



The Gender-Based Violence and Precarity Nexus: Asylum-Seeking Women in the Eastern Mediterranean

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This paper derives from a larger research on gender-based violence and precarity in the forced migration journeys of asylum-seeking women transiting through the Eastern Mediterranean route and arriving in Greece, in the tumultuous, second decade of the 21st century. In this paper we present the findings from the first phase of the research. We analyze and discuss the opinions and information gathered through semi-structured interviews with twenty key informants: service providers, staff of international and national NGOs, local government staff and public officials. Our findings locate the five points/loci in irregular cross-border movements and arrival at an EU member-state where precarity interweaves with gender-based violence. The first locus, is in transit and EU and Greek border crossing; second, during the asylum determination process; third, in their everyday life when they must deal with homelessness and harsh living conditions; fourth, in the deficiency of care services further aggravated by intersectional discrimination; finally, by being trapped in abusive settings and relationships due to the ineffective state response, a sluggish criminal justice system, and the victim's financial dependence on the perpetrator. Adopting a feminist and intersectional approach our analysis shows that violence and precarity are co-constituted and reinforce each other through the undermining of the citizenship status of asylum seekers and the inscription, on their bodies and lives, of unequal gendered social and institutional power relations.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper derives from a larger study seeking to understand gender-based violence (GBV) and precarity in the forced migration journeys of asylum-seeking women arriving in, transiting through, and staying in Greece -an EU member state-in the tumultuous, second decade of the 21st century. The present paper draws upon the perspectives of twenty key informants representing local government, NGO frontline workers and executive officers, community leaders, and IGO staff on the dimensions of precarity and risk of GBV, in the lives of asylum seekers.

The time and place of our research are marked by a great historical confluence of several co-occurring crises, affecting one another: an international humanitarian crisis, a regional EU crisis and a national (Greek) multi-dimensional—economic, social, and political—crisis. This confluence provides a sharp and powerful magnifier on the issues at hand, even if through the “filter” of

the gaze and understanding of the selected key informants. The research site is the Eastern Mediterranean and more specifically Greece, and the time is the period from 2011 to 2019, starting with the aftermath of the “Arab spring” and the unraveling of Syria. The international humanitarian crisis was a massive “refugee crisis.”¹ The regional refers to a political EU crisis over EU member state responsibility for asylum seekers and involved EU asylum policies, securing of “common external” borders and externalization of migration control to a “third” country, in this case Turkey. At the same time, Greece was undergoing its own crisis which presented as a sovereign debt problem in 2009 and was perceived as an existential threat to the Eurozone. Greeks’ economic and social citizenship became increasingly eroded, as they were severely affected by austerity measures, imposed by international and European institutional creditors.

Using a feminist and intersectional perspective we analyze our key informants’ perceptions on gender-based violence (GBV) and precarity experienced by the asylum-seeking women they are dealing with as professionals in various capacities. Through their testimony and opinions we sought to understand the relationship between GBV and precarity during the forced migration journeys, border-crossings to the EU and stay in Greece as a way to better focus our interviews with asylum seekers themselves, in a subsequent phase of this research project. The findings from the key-informant interviews are triangulated with textual data deriving from Greek and EU documents, NGO and IGO reports and analyzed drawing from theoretical frames of GBV and precarity.

In broad terms, we understand gender as a relational power concept maintained and reproduced by materialist conditions and discursive practices including the exercise or threat of violence, while GBV as extending, beyond physical, interpersonal occurrence, to institutional/legal/structural levels becoming “visible” through denial or failure of protection by law, policy, or practice. Furthermore, we claim that violence in a forced migration context has gender-specific expressions. We understand precarity as the politically differentiated spread of precariousness, a condition of insecurity brought about by failing social and political supports which are conventionally expected to mitigate the risks inherent in human life (Butler, 2009). When it comes to asylum seekers, precarity may be a consequence of states adopting restrictive immigration and asylum policies and securing their borders (Freedman, 2012). Precarity may well render diverse groups, defined by gender and other intersectional identities, more vulnerable to GBV.

Based on our analysis, we argue that the asylum seekers’ precarity of life in crossing the EU border and waiting for the outcome of status determination processes, can be attributed to policies and practices deriving from EU and national migration

regimes aiming at securing external borders and containing asylum seekers, ordered in gendered and intersectional ways. Moreover, this precarity is tantamount to institutional/structural GBV and, as such, either increases the risk for interpersonal GBV or directly contributes to reproducing it. Experiencing GBV, in turn, may increase the precarity of life for asylum seekers by decreasing “livability” (McNeilly, 2016). We conclude that GBV and precarity co-constitute one another forming an inextricable nexus in the forced migration journey, especially in crossing the EU border and upon arrival. Interwoven in this precarity/GBV nexus are the asylum-seeking women’s agency, strategic choices and struggles in challenging the impermeable border, resisting victimhood, and achieving their purpose of freedom of movement to a better life.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Structural and Intersectional Gender-Based Violence in Asylum Seeking

“Gender-based violence” is generally understood as the violence directed toward a person or a group on account of their perceived gender. Gender is a fundamental analytic concept for understanding how the social world is ordered and the hierarchies of power in it. It can also be detected through experiences, social movements, and in texts that structure experience and influence individual or collective behavior. The gender hierarchies of power that prevail as “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell, 1987) are being preserved and reproduced through ideologies and everyday processes of normalization in the Gramscian sense as well as through violence. Violence (or its threat) is central to the construction of gender through perceptions of the relationship of the body to violence. Thus, a fundamental element of femininity is perceived vulnerability to violence while masculinity is associated with dangerousness (Hollander, 2001, p. 84). These perceptions about the female and male body are constantly reproduced through everyday life routines, media and texts of various sorts to the point of being thought of as “natural” and normal. Yet even as constructed views, they affect the performance of gender (Butler, 1990) by shaping women’s and men’s ways of living and interacting. Gender constructions are not only underlying structural and institutional inequalities but also being constantly reproduced through discursive practices. Finally, intersections of gender and age, race and class further amplify perceptions of vulnerability or dangerousness. In line with a rich theoretical tradition of intersectionality in the social sciences (Crenshaw, 1991; Choo and Ferree, 2010; Collins, 2010) we take gender hierarchies and inequality-producing processes as co-constitutive of race, sexuality, nation, class, and other context-specific social divisions and processes.

If violence is inherent in the concept of gender, gender-based violence can only be understood as emerging from material and discursive gender inequalities rather than individual or group perpetrator dynamics (Davies and True, 2015). GBV is nevertheless, not only the result of patriarchy. The enforcement processes mobilized by patriarchy are intertwined

¹According to the IOM, the adoption of the Global Compacts on Migration and on Refugees, signed in 2018, emerged from the widely held sense of crisis in population movements “most spectacularly in the Mediterranean.” (IOM, World Migration Report 2020: 293. Available online at: https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr_2020.pdf).

and mutually constituted at various levels with culture, class, race, age, and other relevant social divisions (Anderson, 1997). Furthermore, GBV cannot be understood as operating within the male-female, masculine-feminine binaries (O'Toole et al., 2007; Shaw, 2017). While structurally based unequal gender power can affect women, men, boys, girls, and LGBTQ+ individuals, in this paper we are focusing on women, as a variety of studies and statistical measurements show that globally women/girls are, by a large proportion, the principal victims of such forms of violence (e.g., UNHCR, 2003; WHO, 2013). We understand women in non-essentialist terms, as also including individuals with female gender expression, gender identity or perceived gender.

According to UNHCR (2019), GBV “is rooted in gender inequality, the abuse of power and harmful norms . . . It also includes threats of violence, coercion and manipulation.” Moreover, the “expanded definition” of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) makes explicit reference to the state and institutions “perpetrating” or “condoning” it (UNHCR, 2003, p. 11) and clarifies that SGBV can take the form of a “denial of resources or access to services” (UNHCR, 2021, p. 1). The Istanbul Convention adds that “while women face violence and discrimination based on gender, some women experience multiple and interlocking forms of violence [intersectionality]” (Council of Europe, 2014). This expanded definition of GBV allows us to link acts of violence that occur interpersonally, firstly to practices, policies, institutional and legal frameworks relating to violence, racism, human rights, and secondly to underlying systemic inequalities in sequence.

