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# Gender and Asylum Seeking in a European Borderland: Intersectional Discriminations and “Lessened” Citizenship

Chara Karagiannopoulou<sup>a</sup> , Evangelia Tastsoglou<sup>b</sup>  and Sandy Petrinioti<sup>c</sup> 

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents a feminist analysis of the manifold and intertwined discriminations faced by asylum-seeking women in a European “borderland”—specifically, Greece. It explores how these discriminations operate across law, policy, practice, and discourse, while highlighting the dynamic interplay of intersectional discriminations with citizenship rights and practices. Data were collected through 35 interviews with asylum-seeking women. The analysis shows that (a) intersectional discriminations occur at both macro- and micro-levels, reproducing and consolidating the women’s “lessened” citizenship, while (b) “lessened” citizenship reinforces their precarious status and leaves them vulnerable to multiform, multi-sited gender-based violence.

## KEYWORDS

lessened citizenship; intersectional discriminations; gender-based violence; asylum-seeking women; Greece; Europe

## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article présente une analyse féministe des discriminations multiples et entrecroisées auxquelles sont confrontées les femmes demandeuses d’asile dans une « région frontalière » de l’Europe, en l’occurrence la Grèce. Il explore la manière dont ces discriminations opèrent à travers la loi, les politiques, les pratiques et les discours, tout en soulignant l’interaction dynamique des discriminations intersectionnelles avec les droits et les pratiques en matière de citoyenneté. Les données ont été recueillies au moyen de 35 entretiens avec des femmes demandeuses d’asile. L’analyse démontre que (a) les discriminations intersectionnelles se produisent à la fois au niveau macro et micro, reproduisant et consolidant la citoyenneté « réduite » des femmes, tandis que (b) la citoyenneté « réduite » renforce leur statut précaire et les rend vulnérables à une violence basée sur le genre qui se manifeste de manière multiforme et multi-située.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper offers a feminist analysis of intersecting discriminations—operating through law, policy, practice, and discourse—against asylum-seeking women, survivors of gender-based violence (GBV), in a European “borderland”—Greece—during the 2010s and ar-

gues that discriminations based on the intersections of gender, race, and otherness are at the core of their “citizenship.” We attempt here to contribute to the discussion about asylum seeking, gender, and citizenship by examining our empirical material through the lens of citizenship theory and the notion of situated intersectionality (Yuval-Davis,

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2015) as it plays out in a specific location, time, and socio-political conditions.

This article derives from a larger research project examining the nexus between GBV and precarity. GBV is abuse targeted at individuals or groups because of their perceived gender. It takes many forms, including physical and sexual violence, the threat of violence, mental and economic injury, neglect, and denial of services and protections (UNHCR, n.d., 2003). Precarity in the migration context is understood as a condition of generalized insecurity and vulnerability built on the compromised sociolegal status of asylum seekers. We claim that GBV (or vulnerability to it) in the lives of asylum-seeking women in Greece derives from inadequate state and social protections—"lessened citizenship" (Maher, 2004, p. 144)—and, in turn, further hinders participation in society. Moreover, we claim that the "humanitarian citizenship" (Cabot, 2019) regime in place in Greece, a European Union (EU) member state, has fallen short in terms of protection and basic services for GBV survivors in the case of asylum-seeking women.

We acknowledge that status, rights, and protections can only be achieved through membership in state citizenship, migrant residency, or human rights regimes, although we recognize that these formal rights are not uniformly and consistently applied, and even formally full citizens may suffer "lessened citizenship." Sovereign citizenship is constructed outside the ambit of aliens who cannot claim membership either through *jus sanguinis*, *jus soli*, or naturalization procedures. Rights being granted to people who have immigrated through regular channels hinge on compliance with residency requirements and other citizenship acquisition rules (Soysal, 1994). Human rights regimes comprise the laws, policies, and institutions that guarantee fundamental rights of personhood,

regardless of nationality, religion, gender, class, or other identity markers, for persons in a sovereign state territory, enshrined in international human rights law.

Social scientists' understanding of citizenship goes beyond formal rights, however, and involves a dynamic interrelationship of economic, social, political, civil, and psychological dimensions (Tastsoglou & Dobrowolsky, 2006). We use social inequality, carried out through the "exclusionary intersectionalities" (Kiwon, 2021, p. 285) of significant societal divides and identities, as a concrete way (Romero, 2017) to assess the status of this broader notion of citizenship. To understand the workings of exclusionary intersectionalities, we draw upon the Yuval-Davis's (2015) concept of "situated intersectionality," contextualizing our analysis in the geographic, social, political, and temporal confluence of international, European, and national asylum law, policies, and practices, as well as the large movements of asylum seekers arriving in the borderland of Greece (Balibar, 2009) of the EU, during the 2010s. Furthermore, our methodological choice to focus on asylum seekers' experiences allows us to go beyond the inequalities embedded in laws and practices.

