

# Refugee Women as Agents for Peace

The UN Women, Peace and Security Agenda in the Context  
of Forced Displacement. Country Study Austria

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Barbara Kühhas and Marie-Luise Möller

October 2020



© Kiril Kirkov

**Publisher:**

Wiener Institut für Internationalen Dialog und Zusammenarbeit –  
Vienna Institute for International Dialogue and Cooperation (VIDC)  
Möllwaldplatz 5/3, A-1040 Vienna  
[www.vidc.org](http://www.vidc.org)

Authors: Barbara Kühhas (Gender and Diversity Consulting) and Marie-Luise Möller

Editor: Lena Gruber (VIDC)

Proof reading and editing: Kim Traill

Pictures: © Murtaza Elham and Kiril Kirkov

Published in accordance with §25 of the Media Law.

Copyright: Vienna Institute for International Dialogue and Cooperation (VIDC),  
Möllwaldplatz 5/3, A-1040 Vienna.

Basic issues: discussion papers on development policies, international cooperation  
and south-north cultural exchange, as well as anti-racist campaigning.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors,  
and not necessarily those of the editor/VIDC.

# FOREWORD

In the year 2000, the *UN Security Council Resolution 1325* was adopted – with the main aims of strengthening women’s participation in peace and security governance; ensuring their protection; enabling their recovery from conflict-related and gender-based violence; and contributing to the prevention of armed conflict. In addition, UNSCR 1325 demands gender awareness in conflict analysis and peacebuilding. A number of resolutions, national and regional action plans followed, which together form the *UN Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda*.

Great effort has been put into the realisation of this WPS agenda – by international organisations, the EU, state actors, international NGOs, feminist networks and grass roots organisations. One significant group however has been widely ignored in the discourse, action plans and implementation of this agenda, namely forcibly-displaced, conflict-affected women and girls who have sought asylum in Europe.

In general, European actors tend to look at conflict regions outside the EU and their immediate neighbouring countries to analyse, demand and implement the participation and protection of women and girls. European WPS actors observe women’s participation in the Afghan peace negotiations, develop tools to analyse women’s empowerment projects in development and humanitarian work from Colombia to Myanmar, invite female peace activists from DR Congo to Somalia to conferences and publish analyses of conflict-related sexual violence from Bosnia to Liberia. Yet, do we also acknowledge refugee and asylum-seeking women as experts in conflict analysis and peacebuilding and invite them to WPS roundtables and conferences? Do we demand and guarantee sufficient, adequate relief and recovery mechanisms for conflict-affected women and girls? And do we understand that this participation, relief and recovery and protection of refugee women and girls within the EU forms an essential part of the WPS agenda?

The closer a woman gets to the EU border, the less she appears to be considered a person of relevance

in the context of the WPS agenda. The participation and safety of a woman in Syria is of concern within the framework of the WPS agenda. When the same woman flees to a refugee camp in Lebanon, her protection and the prevention of further (gender-based) violence remains an issue in the WPS agenda. Somewhere on her way to Europe however, and certainly by the time she is beginning to establish her life in an EU member state, she is no longer seen as “conflict-affected woman” worthy of demanding participation, protection, relief and recovery in the name of the WPS agenda. Yet, she is the same person: her story, experiences and her expertise remain identical. It is also highly likely that during her flight she experienced the fear of, or actual, gender-based violence, as well as gaining further knowledge of the realities of other women and girls, and is therefore not only in particular need of medical, psychological, social and financial support but also a very valuable expert in the field of gender and peacebuilding.

The Vienna Institute for International Dialogue and Cooperation (VIDC) has been working on the *UN Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda*, as well as on diaspora engagement over many years. We seek to amplify the voices of migrant and refugee women – for example by inviting them as speakers to panel discussions and by developing empowerment and gender sensitisation trainings for Afghan women in cooperation with Afghan diaspora associations. We took this year’s 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UNSCR 1325 as an occasion to draw attention to the connection between these two policy areas: the WPS agenda and forced migration to Europe. This study focuses on the gaps in the implementation of the WPS agenda in Austria with regards to the rights and living conditions of refugee and asylum-seeking women. We strongly believe that this research enriches the WPS discourse and empowers refugee women as agents for peace.

Lena Gruber, VIDC





## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On 31<sup>st</sup> of October 2020, the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) commemorates its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Celebrated as a landmark resolution in 2000, it reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peacebuilding, peacekeeping, humanitarian responses and post-conflict reconstruction, and stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security.

Since then, nine additional WPS resolutions have been adopted by the Security Council. Currently 84 member states (MS) have adopted National Action Plans (NAPs), and eleven Regional Action Plans (RAPs) are ready for implementation. Both the UN's WPS agenda and the EU's 2008 approach have been criticised for focusing too heavily on women as victims of conflict, rather than on recognising women as active agents of change. In the "first generation" of NAPs and RAPs, the WPS agenda was chiefly understood as providing support for women in conflict and post-conflict zones, and EU MS saw their responsibility regarding internal im-

plementation mainly in terms of the need to increase numbers of female personnel in police and military contingents for peacekeeping and peace-building missions.