In the context of migration, we understand GBV as fundamentally structural violence “built into the structure” and showing up “as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances” (Galtung, 1967, p. 171). The violence is exerted structurally, by institutions, laws, policies and practices relating to migration governance that either directly generate violence or fail to protect from it. It is also exerted by individuals, citizens or others, against the undocumented, “irregularly” arrived and insufficiently protected “others.” This violence is GBV because it is either driven by gender, or affecting individuals differently because of their gender, gender identities and gender perceptions. Such violence is likely to occur at various time/place/legal status associated stages of the non-linear migration trajectories, with intersectional processes differentiating the GBV experiences and access to services of individuals and groups. Additionally, it is important to note that GBV in conflict, flight and displacement are not separate cases but rather the instances form a continuum of structural violence (Krause, 2015).

The structural violence that is built into practices, policies, institutional and legal frameworks manifests itself as discrimination resulting in social exclusion from protection and/or support. This discrimination/exclusion mechanism leads to precarity and increases the likelihood/reproduction of interpersonal GBV. Discrimination is a dynamic process penetrating every level of social life -institutional, collective, and individual. Though difficult to define, it is generally perceived “as a selectively unjustified negative behavior toward

members of the target group” (Henkel et al., 2006, p. 101) that denies “individuals or groups of people equality of treatment which they may wish” (Allport, 1954, p. 51), deprives them of material goods or restricts their liberty (Altman, 2020). A more structural definition of discrimination includes, in addition, differential “burdens, obligations or disadvantages” which result in limiting access “to opportunities, benefits, and advantages available to other members of society” (Andrews v. Law Society of British Columbia, 1989).

Reflection on discrimination in the context of an asylum regime starts with Arendt’s bitter assertion that the “concept of the Rights of man based on the supposed existence of a human being as such, collapsed in ruins as soon as those who professed it found themselves . . . before men who had truly lost every other specific quality and connection except for the mere fact of being humans” (Arendt, 1943, p. 64). This “bare life,” moving “outside the nation-state,” is thus beyond citizenship, and deprived of any role as “state’s terrestrial foundation” (Agamben, 1995, p. 116). Forced migration, a historical by-product of the nation-state system, signifies a conceptual disruption of citizenship. The international refugee regime represents an effort of the global community of states to “normalize” the refugee by restoring rights to protection and establishing the (limited) conditions under which certain categories of forced migrants come under the protection of the state of asylum as “legitimate” refugees (Turton, 2002; Dobrowolsky and Tastsoglou, 2006). Leaving aside the definitions of legitimacy, the system still falls short of equating refugees with full citizens. Prior stages upon “irregular” arrival and registration, such as sorting out eligibility for protection, the refugee determination process, possible illegalization and waiting for deportation, are all stages fraught with variable degrees of precarity and ongoing structural violence. Each and every one may be a pivotal “moment” when liberty and even “bare life” are being determined. All these arrangements involving distinctions among individuals and places where they occur are structural arrangements (de Vries and Guild, 2018) and the violence their implementation inflicts is structural as well, with direct gendered consequences for individual lives.

In addition to being excluded from the protection of citizenship, asylum seekers experience further intersectional subordination and specific exclusions as they may, at the same time, belong to multiple other disadvantaged social groups. Gender identities and gender perceptions, sexualities, age, race, religion, intersect on multiple levels (local, regional, national, international) causing compounded disadvantages and intensifying asylum seekers’ oppression. Individual and systemic factors create an intersectionality of disadvantage for them (Yacob-Haliso, 2016, p. 54) as this, in turn, multiplies their challenges in accessing solutions (Ibid, p. 55).

Ethnic origin fuels xenophobia and racism (Pittaway and Bartolomei, 2001), especially when it is implicated in the West-rest hierarchy that categorizes “the rest” as the “other”—racialized, colonized, or “third country national” in “Fortress Europe” and, thus, of intrinsically lesser value. Gender is a fundamental structure of inequality in society based on, and in turn, fueled by a social construction of inequality between men and women. This construction values

the former, perceived as breadwinners, protectors, rational actors, over the latter, perceived as passive, emotional housewives and care providers. When gender intersects with the positionality of women asylum seekers' "otherness"—lacking the legitimacy of mothering for the nation or educating future subjects (Arat-Koc, 1992; Yuval-Davis, 1993)—it leads to what Parreñas (2001) calls "limited," and Maher (2004) "lessened" citizenship.

But gender-based discrimination may be directed against men too. War settings and asylum regimes often challenge stereotypically assigned traits of masculinity. Drawing from Elshstain (1995) archetypes of "Just Warrior"—men constructed as violent- and "Beautiful Souls"—women as nonviolent—as well as upon Browning (1992) and Goldhagen (1996) ideas of "legitimate" and "non-legitimate victims of war," one can piece together the construction of the "male-perpetrator" and "female-victim" gender stereotypes in the backdrop of the displacement journey. Such stereotypes cause male victimization to be perceived as an anomaly that does not fit the gendered understanding of "legitimate victims." Thus, men asylum seekers remain trapped in their expected gender role of violent perpetrators, deprived of the possibility to be victims. As feminist thinkers have shown, the implications of this schematic image are multiple (Karagiannopoulou, 2020); in the case of men, male experiences are left out of humanitarian considerations (Jones, 2016) while male victims, especially of GBV, become the "absent subjects" (Connell, 2002). This distorted image of the masculine "other" (the complexity of being a man and, at the same time, victim of SGBV and asylum seeker) leads to overwhelming exclusion that creates precarity and perpetuates GBV.

Furthermore, when the gender binary is challenged or sexual orientation deviates from heterosexual orthodoxy (Nagoshi et al., 2008), asylum seekers' "otherness" intersects with his/her/their other inferior positionalities—race, ethnicity, religion—leading to being multiply discriminated against in political, economic, and social contexts (Lee and Ostergard, 2017). Displacement and the asylum-seeking context become loci where homophobia intersects frequently and powerfully with many other forms of discrimination to reveal the precarization and GBV in the lives of these gender minorities.

GBV is often the cause of migration. It may form the main reason for leaving, it may add on to other reasons or aggravate the circumstances of forced migration or it may exacerbate the fear of persecution on other grounds (Tastsoglou and Nourpanah, 2019). GBV can occur during migration in the hands of smugglers, traffickers, fellow asylum seekers in camps and on the road, and security forces in the countries asylum seekers are transiting (Amnesty International, 2012; Anani, 2013; UN Women, 2014). Restrictive migration policies and asylum practices are responsible for increased GBV (Kengerlinksy, 2007) as they necessitate more protracted or dangerous journeys for people seeking to avoid border controls (Andrijasevic, 2009; Amnesty International, 2012). There is some evidence from research of increased fatality rates for women, compared to men, in border crossings around the world, suggesting that the reasons may be gender specific (Pickering and Cochrane, 2012). Moreover, there is a

significant and growing literature documenting the increased opportunistic and systemic GBV risks posed by smugglers, facilitators, co-ethnics, family, police, paramilitaries, and others, during such journeys in multiple geographical contexts and sites of transit (e.g., Dolma et al., 2006; Hamood, 2006; Nagai et al., 2008; JRS, 2009; Amnesty International, 2010; Pickering, 2011; Anani, 2013; Gerard and Pickering, 2013; Formson and Hilhorst, 2016). Restrictive migration and asylum policies and practices often derive from state institutional and legal frameworks to control borders, the "securitization of migration" (Gerard and Pickering, 2013) and to assert sovereignty (Dauvergne, 2008), which in turn may reflect racist and sexist stereotypes of the "other" (Freedman, 2016a) and embody intersecting systemic race, colonial, social and gender hierarchies (Ibrahim, 2005).