We examine humanitarian citizenship as a regime arising out of organized state and non-state (intergovernmental organizations [IGOs] and international non-governmental organizations [INGOs]) efforts to respond to forced migration-induced humanitarian crises. These efforts profess to conform to the international Refugee Convention and the basic principles of international human rights law. We deem the EU and international funding, the mobilization of EU agencies (Frontex, European Asylum Support Office [EASO], Europol, Eurojust), international agencies (UNHCR, International Organization for Migration [IOM], UNICEF), and a

whole spate of international and national NGOs, as well as EU and Greek laws, institutions, and administrative practices that responded to the high inflows of asylum seekers passing through the eastern Mediterranean and arriving at the Greek (European) border, as one model of a humanitarian citizenship regime.

We drew upon interviews with 35 asylum-seeking women completed between 2019 and 2021. These women belonged to four linguistic groups—Arabic, Dari, Farsi, and French—with origins from Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, and west and central African countries. They were Christian, Muslim, and of other African religions. All identified as heterosexual, cisgender women. They recounted their passage to Europe and their experiences in Greece speaking in their own language (without interpreters) to four women interviewers from Melissa, a trusted migrant women’s grassroots NGO based in Athens. The interviews were transcribed, translated to English, and analyzed using a qualitative data analysis program (QDA Miner, v.5, Provalis Research).

Taking a feminist approach, we, the researchers, recognize that the asylum-seeking women who shared their experiences with us were subjects of knowledge positioned at different loci than ourselves, faced different power asymmetries, and experienced the world from different standpoints. Consequently, this paper communicates the knowledge and opinions of the women mediated through our understanding and interpretation.

## THE CONTEXT

The mass arrival of asylum seekers in the southern and especially the eastern Mediterranean region around the second decade of the millennium, originating from some of the world’s worst conflict spots—Syria,

Afghanistan, Iraq, and sub-Saharan Africa<sup>1</sup>—created unprecedented pressure on one EU external border state, Greece, which was at the time experiencing a financial crisis, with severe austerity measures on spending imposed on consecutive Greek governments by the eurozone. The convergence of the financial–political crisis and refugee mass arrivals made Greece a site of humanitarian crisis, with several IGOs and dozens of local, European, and international NGOs converging to tackle the refugee inflows, thus giving rise to what one observer called “an emerging ‘humanitarian marketplace’ of global significance” (Cabot, 2019, p. 760).

A wider regional disruption occurred as asylum seekers sought passage to the rest of the 27 EU member states. Secondary movements went unchecked for several months in 2015 and early 2016, before intermediary Balkan and central European states closed their borders and the EU Council decided to retain control of EU external borders and effectively immobilize and contain in Greece tens of thousands of asylum seekers. This border control enterprise included a readmission agreement with transit country Turkey in March 2016 (Council of the European Union, 2016); the organization of “hotspots” on five Greek islands where unauthorized travellers were contained, registered, and obliged to wait for the lengthy asylum determination process to unfold (European Commission, 2015); and the enormous disbursement of funds to the Greek and Turkish states, IGOs (UNHCR, IMO, UNICEF), and INGOs working onsite, as well as to the EU agencies related to border protection and asylum (Frontex, EASO, Eurojust, Europol) (Howden & Fotiadis,

<sup>1</sup>The number of people coming to Europe peaked in 2015, with 1,011,712 arrivals (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2016). According to IOM (2016), 50.2% of those arriving in Europe came from Syria, 20.2% from Afghanistan, 7.1% from Iraq, 1.6% from Somalia, 2.1% from Iran, 2.2% from Nigeria, 2.7% from Pakistan, 4.2% from Eritrea, and 9.9% from other countries.

2017). The mobilization of all these European and Greek agencies (border guards, the Coast Guard, police, the Greek Asylum Service) in association with the IGOs and INGOs led to the creation of a complex governance mechanism with overlapping authority and with operational dispersal.

One researcher posited that migrants' different but invariably harsh experiences should be viewed as constituting migration governance in Greece (Dimitriadi, 2022, p. 236). Legal-administrative issues pertaining to prevention, admission, and stay were assumed mostly, but not exclusively, by Greek state authorities, with financing, some personnel, and oversight provided by EU agencies (EASO, 2020). Social care issues were handled by some municipal governments, but mainly by IGOs and INGOs.

Scholars have spoken about the rise of a "surrogate state" in protracted refugee settings where an IGO, primarily the UNHCR, is perceived as and is the authority on the ground (Miller, 2017; Nah, 2019; Slaughter & Crisp, 2009). This scholarship studied settings in Global South refugee host countries, but the Greek case was the first large-scale humanitarian action undertaken in the EU. Moschopoulos (2023), examining the situation in Greece, concluded that "the refugee response in Greece overall, and in particular UNHCR's presence and involvement on the ground, has the characteristics of a 'surrogate state'" (p. 144).<sup>2</sup>

These observations raise the question about the character of the humanitarian citizenship created under these circumstances of exceptional inflows, overlapping governance authority of the Greek state and the EU, and the operation of IGOs and INGOs on the ground

