, they typically experienced significant moments in their adulthood that encouraged them to invest in it. However, for both asylum seekers and refugees alike, administrative challenges have strongly impacted

Some of the women faced difficulties in university enrollment processes as a direct result of their legal status, or lack thereof.

their ability to access education in France. Some of the women faced difficulties in university enrollment processes as a direct result of their legal status, or lack thereof. In the experience of Mariam, for example, she was supported by a university administrator through her PhD application process who had little understanding of her personal situation. She explained, “He said, ‘where is your passport?’ And I said, ‘I don’t have a passport, I lost it when I was coming’. ‘How can it be possible that you have all your necessary documents, but you don’t have your passport?’” he asked. At this moment, Mariam struggled to explain that as an asylum seeker, she does not have a passport. This was a particularly challenging experience, as Mariam feared her legal status would impact the continuation of her studies. Her experience highlights the vulnerability of asylum seekers and a certain lack of empowerment to explain their situation to an authority figure who they fear may not understand. This excerpt also represents

¹³¹ Le rôle clé de l’interprétariat dans la procédure d’asile. Forum réfugiés – Cosi.

the effect of a lack of training and sensitization of university employees regarding procedures for students in exile.

Taking the example of Kaylie, she faced difficulties in accessing both a professional training program and university courses, as a result of her legal status and financial limitations. She had pursued numerous avenues toward the continuation of her studies, however could not support herself financially during this time and was unable to continue as a result. She explained: *Also why I am working so hard at this moment is because if at all I do not ever get my status, because it is a long time that I am waiting, at the end I will have a particular amount of pay slips that will allow me to demand a carte de séjour [residency permit] [...] which I am really hoping I can get. It’s important because if I get my status as a refugee in France it protects me from a lot of things. It gives me an opportunity to go find my daughter, you know without that I am blocked, so I have to stay put. Either way, I am open to whatever comes first [...] so that’s the main goal of working, even though education is important, it is important to solve this priority first. As long as I am not fixed with papers, I will never have enough to study, but for how long?*

Kaylie’s experiences with her asylum demand and the effect on her ability to continue her education are extremely complex. On a material level, the issue is not always in financing one’s education, but in having the financial means to live while studying. It is essential to note as well that an asylum seeker has the right to request authorization to work six months after the submission of their demand.¹³² From an administrative perspective, Kaylie has lived in a precarious situation as an asylum seeker for numerous years and therefore must plan for her future if her asylum demand is rejected. Although education is extremely important, she also realizes that these limitations hinder her ability to access quality programs and to succeed within them to the best of her ability.

Administrative challenges, in this way, are closely linked to the psychological impact of migration. In trying to maintain a sense of control over one’s life within a situation of uncertainty for the future, many of the participants expressed strong psychological effects as a result of administrative stress. It must be considered that these women have faced significant losses in their lives and try to avoid any further loss today in France.¹³³ When administrative obstacles

¹³² For more information, see: *Info Emploi Réfugiés. Action Emploi Réfugiés.*

¹³³ *On the Move: Understanding Venezuelan Refugee and Migrant Decision-Making: Implications for Responses to Protracted Displacement.* Mercy Corps, pp. 4.

begin to affect other aspects of their lives, some simply accept that certain opportunities, such as education, may never be accessible. Despite the desire and resiliency, this line of thinking is simply a result of migratory trauma and a way to protect oneself from further loss or rejection. Overall, the women try to make the best decision for the resumption of their lives, economic well-being, security, psychological stability, as well as working to regain autonomy and build the foundations for a successful future.¹³⁴ This was particularly the case of Constance, a undocumented migrant who has experienced long-standing administrative challenges, yet continues to persevere and use her skills to better the lives of migrant populations.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 7.

Constance

*"I don't want to lose the smile,
the smile my mother left me"*



Case study

Administrative challenges

In looking into the effects of administrative obstacles on access to higher education for migrant women in the region Île-de-France, this analysis looks into the case of one research participant, Constance, an undocumented migrant from the Democratic Republic of Congo (RDC). Over a period of 12 years, Constance faced numerous administrative difficulties. Despite having received a professional diploma in esthetics in the RDC and having completed two years of a professional training in cuisine in France, administrative obstacles have completely blocked Constance's ability to validate her experiences and receive a diploma. These difficulties have perpetuated a life of precarious living but have not stopped Constance from pursuing entrepreneurial adventures in the hopes of bettering the lives of others.

This case was selected particularly because Constance's experiences are representative of an extremity of administrative obstacles and how such challenges impact the life of migrants over time. It also strongly represents the resiliency of migrant women in precarious situations. Having migrated to France over 12 years ago, this case provides a certain maturity and insight into administrative barriers for persons in refugee-like situations, which is to say "people who are outside their country of origin and who face protection risks similar to those of refugees, but for whom refugee status has, for practical or other reasons, not been ascertained".¹³⁵ This case remains an outlier to the data set, but is utilized to represent many administrative challenges that other research participants face today. For these reasons, Constance's case is beneficial to the research for its unique perspective and ability to highlight long-term effects of administrative obstacles, legally, academically, and professionally.

Constance was born in the Democratic Republic of Congo and arrived in France over a decade ago as a result of her father's political ties. In consequence of his professional and political actions, Constance was forced to leave the RDC to ensure her safety. Throughout her interviews, however, Constance shared rather fond memories of her childhood. Having grown up in a house with 20 family members, she learned values of hospitality and generosity from an early age. As a child, she explained that her education mainly consisted of practical skills that prepared young girls for motherhood. As a teenager, she participated in courses on cuisine and dressmaking which later became a foundation for her professional career. Constance took a particular interest in cuisine, as she had passed her childhood years watching her mother prepare meals for the family. She shared memories of coming home from school for lunch and "every time I was home, I was behind my mom, 'What are you doing? I want to do that!' Cooking has been a passion in my blood since my childhood". As she grew older, Constance continued to study cuisine and dressmaking, finishing school with a professional degree in aesthetics.

When Constance arrived in France, she was alone for the first time in her life. While she did not discuss in depth the specifics of the asylum process, she shared the effects administrative precarity has on her life. She explained, "The first obstacle is really the papers. I cannot really give you the details, but the papers are really the biggest obstacle so that you can do what you need". She explained how at the time, she did not have the right to work, so she decided to "buy a sewing machine when I was given housing. I said, well, I am going to start my dressmaking". In effort to build a livelihood based on her prior skills and experience, she began working as a dressmaker out of her home.

Subsequently, her asylum demand and appeal case were denied, and Constance found herself faced with an unknown future. "When I had my second rejection, I was lost with all my luggage on

¹³⁵ Glossary, UNHCR.

the street [...] It was another barrier". Since returning to her country of origin was not an option, Constance has no choice but to remain on French territory despite being undocumented. In this case, persons in irregular situations are only eligible for emergency housing if they can justify an exceptional situation, such as proof of homelessness, proof of an exceptional medical condition, or the presence of small children.¹³⁶ Women who find themselves in irregular situations, therefore, may end up on the street where they are at an increased risk of violence, harassment, and psychological detriment.¹³⁷

With nowhere to live and not knowing where to turn, Constance began to seek assistance from local NGOs that could provide her with urgent housing and administrative support. She split her time between local organizations and government structures, in effort to receive some type of state protection that would allow her to live and work in France legally. Unfortunately, she began to feel that the system had failed her and that she was unable to find the assistance she needed. She expressed how in her experience, "there are no associations that accompany people to the end [so] I was alone, there was no one to guide me".

During this difficult time, Constance also faced social challenges with other women in similar refugee-like situations. She explained how to her surprise many women advised her to have a child in order to receive residency papers. "So, I'm going to have children with the trees, with ghosts? Besides, if I don't want to have children? If I don't want to?". As emphasized earlier, the ADFEM network calls attention to risks for violence against women who are foreign parents of French children within the context of the new asylum and immigration law.¹³⁸ In Constance's case, she knew that she could not bring a child into this world without the desire or means. As a result, she refocused her energy toward potential professional opportunities despite her obvious limitations.