Upon arrival to "safe" countries, reception conditions and practices for the identification, registration and relocation or settlement of asylum seekers may pose an additional risk for SGBV (Gerard and Pickering, 2013). Overcrowded facilities, lack of safe and sanitary accommodation, lack of access to services—health, protective or psychological—for GBV survivors (Canning, 2016), as well as language barriers to accessing services, render women and girls more vulnerable to GBV. Finally, there are links between migrant women's homelessness and domestic violence (Mayock et al., 2016). "Transactional sex," a form of GBV, is not exceptional both in migrant and refugee routes as well as in camps as a strategy. Gerard and Pickering in their study (2012) of Somali women's "extra-legal arrival" in Malta discuss "forced pregnancies" as strategic decisions in order to obtain release from detention centers, "as vulnerable persons."

On arrival, asylum seekers are obliged, because of their "irregular" presence at the border, to enter the refugee status determination process or risk return. Legal and feminist research have focused on the integration of gender into refugee status determination (RSD) in various national contexts and the legal and social barriers for women who wish to claim asylum on this basis, even when "gender" (e.g., Government of Canada, 1996) and "sexual orientation, gender identity and expression" (e.g., Government of Canada, 2017) are formally integrated into asylum law (Chantler, 2010; Tastsoglou and Nourpanah, 2019). In the EU, state interpretations of the legal and policy framework, including Regulations and Directives on asylum (Papadimitriou and Papageorgiou, 2005) but also varying practices of member states (Querton et al., 2012), disparities in recognition rates (Schuster, 2011), and EU and member states border regimes contribute to the precarity of asylum seekers waiting for registration or for processing of their asylum applications.

GBV may continue after leaving the camp or even gaining refugee status, as domestic violence, "transactional" or "survival" sex (McGinnis, 2016), trafficking, or labor exploitation in a labor market where asylum-seeking women are deprived of access to legal protection because they do not have the requisite employment authorizations or are cast in underpaid, stereotypical feminine jobs such as domestic and care work. Stereotypical employment casting of female migrant workers is

frequent even for women with conventional migration trajectories. Sassen (2000) finds neoliberal restructuring precarizing livelihoods in developing countries and driving all women's migration trajectories, who are then typically pushed to work in feminized occupations in developed countries.

We use the term “asylum seekers” as a broad descriptive term that purposefully blurs the distinction between migrant and refugee and recognizes that in fact individuals fleeing are affected by a range of factors, political and economic. While “refugee” implies a status as per the terms of the *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* and its subsequent Protocol (UN General Assembly, 1951; UN General Assembly, 1967), “asylum seeker” is a broader term that captures the continuum beyond those who achieve protected status to include those who are waiting for a response, those who have not yet formally applied, and those who do not meet the Convention's requirements (Mitchell, 2006; Papastavridis, 2009). The term does not imply illegality (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 2006) as other terms do (e.g., “undocumented migrants”). Finally, the term accurately captures the life circumstances of the population we are focusing on in this paper.

Precariousness, Precarity, and Precarization

We understood, from a multitude of studies of the mixed migrations that gave birth to the “Eastern Mediterranean route,” that one common feature that appeared in all accounts was the precariousness of the lives of asylum-seeking women and men (Akyüz and Coşkun, 2014; Baban et al., 2017). We sought to discover whether this precariousness is linked to politically produced precarity and ongoing precarization and how this may be related to GBV.

The dictionary definition of precarious is something that is “dependent on chance circumstances, unknown conditions, or uncertain developments” and also “characterized by a lack of security or stability that threatens with danger.”² The epistemic history of the term, along with its complements precariousness and precarity, extends to several disciplines and traditions in the social sciences. In addition, during the 2000s and the 2010s, activism related to the casualization of work and the precarization of life (Vanni and Marcello, 2005; Foti, 2017) took place in many parts of Europe and the United States.

In the years following the oil crisis, around the middle and late 1970s, economic stagnation accompanied by high inflation, prompted changes to fiscal and monetary policies. At the same time capital turned away from arrangements of secure, full-time, lifelong jobs to flexible arrangements where firms could shift employment according to changing demand. Employment flexibilization gave impetus to the new, atypical jobs that were proliferating, driven both by the undoing of the Keynesian—Fordist compact between capital, labor, and the state and by the application of information technologies

(Tsianos and Papadopoulos, 2006; Dyer-Witthof, 2015.). A marked shift occurred as more countries, in the capitalist core and the periphery, started implementing employment flexibilization measures (Standing, 1999) but also the entire gamut of liberal ideas of free trade, privatizations, restructuring, austerity and deregulation of capital and money markets and especially the labor market.

Some scholars held that precarity has been, historically, the capitalist “norm” (Betti, 2016). “Precarious work” has been a feature in much of the world in domestic and care work, agriculture, hospitality retail and construction to name a few (Mitropoulos, 2005:3). In global cities, Sassen (2001) argued, the jobs of the services complex done by immigrants and people of color, many of them women, are necessary for the working of the global economic system. The entry of women in paid employment, attributed to the failure of the “family wage,” deindustrialization and the growth of the service sector gave rise to “global care chains” firmly placing migrant women in the burgeoning care economy (Parreñas, 2001).

The “genealogist” of the usage of the term “precarity,” Jean-Claude Barbier (2002), posited that precarity has acquired fluid, evolving meanings. From the late 1990s the term came into common use and also applied to vulnerability or fragility and insecurity in society at large (Bourdieu, 1999) as precarious living and working conditions are normalized “and thus become an important instrument of governing” (Lorey, 2011: 4).

The tradition which sees precarity as a condition of labor and as a condition of capitalism, breeding inequality and setting people in motion because they are so wretched where they are and because “things seem and indeed are better in the places they are trying to get to” (Robbins, 2018), is relevant to our subject as we acknowledge the volition of the refugees and other migrants to not only search for a sanctuary from war and persecution but also a chance for a better life. Indeed, Castles (2015) asserts that the inflow of asylum seekers was a prominent form of immigration in the 1980s and onwards as refugees from the Hungarian Uprising, the Prague Spring, conflicts in Latin America, Asia and Africa and the Yugoslavian wars claimed political refuge and opportunities to earn a living in the affluent West. Informal economic activities, which had been the mark of the Global South and the southern European periphery, bloomed in the heart of advanced capitalism, marked by subcontracting, temporary work, and casualization made possible by the exploitation of these imperfect citizens (Castles, 2015: 56).

Lewis and Waite (2015) use the concept of hyper-precarity to describe the multiple insecurities experienced by forced migrants in the global north. They argue that the (United Kingdom) asylum system produces susceptibility to forced labor due to a compromised socio legal status. Anderson claims that immigration controls work with migrant trajectories to lead to exploitation through the absence of status and access to rights, but immigration controls can also be seen as “producing” illegality. (Anderson, 2010: 306; de Genova, 2002). Thus, precarity is an outcome of the articulation of precarious work and precarious citizenship status.

Beyond the analysis of precarity as a labor condition (Vosko, 2000; Kallenberg, 2009), as a class identity, -the precariat-

²Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “precarious,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/precarious>.

(Standing, 2011), and general condition of life under capitalism, the precarity discourse gained, through the work of Judith Butler, a gendered dimension, and an ethical gaze. Butler (2009) references the ontological condition of the fragility of human life: “Anything living can be expunged at will or by accident.” Precariousness is the state of existence of all human beings characterized by insecurity, vulnerability, and dependence (on others) for survival, both as bodies and as social beings. Social and political institutions are partly created to mitigate these jeopardies (Butler 2009). Precarity is the politically differentiated condition of precariousness i.e., different populations are differentially exposed to precariousness by political decisions involving hierarchization, and othering (Lorey, 2011) with distinct gender expressions. Precarity is politically induced vulnerability. Precarization is the governance process by which precariousness intensifies not only through “destabilization of wage labor but also a destabilization of ways of living” (Lorey, 2011 p.1).

Common in all understandings of precarity is that the vulnerability, contingency, and risk inherent in precarity is induced by material structures, and cultural norms. It refers not to individual or group identities but to precarious situations. For example, in the context of forced migrations, de Genova views humanitarianism as such a structure, specifically as it is used as a “political technology with its different regimes of visibility, temporal borders, tactics of border enforcement” which is key in the “production of vulnerability.” (de Genova, 2017: 28). In the same context, national and EU migration and asylum laws, and practices by border guards and officials also constitute such structures, by raising obstacles for asylum seekers and “. . . inscribing precarity” on them. (Hodge, 2019: 89).