(with significant responsibilities adding to national capacity but also in making decisions about the disbursement of cash assistance to asylum claimants, their access to shelter outside camps, and provision of basic health care as well as mental health and psychological support services). The frictions that ensued between the government and these international humanitarian actors (Dittmer & Lorenz, 2021), the paradox of Greece being at the same time a donor and a recipient of humanitarian aid but not able to administer it as a fully sovereign state, the lack of operational coordination, the gaps in services, the shifting of blame—all contributed to a fragmented asylum response. The reduced protection and rights that ensued constituted lessened citizenship resulting from a failure of both the state and the surrogate state. This "lessened" citizenship fell short not only as regards the basic freedoms guaranteed by human rights law (e.g., freedom of movement, equality, and non-discrimination before the law) but also in basic services provision, something that was felt acutely by the asylum seekers immobilized in Greece in their everyday lives.

## THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Citizenship as a concept has a long and contested history (Lister, 2003), with gender, class, race, sexuality, and other forms of social divisions inflecting, formally or informally, the status of citizens in various times and places (Dobrowolsky & Tastsoglou, 2006; Tastsoglou & Wilkinson, 2023). As a legal and political status, citizenship entails a "covenant" of duties and rights between individuals and states that may vary over time. Under ideal conditions, individuals enjoy full and equal rights to participate in the state of which they are citizens (Marshall, 1964; Turner, 1993). In reality, however,

<sup>2</sup>These findings contradict the agency's professed principles of independence. According to the UNHCR Emergency Handbook (2024), "Humanitarian action is designed to complement and support States in fulfilling those responsibilities; it should neither undermine nor supplement state responsibility" ("1. Overview").

not every individual residing in a state is a citizen, and not all citizens enjoy full and equal rights. T. H. Marshall (1950), the father of citizenship theory, recognized the permanent tension between the principles of equality in a democratic society and the de facto inequalities of wealth and income in capitalism. Beyond class, however, other boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are not necessarily visible at first sight and often hide “others” with “differentiated citizenship” (Stasiulis & Bakan, 1997, p. 115) because citizenship is “a nodal point for the intersection of many other social relations” (p. 117). For example, the accomplishment of formal equality for women is still accompanied by “second-class” (Arat-Koc, 1992, p. 235) and “incomplete” citizenship for some women (Tastsoglou, 2010, p. 24); “ambiguities” about citizens and noncitizens (Bosniak, 2006, pp. 102–121); a “multi-tier construct” with different kinds of memberships in diverse collectivities (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p. 91); “partial” citizenship, albeit in different ways, for all migrants (Parreñas, 2001, p. 1130); and “diminished” (e.g., Vlieger, 2014, p. 295), or “lessened” citizenship (Maher, 2004, p. 146) for migrant domestic workers, as it is undermined by sexism intersecting with racism, legal citizenship status, and other forms of social divisions.

In this article, we use the concept of lessened citizenship to signify the reduced rights, protections, and privileges—compared to full citizenship—afforded to asylum-seeking women. Citizenship has been historically constituted by states and with the power of states. As states have a monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within their territory, in Weber’s classic definition of the state (Gerth & Mills, 1946), states, citizenship, and violence are closely interwoven. At the same time, as feminists have argued, “citizenship has always been defined, under-

stood and practiced in terms of gender,” and “sexual politics” reproduce “the gender inequalities of the public/private divide and the patriarchal state” (Franzway, 2016, p. 19).

Extending this argument to race and otherness, if we consider the exclusion of “aliens” and “slaves” of the ancient Athenian city-state, where the earliest documented notion of citizenship arose (Franzway, 2016), we can argue that citizenship has been defined as a racialized concept as well. Gender and politically defined others have historically been fluid concepts with different meanings in various times and places, while gender and race politics have signified dynamic power struggles between groups. These ongoing contestations by subordinate racialized and gender others suggest that violence is implicated in the social and political construction of gender and otherness against efforts to enforce certain men’s dominance over women and politically excluded others (Franzway, 2016; Nayak & Suchland, 2006; Walby, 2009). The interconnected gender and race/otherness foundations of citizenship allow us to conceptualize women asylum seekers’ experiences of GBV in terms of lessened citizenship. They also allow us to interrogate how exactly gender and race/otherness “lessen” citizenship by giving rise to risks and vulnerabilities (e.g., those exposing people to risk for GBV), within or under the auspices of institutions, policies, and practices of a host state (including its humanitarian citizenship regime).