Constance found a volunteer position at a local organization, where she worked for several years and earned a number of professional responsibilities. During her time volunteering as a receptionist, one of her responsibilities included delivering food tickets to migrants to dine at local solidarity restaurants. Constance became increasingly curious about the conditions and regulations for the tickets and found it unfair that "if you eat maybe in the afternoon, you can't eat in the evening. [...] There were families who came asking me for a ticket". Coming from a background where family meals were a major part of her life, she was troubled by this struggle for families to have more than one hot meal a day.

Constance pursued her curiosity and began volunteering at a local solidarity restaurant. "It's where I realized that there was really a need," Constance explained. "Every time I saw people throwing out, they might take yogurt, they would take bread, they throw it out, and I wanted to understand why because it's the same vegetables, the same products that I could transform in my cooking as my mother taught me". She realized through this experience, how cuisine became a source of a cultural barrier for migrants who were unfamiliar with French cooking. She could see the potential to change how solidarity restaurants approached feeding the populations who were actually eating at them. This was a transformative experience for Constance. She explained, "I will go toward others, even a residency permit will not block me! I understood that I had something to offer". Finally, she found an opportunity to follow her passion and use her skills and experiences toward bettering the lives of other migrants.

Constance began to develop a plan for a solidarity restaurant based on embracing a diversity of cuisines and cultures that reflected the consumer population. She built a team of individuals who supported the project and sought out educational opportunities that would allow her to professionalize her skills. Constance registered for a professional training program, CAP, in cuisine. She explained that, "We called the establishment, and they said [...] even if you don't have a residency permit, given your presence in France, you can do the training course". As Constance had been in France for many years and had developed a professional project, she was admitted

136 *Étude sur l'inconditionnalité de l'accueil en hébergement en Île-de-France. Fondation Abbé Pierre.*

137 *Violence Against Asylum Seeker and Refugee Women in France. France terre d'asile.*

138 *For more information, see: Analyse des dispositions relatives aux femmes étrangères victimes de violence : Audition devant la Délégation Droits des Femmes de l'Assemblée nationale. Femmes de la Terre, la Cimade, le GISTI et les autres associations du réseau ADFEM.*

to the program. For two years, she followed the program until being denied the opportunity to sit for the final exam as a result of her legal status. “I can’t pass the exams because of my residency permit. But I did practically a year and a half in the training, but to pass the exams or to do the internship, I must have a valid residence permit. [...] It’s really an obstacle, it blocks, because I need this diploma here”.¹³⁹ This was an unforeseen obstacle for Constance, as she had been transparent about her legal situation and was accepted into the program, nonetheless.

Following over a decade of hardship, Constance took these experiences as a reason to persevere. She expressed in her second interview, how everything that led her toward the development of her project served as a valuable foundation for the future that she was determined to make reality, despite any administrative obstacles. “I can say that the project changed my life because to have an idea is one thing, but to realize the project is another thing”. Constance began working closely with numerous organizations, all of which helped her define a business plan. In 2018, Constance officially launched her project. Although she has yet to find a location for the solidarity restaurant, she currently caters events, as well as preparing between 150-200 meals per week for asylum seekers and refugees living in camps around Paris.

In making her dreams a reality, Constance feels like she can better the lives of other migrants, one meal at a time. “What makes me happy is to cook with my own efforts, nobody gives me money, I take my shopping cart without a car, I go to collect the unsold goods, I cook the food at home, and I bring it to the homeless! [...] I see how I make others smile and that’s really it!”. In the process, she is able to preserve her cultural traditions and integrate Congolese cuisine into French culture through her cooking. She expressed that, “In France, I notice that my culture is not known, the Congolese culture is not known. I said to myself, no, I can’t lose that because already when I walk in the streets, I never see a Congolese restaurant! That’s what bothers me. But I see Chinese restaurants everywhere, Indian restaurants, and Congolese? So, I said that I will make this cuisine known!”. With the growth and development of her professional project, Constance shows great resilience despite the challenges and barriers she has faced throughout her time in France.



139 For more information, see: *Accès au marché du travail. Légifrance, le service public de l'accès au droit.*

Gender inequalities

Without being prompted by specific gender-related questions, each of the interviews revealed the weight of gender dynamics on the journeys and daily lives of refugee women. As such, three levels of analysis were identified in order to highlight the presence of gender in the data. This includes the perception of gender in the individual and self-construction, the society of origin, and French society.

On the individual level, many of the research participants expressed a strong connection with their mothers, who served as role models and inspirational figures. The development of the motivation to pursue their studies was in large part influenced by their identification with other women who supported them, often a mother but sometimes a teacher or colleague. In the case of Maya, she shared in her interview the reason for her persistence in going to school, despite facing many difficulties. She explained, “My mom is a very strong woman, she tried, tried with me. My dad no, for him if I go to school it’s okay, but if I don’t go, I stay in the home. But my mom, no, I had to go to school, you have to go to school”. Having a model figure thus was an important element in Maya’s relationship to her education, encouraging and supporting her despite other conflicting environmental elements.

While many of the women emphasized the importance of support from other women in their environment on their education, the interviews also reflected a family environment that heavily constricted their individual choices. In Mariam’s experience she evoked that, “even my uncles, [think] that for women education is not considered a good thing. In their mind if you educate a girl, maybe she speaks against you, that’s what happened to my cousins because they are not permitted to go to university. They think that since universities have co-education, women and men are together, so they don’t want, you understand what I am saying?”.

The norms and social expectations detailed by Mariam align with the gender inequalities described in the theoretical part of this report. As such, many of the research participants also mentioned conflicting relationships with their parents and

families by rejecting the expectations placed on them. They explained that as women and girls they were expected to get married, have children, and quit school. Through opposing societal norms linked to the attribution of different roles for men and women, this enabled them to overcome additional obstacles to their education. In a report on the education of refugee girls, the UNHCR mentions that in addition to the expectations regarding marriage, families expect young girls to carry out domestic tasks, taking priority over their education.¹⁴⁰

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In looking beyond the effects of gender on the individual level, a secondary tendency was observed in the interviews: the strong awareness of gender inequalities in their societies of origin, which worked to their detriment. Education, employment, and violence (forced marriage and sexual harassment) are all obstacles the women faced as girls and women in their countries of origin. Alecia recounted her experiences with gender inequalities and violence against women in Uganda that took place both during her university studies, and afterwards in her professional environment. She explained that at university, “there were more males in the class than females, so the lecturers wanted to take advantage of female students. For example, they would want failure on purpose in order to gain something, like sexual relations or stuff. Those things were happening to students, people close to me, even to me it was proposed sometime by a lecturer”. She was aware, therefore, of the abuse, harassment, and violence against her, as well as of this global trend that affected many students. In her professional experience, Alecia also shared her indignation at the inequality of wages between men and women in equal positions. She

140 Her Turn: It’s Time to Make Refugee Girls’ Education a Priority. UNHCR.

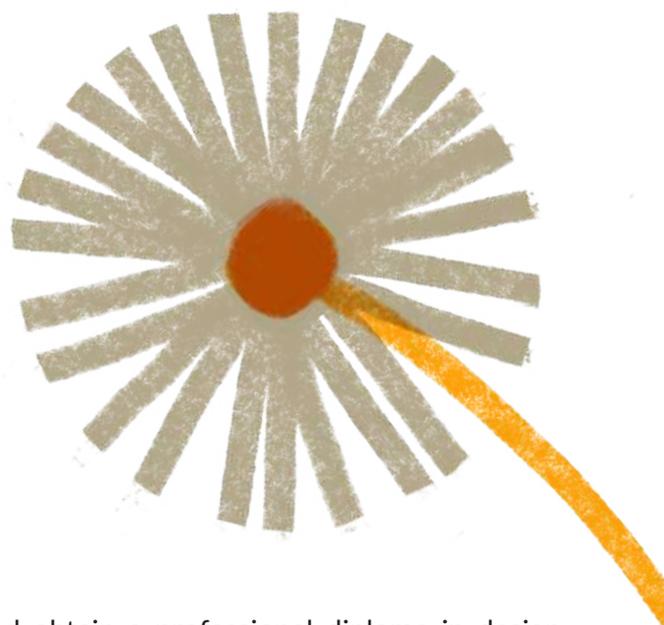
said, “If you had a colleague who was a guy, you are doing the same job, he would definitely be higher paid than you. So you are always having this conflict, like why is he getting more than me, yet we are doing the same job, I am even doing more than him”. Her narrative shows a strong awareness of gender issues and the inequalities they generate in the participants countries of origin.

