

Integration of female asylum seekers

Female asylum seekers are an extremely heterogeneous target group: it is composed of illiterate individuals who lack any proper schooling and of well-educated academics. Asylum seekers may be single, married or widowed women. They may be women without any children or mothers with or without a husband. Female asylum seekers are entrepreneurs, but they are also women who have never worked and who believe their place is at home. They come from the most diverse countries, cultural heritages and traditions. They have different mother tongues and their command of German and other foreign languages is quite varied.

The Women's Self-Perception and How they Discern their Role

The heterogeneity of female asylum seekers comes to light when examining how they perceive their role as women in society. For many women, having a career is an essential part of how they identify themselves. Indeed, many female asylum seekers from former communist countries possess skills and vocational experience in areas still uncommon for women in Austria. On the other hand, other women have a difficult time envisioning themselves taking part in the labour market. This is based upon their cultural and social heritage, and upon prevalent views regarding gender roles in their homelands.

Perceptions regarding the distribution of interfamily responsibilities also vary: in many families childcare is seen as the undertaking of both men and women, whereby in others it is viewed as solely being the responsibility of women.

Difficulties in Labour Market Integration

On various occasions, the individual's circumstances impede their integration into the labour market. However, the integration of female asylum seekers into the labour market is also unassailably difficult due to existing structural hindrances. Female asylum seekers are at a double disadvantage: they are discriminated against in the labour market, as women find themselves in less lucrative positions even today, and they receive less pay than men do for carrying out the same job. Serving to further impede their search for employment are their foreign origins, a sometimes insufficient command of the German language, or an exotic name or accent. Realistically speaking, female asylum seekers have very marginal prospects in today's labour market. Their endeavours to find legal employment are often futile. Those

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women who are indeed able to obtain a position are often drastically over-qualified for the post. Many are only able to find posts cleaning or doing other odd jobs even though they have completed vocational and academic schooling in their home countries. Training and education achieved outside of Europe is seldom officially recognized and, in the case that it is, is usually coupled with expensive court proceedings and costs.

The Burden of Migration

Many women, especially those with a family, experience migration as an encumbrance and terrible burden. Some of them were not even involved in the decision-making process that led to their coming to Austria. More often than not, women are the ones who take the brunt of the burden when it comes to caring for children and household. They are under enormous pressure to hold the family together and provide a certain level of stability - often despite suffering their own traumas or having to cope with traumatized family members. The existing living conditions in the refugee quarters severely detract from the traditional responsibilities the women have had. Many refugee quarters provide three meals a day. This encroaches terribly in their ability to provide for themselves and in the realm of child-rearing. Many women are also unaccustomed to living in such close, intimate quarters with men who they are not related to. The intimate interaction with men of radically different cultural legacies is also a burden for women without families. Another hurdle asylum seekers face is that they must navigate their way through a new, unfamiliar culture. This challenge taxes already troubled families further. Also, many families are patriarchal in nature and the incessant questioning of traditional gender roles only adds fuel to the fire.

The Importance of Social Integration

The holistic integration of women seeking asylum cannot be achieved through measures solely supporting vocational integration. The assumption that employment opens doors to social interaction may be true under certain conditions and may be possible for male asylum seekers to a limited degree. However, this theory has little application in the actual lives of female asylum seekers. With regard to women, it is therefore necessary to implement measures which extend beyond just vocational integration in the labour market. Targeted measures which contribute to the social integration of female asylum seekers are of the essence. For many women, employment is not an option - either owing to their self-perception as women or because of household duties. In such cases, access to at least some areas of social life in Austria is of great significance. Naturally, basic linguistic skills must be mastered before such social interactions are possible.

Measures for social integration promote contact and instigate encounters with members of the local community - be it in mother and child group programmes, in kindergarten or school, be it by parents' nights, coffee parties or celebrations, in choirs or cooking groups, in churches or religious communities, or through the framework of neighbourly help. When female asylum seekers have the opportunity to partake in such activities, they have a chance to come into contact with prevalent views regarding gender roles in Austria. Such experiences could also lead to a change in how they regard themselves as women: they may even discover new horizons - ones they never thought possible up until now due to their hitherto existing self-perceptions. For women seeking asylum, vocational integration is only possible after the necessary steps towards social integration have been made. Measures for social integration are especially vital in cases where vocational integration is not an option. Mothers can become key figures for the social integration of their children: they are capable of bridging the gap between their unique cultural heritage and germane Austrian culture.