Citizenship is both an analytical and a normative concept. As an analytical concept, citizenship reveals the rights and duties enshrined in the contract between a citizen and the state; however, the “model” of citizenship—the ideal citizen—was male, white, heterosexual, and bourgeois. As there are various others in a state, “citizenship” can serve as a measuring stick of actually

existing rights and privileges. As a normative concept, citizenship has been assigned a positive value, and thus the qualifier “lessened” signals reduced rights and partial protections and possibly a lack of a sense of belonging. Increasing population movements have led to a more recent focus on citizenship discourse on the status and rights afforded migrants, refugees, legal residents, and even dual citizenship holders and first- and second-generation citizens with active transnational ties (Hildebrandt & Peters, 2019; Shachar, 2020). As Faist (2000, p. 203) wrote: “citizenship is in short supply” for new arrivals. Formal citizenship associated with the nation-state aspires to protect equal rights among its membership. In a global state order, this commitment to universalism does not prevent the state from setting limits to membership access, thus giving rise to “fewer,” “lessened,” and “diminished” rights and “semi-citizenship” status (Bosniak, 2017; Cohen, 2009; Sinha & Uppal, 2009).

Nevertheless, although there are rights that are indeed reduced for “outsiders” present on national territory, other rights are rights of personhood and are inalienable and enshrined in international human rights law (e.g., the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights). These more often are embedded in the constitutions of most liberal democratic states or their charter of rights and freedoms (Crépeau & Nakache, 2006)—for example, the right to life, liberty, and security of the person (UN, 1948, art. 3), or equality and non-discrimination before the law (arts. 7–10). These human rights apply to all persons on state territory including refugees and asylum seekers (Chetail, 2014). Some evidence indicates that international human rights regimes hold states accountable for the protection of both citizens and migrants and enable migrants to

make demands in relation to international treaties on human and migrant rights (Soysal, 1994). The consistency and uniformity of the enforcement of these rights and freedoms, however, depends ultimately on their incorporation in domestic law, on institutions and practices, and on political and cultural norms.

Legal/formal citizenship status creates a distinct demarcation that intersects with existing and ever emerging social divisions. The “embodied illegality” or semi-legality creates a “forced invisibility” of rights (Angulo-Pasel, 2019, “Abstract”). This places non-status or precarious-status women, children, and various minorities at higher risk of sexual exploitation and all forms of GBV. As the legal status of categories becomes the outer boundary of access to rights for individuals and groups, the state becomes complicit in legally condoning violence (Angulo-Pasel, 2019).

Violence (and its threat) as an outcome of incomplete protection by states is shaped and experienced differently as it is filtered by gender and other institutional orders (e.g., race, social class, legal status). This means that multiple intersecting inequalities within states engender the vulnerability and precarious states that can lead to GBV. In turn, the GBV experience reinforces the marginalization of survivors and reproduces the social divisions and intersecting inequalities. Consequently, there cannot be a thorough understanding of GBV and its mechanisms without including intersectional components of gender inequality (Strid & Verloo, 2019). At the same time, there cannot be a clear understanding of GBV in migration without a contextual analysis of the specific intersectionalities at play (Reilly et al., 2022).

With roots in Black feminist scholarship and activism on both sides of the Atlantic, the term **intersectionality** was formally coined by Black legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw

in 1989. It refers to systems of oppression demarcated by hierarchies of power and privilege that crosscut and define particular social locations, which in turn construct our identities (Carastathis, 2014, p. 304). Thus, the concept allows us to understand the interaction and outcomes of different forms of social divisions, boundaries, and disadvantages at the level of the state and its institutions, but also in everyday life, interpersonal relations, and social identities (Grabham et al., 2008).

Yuval-Davis's (2015) "situated intersectionality" aims to achieve this contextual analysis. It is ultimately a complex social stratification theory that applies to everyone, not just marginalized groups, and adopts two levels of analysis with distinct queries and dimensions on each: macro and micro. Drawing upon Yuval-Davis's approach, we dissect experiences of discrimination and violence from our interviewees' stories and trace their consequences on societal participation (a) at the macro-level, where discriminatory systems operate in hierarchical and intersectional ways, where states define the social world through raising boundaries and barriers (Wendt & Duvall, 1989), and where institutions exercise power in providing guides to practice (Onuf, 1989); and (b) at the micro-level, where the "international becomes personal" (Enloe, 1989, p. 196). This is the level where the discriminatory systems of the macro-level and policies and practices become discriminatory behaviours and, therefore, traumatic, and painful personal experiences.

## INTERSECTIONAL DISCRIMINATIONS AND LESSENERED CITIZENSHIP PRACTICES

### Macro-Level: Discrimination on a Global and State Scale

The empirical material derived from our interviews with asylum-seeking women shows how several intersecting discriminatory hierarchies operate at the macro-level. Gender and otherness here constitute the intertwined foundations of citizenship. In the following, we use each as an entry point to understand their complex intertwining.

#### *Patriarchy: The Gender Hierarchy*

Gender is part of a larger system of subordination—patriarchy—within which femininity is experienced as a "cage" (Scott et al., 2021; Wrigley-Asante, 2011). Women asylum seekers are no exception as they often find themselves confined in a state of captivity, "safeguarded" by gender stereotypes. The dichotomous schema, man (autonomous, independent, breadwinner) and woman (dependent, caregiver, honour bearer), that prevails in patriarchy was narrated by our interviewees to manifest in a double standard of morality that dictates the ethics of care and duty (Driver, 2005; Friedman, 1991). It results in women's economic vulnerability, trapping them in potentially unsafe relationships and exposing them to various types of GBV.