In the case of Raphaëlle, she shared her history of fleeing forced marriage and attempted forced pregnancy, experiences which led her to leave the country. She explained: *After a while and all, there was a friend who I saw as a father and we spoke a lot. And he wanted to get close to me because he wanted to marry me and so he asked my stepfather and I couldn't escape so I got married. [...] So it wasn't a life that I wanted, it was a life that was imposed on me. [...] It was after a year that he wanted to have a child, but I wasn't ready, I didn't want a child since I didn't choose him as my husband and it isn't the life that I want.*

The persistent violence, inequalities, and rejection from their societies of origin, were mentioned by most of the research participants. These gender issues particularly linked to the difference in expectations between men and women were some of the very reasons for fleeing and migrating elsewhere.

With an awareness of the gender roles which have worked their expense in their societies of origin, the weight of gender is much lighter in France where protection is expected. Some women even evoked an empowered feeling upon arriving in the country. This was particularly the case of Maya, who expressed her feelings about gender relations in France. She explained that: *It's easy! Easy easy easy, between man and girl. You know when I arrived here, I had problems and I called 115. I had some interviews with some girls and some guys and someone translated. When I finished, I told her all about my problems and she said you have to do what you want, you have to make it happen, she says dont stop, you have to do everything, you are alright, you are here, you have many rights. And when I left, I thought why did she say like this, because I never heard like this before in Saudi or anywhere! [...] You know, I was surprised, before I didn't know at all and it took time for me to be like yeah, okay, to accept this you know? Before I couldn't, it was the first time. It's difficult for me because you know I am 35 years [in Saudi], many years.*

Through her interviews, Maya highlights a perception of newfound freedoms in France, compared to Saudi Arabia. This empowerment found through migration also reinforces her professional ambitions. While she was a makeup artist in within the private sphere in Saudi Arabia, she shared in her interviews her desire to further her professional career in France and to



study and obtain a professional diploma in design. Maya's interviews were one of the few that did not mention experiencing gender-related professional downgrading in France. This was a recurring element for the other women, however, where gender played a major role.

Overall, the interviews revealed a persistent gender influence, even if the women did not mention it directly. This was expressed throughout the interviews within the context of interactions with other migrant communities and in their socio-economic integration. As such, it is important to emphasize that a gender-based analysis must consider other factors such as discrimination, marginalization, and exposure to violence. Within this context, the factors of vulnerability relating to violence against women were only reflected in one interview, that of Constance. In this regard, Constance revealed that, “I was almost harassed by a man around 5 o'clock in the morning” when she was living on the street. These experiences confirm that the lack of accommodations has the effect of putting women at greater risk of violence. This point is further developed in Constance's case study. From the theoretical perspective of gender inequalities, violence against migrant women was not specifically addressed during the interviews and therefore cannot be subject to a more detailed analysis in this section.

In terms of factors of discrimination and professional marginalization, it was observed that they often experienced professional downgrading and the disqualification of skills as many shifted into care careers or working from home.¹⁴¹ From this perspective, we see gender roles play out on a complex trajectory as the decline into service professions in France is justified by the skills the women have acquired within

¹⁴¹ This downgrading of work and the predominance of women in care professions is observed all over the world. Thus, women are in the majority (+ 70%) among domestic workers, health workers and people who take care of household tasks. For more information, see: *In Focus: Women Refugees and Migrants*. UN Women.

the family and in taking care of others. This was the case for Alecia who worked in a tourism agency in her country of origin but could only find work babysitting in France before she landed a receptionist position. This was also expressed in Constance's interview, as she shared how her best friend went from being a physiotherapist to a housekeeper.

Some of the research participants also mentioned difficulties in maintaining gender relations within their community of origin in France, specifically in terms of being judged by others on their chosen lifestyles. In this context, Maya explained that it is difficult for her, as a single woman, to build friendships with other men in her community. She said, "I talk with him one time, two times and he thinks about nothing else, and comes to me like a girlfriend, but no I don't want". Understanding the specific difficulties these women have faced within their communities of origin makes it possible to understand that beyond gender, many other social factors overlap. Mariam's case is particularly emblematic of the difficulties in which a 32-year-old asylum seeking woman living in the Parisian suburbs, who is a doctoral student and Muslim, but not Arab, may be exposed.



Mariam

*"My degrees are my wings,
they make me fly."*



Case study

Gender inequalities

Mariam is an asylum seeker who was born in rural Afghanistan and raised in Pakistan. Having never traveled to a foreign country before fleeing her own, Mariam has faced a multiplicity of challenges in France since her arrival in 2017. With a master's degree in biochemistry and two published scientific articles, Mariam's educational background breaks many social norms and has put her in an unconventional position compared to the other women in her culture. In looking at Mariam's experiences, this case study presents gender as a multifaceted obstacle that often puts refugee women in vulnerable situations. In this way, her experiences contextualize gender inequalities from a diversity of perspectives that relate to the concept of intersectionality. This is to say that Mariam falls under several social denominations, based on gender, age, religion, and migratory background, which become the source of new obstacles she faces in the resumption of her education in France.

As a young girl in Pakistan, Mariam struggled in school because her teachers used harsh forms of punishment to reprimand students for poor performance. "One time, I didn't do well on my test. It was a test in school, and my teacher asked me to put paint, black paint, on my face because it was punishment. I went around the whole school and the girls and boys watched." This humiliating experience set a foundation for a future of disinterest in education. Following a transfer to private school, Mariam's performance began to improve thanks to one of her women teachers. "She was like a role model for me," she explained, "she was a very hard-working teacher". For two years, Mariam worked hard in school and "got second position, so after that I never thought that I would detach myself from education. I have determined that one day I will become a scientist". This was a turning point in Mariam's childhood, as she finally felt appreciated by her family and teachers.

With her father's support, Mariam continued through to university where she graduated with a master's degree in biochemistry. "In my culture, they don't allow female education, so I have struggled a lot for it," she explained. Despite cultural and social norms reinforcing the idea that university was no place for a woman, Mariam took this as a challenge to work harder in her studies. As few women attended university beside her, she faced instances of sexual harassment throughout her studies which challenged her dedication. She explained that, "Sexual harassment is the main thing in Pakistan. In the lab where I've been, there were many problems [...] You are in a veil and still you are facing that".

When Mariam migrated to France in 2017, she left behind her academic accomplishments and found herself in a state of culture shock with no clear path back to her education. "The first thing in my mind is my safety," she explained, "because I am here due to a reason, so the first thing is my safety. And I am happy in France, in Europe, they have human rights, and especially they are thinking about women, their security, their safety. And second priority for me is my education. First security, if you are safe you will achieve your goals and dreams, second thing my education, my higher education". As a woman with her level of experience, Mariam's history in challenging social norms provided her with a perspective to recognize the importance of education for a woman across cultures.

On one hand, Mariam's regard toward education has shifted significantly as it is no longer just a form of escape from a life she did not want, nor merely a means to ensure professional success. However, on the other hand, Mariam also faces new obstacles as she works toward the resumption of her studies in France. Faced with a combination of complex university administrative procedures, an asylum appeal, and a precarious housing situation, Mariam experienced strong feelings of social isolation during this transitional time.

She expressed facing discriminatory encounters with her building manager, making her feel increasingly unwelcome in her own home. “He said to get out, get out, and my husband was ready. I told him if we are going out, where are we going to go? [...] The manager of the hotel, he’s like racist. [...] He insulted me two, three times, and I am not feeling good there now”. As Mariam expressed, she was already depressed as a result of migration and the stress of transitioning into a new environment and now, “it’s sticking in my mind that they don’t like me”.