Finally, vulnerability has also been used in the discourse about gender-based violence. We do not refer here to the assignment of “vulnerable” labels by humanitarian practice but to the conceptualization of GBV as resulting from “relational vulnerabilities,” “embedded in asymmetrical social relations” (Kabeer, 2014: 2). Discriminating border regimes, unequal resources, uneven access to supporting networks, that is the precarization of mobility, exacerbate these relational vulnerabilities for bodies in arrested transit in the European borderlands where different gender vulnerabilities produce distinct forms of gender-based violence.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

This paper derives from a research project consisting of a qualitative study on the experiences of gender-based violence by asylum-seeking women on the Eastern Mediterranean route. The present paper is based on data collected during the first phase of the project which included interviews with twenty selected key informants, conducted by the three co-authors in the summer and fall of 2019. In this paper we draw upon some of the thematic categories we addressed in the interviews, namely GBV, precarity, and discrimination/intersectionalities. Our interview protocol was approved by both institutions we are affiliated with, located in Canada and Greece, respectively. Our participants included 6 men

and 14 women, all of which are University-educated and some with graduate degrees. With a couple of exceptions, the interviews were conducted in Greek, transcribed in Greek and coded and analyzed using QDA Miner 5. The responses were translated in English by the three co-authors.

While our key informants did provide information about their knowledge of violence and precarity affecting women (and men) asylum seekers, knowledge garnered from their work as front-line service providers, staff of international and national NGOs, local government staff and specialized public officials, records of case histories were not made available to us, nor could our interlocutors provide the authentic first-person narratives of experiences. This remains for the women themselves to relate in the following phase of research, currently ongoing. We fully acknowledge the biases and blind spots of the interviewees’ perspectives and identities, the gaps in the accounts, the conflicts, and discrepancies between their views, as we witnessed these ourselves in the interviews and as such discrepancies and biases have been documented in scholarly research. The case in point is made by a recent study of professionals working in Asylum Reception Centers in eight European countries including Greece, which reveals significant variation of conceptualization of SGVB which differs by age, sex and country of work with some forms of violence not perceived as such by some groups of professionals (Oliveira et al., 2019). With these caveats in mind, we feel the lens the key-informant interview data collectively provide in understanding the situation “on the ground” is unique and valuable. Finally, we triangulated our analysis with published work: other relevant scholarly research, NGO and IGO reports, media accounts and government and EU documents of statistical data, laws and policies.

SETTING THE CONTEXT

To address gender-based violence among women asylum seekers we had to look at migrations in the Mediterranean where sea arrivals to Europe had been rising throughout the decade, peaking in 2015 with 853,650 arrivals in Greece and 1,011,712 in total for the EU (IOM, 2016a). These movements triggered an international and European response involving massive outlays of funds (Howden and Fotiadis, 2017) and the deployment of dozens of international and Greek humanitarian actors creating “an emerging ‘humanitarian marketplace’ of global significance” (Cabot, 2019 p. 760). This mobilization was to help Greece, on the common European external border, cope with what was dubbed a humanitarian crisis after the borders with Balkan countries, mainly the FYR Macedonia (March 9, 2016)³ but also Bulgaria, Serbia, (and farther afield the borders of Croatia, Slovenia, and Hungary), had shut down, leaving tens of

³Human Rights Watch, Greece/Macedonia: Asylum Seekers Trapped at Border Blocked Access to Asylum; Beatings by Soldiers; Poor Conditions February 11, 2016 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/02/11/greece/macedonia-asylum-seekers-trapped-border>.

thousands of asylum seekers, pursuing a path to western Europe, stranded.

The EU-Turkey Statement (March 18, 2016),⁴ a hastily negotiated “readmission agreement,” decreased (but did not stop) the flows to the islands. It did make the sea crossings more perilous and uncertain (The fatalities in 2015 for this route were 805 out of a total of 3,771 for all the Mediterranean routes -IOM, 2016b). The five Aegean islands which had been turned into “hotspots,” on EU prompting, to help control the exceptional flows of 2015,⁵ became places where asylum seekers waited for their application to be adjudicated.⁶

The European Union recast Regulations, Directives, border enforcement, asylum procedures, budget allocations, and “partnerships” with “third,” migrant transit, countries. The EU, trying to navigate “the new normal” (Geddes and Hadj-Abdou, 2018), followed a path of securing its external borders. The “flows” of 2015 and all subsequent flows would be managed as a continuing Mediterranean refugee “emergency” (Lopez-Sala and Godenau, 2017) and as a state of exception.

Turning to Greece, the time frame of the refugee increases overlapped the frame of the “Greek crisis.” The country presented in 2009 a sovereign debt problem threatening the integrity of the Eurozone. As successive Greek governments implemented austerity and restructuring measures prescribed by the bailout programmes, the resulting unemployment, wage and pension cuts, emigration of young, educated people, loans and mortgage defaults, privatizations, and business failures created a dismal climate which the Greeks collectively referred to as “the crisis.”

The concurrence of the peaking of the refugee arrivals, and their subsequent entrapment in Greece, with the on-going precarization of Greek society was constructed as a ubiquitous crisis in media accounts and in political discourse so that the two “crises” were conflated in the public imaginary. This migrant influx was not unprecedented: there were hundreds of thousands of irregular border crossers from Albania and Bulgaria in the early 1990s, “refugees,” of Greek heritage, arriving from the dismantled Soviet Republics in the mid-1980s, and returning Greek workers from Western Europe in the 1970s (Petrinioti, 1993; Petrinioti, 2009). But what was different in 2015 was that the EU had acquired, since 2004, the competence to set common rules about asylum and thus had a leading role to play in this asylum “crisis.”

The drama of arrival of so many asylum seekers and the governmentality of counting, identifying, fingerprinting (for the EURODAC digital base) and “sorting” them in the hotspots, hides an aspect of the illegalized mixed migrants’ precarious

existence: the incidence of GVB. Freedman writes that “the true scope of sexual and gender-based violence against refugees remains unknown” (Freedman, 2015, p. 79). One dimension of GBV, sexual violence, has been examined, notably by some humanitarian organizations, (Keynaert et al., 2015; de Schrijver et al., 2018). A recent report from the Médecins sans Frontières clinic on Lesbos island, found that 94% of the incidents reported involved rape while among the 215 survivors 28% were men and 81% were from Africa. Interestingly, more than half of the reported incidents (118) occurred in transit, mainly in Turkey, and 76 (35%) in the country of origin while 10 cases (5%) happened on Lesbos. (Belanteri et al., 2020).

THE PRECARIETY AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE NEXUS

We asked our key informants to share their observations and thoughts on the everyday lives of asylum seekers pointing to instances of precarity and GBV, from their experience with them, either as front-line service providers, law enforcement and national defense agents with various responsibilities on mixed migrant arrivals, or their knowledge as policy makers or as advisors.

Our analysis of the interviews identified **five** loci of interface of precarity with gender-based violence and connected them with the various levels of the larger structures: 1. Transit and border crossing, in particular the European and Greek border, heavily secured by European migration control externalization policies and border enforcement practices; 2. The refugee status determination process with the uncertain outcome and the associated lengthy waiting period which involves interacting with staff of formal state apparatuses, lawyers, social workers, and NGO supporters; 3. Accommodation and living conditions which are inadequate, both in island hot spots and hospitality structures in cities, especially for the categories most affected by precarity and GBV. Living conditions are affected by national and EU institutional regimes of care for asylum seekers, but also local communities’ reactions toward them. 4. Services are characterized by deficient care and exclusion resulting from inadequacy of resources in comparison to the need but also discriminatory practices by state employees, and health care practitioners. 5. State protection from GBV is sluggish and poorly coordinated resulting in reproducing GBV and perpetuating and amplifying precariousness for the asylum seekers who are GBV survivors.