Asylum-seeking women in our study were aware of, discussed, and openly criticized this double standard. Aseel, a Syrian refugee, complained about her "captivity" behind her gender bars:

When I first got to Europe, men became reckless ... drugs, weed, women, bars ... but if a woman removes her hijab, they say horrible things about her and abuse her. But why ... why is everything forbidden for women? Why can't she remove her hijab or change the way she dresses? Why can't she ride a bike?



Azadah, a Tajik woman from Afghanistan who was seeking asylum in Germany, also narrated the burden of being the symbolic bearer of the collectivity's identity, the embodied signifier of its cultural boundaries (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p. 46), "the location of culture" (Bhabha, 1994): "Society never talks behind his back. They never say a man was out late, or he travelled somewhere alone. But for a woman they do, and it's difficult to live with these thoughts."

GBV is another painful expression of patriarchy that asylum-seeking women discussed. They spoke about their own experiences and noted that it is more common for women and girls to experience GBV than men. Many women may also experience gendered emotional or economic violence that may affect men differently. Aseel, a Syrian refugee, made this point when asked if she had experienced GBV more than the men in her life. "Of course. Yes. Violence also in terms of not being able to express your opinion or speak your mind. Violence is also being forced to do things you don't want to do."

Patriarchy led asylum-seeking women to the bitter realization that if they were men, they would not face the severe constraints they experienced—in their responsibility as mothers, for example. Emma, an asylum seeker from Gabon, phrased it thus: "I wish I were a man. A man does not give birth, does not take care for children. We women do. Sometimes I wish I would be like that, free as a bird to fly."

According to many of the 35 asylum-seeking women, patriarchy is everywhere. Gender-neutral policies and practices that cut across all discriminatory systems and hierarchizations—that is, structural violence—were felt like a "silent" kind of violence because of their lack of status. Asylum policies, planned and implemented at the national level, contribute to depreciating the precarious life of

asylum-seeking women and ultimately limiting their human security (United Nations Development Programme, 1994). For example, accommodation is a locus where "gender-blind" policies and practices (re)produce intersectional discriminations and have gendered consequences (Tastsoglou et al., 2021). Many asylum-seeking women described unsafe living situations, especially in the camps, where overcrowding led to disputes and violence, including GBV. But even when accommodation outside the camps was provided, neither gender nor the family situation of those who are expected to cohabit was considered. Women asylum seekers (often single mothers) and men must live together in small, dirty, and crowded apartments.

But patriarchal inequalities underlying asylum procedures negatively affect the economic citizenship of asylum-seeking women. An example of this is the prepaid cash cards that the UNHCR program ran from the beginning of the refugee crisis. In the beginning, women did not receive these cash cards. They were given to men, considered by the UNHCR as "heads" of the family. The women told us that things changed later, and women were able to receive them.

### *The Asylum-Seeking Other, Race, and Gender*

People who move "outside the nation-state," deprived from any role in the "state's terrestrial foundation" (Agamben, 1998, p. 64), experience intersectional subordination and exclusion. Several women commented on the lack of dignity in the natives' treatment of "foreigners," comparing them to viruses, invaders, or pests. This discourse, reproduced in mainstream and social media but also in everyday social relations, led Fariba, an Afghan refugee woman, to explain her feeling of not being recognized as a person: "A big problem here is, you are a migrant. And your voice will never be heard, no matter how much you

shout, no matter how much you scream, your voice will not reach anywhere.”

But when a person’s voice is not heard, they remain invisible, and their life is “bare” (Agamben, 1998), deprived of political significance, exposed to danger by those possessing power (Athanasidou, 2007). Azadah commented that Greek women receive the appropriate attention should something happen to them, while migrants are “totally ignored,” trapped in a space with reduced rights and protection:

They [Greek women] would be heard if they ever complain or something happens, they would have attention, and be listened to, but migrants, we are not seen or heard. ... So, when you are not listened to you know anything bad could happen to you.

Asylum-seeking women not only belong to the disadvantaged social category of the other but additionally lack the gender legitimacy of being cast as the “mothers of the nation,” expected to educate future subjects (Arat-Koc, 1992; Yuval-Davis, 1993). Thus, they are located within more than one inferior social position, suffering intersecting disadvantages (Yacob-Haliso, 2016, pp. 54–55).

Otherness is based on legal status. Those receiving accommodation, paid for by NGOs (under one of the humanitarian regime’s shelter programs), are placed in a vulnerable position by having their housing tied to their status. In most cases, the accommodation is only temporary, meaning the organization will pay for the accommodation for a set period. Once that time is up, the person will need to secure new accommodations. These services are only available to those who are undocumented or awaiting an asylum decision. If they are rejected or if they are granted status and are able to work, they must vacate the lodgings immediately, whether or not they have funds to pay for new lodgings. This policy, in combination

with rampant racism among landlords, has gendered consequences. Women asylum seekers who are single mothers are the ones most harmed. Lina, a single mother with refugee status from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), noted, “We [my son and I] didn’t even have a place to sleep ... they won’t even give us a house. They don’t rent houses to migrants.”

