

Dear Members

I have attached 2 articles. The first is the workshop I attended at Graz in August. We heard from a Syrian refugee about her experiences and the challenges that she has had to deal with to date. The second is a transcript of the speech by Helga Konrad one of the keynote speakers.

I think you will find them extremely informative.

Regards

Oonagh Ferrity
Acting CER

Workshop 2 - Women Refugees in Europe

This workshop was introduced by Sophie Ederer under the title 'Not Born a Refugee Woman'. Sophie is an advisor at the Federal Office of Asylum & Alien Affairs. There was a brief overview of Austrian Asylum Law 2016. According to the Federal Ministry of the Interior 42,285 asylum applications were submitted in 2016 of which 33% were made by female refugees. Sophie believes that by listening to the stories of refugees we might be able to change the negative stereotyping and prejudice that many refugees encounter. She introduced Linda Al-Ghalayni, a Syrian refugee.

She is 39 years of age with 3 daughters. She had a lovely home and a career as a journalist. She studied at Damascus University and obtained a degree in English Literature. She speaks 4 languages including German and English. She told us that her home and her daughter's schools were bombed. They moved from building to building. Then one day her husband disappeared. She was told by a friend that he had been detained by the Syrian government's security forces. She spent a year trying to find out where he was being held but to no avail. Fearing for her children's safety she fled to Turkey. There she continued as a free-lance journalist. The photograph behind Linda shows her reporting on a suicide bombing by a young boy on the border with Turkey. While in Turkey she had access to what are now known as 'the Caesar Photographs'. Code named 'Caesar' he was an official forensic photographer with the Syrian Military Police employed to photograph bodies of dead detainees. He defected and smuggled 50,000 images out of Syria. He is now assisting the UN Commission of inquiry on Syria. Among the images she found one of her husband. He had been tortured.

She left Turkey and travelled to Austria. She stated that there are high expectations from the receiving countries that refugees will integrate and communicate but she believes that there is a duty on both sides to help each other.

"As refugees we have many problems but we do not come here to occupy your country and get money without working. We do not know the traditions and the rules that control the system here. We are coming here because we are running away, just trying to save our children's lives – that's it". She never had a dream to come to Europe. She has relatives and friends in well paid professions throughout the world but she had been happy in her homeland. Even with all the advantages that she had she has found her journey, so far, extremely difficult.

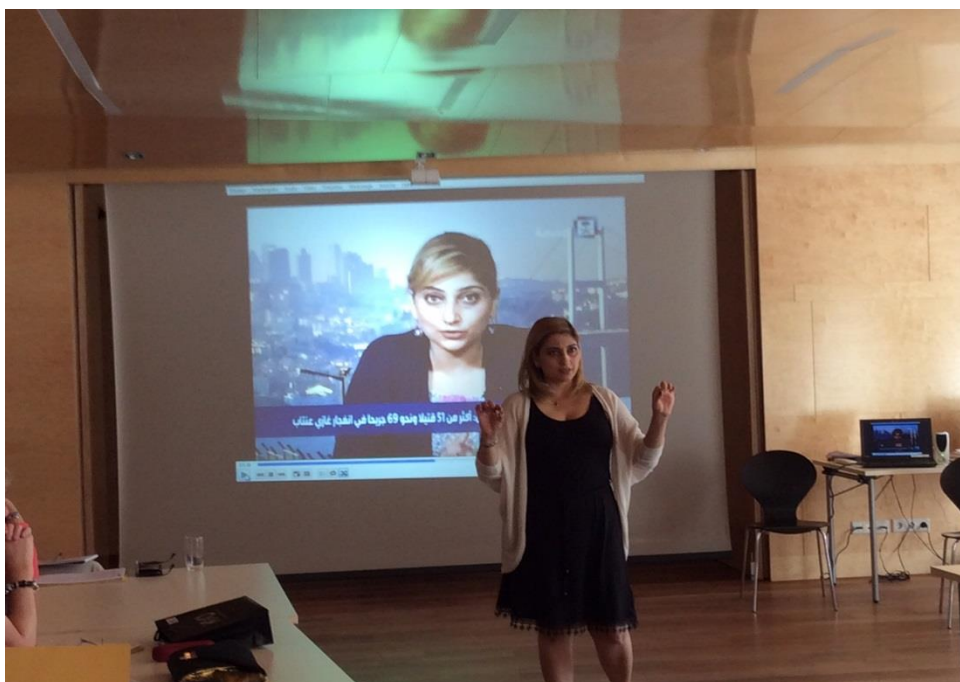
She said that the three main problems faced by refugees were firstly the language. Many do not speak English and they need time to learn German. Without competency in the language it is impossible to find employment. Secondly filling out the official forms for asylum can be