Our findings based on key-informant interviews confirm that 1) there is a patent gender dimension to both precarity, and violence experienced during the asylum-seeking journey and upon arrival. Moreover, this dimension is significantly intersectional 2) there is an interrelationship between precarity and GBV, with precarity increasing the GBV risk or contributing to reproducing it and GBV, in turn, amplifying precarious living for survivors 3) the specific policies and practices affecting precarity and GBV in the lives of asylum seekers derive from EU and national legal regimes of securing external borders and institutional regimes of asylum seeker control and containment.

⁴Council of the European Union. EU-Turkey statement, 18 March 2016—Press release 144/16. Brussels: General Secretariat of the Council; 2016.

⁵Hotspots are facilities to screen people arriving by sea in Italy and Greece, conceived in the European Agenda on Migration and adopted in May 2015. Procedures in the hotspots are carried out by national authorities and personnel from European institutions (EASO, Frontex, Europol and EuroJust). European Commission (EC) 2015. Available at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52015DC0240&from=E>.

⁶See details: EASO, Border Procedures for Asylum Applications in EU + Countries 2020. Available online <https://www.easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/Border-procedures-asylum-applications-2020.pdf>.

These legal and institutional regimes are ordered in gendered and intersectional ways and grounded on larger systemic inequities. We discuss each of the five loci highlighting the GBV-precarity nexus and the gender and intersectional dimensions of the relevant inequalities.

Transit and Border Crossing

Most key informants agreed that women and men have distinct experiences of precarity and GBV while traveling and in border crossing. Women are seen as susceptible to greater dangers associated with transit and border crossing as irregular travelers, especially under heightened security of external borders. K.Y.,⁷ a GBV specialist working on the protection of survivors in an International Governmental Organization (IGO), summarizes GBV risks in displacement: “*And trafficking is also a result of trying to transit when individuals may not have the resources, they are at higher risk of exploitation . . . Women especially on the road are extremely vulnerable to sexual assaults . . . and many of them arrive pregnant as a result of a sexual assault . . . En route, people may be affected by violence from smugglers, from border police, from other refugees, within their family or upon arrival in Greece.*”

In border crossing and in the European arrival context, procedures are governed by overlapping regimes of national, EU and international norms, laws, policies, and practices. The external EU border, which asylum seekers must negotiate, is secured by the deployment of Greek Coast Guard boats along with Frontex patrol boats, and Turkish Coast Guard vessels operating within Turkish territorial waters. These patrols cannot legally intercept dinghies, and there have been many rescue operations, but recently there have been reports of “push backs” by Greek Coast Guard officers allegedly “tolerated” by their Frontex counterparts (Christides et al., 2020; Didili, 2020). Frontex also flies surveillance planes and drones over the Aegean and has a force of over 600 officers deployed in Greece in the maritime and land borders with Turkey (Frontex, 2020a) while Greece has 4,500 border guards in place “to combat illegal migration” (Frontex, 2020b).

In such circumstances, the logistics of arranging passage on a boat require an intermediary. Although trafficking entails the exploitation of the victim, the use of smugglers, or facilitators, who undertake to provide passage for pay has become so frequent as to be almost universal in the boat crossings from Turkey to the Greek islands. Sophia, a psychologist working in an open Reception and Identification Center, mentioned that single women often must use human smugglers: “*Some women from Sub-Saharan Africa, when they are single and travel alone, it’s easier either to have arrived in our country through these webs or to be approached by them.*” The previous statements are supported by research, which was carried out in Greece immediately after the peak months of arrivals in 2015: All the

respondents used a smuggler for at least one stage of their journey, and all, save one, used a smuggler to cross the Aegean Sea. One of the reasons mentioned was because they could not obtain a passport or visa to travel a legal route to their destination (Crawley et al., 2016).

There are distinct risks undertaken, with the use of a smuggler, as well as strategic calculations in a situation of limited and less desirable alternatives. Gabriele, a GVB specialist in an international NGO, was explicit in her analysis of these risks: “*She knows that from the moment that she proceeds with her facilitator and there is no man with her, she might have to succumb to attack in order to cross the border. Not that a woman wants to be raped to cross the border, but what I mean to say is that there is so much desperation she may finally accept even a forced pregnancy because she knows that on the opposite side, when she arrives in Greece, that’s vulnerability, there’s a better treatment, maybe more chances for asylum and more opportunities for welfare [. . .]*” The acceptance of rape and the risk of pregnancy is not seen only as an instance of transactional intercourse, in other words as a means to secure passage, but also as a possible advantage once in the European destination.

Sexual violence and pregnancy then, can be conscious, risk-accepting propositions, if not intentional exchanges. Both are also well known, integral risks of transnational mobility, especially for African women. To cope with the realistic expectation of sexual violence, if a possible pregnancy carrying its own risks must be avoided, most of the African women on the move that Gabriele, a GVB specialist in an International NGO has met in Athens, bear subcutaneous implants of time-releasing hormones as a means of contraception. Their reason, as told to Gabriele, is starkly simple: “*Because I know that I can be raped at any time since I am traveling alone. So, I wear it if I get raped at least I won’t get pregnant.*”

The concept of transactional sex has been discussed as a practice in Sub-Saharan Africa which women may engage in to get money or favors from men because “of women’s limited livelihood opportunities” (Formson and Hilhorst, 2016, p. 8). In the migration and displacement context it is viewed as a coerced exchange: for example, to procure a fake passport or passage on the boat to Greece (UNHCR, UNFPA and WRC, 2015). Transactional sex is instrumentalizing intercourse as an everyday means of transaction. Nadina, co-director of an Athens-based grassroots migrant women network, comments: “*Rape, let us say, becomes what we call ‘transactional intercourse,’ a means of exchange during travel, so we are talking about an open cycle of precarity that starts from the society of origin, the family circle and social surroundings and then continues during travel.*”

We place transactional sex in a gray zone between rape and survival strategy—sometimes the only one - in the extremely limited options available to asylum-seeking women to travel. By doing so, we recognize the agency of the women who engage in it (Gerard and Pickering, 2012). However, the normalization of sexual violence, as constitutive of mobility toward Europe for women without papers and money, is founded on the precariousness of the status of asylum seekers at the European external border and is an example of structural violence, with distinct gender expression, affecting all illegalized asylum seekers.

⁷Participants were given the option to select pseudonyms for anonymization. Some expressed a clear preference to use their real names. As a result, we have a mixture of pseudonyms and real (first) names. Interview excerpts have been slightly edited for readability.

Asylum Determination Process

The second locus of the precarity - SGBV nexus concerns legal status as it relates to asylum procedures. There is a “permanent transience” (Pickering, 2011) or suspension in a constant “state of arrival” (Gerard and Pickering, 2012) that extra-legal arrival entails for the asylum seekers. This transience means that the journey of displacement is ongoing, with the risk of return looming, with changes in legal status and physical space of residence fragmenting their daily experience and resulting, in turn, in enormous physical and mental exhaustion, a “politics of exhaustion” (de Vries and Guild, 2018). Several key informants speak powerfully about the anguish of waiting interminably for the asylum process to unwind and the torment of uncertainty about its outcome. *“Speaking about these [past] years in the European Union, [following]...the EU-Turkey agreement, precarity is exactly that: if I will be able to complete the process, to be accepted, or if at some point ... in some interview, I will be rejected and I will not get my asylum”* (Thomas, advisor on asylum seekers to an island municipality).

The UNHCR in a survey of the asylum process in Greece, found that most participants were frustrated by “the lack of clarity on procedures or feedback on the status of their asylum claim, particularly on the islands. This has severe implications on psycho-social wellbeing, irrespective of age and gender.” (UNHCR, 2018a). As to the length of the waiting period, according to the Greek Ombudsman Annual Report, the Asylum Service confirmed the waiting period for asylum applications, from countries with high recognition rates, is over three years (2019, p. 53).