In developing a plan toward the resumption of her studies, Mariam realized that she first had to learn the language. “I am worried about my education and my life, how to start it. [My husband] told me that we didn’t understand any French language, how to enroll, we had to search on the internet”. For a short time, Mariam enrolled in French courses at the city hall in Paris but was unable to finish the program as the course was over a one-hour commute from her home on public transportation. “It’s very far away, where I’m living, and to buy tickets every time it’s hard for me [...] And it ends at like 8:45 in the night and sometimes trains are not going there”. As an asylum-seeking woman who does not know Paris well and is concerned for her security, not to mention her financial limitations, her concerns with traveling long distances was a challenge that hindered her ability to learn the language.

The internet was a key resource for Mariam in the resumption of her studies, as it allowed her to find resources and information in English. In researching potential programs for her scientific work, she realized that she “first had to find a supervisor and then funding, so I looked at both side by side and one day I was looking on Google and I found UniR”. Through the support of UniR, Mariam connected with a government-based initiative that provides scholarships for scientists in exile. The PAUSE initiative was introduced by the State in 2017 with the support of civil society actors, higher education institutions, and public research organizations in effort to facilitate the academic integration of scientists in exile.¹⁴²

Throughout close to a year of working with UniR toward the resumption of her studies, Mariam benefited from a personalized support program which included finding programs that fit her profile and target area of research, building her CV and letters of motivation, and reviewing application procedures. With the guidance of UniR’s specialists, Mariam explained, “I went home and searched many universities with my subject. I found the supervisors, I mailed them thousands of times and eventually one day I got an email from a supervisor. There were tears in my eyes [...] he was asking me to come for an interview”. Mariam was later accepted into a doctoral program with a generous scholarship from the where she currently pursues her degree in biochemistry.

Although she feels extremely grateful to have this opportunity, she has also faced numerous challenges in the resumption of her student life. Faced with a complex administrative system and a language barrier, Mariam has worked closely with her program supervisor throughout the submission of her application and the beginning of her studies. In working with a male supervisor who has little knowledge regarding the asylum system and the specific circumstances and limitations of life as an asylum seeker, Mariam has become victim to numerous instances of discrimination and stereotyping based on social differences and gender inequalities.

In her interviews, she explained how in meetings with her supervisor, he often reminded her, “your case is not normal. He keeps telling me this, your case is not normal, you are very different. [...] And sometimes he tells me, you are very old”. Mariam was taken aback being judged in such a way from a highly educated man. In calling attention to her differences from other students, she felt increasingly unwelcome on campus and uncomfortable around her supervisor. In this case, it is observed that there is an underlying process of dis-empowerment through an imbalance of powers. For example, Mariam struggles as she is faced with a supervisor who passes preconceived judgement, as well as needing to rely on his support in navigating a complex education system in which she rightfully does not know.

142 For more information, see: *Présentation - Programme national PAUSE. Collège de France.*

On another occasion, she received an email on her supervisor's behalf explaining that she will not be permitted to wear a hijab in his laboratory and that she is not to reserve any religious practices while at university.¹⁴³ He continued on to expressed that she will never succeed as a scientist in France because she is sans papiers. This is a representation of stereotypes that perpetuate the idea of asylum seekers being illegal immigrants, of which they are not. With great distress, Mariam shared: *I was there for my education, I wasn't there for fighting on the basis of religion. This was the first time I ever heard anything from someone like this. It's very personal. It's who you are. I can't blame you for what you practice or what you don't practice. I was near to weep because inside I was thinking he thinks I am an extremist. [...] So I emailed him, I am not here for religion, I am here for studies, and if I got a chance to be your student you will see that I am your student, I am not a Muslim, I am not a Christian, I am not a Jewish, I am a student, just take me as a student. Leave scarf, leave everything. I will not practice. You say no scarf, I will not, I will not offer prayer.*

Not only can it be further observed through these experiences that there tends to be a lack in training and sensitization of university administrators on the specific procedures for students in exile, but it can also be seen how such experiences perpetuate feelings of isolation from society. In calling constant attention to Mariam's migratory situation, she increasingly felt singled out from all other students in addition to the social isolation she was already experiencing in her personal life.

Mariam recounted this event in both her first and second interview. In the first interview, she expressed how this type of discrimination perpetuated a constant feeling of judgement and isolation, hindering her daily efforts to make new connections and build networks towards the resumption of her studies. In the second interview Mariam's attitude shifted as she became unapologetic and accepted these as learning experiences, despite the internal conflict it created. This put Mariam at a major crossroads between her cultural and religious values, and her education. She explained how in France, she actually feels comfortable not to wear a hijab, especially if it is in favor of her education. "It's my life," she explains, "so why would I miss the chance, it's my dream". She knows, however, that if her brother or father were to find out they would tell her, "Ok leave it! If they are not allowing you to wear the scarf...ok come back, leave it!". But when you get something, you have to lose something, she explained; in other words, she accepts letting go of this part of her religious and cultural values as she is presented with the opportunity to study and to be respected as a female student.

She compares how differently she feels in the laboratory now, compared to her studies in Pakistan. She explained, "You have continuous pressure on your mind, yeah maybe somebody will harass you [...] you are in veil and still you are facing that, and here I am not in veil, I am not using scarf and I'm not feeling anything, I didn't see anything here, so that way I decided to never do my PhD over there, even if I got a chance over there to continue my PhD, I would never". Overall, she feels grateful to live in a country where she can be respected at a minimum by her peers as a researcher and as a scientist before being judged on aspects of her life over which she has no control. "It's very different here, you have facilities, you have respect, you have your own life, your own privacy, nobody bothers you, nobody stares at you, and you have your own choices".

Since coming to France, she is thankful to be in a country that upholds human rights and women's rights. In her second interview, she expressed her journey in progressively becoming more comfortable as a woman, despite having taken off her hijab. Although Mariam has decided to remove her scarf while working in the lab, this action was still prompted by a man, and she continues to wear it in her personal life. Mariam's experiences call attention to the complexities of a woman's right to choose over her own body, especially in an intercultural context. Mariam's experiences are highly representative of the concept of intersectionality, insofar as issues of gender, race, age, status, and religion all play a complex role in her integration process and access to education.

143 For more information, see: *Laïcité et fonction publique : Mode d'emploi pour les agents. La fonction publique.*



Access to personal, academic, and professional networks

Access to networks on a personal, academic, and professional level is arguably one of the most essential steps toward an effective socio-economic integration. Aside from the fundamental necessities, such as obtaining international protection and having a safe place to live, networks provide the tools to build a life in a new cultural environment. Networks are not only essential for refugee integration but are also strongly tied to the need for access to reliable information and support systems, which encourage newcomers to become active members of society.

From a personal point of view, discussions regarding networks were often synonymous with building a community that supports and mediates cultural

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transitions. As Alecia expressed, cultural differences often posed many challenges for her in connecting with others, both locals and within the refugee community, as well in finding resources to support her integration. She said, “There are cultural differences here, so you wouldn’t know how things were handled in this county, but if I were home, I would know where I would find, like the people I am looking for, I would know where to find them, what place to make this kind of network. Here, I don’t know much”. This excerpt shows how it is not only challenging to navigate a life in a new culture during this transitional period, but also how difficult it is without initial support and orientation.

She continued, “Honestly, it’s so hard to get friends or to get people who you can share your experiences with, so definitely that would be on my mind a lot and I would sleep and dream about it because I find myself alone a lot.” In being able to share experiences with other women on a fundamental level, Alecia finds

she is better able “to understand what people face in different countries and from their experiences we would be able to use it and help each other [...] at the end of the day we are all human beings facing the same problems”. Alecia’s reflections highlight the need for personal networks that are rooted in the simple act of making friends and supporting the integration of one another.

For some of the women this sense of community was more difficult to find. During a transitional and often traumatic period, their personal situations hindered such ability to make connections. This is especially seen as a result of certain obstacles having a strong impact on other integrative processes. In the case of Kaylie, her experiences stood out from the group as

she explained in detail her situation as an asylum seeker and why it has been challenging for her to build a personal network of support. She expressed: *I am not yet stable in life; I cannot say I have everything. [...] I still don’t have the life that I wish for myself, I stay very far from Paris in a one-*

room house where you are so isolated because you are a demandeuse d’asile and the people around, they are not in a good social environment, to say the least [...] so it is still a stigmatizing situation for me because I live in the middle of all this and given my background and the reason as to why I am in France, I am still afraid to be really who I am. So, I stay in my room, sleep, eat, walk, do the same thing. It is important to keep the routine but after some time in the same environment where you know you are not really yourself it is a bit hard, but I can see it changing for the better.