overwhelming and many fail to realise that each form is important. The majority of refugees will not have encountered this amount of bureaucracy in their homeland. Her asylum application has been approved. It took 5 months and just recently she has been issued with a work permit. She found the procedure very complicated despite being educated and speaking German. Thirdly the inability to work has frustrated many. Any Syrian refugees that she knows are hardworking people. They are used to work, they worked hard in their homeland. When they are eventually allowed to take up employment it is difficult to find a job. She has assisted many refugees by translating for them when dealing with the different government agencies. When she suggested that the agencies could employ her as a translator she was told that this was not possible. She receives 150 euros a month for food and is housed at a reception centre but hopes to move in the near future to private rental accommodation.

She also talked about the role of the media. "I feel the media are portraying refugees as poor, uneducated, dirty and vulgar people. All refugees are not the same. Just like any other country, in Syria, there are educated and uneducated people, there are city and country people but we are seen as all the same".

In relation to religious freedom she believes that people should be allowed to practice their own religion in their own way provided it doesn't affect others. She knows of refugees that have become Christians since arriving in Austria in the mistaken belief that it will help them to integrate faster and receive more support to do so. She thinks this is nonsense and that you receive help because you are human and not because you are Christian.

In the Q&A session in reply to when she would return to her homeland she said that, at present, this was not a realistic prospect. When Linda was asked what her hopes for the future were she said "We want to live here, we want to integrate but we need time to learn the systems, the rules and the ways. People need to understand this. By ourselves alone we cannot do this."



Helga Konrad – Former Federal Minister for Women

“Migrant/Refugee Women on the Radar”

Profile

1993-95 - Councillor in Graz

1995 to 1997- Chairman of the SPÖ.

1990-93, 1996 and 1997-99 - elected to the National Council

1995 to 1997- Minister of Women's Affairs

2000 to 2004 - Chairman of the EU Stability Task Force on Human Trafficking for South Eastern Europe

2004 to 2006 - Special Ombudsmen in the fight against human trafficking of the OSCE

In relation to migrants we simply think that they are there without looking at the position more closely.

According to the estimates of international organisations available there are more than 200 million people who live as migrants outside their country of origin so when you take a closer look at Europe and in industrialised countries the numbers are relatively small and it is important that the position is looked at in a more realistic way.

In the past 2 decades industrialised countries, in particular, have counted record number of migrants but altogether compared to the world wide population the number is relatively small accounting for no more than 3.5% with a maximum of 4% of the worldwide population so industrialised nations should recognise this.

Traditionally migration was dominated by men and women migrants mainly in the context of family reunification. In recent years however a significant proportion of migrants have been women who have migrated on their own. Recent figures indicate that women are in the majority and while we can't be absolutely sure of the figures, statistics that we have indicate that it's up to 53% and some figures give a higher percentage. So far the female dimension of migration has been rarely addressed in terms of services. Migration is different for women than it is for men. Women migrants are often doubly disadvantaged in the labour market as migrants and as women. In many countries of transition employment of migrant women has fallen by 40% and the quality of employment has deteriorated dramatically. Women normally remain unemployed, are offered low ranking jobs and are paid far less than men in similar jobs. Reports from the European Union indicate that women migrants' employment is concentrated in certain economic sectors such as domestic work. Their status as dependants often limits their access to employment and the wives of residents may depend on an employed male husband. If the relationship changes a migrant woman may lose her legal status and may become an irregular migrant and as such may face deportation. These are matters that could be relatively easy to change especially when a woman dependant on her husband leaves him because for instance she is being subjected to domestic abuse.

It is absurd that women migrants face a higher risk of being subjected to violence than men. Their economic situation combined with fewer job opportunities and widespread disenfranchisement of women are the biggest push factors for them to migrate and seek work abroad. This increases the number of vulnerable people – vulnerable also to traffickers

and their accomplices. My recent expertise has centred on trafficking in human beings. So we know that migration and trafficking have close links. We know that the number of women who are willing to risk their lives in wanting to escape from poverty and to earn money for themselves and their families has been growing in recent years, but we also know that in contrast to free movement of goods, free movement of people has remained a sensitive, political and social issue even though more and more countries are coming to realise that they will need migrants if they wish to maintain their current growth rates. According to the report of the Employment Committee of the Council of the European Union, international migration plays an important role in population growth - without the net migration the population would have declined within the European Union. It would be interesting to study the role of migrant women in the socialisation of future generations, the values and skills they pass on to their children and the long term impact on the migrant within the host countries.