Finally, colour discrimination also positions people in a subordinate status in social hierarchies. According to asylum-seeking women in our study, there are multiple manifestations of preferential treatment given to “whites” in the Greek context. Azadah, a Tajik woman, said, “The Black people were always last.” Although Greece does not have a recent colonial past, Greeks are carriers of ethnic and national pride, which traces its roots back to ancient Greece and other glorious historical periods like the Byzantine. The racism mentioned by Black women is a consequence of othering based on this presumed uniqueness rather than a manifestation of white supremacy. Nonetheless, it effectively others women of colour, adding more obstacles to their ability to access protection and vital services as asylum seekers and GBV survivors.

### *Some Wars Matter More: Legitimate and Illegitimate Others*

In the backdrop of large movements of people trying to escape from life-threatening circumstances and the EU’s media discourse about “the European refugee crisis,” the EU prioritized recognition and protection of those fleeing the Syrian conflict through a series of decisions, among which was the 2013 recast (see EU, 2013) of the 2005 Asylum Procedures Directive (EU, 2005). These procedures fast-tracked claim processing of asylum seekers from Syria. The high ranking of the Syrian conflict and the decisions taken by the EU led to national policies that prior-

itized Syrian asylum seekers over the “rest.” Fast-track processing began being applied in Greece in September 2014 for Syrians and for those with former habitual residence in Syria. A special *Asylum Service* (2016, 2017) directorate was established to speed up the process of granting asylum to Syrians. Greek Asylum Service statistics (*Hellenic Ministry of Migration and Asylum, n.d.*) show that between 2014 and 2017, Syrian asylum seekers received a positive response at a rate higher than 99%, while in 2015, during the peak of refugee flows, Syrians received positive responses at a rate of 99.90%; rates are much lower for non-Syrians. Fast-track practices followed by the state were mirrored by INGOs.

The selective humanitarian protection of Syrian civilians (“legitimate others” or “legitimate victims”) is not an isolated case. *Hyndman (2007)* argues that advanced liberal states selectively declare themselves benevolent protectors of civilians in some crises but not in others. Some interviewees referred to the prioritization of Syrians and the hierarchization of conflicts. They noted that there was differential treatment of asylum seekers and spoke about the difficulties they had faced because of this. Azadah commented, “They [Syrians] mattered more. ... You know, there were levels. First Syrians, then the rest of the migrants, then the Black people.”

National interests, as well as the native population’s ability to empathize with the suffering people, determine which war and whose life matter more. Black bodies and Black lives harmed by Black-on-Black violence in Africa seems to matter less to both citizens and authorities. Fleeing wars ranking high as producing “legitimate casualties” renders asylum seekers fleeing them automatically “legitimate” victims and, as such, preferentially treated in terms of asylum processing,

compared to those fleeing conflicts that “matter less.”

A feminist geopolitical analysis (*Hyndman, 2019*) allows us to discern two groups of “others”: the first is the group of **legitimate victims**—as such, recognizable as “people in need of protection”—and the second is a collection of individuals who must prove the reasons they left their country of origin and convince asylum officers that they are entitled to receive asylum status. They must present “their story” in ways compatible with both the criteria set by the asylum regime and those embedded in stereotypes held by individuals in positions of authority. When asked why she thought Syrians received preferential treatment, Chantia, an Iranian asylum seeker, responded,

Arabs are war-torn, Afghans are war-torn. They say our country is safe. ... We can’t just say Iran is not safe, we have to prove it with so much evidence, and then maybe, they might give you a second chance.

Although the legitimization criteria are not gendered, they have gendered consequences leading the women survivors of GBV (as in our study case) to a second victimization. The use of the term **legitimate victims** in this article does not “subsume all women under the sprawling canopy of ‘victims’ nor all men under the category of ‘militia fighters’” (*Enloe, 2004, p. 104*). It argues that othering, because of the geopolitical (im)balances, when intersecting with gender, becomes a mechanism that aggravates gender inequality, thus intensifying the vulnerability and precariousness of GBV survivors.

#### *Amplifying Hierarchies and Intersections: The Pandemic*

The COVID-19 pandemic aggravated prejudice and discrimination against those who were not deemed citizens or were people of colour and generally amplified the effects of

racism and xenophobia (e.g., [Tschalaer, 2022](#); [Yeboah, 2020](#)). Lockdowns and travel restrictions exacerbated the situation for women who experienced domestic violence. They remained trapped with their abusers, with no access to support networks or work that would allow them to escape economic precarity ([UN Women, n.d.](#)). In Greece, gender-neutral COVID-19 restrictions were imposed horizontally in the name of public health. The implementation of restrictions led to long delays on asylum application decisions, denial of free movement, entrapment in violent domestic settings, difficulties in accessing health services, and increased digitalization of learning courses (which implies greater challenges in accessibility). In sum, the “gender-neutral” approach led to the invisibilization of these women survivors of GBV and their needs, greater precarity and likelihood of sexual and gender-based violence, and ultimately limited social citizenship.