From an academic perspective, infrastructure has been put in place, such as the MENs network and DU Passerelle programs, that are being implemented to support the development of academic networks for students in exile. Students have also taken the initiative to organize inner-university groups and social media groups to connect with one another and encourage the sharing of information. Within this context, theorists support that universities are

“fertile ground for intercultural dialogue” as they have the potential of facilitating the integration of students in exile into university networks through the mixing of peers at different levels and from diverse backgrounds.¹⁴⁴

As expressed by Mariam, within the university setting it was important that her peers “consider that I am not French. The other students, they are French, and so they have had the luxury of learning with the proper materials, and they must consider that it will take me time to learn, but I just need one push”. In this way, support systems that are set up within university environments can effectively facilitate this transition. In the case of Cecile, a refugee from Burundi, when she was accepted into university, she found it helpful to befriend a group of African students who could provide her with insights into the French education system. She explained, “Already, I had friends. When I arrived, it was my second-year undergrad (L2). It’s normal in fact, I followed a group of Africans like me. Already, I arrived a little late, but I am not shy, so I went to them, I explained my situation. I told them I am an asylum seeker, so we can start on a good basis, so I’m late, I would like you to help me integrate”.

While these types of formal and informal academic networks are extremely helpful in supporting students in exile, there is a major lack in infrastructure outside of institutions to support the academic integration of refugees. In fact, the issue of developing an academic network begins long before refugees reach the point of enrolling in university. Therefore, the importance of networks must also be considered insofar as addressing the need to find information regarding the resumption of studies. Without proper knowledge of the French university system or application procedures, it can be quite challenging for refugees who are starting with no baseline understanding of the education system. Despite the high demand, UniR is one of the few organizations in the region whose mission is specifically oriented towards providing personalized support and preparation towards the resumption of higher education.¹⁴⁵

Within the interviews, some of the women expressed that their first source for information regarding higher education was from other women residents and employees working in housing centers for asylum seekers (Centre d’accueil pour demandeurs d’asile, CADA), as well as from language teachers and friends. In this way, often the refugee women who have been in France longer took on the informal role of orienting newcomers. As Cecile explained, “That’s where I

applied [to university], I was supported by where I lived, in fact, it was a CADA. I don’t know if you know what it is, it’s a center for asylum seekers and the director of where I lived helped me with the costs, we made an exemption request together and it went well. That’s what motivated me [to apply to university] and made it easier for me to continue, otherwise I wasn’t going to do it”. In taking another example of Lorelle, an asylum seeker from Nigeria, her French teacher was helpful in providing her with information regarding university requirements. She explained that, “I have a lot of questions because I want to know more about education here [...] My French teacher has just been giving me ideas that at this stage if I want to integrate in France, I have to have the diploma B1 so that I can go to school, to university”.

From a professional perspective, the local NGO community plays an important role in the development of networks for the refugee population. Many programs have been developed for professional

From a professional perspective, the local NGO community plays an important role in the development of networks for the refugee population.

orientation and entrepreneurial support. Specifically, numerous programs have been launched with the aim of supporting the development of entrepreneurial projects by women. It was expressed through the interviews that for those whose educational pursuits were driven by the need to validate prior work experience and the re-building of a livelihood, organizations that offer mentorship type programs were the most effective in building professional networks. While this claim is rooted in the experiences of the research participants, it is observed that the number of innovative mentoring programs creating links between refugees and locals are on the rise, proving a real need for such connections.

It was highlighted throughout the interviews that access to networks was actually often part of the solution for overcoming other obstacles. It can be seen through the case studies of Alecia and Constance, how networks on all three levels had a strong impact on their integration. Both went through mentoring type programs that connected them with professionals working in their domain,

¹⁴⁴ Bergan, Sjur, and Jean-Philippe Restoueix. *Intercultural Dialogue on Campus*. Council of Europe.

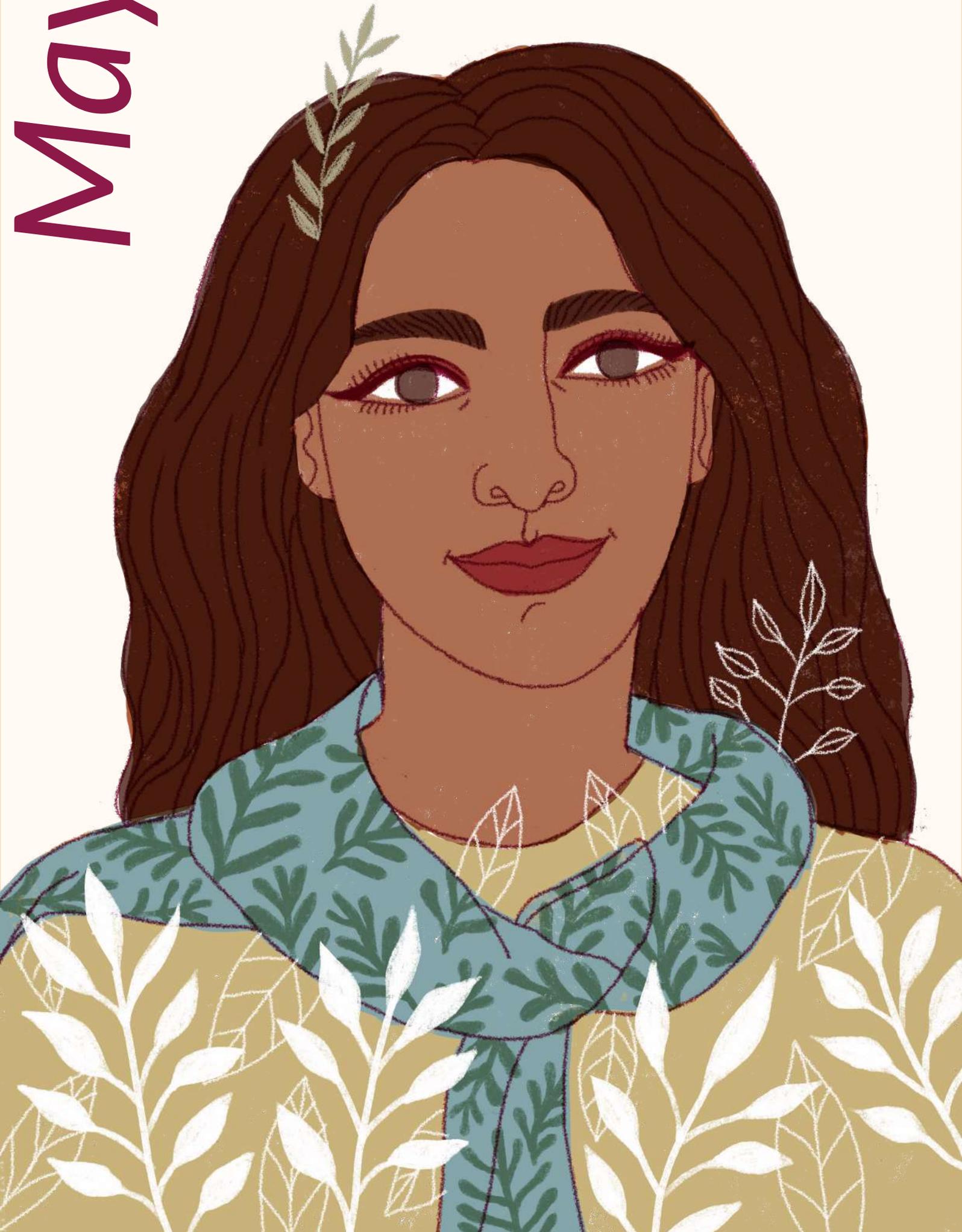
¹⁴⁵ Other organizations include: Weintegreat, RESOME, and Union des étudiantes exiles.

and they were able to successfully integrate into the workforce as a result. In the case of Alecia, her mentor helped her find professional opportunities which led to her employment. For Constance, her project was mobilized through the support of the women in her community, her participation in entrepreneurial programs, and through the assistance of her mentor.