Migrant women have always been local and global actors of not just being badly treated but also recipients of manifold exploitation. Evidence suggests that women are more likely than men to engage in short term and short distance movement and they frequently engage in what is known as circular migration, that is to say they usually travel with a tourist visa and without work permits and are mostly occupied in domestic service as cleaners, as babysitter, as care takers. This means that they often get trapped in occupations which do not correspond to the human capital and skills they import from their home countries which results in a double loss of skills in both countries. Often migrants in general and women in particular take up jobs they would never have accepted in their home country. This is also true for men but it is even truer for women and this process involves an enormous loss of human resources. Against this background in many countries so called informal employment has become the major source of income for lower income groups in general and for women in particular. We are aware in countries with high unemployment in many western world countries irregular migrants find it easier to find jobs in unprotected labour market not in the official one. Experts believe that even a marginal utilisation of international labour flows would create gains for the world economy far larger than prospective gains from trade negotiations. The benefit to workers from poorer countries would yield hundreds of billions of dollars for the developing world so we need to have the bigger picture of what is going on.

In many countries the number of women living below the poverty line is much higher than that of men. Unemployment among women with the same level of education as men is much higher. For women who do find jobs their income will be 30-40% lower than that of men in similar positions – this applies in many countries e.g. African countries. Very often legislation does not provide for the protection of women's fundamental economic rights – frequently exposing them to discrimination. Women with full time jobs have to shoulder the extra burden of the responsibility of looking after children and households. We women all know that. This also affects their career development and the upgrading of their professional skills. When you are a migrant the situation is often mirrored in the destination countries primarily in the demand for unprotected labour and services. This is very often the opening for human trafficking, as I mentioned before, into forced labour where female migrants are frequently exploited in domestic service and sweatshops in restaurant chains and many more.

Prior to 9/11 we all know that the discussion about migration in general focused on issues such as addressing the numbers for the labour market requirements and the integration of migrants and multiculturalism. Nowadays the focus is increasingly on security and for some time to come migration is likely to be perceived through the magnifying glass of the fight against terrorism. Owing to the fact that most industrialised countries wish to restrict immigration to the absolute minimum they seem to compete for the most restrictive asylum

regulations that is in Europe at the moment. The choice left to the majority of migrants is illegal or irregular migration.

In recent years the number of migrants using irregular ways in travelling into the countries without permits has steadily risen. The UN protocol on trafficking human beings suggests especially women and children are at the mercy of the traffickers and their accomplices. Currently intergovernmental cooperation in the field of migration management is concentrated on stepping up border controls and preventing irregular migration and illegal immigration. But concentrating on border controls, deterrents and illegal repatriation of migrants, many of whom are not identified victims of trafficking, is frequently the beginning of a vicious circle. Statistics confirm that up to 50% of those illegally deported are reintroduced into the criminal cycle – we call it recycling. Instead of realising that such measures are short sighted it is stubbornly held that these are effective means of self-protection, serving the interests of state security. We tried to discuss this 10/15/20 years ago so it is not new and it is still not on the actual current debate on migration and refugees. The thinking and the reaction of what is going on is very low. The fact that migration in general, regular and irregular, is more often linked with criminality and organised crime impacts most negatively on women and children. Criminal organisations are able to profit from the demands for low cost unprotected labour and commercial sex deriving immense profits. In addition the emergence of illegal markets pose a danger that women drift into the criminal business of trafficking. Most of these irregular and undocumented migrants are being exploited, have no access to healthcare, are unaware of their rights, are exposed to mental and physical abuse, are underpaid or have their wages withheld by middlemen. Instead of providing appropriate protection they are treated as illegal immigrants and as soon as possible returned to their own countries which in reality are not safe countries. There is also the assumption that to offer an extension of stay or protection services in general would attract more migrants and be abused. Since most European countries and other destination countries are concentrating on the fight against illegal immigration trafficked persons run the risk of being categorised as illegal immigrants and frequently as criminals and are, in some cases, being illegally deported and even put in jail.

We should also realise that human trafficking involves outdated and unacceptable attitudes about and towards women in society. So it should be realised that the empowerment of women is the key toward protecting against many forms of exploitation. Empowerment means the establishment of equal opportunities between the genders and extending choices. New frameworks must be developed to give women increased access to their fundamental human rights. Women should be seen as an investment instead a burden. Many studies indicate that migration involves deskilling of some groups of women e.g. many Filipino women with degrees come and work in domestic service and the entertainment industry. As compared to men most migrant women end up performing the '3 D' jobs which mean dirty, dangerous and demeaning. They are in isolated situations with limited opportunity to leave their jobs. Women more than men tend to perform jobs that are not covered by legislation or social protection. Governments lack a clear policy framework with regards to migrant workers and further lack effective enforcement mechanisms with clear management. Legislation is fine but they do not do anything with it – it is just paper.