The subject of “vulnerability” as elaboration on precarity has been raised several times by our key informants. “Vulnerability” has been operationalized by both the UNHCR (UNHCR-IDC, 2016) and the European Asylum Support Office (European Asylum Support Office (EASO), n.d.), so that a parsing out of asylum seekers can take place, according to normative criteria. Human Rights Watch (2017a) claim that *“...there has been considerable pressure on Greece from the EU and its member states to narrow the criteria to minimize the numbers of people eligible.”* Konstantinos, an elected official in the Municipality of Athens responsible for migrant and refugee affairs, alludes to the controlling nature of this sorting mechanism: *“So, vulnerability has been dramatically reduced so that the stream toward the mainland [from the islands] can be reduced and to increase the pressure on those that are arriving ‘you are not vulnerable like you were in the past’. The vulnerability criterion ... you tweak it depending on how you want to drive the system [...]”*

In Greece individuals arriving by sea are given a “preferential” treatment in that they are exempt from the geographic restriction imposed by the EU-Turkey statement and are allowed to leave for the mainland following registration only if they are designated as “vulnerable.” Thus, they may escape the crowded, unhygienic, and insecure living conditions of the camps -created on EU instigation on the five islands in 2015 and designated as “hotspots”- where they are segregated, contained and “slowed down.” Also, invoking vulnerability may confer privileges in terms of having asylum claims processed faster and favorably. Freedman reports a UNHCR official interviewed in 2015, as

saying that more women are traveling alone or with children as a strategic choice made by men to increase the chances of entering the EU. They expect women will be perceived as “vulnerable” and offered protection with the men then, being accepted as part of a family reunification policy (Freedman, 2016b, p. 18–19). Women made up 21% of all asylum claimants in 2015 and that number had jumped to 37% in 2019 (Greek Asylum Service, 2020).

The “vulnerable” list includes pregnant women, unaccompanied and separated children, single parents with minor children, people with disabilities and medical conditions, the elderly, victims of torture and gender-based violence and trafficked persons, while special status is accorded to those eligible for family reunification if other family members are already in the EU. The criteria of vulnerability are mostly gendered: pregnant women, unaccompanied children—mostly boys- and women identified as survivors of GBV (men are often missed, because they do not declare they have been victimized by GBV or they are not believed when they do so). In an invocation of vulnerability to further asylum applications, Freedman writes that NGO representatives in Greece estimate that “in some cases” it is in women’s strategic interest to arrive pregnant (or become pregnant while in the asylum process) as their claims will likely be processed faster and in their favor (Freedman, 2019, p. 11).

The relationship of precarity in the asylum status determination process and gender-based violence is complex and ambiguous. The structural violence exerted on all claimants due to the confusing, opaque, and lengthy proceedings is indisputable. Waiting has become one of the “weapons in the battle to deter” asylum seekers on the move (Schuster, 2011, p. 41; Andersson, 2014). The precariousness of “waithood” means increased risk of everyday GBV especially affecting women and children, due to poor physical infrastructures, transactional sex and inadequate services inside and outside the camps (see below).

While entering the asylum determination process may be associated with increased risk for GBV, (protracted waiting) its operationalization as “vulnerable categories” seems to create conduits which allow some people a sliver of opportunity for agency that moves them ahead in the queue, reducing thereby the hotspot GBV risks. At the same time, the labeling creates an identity in which the individual had no input and may create a sense of victimhood that is mobilized by the asylum seeker in turn, to claim rights and privileges (Honkasalo, 2018, p. 9). The “benefits” of the constructed categories may shape behavior in a way so that the individual “fits” the definition. Konstantinos, an elected official in the Municipality of Athens responsible for migrants and refugees, explains the mental process behind this mobilization: *“Once, when a woman with five kids entered Moria [camp] she was considered vulnerable. But now, if these five kids don’t have a health issue ... and then you see another Mom and her two kids and one of them has a chronic condition, let’s say asthma, and she passes off as ‘vulnerable.’ Then you look at your kids and you say, ‘one of them must become vulnerable, or ‘I must become vulnerable’ and ... the system, it makes you self-ideate, [about] hurting yourself ... When you have someone so pressed*

from the system that they can't pass through, at some point they are going to do something to pass."

Given the unintended "incentives" the constructed categories of vulnerability generate, it is not surprising that the vulnerability rates among asylum seekers are on the rise. It is interesting to compare the figures for 2015 and 2019: Pregnant women made up 3.8% of vulnerable persons in 2015 and 12.7% in 2019; abused persons were 11.6% in 2015 and 15.9% in 2019 (Greek Asylum Service, 2020).

Living Conditions

Another form of precarity increasing the risk of GBV is provided by living conditions including inadequate or non-existent accommodation and lack of support networks for asylum seekers: Sophia, a psychologist and social worker at an open Reception and Identification Center, sums this up succinctly "*The basic thing is to secure shelter.*"

The Reception and Identification Centers (RICs) on the islands and the ones on the mainland, in cities and rural areas, as well as the rented accommodation under schemes subsidized by the EU and administered either by the municipalities or NGOs, as well as rooms in the private rental market, all present their own different problems which create precariousness for the two groups primarily identified by our key informants as suffering precarity: unaccompanied minors and single women.

For the island camps the UNHCR Inter-Agency Participatory Assessment Report noted that "especially in RICs (e.g., Moria, Vathy) there are mixed latrines, showers, and accommodation overcrowding, lack of lockable containers and poor lightning." (UNHCR, 2018a). Sue, a child protection officer in an International Non-Governmental Organization (INGO), told us: "*Again, in the islands there is ...overcrowding in some reception facilities which increases risk, there is increased stress on the family context, which sees an increase in domestic violence because people are managing this stress they have here.*" Thomas, advisor on refugees to an island municipality, confirms that there had been cases of prostitution with trafficked women who were sexually abused and forced to offer their services to clients staying in the camp, something he attributed to the formation of a ghettoized population.

Under conditions of homelessness, relations with the trafficking or smuggling network are likely to continue even after relocation to cities. A report by the Greek Médecins du Monde noted that many of the women they see "are living in Greek cities in what they call 'Afghan hotels', paying €1 a night to sleep 10 to a room" (Boseley, 2017) Sexual violence or transactional, aptly called "survival" sex (Anani, 2013) are sometimes the requisite price to pay outside the camp. Nadina, co-director of an Athens-based grass root migrant women network, relates this story of control over the trafficked woman by the trafficker: "*Last Friday a woman with a baby came just before we were about to close and said she had nowhere to go. She stayed in the trafficker's place, but he was throwing her and the baby out in the morning and when she was returning in the evening—having nowhere to go-, he demanded to rape her.*"

Unaccompanied children were the most often mentioned group experiencing precarity, and, at the same time identified as being at increased risk of gender-based violence. Konstantinos, an elected official in the Municipality of Athens responsible for migrants and refugees, captures a temporal insecurity that afflicts minors uniquely and which arises from civil law classifications and asylum practices: "*...when you are 18-1 they feed you, they take care of you at 18+1 you are on the street. I can't find anything more, ... violent than that, from one day to the next the clock hand turns and then you are on the other side ... and protection stops. That is a horrific state of precariousness.*"

Human Rights organizations have repeatedly reported on the widespread detention of minors (often together with adults even at the risk of sexual abuse) (Human Rights Watch, 2016), the living conditions in RICs on the islands (Save the Children Net, 2017) in open camps under special care arrangements called "safe zones," or in informal arrangements (squats, parks). As of September 30, 2020, out of a total of 4,222 children (almost all boys) 1,019 lived in informal/insecure housing conditions such as living temporarily in apartments with others, living in squats, being homeless and moving frequently between different types of accommodation, while 226 were in "protective custody" (UNHCR Data Portal, 2020). The Ombudsman cites another dimension of institutional violence: "Children, especially children with disabilities or chronic conditions, are institutionalized in asylum type facilities at a very young age, in inadequate or abusive living conditions and remain there until they come of age and usually for life." (Greek Ombudsman Annual Report, 2019, p. 60). From our key informants, Sue, a child protection officer in an international NGO, speaks about the effects of homelessness and the absence of family protection on unaccompanied boys in camps: "*We hear stories from them, either trying to get cash and maybe exchanging sex for money or in the context of no police, not enough reception capacity to protect them in Greece. So over 50% are not living in a proper safe accommodation and so we hear that, like, in the refugee camps maybe there are supposed to be safe areas for these children, but after hours adult single males will take over and start partying and using drugs and maybe subject them to sexual harassment or exploitation.*"

Local communities often shun asylum seekers when it comes to accommodation in their neighbourhoods. Theresa, an elected official, responsible for social solidarity in the Municipality of Athens, narrated such a case: "*Oh, there was a strong reaction from the local community. If we tried to make a shelter for unaccompanied minors somewhere, there would be protests by the residents' association. This is a big problem.*"

The national institutional frameworks on accommodation for asylum seekers are undoubtedly deficient and the support staff inadequate not only because there has been an aversion -shared by the public and political personnel- to the idea that these post-2015 "mixed migrants" would not simply transit through but stay, and also because the austerity policies, in effect since 2010, have seriously underfunded public services for citizens and newcomers alike. The step up of the humanitarian actors to "handle" the refugees, is a constant reminder that the Greek economic and social crisis precarized natives and aliens into a "humanitarian" citizenship" placing them along a "partially shared continuum of

precarity” (Cabot, 2019, p. 747). The recognition of incapacity necessitated a devolution of state obligations to non-governmental and even extra-national organizations.