In their experiences, the creation of connections with a diversity of individuals, both refugees and locals, supported the development of objectives and projects that allowed the women to mobilize their goals. Within this context, access to networks is not merely an obstacle that was faced by the women but is also part of the solution insofar as it directly impacts overcoming certain integrative barriers. Looking at access to networks as an obstacle can be seen particularly through the experiences of Maya who faces numerous challenges in building a local network and validating over 15 years of professional experience.

Maya

*"I believe that life is with learning,
not without learning"*



Case study

Access to personal, academic, and professional networks

This case study takes an in-depth look into the experiences of Maya, an asylum seeker from Saudi Arabia. Born from Yemeni heritage, Maya has been considered a foreigner her whole life. This has made access to education at all levels a constant challenge. Throughout her experiences Maya has learned the importance of education, both formal and informal, and the necessity of strong networks for a female entrepreneur. As a professional make-up artist with over 15 years of professional experience, Maya faces the difficulty of integrating into French society, validating her professional experiences, and building a local network to support the continuation of her career. This case study strongly considers Maya's experiences both in Saudi Arabia and today in France, showing the impact of networks on refugee integration from a multiplicity of levels.

As a Yemeni national growing up in Saudi Arabia, Maya shared throughout her first interview some of her earliest memories of her education. As a result of what she described as ethnic discrimination, Maya shared a narrative of going to register for school each year and being turned away. "When I wanted to start the new year for school, I had the same problem," she explained, "I go with my mom, please, please, this is school, this is important. But no, have to wait. If there is a place, then okay". She expressed how it was her mother who encouraged her to continue her education, even when her father would have accepted her staying in the home. "Sometimes the neighbors they didn't go to school. This was a big problem. I was scared that okay, maybe no," she continued.

As she grew, so did her affinity for education. The fear that each year her education could be cut short pushed her to continue her studies as far as possible. "I wanted to teach drawing, but when I came to university it was not allowed, not allowed because you are Yemeni, so I stopped". Maya, however, saw how education could support her personal growth and professional desires, so she tried to convince her father to let her go abroad for university. "When I saw that I loved school [...] I told my dad that I want to go out of Saudi, but no, not allowed". As a result, Maya began working alongside her mother as a make-up artist out of their home.

Maya recognized that if she were to build a successful career, in order to eventually have the means to leave Saudi Arabia, she would have to continue her education despite societal barriers. "So I started work and I didn't stop," she explained, "I learned English by myself. At the start I learned on the internet, but then I got some money from my work and I went to courses, three levels. I didn't want to stop learning". For Maya, this was a type of internal escape and a way to continue her education when formal schooling was inaccessible.

With her mother as a strong female influence, Maya learned to perfect her craft. She explained that, "I helped [my mother] in the home, and I learned by myself [...] and I got some course, some course for make-up, professional, because I learned from my mother but I had to do some course training to work in some salons". Through a combination of formal and informal training and a strong social media presence, Maya became an extremely successful businesswoman, relying almost entirely on local networks to support her business and to build a clientele. She shared that, "Women, they didn't see work life this, and I did this for my work and with my mom, and oh my god all the people liked it, and we got almost famous in the village". She expressed that all the brides would come to see them because their style of work was uncommon in the area.

As a result of ethnic discrimination and difficulties that coincided, Maya and her family were put in a compromising situation that led her to seek asylum in France. Today, Maya faces the challenge of waiting for a decision on her asylum demand, learning the French language, and

building a local network in order to re-build her career. "I think it is really difficult if I don't speak French," she expressed, "I am feeling that. If I speak French, I feel that it is very easy to find anything I want to do, anything I have questions about. I want to speak French very well, very fast. [...] I don't speak French very well. I don't know people here. You know there is something in my country, in my culture, if you know the language of these people, you can be more flexible. I have to know French and maybe then it will be easy for me". This passage exhibits how language is typically the first major barrier in building a local network and reaching academic and professional objectives. It also is representative of the fact that refugees often feel a strong pressure to learn the language quickly to not lose time.

Throughout her interviews, Maya discussed in detail how she has worked to build a sense of community with other individuals from similar backgrounds but finds that she is not easily accepted as she no longer observes certain religious and cultural traditions, such as wearing a hijab. It is observed that within this community she is continually reminded of the cultural barriers she hoped to leave behind in Saudi Arabia. She expressed: *I don't know people here, it's not easy for me to make contacts. I have to know the culture here more. I have to know because I am afraid. [...] I have to spend some time to know how it is in this culture. I don't want to stay in Arab culture. If I make friends with [a man], he makes another thing [...] he thinks about nothing else, and comes to be like a girlfriend, but no I don't want. [...] That's why it's a problem for me, so I have to spend time for knowing what people are thinking about this there.*

She continues on, comparing how connections with locals have actually facilitated her integration and mediated the cultural transition. She stated, "French people, yeah, they helped me directly [...] You know I asked my teacher, the first time in this course, my teacher, I want to improve my language so how can I do that? Okay so he brought me books, this is nice people. Actually, I asked Arab people because it's easy to ask, [...] but not helpful and they make me feel bad. No, no people here who can help you. It's not easy".

As Maya has faced numerous challenges in building a support system and local network to facilitate the development of her career, these obstacles reflect an overall difficulty she experiences integrating into French society. Throughout her whole life, she finds herself living between two cultures where she is not necessarily accepted nor fully able to be herself in either one. It can be seen through her experiences how cultural integration is strongly linked to building a sense of community, which was represented in interviews with many of the other research participants as well. However, it can be observed in Maya's case that the complexities of building connections not only with locals, but with other refugees from similar backgrounds can both be challenging as a result of social barriers that hinder her ability to build a community in France.



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CONCLUSION

Recommendations

As a result of the recent influx in migration flows, regional response at the governmental and institutional level on the socio-economic inclusion of refugees has had a transformational impact on long-term integration approaches. On a large scale, the country has tried to find realistic and effective ways to welcome newcomers in society and ensure socio-economic inclusion. Some initiatives have been more effective than others and there are many areas where existing efforts can be improved to better address the needs and rights of refugees. As such, UniR proposes the following recommendations that are proposed within a framework that not only addresses refugee women, but the refugee population as a whole and aim to impact future policy and program development based on the research results. These guidelines encompass a diversity of actors and can be adapted in accordance with the function of each stakeholder. This includes, but is not limited to, the French state, local collectives, private and

1 public institutions, civil society actors, and the NGO sector.
Addressing the language barrier through the development of programs for asylum seekers. Throughout the study it was recognized that accessing language programs is a major barrier, particularly for asylum seekers. While addressing the linguistic integration of newcomers in society is one of the primary objectives of the State's national strategy for welcoming and integrating refugees, language programs are not ensured for asylum seekers during the examination of their demand. UniR proposes therefore the consideration by OFII to expand linguistic training opportunities for asylum seekers in effort to

2 ensure socio-economic integration and access to equal opportunities.
Reinforcing language programs designed for academic and professional integration. Within this study, the data highlighted the need for language programs that continue beyond a basic conversational level and address the academic and professional objectives of refugees and asylum seekers. Many programs have been developed by universities for the academic integration of students in exile, which help a number of individuals pursue higher education. In order to ensure an effective integration, such efforts must be furthered to provide equitable access to education and integration into the workforce. One recommendation is to reinforce efforts made by Pole Emploi to support the linguistic training of refugees and asylum seekers looking for employment. A second recommendation is for the French state to continue offering financial support to NGO structures who offer advanced and specialized language programs, as well as universities that have developed programs dedicated to refugees. A third recommendation is for professional training centers (centres de formation) to recognize the language barrier by offering courses to students