Gender-Mainstreaming in the Project

In the state of Salzburg, women form about 30 percent of the sum total of asylum seekers. During the duration of the project, roughly 490 women seeking asylum were residing in the state of Salzburg. Only 75 of them were dwelling in the four project regions. Considering this relatively low number and the immense heterogeneity of the target group, it was very difficult to form groups of women with the same point of departure (for example, homogenous groups based on a shared cultural heritage or mother tongue). Very often, only two or three women with the same background were living in a particular refugee quarter simultaneously.

Hence, project measures had to be designed to accommodate the most varied of learning capacities. They also had to take a range of living conditions into consideration. The project's frameworks needed to be extremely flexible and to be able adjust themselves, one by one, to the individual women.

The foreign language acquisition courses, especially those offered for women only, encouraged dialogues regarding gender roles. The exclusive, women only courses facilitated discussions amongst female asylum seekers regarding the status of women and pertaining to specific incidents, where cultures sometimes clashed. Moreover, the course books portray daily events and situations in the working world, which allude to gender roles both overtly and implicitly. The course instructors themselves were working women and, at the same time, authority figures because of their position as a teacher. Because these realities, the issue of gender roles was further broached. Chapter 2 describes in detail how the general living conditions of the female course participants was considered in the configuration, structuring and development of the foreign language acquisition courses.

It was possible to only marginally incorporate women within the framework of charitable employment: 17 of the 63 individuals who executed such services were women. However, their share of the total hours worked was clearly under 10 percent. The situation in Lungau was much rosier: here, responsible parties managed to find employment opportunities transcending the "classic" (building yard) jobs. Women worked in kindergartens, for the association Lebenshilfe, and in libraries. The dissatisfactory situation of female asylum seekers has its roots in a complex multitude factors: the difficult living conditions of the women (of whom several became pregnant during the course of the project), limited employment opportunities, and interfamily priorities.

The accompanying learning workshops tried to make special allowances for the state of affairs shaping the lives of female asylum seekers. In Mittersill, for example, a course was especially designed to promote their self-esteem and self-confidence. Self-confidence is not only important during interviews for jobs or for possible future employment opportunities. It also assists the women in coping with everyday circumstances and problems. In all three project regions, there were workshops about women's health. These workshops offered both a cultural point of reference and practical support for the women's health issues.

The project module "work IT!" involved asylum seekers in the construction of a web portal. Here, asylum seekers were engaged in the project's management. They contributed to the content and final structure of the homepage.

In the dialogue processes accompanying the other project activities, the subjects of gender roles and, specifically, the roles of Muslim women were continually broached. These subjects were often made the explicit topic of discussions. Participants in the dialogue processes repeatedly deliberated over the general living conditions of female asylum seekers. The discussions made people conscious of existent hindrances to integration. A workshop was held in Puch to make enquiries how to improve the living conditions for women seeking asylum. The current housing conditions were mentioned as a central point to be improved, as well as the possibilities for interactions with other women and especially with Austrian women.

In the context of the job-coaching accompanying Project FluEQUAL, only coaches with affirmed expertise in dealing with gender aspects were employed. Job-coaching can only be effective when it takes the unique situation of female clients into account.

Childcare as an Indispensable Element

Childcare was offered during the operation of all FluEQUAL project measures. Although the offer was not always taken nor always needed, access to adequate childcare is an essential component of gender-mainstreaming. Experience shows that forms of childcare should be flexible. Depending on the family's needs, childcare can be provided by a day mother (or sitter), a kindergarten or another resident of the quarters. The form best suiting the needs of the family must be discussed and planned in a manner giving the family enough warning. For some families, it is a totally new life experience to allow their infants to be cared for by someone not within the immediate family.

The Vocational Integration of Asylum Seekers?

There is no all-inclusive, blanket answer to the question of how female asylum seekers can best be integrated into the labour market. The heterogeneity of the target group calls for flexibility and a variety of tactics.

In order to support the vocational integration of female asylum seekers, methods must be developed which help them orientate themselves and which prepare them for the labour market.

For many women seeking asylum, vocational integration is only possible if and when channels for social and societal integration are opened. It is crucial that the women are acclimatized to Austrian culture so that they can gain a foothold in their new surroundings. Nonetheless, for some women vocational integration will always remain only a dream.

In any case, the integration of female asylum seekers can only transpire if they are incorporated into the process just the way they are. Even if women seeking asylum do not always embody the image of women we have here in Austria and in the western world (because it, for example, does not include the realization of a career), it is still necessary and meaningful that their social integration be backed in every way possible.