### Micro-Level: Discriminations at the Interpersonal Level (Lived Experiences of Refugee Women)

Forms of interconnected systemic discrimination operating at the macro-level may be expressed by different individuals possessing variable degrees of power (Asylum Service staff, IGO and NGO personnel, public service workers, ordinary citizens). This “translation” of system-wide forms of discrimination through various levels (global, national, local) into actions and omissions regarding protection takes place where asylum-seeking “bare lives” ([Agamben, 1998](#)) encounter the politics, practices, and discourses of the receiving country. Intersectional discriminations are experienced by asylum-seeking women as exclusion from the rights and entitlements associated with social participation and as personal traumatic experiences. Thus, geopo-

litical interests and the national (Greek) implementation of EU asylum policy occurring at the macro-level produce new fields of subordination for “others.”

Where patriarchy intersects with other systems of subordination, asylum-seeking women experience lessened citizenship. For example, the patriarchal social and cultural conventions that produce the woman/caregiver linkage place asylum-seeking women at a disadvantage. When gender duties and responsibilities intersect with the subordinate axis of asylum seeking, women must struggle harder (than men) to access fragments of citizenship, spending a large portion of their time, energy, and money. Gendered division of emotional and material labour leads to different levels of access to rights and dictates different responsibilities and supports for women ([Lister, 1997, 2003](#); [Pateman, 1988](#)). Zeinab, a Syrian asylum seeker, commented on the cost of time and energy of care:

I would give 100% effort to get my children papers. I would get up at 4:30 in the morning and be in Katekhaki [Asylum Service offices]. Men wouldn't bother doing that. ... If I'm going to sleep in and have coffee or smoke cigarettes like some men ... I won't be able to get my children papers or give them a decent future.

When discriminatory systems intersect with racism, the experiences of women asylum seekers in Greece became more difficult. Angelique, a refugee from the DRC, bitterly commented: “Being Black is a barrier for me.” National interests and the geopolitical power balance determines how political power is distributed to people of different origins. This distribution of power “impacts on the creation and distribution of resources ... and well-being” ([Marsh & Stoker, 2010, p. 7](#)). Citizenship practices and discourse deriving from political considerations may result in negligence and discrimination. Sophie, Emma, and Shansay provided examples of how the discriminatory discourse leads

to discriminatory treatment in accessing services. Sophie, an asylum seeker from the DRC, spoke of lack of communication with health care workers:

They are racist. When I go to the hospital it is really difficult. There is a doctor that speaks a bit French, but she refused ... to speak French so that we can understand each other and for me to explain to her ... the symptoms of the child. So, she only wants to speak in English.

Being Black, woman, and asylum seeker is also an obstacle to entering the labour market and accessing economic citizenship. Shansay, a refugee from the DRC, commented on the consistent racism she experiences, making it impossible to find work:

They are racists, definitely racists. When I look for a job, they always ask my nationality, I reply that I am Congolese and then ... you wait, you wait, you wait until the day that you decide to go back there, and they tell you "No, no, no, we do not have a place for you here."

Being the "coloured other" intensifies precariousness and makes women survivors of GBV even more vulnerable to (new) experiences of GBV. Emma, from Gabon, commented on the differences between asylum seekers and Greek-born women:

When a Greek sees a Greek woman, it is not often that they start speaking to her about sexual things. It is not easy for men, because the woman can create [for] him problems and men know the consequences. For us, Africans with Black skin, they know that we do not know the law of this country. We are not part of this country, and they know that we are victims of rapes in our countries and that we are poor. We came here to seek support and they use this weakness that is part of us, to hurt us.

Regardless of skin colour, asylum-seeking women shared discriminatory experiences due to their ethnicity and refugee status. Yasaman, an Iranian woman, commented,

If I go somewhere like a hospital as a refugee, and there was a Greek person next to me ... I saw it with

my own eyes that the Greek person got not only a better service but respect as well! I don't want to call it discrimination, but this exists! And its very common. And it hurts a lot to see it.

Finally, while both (geo)politically constructed categories of "legitimate" and "non-legitimate" victims experience multiple discriminations, the intensity and specificities of their experiences differ. Syrian asylum-seeking women, though they were considered the privileged other, were still positioned in multiple subordinate positions (due to their gender and othering), but their location in the hierarchy of "legitimate" conflict lowered the intensity of the discrimination they experienced and eased their access to the limited rights of humanitarian citizenship. The remaining "others" must struggle harder to be recognized as persons entitled to rights and protections. Mahboubeh, an Iranian woman, commented: "Iranians are never the priority. ... The war in Iran is a cold war but the war in Syria is a hot war. ... They [people in the EU] think I just moved because I wanted to change scenery." Many of the women referred to discriminatory practices and felt that Syrians were the most privileged and women of colour the least. Shansay noted, "If you are Congolese, Cameroonian, it is difficult. If you are Syrian, they will take you faster." And Chantia defined **faster** by saying, "They quickly give them houses, quickly set up their cash cards. On top of their cash cards, they have shopping cards."