3 throughout the duration of their studies.
Reinforcing quality language programs developed by the NGO sector. Currently, the NGO ecosystem plays a key role in the linguistic integration of refugees and asylum seekers through providing quality and immersive programs. In several instances throughout this research, participants affirmed the effectiveness of NGO programs that specifically allow participants to benefit from additional services in parallel to learning the French language. While a number of programs currently exist, NGO structures often face the challenge of providing students with formal certifications due to high testing costs. UniR encourages, therefore, the development of partnerships between testing centers, often language or academic institutions, and NGOs in order to validate existing programs. Additionally, many NGOs rely on volunteers

who offer their time to contribute to the linguistic integration of refugees and asylum seekers. It is important to validate such efforts through increasing formal training opportunities for volunteers. This recommendation could be made possible through the support of the Ministry of Education in providing

4 financial opportunities for NGOs to formally train their volunteers. **Decentralizing language programs to ensure equal access around the region Île-de-France.** Considering that Île-de-France receives almost half of all asylum demands in the nation, there is an increasing need for access to language training programs. The city of Paris (Ville de Paris) has been a key stakeholder in the development of a number of programs however, the high density of newcomers in the region has made it challenging for the city to accommodate the demand. UniR recommends, therefore, the decentralization of language programs. This is to say increasing the number of programs outside of Paris, specifically within departments that have high concentrations of refugees and asylum seekers. Through increasing linguistic initiatives in a multiplicity of departments around the region, such efforts can combat obstacles including social isolation, financial instability, and security concerns, specifically for

5 women commuting long distances. **Systematizing the training of academic institution personnel on the rights of and procedures for students in exile.** Universities and other academic institutions have been instrumental in developing long-term integration strategies for students in exile. Unfortunately, however, there remains to be a lack of training of personnel regarding the rights of students in exile and the specific enrollment procedures that apply. Considering the density of newcomers in the region, universities and professional training centers should offer training opportunities for personnel working with students in exile. Creating clear guidelines and communicating the specificities of application procedures are vital in ensuring refugees and asylum seekers can enroll in

6 university and have access to available student and financial aid. **Strengthening interventions by local specialists for the sensitization of regional actors.** In a time when migration flows are rapidly changing the regional landscape, the sensitization of citizens and regional actors, in a broad sense, are essential to ensuring the long-term inclusion and integration of refugees and asylum seekers. In direct response to the former recommendation, UniR takes on the responsibility in the coming year to develop sensitization workshops with a focus on access to higher education, gender, and interculturalism. These workshops will be made available for university personnel and other additional actors concerned. Sensitization is essential for opening a dialogue and increasing collaboration between civil society actors and public institutions, as well as to ensure the transmission of accurate and reliable information regarding refugees and asylum seekers in the region. It is recommended, therefore, that other local specialists and NGO structures consider strengthening the availability and frequency of interventions of the like. To make such efforts possible, it would also require strengthening financial support by the State for specialists to effectively mobilize the necessary

7 resources for quality interventions. **Encouraging the application of gender and intersectional approaches.** Migratory and integration experiences are impacted by social hierarchies often defined by migratory status, gender, level of education, age, country of origin, religion, sexuality, social class, and more. As it stands, the city of Paris and the French state have been generous in mobilizing gender-based approaches and supporting the development of such initiatives. UniR encourages the continued and increased application of these approaches to support effective

integration and active citizenship, while combating oppressive discourses. In this way, gender and intersectionality should be considered not only as analytical tools but also as a means of achieving access to equal opportunities. UniR recommends that NGOs continue to work toward bridging the gap in the participation of men and women in local programs, as well as the development of initiatives dedicated specifically to women (ex: mentoring programs for women, same-sex housing, etc.). It is also essential therefore to encourage the coordination between actors (the city of Paris and NGOs, for example) to

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increase visibility and strengthen the overall impact of such initiatives.

Ensuring internship opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers.

Universities are some of the most immersive experiences for newcomers who invest in it. Students in exile benefit from being in an academic environment that supports not only academic, but social and professional integration. Many newcomers, however, find themselves in situations where they are admitted to university and are later blocked by the inability to find internship opportunities or due to consequences of administrative complications. This creates a barrier, most often for asylum seekers, who are blocked from receiving a diploma and are forced to stop their studies as a result. Although this issue was only briefly touched on throughout the research, it is necessary to put forth a recommendation for the French state, in addition to the private sector, to consider developing internship opportunities for asylum seekers and refugees

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in order to ensure the reception of a diploma and inclusion in the workforce.

Increasing the accessibility of online resources and technology. The internet is a key tool for refugees and asylum seekers to access a plethora of information in all languages, which is especially useful for navigating life in a new cultural environment. Whether it's a search on how to submit an asylum demand, how to apply to university, or how to learn French, for example, the internet is a resource that allows newcomers to access information on available resources and existing programs. With an increase in innovative online language programs and numerous platforms that gather useful information for refugees into one place, UniR supports the further development of online resources of the like. This recommendation also includes, therefore, encouraging the collaboration between the developers of tech-based programs and local NGOs to bridge the

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digital divide and ensure the visibility of such resources and technologies.

Fostering networks between newcomers and locals. Many of the research participants expressed throughout their interviews that they had decided to participate in the study because if sharing their experiences can help other women facing the same obstacles, that is reason enough to share. In this way, almost all the participants expressed the desire and need to connect with women from diverse backgrounds in order to support each other through periods of transition and to overcome integrative obstacles. As such, access to networks as presented earlier in the study serves not only as an obstacle but also part of the solution to strengthening bonds between newcomers and the host community. UniR recommends the fostering of networks between women through tandem and buddy programs both in universities and local NGOs to bring together diverse individuals and provide an opening to local society. In direct response, UniR presents its new mentoring program for

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women, Intercultur'elles, in the following section.

Encourage data collection and information sharing. As of now, there are limited studies and no public statistics concerning refugees and asylum seekers enrolled in higher education. Finding ways of gathering data and encouraging institutions to work together on this effort remains a challenge not only regionally, but nationally. MEnS has tried to initiate efforts to collect such data from universities who are part of the network, but such initiatives additionally require state support and university collaboration in order to be effective. Access to such information, in this way, has the potential to greatly impact the development of long-term integration strategies, policies, pedagogies, and

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programs developed by NGOs working on access to higher education.

Supporting future migration-based research. In a day and age where globalization and migration are having a major impact on national policy and pedagogical approaches, this study encourages private and public institutions to support and invest in future research projects that expand the reach of literature in the sector. One recommendation, in particular, is the development of partnerships with universities and NGO structures to bring together researchers and field workers who can collaborate on migration-based studies. While some efforts have been made by universities in Paris, literature in the field remains limited with much potential for innovative and informative research.

UniR additionally puts forth a suggestion for future research topics that consider the ways in which access to information and knowledge differs between cultural groups. Although this tends to typically be a question addressed by in the field of development, such inquiry could also be highly informative when looking at obstacles in access to education and in understanding the decision-making processes of refugees. Through a deeper understanding of cultural and societal differences, this also raises the question of how modern societies can create non-formal educational opportunities for those who are unable to

Action

access higher education.

Throughout the research process, a strong majority of the women interviewed expressed the need for a space to come together and create links with one another, particularly in terms of the development of academic and professional objectives. In addition to proposing recommendations based on the research results, the main priority of this study was to learn from the experiences of the research participants in order to develop a program in line with UniR's organizational vision to respond to the need of refugee women seeking access to education and the validation of prior experiences.

Intercultur'elles, a mentoring program for women

As a result, UniR has launched a mentoring program for women, Intercultur'elles, which is designed especially for refugee and asylum seeking women engaged in the process of resuming their studies or the validation of prior experiences. The program promotes gender equality and ensure that the objectives and needs expressed by the women concerned are respected. As such, the aim of the mentoring program is as follows: to support women in the development phase of the resumption of their studies, validating their prior academic and professional experiences, strengthening confidence, and facilitating connections between refugee and local women.

Through the sharing of personal, professional, and academic experiences, Intercultur'elles, takes an intercultural approach to which includes both one-on-one mentoring and collective workshops to engage the entirety of the participants in learning to develop networks with one another and discover a diversity of cultures through the sharing of mutual experiences. The six-month mentoring program values community engagement with UniR's partner organizations. The first session officially began in April 2020 and includes 18 participants. For more information on the program Intercultur'elles, visit www.uni-r.org or contact mentorat@uni-r.org.