Services

Inadequate services, problems of articulation of services and discriminatory treatment of asylum seekers, exacerbated by various intersectionalities, provide the key dimensions of the precarity - GBV nexus. Inadequate services are an outcome of excess demand over existing resources, while poor articulation of services renders asylum seekers more vulnerable.

Overcrowding exists both in camps but also in asylum-seeker accommodation in cities. “. . . , in some agencies, those in charge of refugees in apartments are dealing with such high numbers that they can do nothing else, as social workers, they only rush from one apartment to another to take care of practical needs” (Anastasia, educator working in a feminist NGO).

Lack of adequate interpretation services is a major barrier especially for women in making their cases before the Asylum Service. Individuals may not feel comfortable to speak through particular interpreters, especially because of their gender or because the interpreters are perceived to have their own personal, religious, or sexist views: “it is not that the interpreter does not understand, it is because the woman feels ashamed to speak to him...that the interpreter will try to cover things up in some way. To cover up based on traditional values . . . so that he does not function as an interpreter at the moment, he functions as a member of that society . . . ” (Julia, a sociologist working with refugees in a Greek NGO).

Accessible psychological services for traumatized individuals are gravely inadequate: “For women who have suffered GBV [before arrival], there are very few support programs in organizations, so that they can overcome these past experiences” (Julia, a sociologist working with refugees in a Greek NGO). Prior trauma and/or ongoing GBV are aggravated by anxiety due to precarious living conditions and legal uncertainty. Living in fear and shame are often consequences for women GBV survivors in camps and outside: “It is not easy, for the abused woman—and I am not speaking of domestic violence only, which may be seen [as] socially normal, but even for women who have sustained assaults by strangers, they cannot speak easily about rape. Shame and stigma.” (Gabriele, a GVB specialist in an international NGO).

Furthermore, GBV is not limited to women asylum seekers. Gender discrimination limits males’ access to health services. Our key informants state that asylum-seeking men are rarely considered—by the state, local authorities, NGOs, health services or even other asylum seekers—as GBV survivors. They remark that the denial of rights or services to men is due to stereotypical social casting of manhood and, possibly, to a learned inability of male GBV survivors to open up and disclose what they perceive to be humiliating experiences. Gender discrimination here is tantamount to a systemic form of GBV, because barriers to services helps reproduce GBV and associated emotional trauma. This understanding of the systemic form of GBV agrees with the UNHCR position (2003, p. 11) on SGBV definition as referring to a range of acts that include systemic forms of exclusion and marginalization, such as economic and institutional violence.

Konstantinos, an elected official in the Municipality of Athens in charge of migrant and refugee affairs, discussed at length GBV against men. “Men expect that they will fight in the war, that they may perish in battle and that they will become heroes... If you are a victim of rape, e.g., because someone targets your identity, either social or sexual or gender identity, this is not common, there is much greater shame in these cases, that is, men do not open up in the same way.” Some key informants state they have seen cases of GBV against men being treated as torture and the survivors as victims of torture.

Key informants reported intersectional discrimination against asylum seekers in accessing health services. When it comes to primary medical care, even places like hospitals appear as places of discrimination against asylum seekers, aggravated by ethnic origin, gender, and race and resulting in a denial of care. Trifonas, director of an open Reception and Identification Center, remembers: “There was a woman, nine months pregnant, ready to give birth. I think she was from Kenya . . . She went to the hospital and she was told to leave. She came back [to the camp] and during the afternoon she delivered. That was discrimination! They had sent her away [. . .] if this woman were Greek, she would have been given at least some information.”

Interface with NGOs providing services is not necessarily free of gender, sexual and ethnic stereotypes Gabriele, a GVB specialist in an international NGO, was explicit: “About the African women . . . gender and racist stereotypes [are] held by people . . . who work in the institutions which supposedly provide protection... What I hear constantly from the social workers, the psychologists who educate others, is: ‘for God’s sake, these African women have all been raped?’”

Additionally, key informants argued that often, asylum seekers and refugees outside the gender binary suffer discrimination. Julia, a sociologist working with refugees in a Greek NGO, spoke of case workers who are uneasy when they interact with LGBTQ+ individuals. These feelings are expressed in subtle and indirect ways: “Yes. There is discrimination. When someone [for example] is transgender and behaves somehow [differently] and that can be seen by the other [the case worker . . .] there is a grimace of disapproval.”

Key informants provided information on many instances of intensifying precarity and increasing risks for GBV or directly reproducing it, through denial of rights and remedial services. Starting off from their primary identity as non-Greek (non-EU) citizens, i.e., “others” discrimination is based additionally on asylum seekers’ gender “intersecting” (Crenshaw, 1991) with multiple other forms of social divisions conceptualized as axes of inequality or oppression (Collins, 2010). These intersections create unique categories of heightened risk and exclusionary processes (Choo and Ferree, 2010). Key informants agreed that the groups more likely to experience discrimination and oppression based on multiple intersections are women (especially African women), men, LGBTQ+, and unaccompanied minors.

Asylum-seeking women and girls are discriminated against through gender-based exclusions from protection. In their lives then “violence is seen as normal and as something that women have to endure” (Gabriele, a GVB specialist in an international NGO). The interaction between gender and ethnic origin is often

discussed by the key informants. African women are more discriminated against as being both asylum seekers and women of color: “...especially women coming from the Congo or Nigeria, all of them, are considered prostitutes and they are treated very badly, because there are a lot of African prostitutes, mainly Nigerians, in the streets of Athens and Thessaloniki. So, when [African women] arrive in Moria [the camp on Lesbos island] they are treated as ‘whores’” (Gabriele, a GVB specialist in an international NGO).

Key informants were cognizant that gender discrimination affects also male asylum seekers due to the gender stereotype that links masculinity with aggression and dangerousness and excludes men from the category of “vulnerable” individuals. Konstantinos, an elected official in the Municipality of Athens, told us that “at the beginning, around 2015–2016, the most vulnerable group was single men. No one wanted to work with them.”

Asylum seekers who identify as LGBTQ+ are confronted more often than the rest of the refugee population with multiple “othering.” Gabriele, a GVB specialist in an international NGO, was emphatic about how “women” should include those who self-define as women: “Those who experience GBV are women and those who self-define as women, without this agreeing with their biological sex . . .” Konstantinos, an elected official in the Municipality of Athens, summed up the exclusions against LGBTQ+ individuals: “It is one thing, to put it bluntly, a Greek gay and quite another a foreign gay. The latter is not simply a man who is gay.”

Unaccompanied minors also suffer from a multiple disadvantage when it comes to GBV at the intersections of “other,” gender and age. All these key-informant opinions relating to the intersectional gender identities of asylum seekers in Greece, are in full agreement with findings of many international organizations about GBV globally (e.g., UNHCR, 2003; WHO, 2013).

Protection of Asylum Seekers From GBV

In 2017, UNHCR received reports from 622 survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) on the Greek Aegean islands, out of which at least 28 per cent experienced SGBV after arriving in Greece. Women reported inappropriate behavior, sexual harassment and attempted sexual attacks as the most common forms of SGBV. Of all the incidents registered by the agency in the country during the second half of the year, 80 percent of the survivors were female (UNHCR, 2018b). Similar reports were released from Human Rights Watch in 2017 citing fear of assault even in the sections of the notorious Moria camp that was reserved for women and girls traveling alone. (Human Rights Watch, 2017b).