Regardless of which side of the geopolitical divide women stood on, they felt unsafe in Greece due to experiences of severe harassment. Noor, a Syrian refugee, narrated the following:

They harass me a lot because of the hijab. Once at the metro station at Syntagma, a woman was going to push me on the railway [tracks] when the train was coming. If a young man hadn't pulled me from my arm, God forbid, I would have died. ...

She followed me and said, "You are now in Europe, take it off, this headscarf, take it off."

The long-lasting process to acquire legal status pushes no-status women survivors of GBV ("illegitimate victims") to even more precarious positions where multiple axes of subordination (gender, colour, ethnicity) intersect. Bryan, a Cameroonian single mother seeking asylum, said,

When I arrived in Greece I had nowhere to sleep for 5 days. I gave birth by C-section, I stayed at the hospital ... but I had to leave. ... They gave me an address. ... I went to this address ... with the newborn, and when I arrived there, they told me that they cannot do anything for me because I did not have papers.

Extreme survival challenges push many women to prostitution. Chantia described her second-hand experience:

I've even heard some women are selling themselves in the parks. ... Well, this is a kind of violence against them too. She's hungry, she has no money, so she's forced to go with a stranger for 5 euros for food, whether she has a child or not.

Being undocumented relegates women to the even worse position of suffering GBV in silence. Ritz, a woman from the DRC without papers, commented on this scenario: "If a man inflicts violence on me and I do not have papers, when arriving to the police to report, the first thing they will ask is for my papers."

The horizontal, equal but not equitable, implementation of COVID-19 restrictions posed great challenges. The interviewees narrated the difficulty of wearing masks, having to stay inside all the time, and having language and skill acquisition courses cancelled. Most notably, in many asylum seekers' cases, pandemic measures increased precarity by delaying asylum determination procedures. Chantia related: "Corona has really affected everything, delayed everything, multiplied our difficulties. ... Now for me, my interview

has been delayed by two and half years, at least one year was for Corona."

Other women noted gendered impacts on how GBV was perpetuated and amplified through the pandemic. Women more commonly stayed at home with the children while men left the house to go to work or to socialize. With men being forced to stay inside, women expressed annoyance at having demanding men around all the time. Some conveyed the anguish of increased domestic violence. Azadah said, "But now, you know, now men are home, and they are angry, so they don't behave right with women, so there is a lot of violence against women now."

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have explored the experience of broadly defined citizenship as revealed in the responses of 35 women asylum seekers and gender-based violence (GBV) survivors who arrived in Greece through the eastern Mediterranean route in the years following the Arab Spring and the outbreak of the Syrian conflict—a period that has been referred to as the European refugee crisis. Methodologically, we draw upon Yuval-Davis's "situated intersectionality," requiring contextual analysis of the empirical material at the macro- and micro-levels. Acknowledging that in the present social order, entitlements and protections can only be attained through membership in sovereign citizenship, migrant residency, or humanitarian citizenship, we use the concept of "lessened citizenship" to signify the barriers in protection and competent participation of asylum-seeking women. We conclude that intersecting gender and politically or socially defined otherness/racialization, amplified by pandemic mobility restrictions, constitute the core of asylum-seeking women's lessened citizenship, which, in turn, preserves

the harm they have suffered from GBV and perpetuates their vulnerability to it. The so-called humanitarian citizenship extended to these women is barely adequate to guarantee protection or services and to ensure equitable social participation, doing nothing to help them acquire a sense of belonging.

Our study is a qualitative one pertaining to asylum-seeking women who arrived in Greece at a particular time. As such, we could not generalize to all asylum seekers or to other contexts. Nevertheless, the fact that Greece is a European borderland, subject to EU regulations and directives and dependent on international and EU funding for asylum seeker reception and processing, makes this study relevant as a case where the confluence of massive arrivals and the inability and/or the unwillingness of the state to shoulder the sovereign burdens of refugee protection produce lessened citizenship, even falling below the threshold of humanitarian citizenship. Rights, protections, and entitlements for asylum seekers are limited by deficient practices informed by gender and racial prejudices and discriminations that effectively other asylum-seeking women. A limitation of this study pertains to the very nature of our sample— asylum-seeking women who self-identified as cisgender and heterosexual—excluding citizenship experiences of gender minorities. Based on these women's narratives, we identified the gender and race/political otherness dimensions/pillars of citizenship. However, we do not have adequate data on class, sexuality, gender identity, or other social divisions and identities.

The asylum-seeking women's narratives of their lives reveal a vicious circle where the impacts of intersecting discriminations and exclusions, stemming from "lessened citizenship," intensify their precarious social and legal status and further diminish their

citizenship. Although we have focused here on the grim situation that these women have faced, we recognize that they do not act solely as victims, and many of them showed insightful awareness but also willingness to resist and fight the inequalities and discriminations that have been foisted on them.

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