Conclusion

Throughout the process of migration, education serves as a tool for refugees to gain knowledge about the world in which they live and to navigate life within a new culture. By interviewing 12 women from diverse backgrounds on the obstacles they face in accessing higher education in region Île-de-France, it was observed that there were four major difficulties they face: the language barrier, administrative challenges, gender inequalities, and lack of access to personal, professional, and academic networks. It was revealed throughout a series of qualitative interviews that for these women, education functions as an active form of exercising their rights, which were often denied in the past. Having provided only a small window into the lives of the research participants, it was overwhelmingly clear that their motivations for continuing education and validating prior experience included the way in which knowledge can serve as a form of livelihood, how it encourages problem-solving and strategic decision-making skills, and how it can allow individuals to empower themselves in a new society.

Through the development of an understanding of the major obstacles that hinder access to higher education, the research analysis is significant in providing substantial evidence for why government structures, educational institutions, and civil society actors must consider improving the accessibility of education for refugee populations. Some of these obstacles can be directly combated through social and political action, while others require more long-term shifts in the way policymakers and regional actors

address the effective integration of refugees. It can be seen that regional actors have directly addressed the need for quality language training, as well as the facilitation of networks that build links between refugees and locals in order to support academic and socio-economic integration. However, administrative challenges and gender related inequalities are more difficult to combat as they are greater societal and political issues that require a widespread and long-term response.

In addressing such obstacles, this research achieves its aim in uncovering the experiences of refugee women in accessing higher education in the region Île-de-France. This study contributes to the field by offering a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of qualitative interviews that give voice to the experiences of the population in question. The results and recommendations presented are not limited to obstacles in accessing higher education but are highly applicable to organizations working toward professional integration and gender equality. In mobilizing the data and through the development of new programs offered by UniR in direct response, this research-action project continues beyond the scope of this report and aims to have a lasting impact. With the publication of this report, UniR calls to action local actors to raise awareness around the issue of access to education and advocate for the development of long-term approaches to address the issue of socio-economic integration.

ANNEX

Informed consent #1

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research. You are being asked to consent to participate in this research project on the experiences of migrant women accessing higher education in the Île-de-France region. This consent form is necessary to ensure that you understand the purpose of this research and that you agree to the conditions of your participation.

The project is being conducted as part of an action-based research project for the NGO, UniR - Universités & Réfugié.e.s.

You will be asked to recall specific episodes, events, thoughts, feelings, behaviors, as well as situations, places, and people connected with your experiences. We do not anticipate the questions to be emotionally difficult, however, if you feel uncomfortable for any reason you may stop the interview or refuse to answer the question.

This interview will be used for academic and professional purposes and will not be shared in its entirety. Quotes and/or parts of the interview content will be used in academic papers and professional publications, on our website, and in other media that we may produce. We will do everything possible to insure your confidentiality, including changing names, locations, or any other identifying information.

You understand that the interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. The interview will last about an hour.

Two copies of this informed consent form have been provided to you. Please sign both forms, indicating that you have read, understood, and agree to participate in this research.

Return one to the researcher, and keep the other for your files.

Informed consent #2

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research. You are being asked to participate in a longitudinal research project on the experiences of migrant women accessing higher education in the region Île-de-France. You are being asked to participate in the second, of two, interviews that will be used in the research. This consent form is necessary to ensure that you understand the purpose of this research and that you agree to the conditions of your participation.

The project is being conducted as part of an action-based research project for the NGO, UniR - Universités & Réfugié.e.s.

You will be asked to recall specific episodes, events, thoughts, and feelings connected with your experiences. We do not anticipate any of the questions to be emotionally difficult, however, if you feel uncomfortable for any reason you may stop the interview or refuse to answer the question.

This interview will be used for academic and professional purposes and will not be shared in its entirety. Content from both of your interviews will be included in the research in order to identify key changes over time. Quotes and/or parts of the both interviews will be used in academic papers and professional publications, on our website, and in other media that we may produce. We will do everything possible to ensure your confidentiality, including changing names and any other identifying information.

You understand that the interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. The interview will last about an hour.

Two copies of this informed consent form have been provided to you. Please sign both forms, indicating that you have read, understood, and agree to participate in this research.

Return one to the researcher and keep the other for your files.

Interview guide #1

Early education:

Tell me about your first memory of school...

Were there any particular people who influenced or encouraged your education?

Tell me about your experience in school as a child...

Tell me about your life growing up...

Were you interested in any specific field as a child?

As you grew up, what was your experience with education like?

Were there any specific moments that stand out?

Was there anything that made you particularly passionate about education?

Was there anything that kept you out of school?

Tell me about your most memorable professional experience...

Higher Education:

Did you attend university in your home country? Where? Why or why not? What or who influenced you? If you could have, would you have?

When did you decide to continue your studies or validate your credentials in France?

Can you tell me what factors, if any, led to this decision?

Are there any specific barriers that have challenged you during the resumption of your studies? How have you worked through these challenges?

Do you speak French?

How did you learn or how are you learning?

Were there any particular people or associations that influenced your education in France?

Tell me about how you selected your university program...

What was the application process like?

Did anyone help you through this process?

Have there been any experiences where you have felt particularly welcome or unwelcome in the classroom?

What has been the biggest challenge for you since entering university in France? The greatest benefit?

Migration Journey:

Can you tell me about how, if at all, university has changed your life since coming to France?

Has it helped you navigate better in your daily life, or not?

How do you feel about your current quality of life?

Tell me about your family situation in France...

What do you like to do outside of school?

Tell me about how your life today compares to daily life in your home country...?

Tell me more about why you left...

Tell me about your journey to France...

How did you feel when you first arrived?

What was your first memory?

Since coming to France, what has been the biggest challenge for you? How did you try to solve this?

Have there been any specific experiences where you have felt welcome in France? Unwelcome?

Are there any relationships that have been particularly important to you since coming to France? What is your current legal status? What was the process of obtaining your status like?

Future:

Why is education important to you?

How, if at all, has education changed your life in France?

Are there any particular accomplishments or achievements that you are most proud of?

Thinking back over this experience, what advice would you give to yourself now that you wish you had known when you first arrived? When you first started university?

What do you find more important: formal or informal education?

Interview guide #2

Is there anything else you would like to share that we did not already discuss?

Higher education:

Tell me about why education is important for you...

Tell me about your decision to continue your education in France...

What steps are you taking, or have you taken to work towards continuing your education?

Tell me about how you selected a university program/professional training/etc...

What resources have you used to facilitate this process?

What was the application process like for you?

Were there any associations that supported the continuation of your studies?

How did they help you?

How did you come into contact with them?

Do you participate in other activities with this/these associations?

How has your education in France changed your life?

Has it helped you navigate better in your daily life, or not?

Are there any specific barriers that have challenged you during the resumption of your studies?

How have you worked through them?

Have there been any experiences where you have felt particularly welcome in the classroom? Unwelcome?

Integration (obstacles and opportunities):

How has access to education impacted your life in France outside of school?

What has been the greatest benefit for you since entering higher education in France?

Do you speak French? How have you learned?

How has your level of French improved since the last time we met?

How do you practice French outside of school?

Since coming to France, what has been the biggest challenge for you?

How did you try to solve this?

Have there been any specific experiences where you have felt welcome in France? Unwelcome?

What new challenges have you faced since the last time we met?

How have you maintained your cultural identity? How has it changed?

What is your current legal status? What was the process of obtaining your status like?

What new opportunities have been presented since the last time we met?

How do you feel about your current quality of life?

Have you held a job since coming to France? Currently? What is it? How did you find it?

Are there any particular accomplishments or achievements that you are most proud of since settling in France?

Personal reflections:

If you were working in an NGO, what type of program would you create for women like you?

What types of programs would you like for NGOs to put in place?

Would you be interested in participating in "talks" to share your experiences?

What would be a useful way for you to connect with other women?

Why do you find it important to participate in this research?

Is there anything else you would like to share with me that we did not already discuss?

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