Response to GBV at the national level is sluggish and poorly coordinated at best. The justice system in Greece moves very slowly in removing the perpetrators from the social scene, so that they are free to terrorize their victim for a long time. This sluggishness is particularly consequential in enclosed spaces, such as hotspots, and with populations in precarious conditions on account of a multiplicity of grounds, such as asylum seekers. Furthermore, many communities may look

down upon or even condemn a woman who is accusing her spouse of domestic violence or may not see the police as offering protection. K.Y., a GBV specialist working on the protection of survivors in an IGO, describes the “impunity” of perpetrators, because of bureaucratic and legal procedures ending in contradictory and precarious outcomes in terms of safety for the survivors: “Another contributing factor that we see a lot is impunity. Even when we do have response, we have perpetrators that are identified, that are detained, [then] they are often released the next day and they are in the same location with the survivor which exposes them to greater risks and also less willingness to even report the case [because of] the risk of retaliation. Because until the trial date it would be perhaps weeks and months and during this time the perpetrator is freely living among the population.” Trifonas, director of an open Reception and Identification Center, is more blunt on the “missing” role of the state viewing it as collusion with the perpetuation of GBV against asylum seekers: “We can say it is ultimately the state’s indifference that does not want to help out in a certain situation.”

Away from the camp but still living precariously, financial dependence on abusive spouses fuels asylum-seeking women’s hesitation to leave them. It is these anxieties that often drive domestic violence immigrant and refugee survivors back to the abusive domestic situation (Erez, 2000). State institutions and humanitarian actors appear to hold gender stereotypes that result in limiting access to financial supports. Nadina, co-director of an Athens-based grass root women migrant network, narrates such a case of institutional discrimination. The stereotypical gender perception of men being the “breadwinners,” rationally managing the family budget, was reflected in decisions related to the provision of cash assistance (i.e., the prepaid cash cards program by UNHCR) to men. The end result was men would spend the cash they were entrusted with for the family on cigarettes and alcohol, leaving the women to scrape for essential items being given for free in NGO shops: “when this program started, the cash card was given to the head of the family—the husband— and when I protested this decision, I was told that it would be impossible to give cash cards to everyone. ‘So, we give it to the head of the family. If they [refugees] wish something different, let them tell us that the head of the family is the woman’. If that is ever possible! The money was given to the husband and women refugees were coming to us furious” (Nadina). This practice changed later.

The same key informant, Nadina, from the women migrants’ network, paints vividly the full picture of structural negligence against asylum-seeking women affected by domestic violence: “From the lack of a 24/7 referral and interpretation line (at that time) to the fact that she must make the complaint herself, and not another person on her behalf. Very often they tell you [at the police station] that now is too late, 3 pm already, she should come back tomorrow, and this woman may have set up an entire ‘front’ to be able to leave the house at that hour... Even if she arrives at the shelter the first 100 h when it is still critical for such an incident [domestic violence] she cannot see a social worker beyond the initial intake—which consists in giving her a nightgown, a piece of soap, a key etc. She does not see any social worker or psychologist or lawyer who can explain to her the prospects, where she will find

herself, what she needs to do. She has no cash, she is forced to cut herself off from the organization which has supported her so far, because she cannot be involved with them if she has been referred elsewhere.”

In conclusion, in cases of domestic violence in the lives of asylum-seeking women in Greece, there is a definite combination of an ineffective state response, including lack of sensitivity by police and other state actors, and lack of continuity in providing support to domestic violence survivors. In the context of precarious legal status, limited or non-existent linguistic skills, lack of communication/information on legal options, limited support networks and scarcity of financial resources, it is not surprising that domestic violence survivors often “choose” to return to the abuser. All these risk factors have been well documented in scholarly research as contributing to reproducing or aggravating the GBV experiences of migrant women (e.g., Moynihan et al., 2008; Fong, 2010; Tastsoglou et al., 2015).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This qualitative study inquired into gender-based violence among women asylum seekers using the theoretical lenses of gender and precarity. We use precariousness in the tradition of Butler, and we recognize the ontological vulnerability of bodies and social beings left foundering by the abandonment of institutions which, conventionally, are expected to mitigate the dangers inherent in all life. These hazards are intensified and differentially affect asylum seekers as they attempt to arrive in Europe, denuded of whatever rights they may have once enjoyed as citizens in their country of origin and invested in the category of “irregular” others at the border. Gender-based violence is shown to be systemic and structural and is enacted as different forms, originating from institutions, practices, and individuals, and directed against asylum seekers. It occurs in all the stages of the migratory journey forming a continuum although in this paper we focus on the segments of border crossing into Europe, entry into the asylum determination process and early stages of the latter’s completion.

We locate the points in this continuum where precarity produces violence and show its gendered forms. The first locus, is in transit and European and Greek border crossing, when asylum seekers are confronted with restrictive asylum policies which increase both life -and GBV risk and instrumentalize GBV as a mean of transaction; second, during the long waiting period for the asylum process which either keeps asylum seekers in limbo or forces them to enter the “vulnerable” category, through the dark tunnel of suffering GBV; third, in their everyday life when they must deal with homelessness and inadequate living conditions that further precaritize their lives and increases the risk of GBV; fourth, when they struggle to overcome language barriers, deficiency of care services and intersectional discrimination (based on gender, gender perceptions, age, country of origin, etc.) in order to access services; last, by remaining trapped in abusive environments and

relationships due to the ineffective state response, a sluggish criminal justice system, and the victim’s financial dependence on the perpetrator.

We acknowledge that the sustained intensity of migrations toward the EU- in the last two decades of the 20th but especially the second decade of the 21st centuries, have “provoked” -in an increasingly vehement securitization discourse- national and European system of laws, policies and practices regarding asylum seeking which present formidable obstacles to mobility from outside the Union (at the same time that intra-EU mobility is promoted through arrangements such as the Schengen Treaty). These obstacles are, nonetheless, traversed, and surmounted, albeit at great cost and suffering, by those that they are intended to immobilize. The encounter of migrant agency and EU/state apparatus of mobility controls and defense of external borders reveals the acts of violence committed in the name of security and sovereignty. However, it is this encounter which “allows us to recognize the precariousness of others and that it is in this recognition that an ethical encounter becomes possible” (Millar, 2017, p. 4). It is interesting that most of our key informants drew our attention to this structural violence and criticized both European and national reception conditions and regulations as being both ineffective and inhumane.

Looking through the lens of our key informants, and adopting a feminist and intersectional approach our research shows that 1) forced and mixed migration set apart asylum seekers as “other” from citizens and forces them into precarious positions with GBV being a permanent feature of their experiences, 2) intersectional discrimination aggravates the precarity of these positions and facilitates the reproduction of GBV ensuring asylum seekers’ incomplete or “lessened citizenship,” and 3) systemic inequalities (re)construct gendered social and institutional power relations that are being *performed* (Butler, 1990) and validated on the bodies -and in the lives of asylum seekers.

Incomplete citizenship built on intersectional discrimination and multiple exclusions, forms the backbone for the precarity and gender-based violence of the embodied and gendered asylum seekers, as they face the classification and ordering of the EU border and asylum regimes, but also the state and humanitarian actors’ political and cultural norms, as well as citizens’ everyday behaviors. It is this incomplete citizenship and intersectional discrimination that become instruments of precarization, which contribute (directly or indirectly) to gender-based violence, which, in turn, intensifies precarity. A vicious circle is being constructed that follows a downward spiral entraining and “decreasing the liveability” (McNeilly, 2016) of those already located at precarious positions.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because research ethics requires that researchers limit the use of interview data collected to the particular research project for which the ethics permission is sought. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to evie.tastsoglou@smu.ca.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The study involving human participants was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Board (REB), Saint Mary's University, Halifax Canada and the Ethics Research Committee, Panteion University, Athens, Greece. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

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