A major critique of the WPS agenda points to the fact that although forcibly displaced women are present in the WPS resolutions, the issue is of only marginal and inconsistent concern. Scholars' analysis suggests that this marginalisation has negative effects on refugee women and recommends that including the refugee question more prominently into WPS policymaking has the potential to improve the security of those who have fled to Europe. *"The separation of the normative commitments of the WPS agenda on the one hand and the response to the refugee crisis on the other hand lead to problematic outcomes at the level of knowledge production, policy commitments, and the broader public discourse."*<sup>1</sup> The "new generation" of the EU RAP includes a different approach and represents a shift –

1 Holviki, Aiko and Reeves, Audrey (LSE, Centre for Women, Peace and Security): The WPS Agenda and the "Refugee Crisis": Missing Connections and Missing Opportunities in Europe. London School of Economics and Political Science, 6/2017p.5.

from a state-centred and uniform approach, towards a greater focus on diversity and inclusiveness. In July 2019, the *EU Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security WPS 2019-2024* (EU RAP) was established, which complements the *EU Gender Action Plan for 2016-2020* (GAP II).<sup>2</sup> Importantly, and in line with the *European Consensus on Development* and the *Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*, as well as within the broader human rights framework, it also includes the situations of refugee and asylum-seeking women and girls in Europe.

At the time of elaborating this research paper, of the 18 EU MS which do have a NAP on 1325, 11 already include provisions regarding refugee and asylum seekers within Europe in their NAPs on WPS. Until now, the Austrian NAP on 1325 has not yet considered the situation of female refugees and asylum seekers within Austria.<sup>3</sup> Austrian civil society actors are calling for this gap to be closed. In order to bridge these gaps, this study analyses the internal implementation of the EU RAP in Austria, with regards to the situation for refugee and asylum-seeking women along the following objectives of the EU RAP: Participation (including Leading by Example), Prevention, Protection, Relief and Recovery.<sup>4</sup>

The methodology included a desk review of relevant literature and an overview of relevant obligations derived under international law. The overview of relevant obligations under international and EU law, including relevant instruments of the Council of Europe, outlines to what extent the WPS agenda is intertwined with (international) refugee law, other human rights standards and victim's rights in the European context. The analytical section of this study includes brief summaries of relevant national laws, with the aim of providing an overview of the extent to which binding obligations under international law are implemented at a national level. The following section comprises an extensive analysis of all European NAPS on WPS, focusing in particular on good practice examples of the inclusion of refugee and asylum-seeking women's concerns and rights.

Based on this, semi-structured interview and focus group discussion guides were elaborated, empirical

data was collected from Afghan and Syrian refugee and asylum-seeking women in Austria, then data triangulation and analysis took place. The authors concluded each chapter along the EU RAP objectives, with recommendations for Austria. The results should inform possible amendments to an updated Austrian NAP on WPS in line with EU commitments, and support actors working in the fields of WPS and refugees. Importantly, it also aims to support the inclusion of refugee (women's) organisations into existing WPS platforms, to enable women to voice their concerns and become active agents of change in both their countries of origin, as well as in their host country, Austria.

Under the key objective of *Participation*, the EU RAP underlines that "(...) *The EU Strategic Approach places the WPS agenda at the centre of the full spectrum of the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy, as an essential tool in ensuring that the rights, agency and protection of women and girls are observed and upheld at all times, and to confirm that a meaningful and equitable role in decision-making is secured for women of all ages during all stages of conflict prevention, peace-making, peace-building and post-conflict rehabilitation.*"<sup>5</sup> The key findings include shortcomings in the involvement of asylum-seeking and refugee women in humanitarian camps, as well as accommodation and reception centre management, as well as early access to information on language courses and programs; a lack of intercultural understanding between refugee and host communities, and non-involvement in WPS platforms. Recommendations include the promotion of research regarding gender analysis of the drivers of forced migration, as well as into the situation for asylum-seeking women and girls in their host countries. It is seen as important to actively involve diaspora organisations in project design for their communities, as well as to support transformative media work in order to change stereotypes about refugee women in the mindsets of the Austrian population, and to support positive role models for refugee women and girls themselves. Overall, an institutionalised consultative process with civil society in line with the *Policy Recommendations (OIIP, CARE 2019)* is deemed necessary, as well as the provision of funding for refugee women's and diaspora organisations in line with the *Vienna Declaration (2020)*. Positive examples can be found in Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands. In order to achieve greater participation in the labour market, more active

2 See: <http://epd.eu/2020/05/06/consultation-on-the-gender-action-plan/> at the time of writing this paper, GAP III is developed

3 See: [https://www.bmeia.gv.at/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Zentrale/Aussenpolitik/Menschenrechte/UN\\_Security\\_Council\\_National\\_Action\\_Plan.pdf](https://www.bmeia.gv.at/fileadmin/user_upload/Zentrale/Aussenpolitik/Menschenrechte/UN_Security_Council_National_Action_Plan.pdf)

4 EU Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), 2019-2024. Working document of the EEAAS, EEAS (2019) 747 – 4. July 2019, p. 5.

5 Ibid., p.9

talent management by the Austrian Labour Market Services would create a win-win situation, as many refugee women are well-educated but unable to utilise their full potential.

Under the pillar of *Prevention*, the EU underlines the application of a holistic perspective, emphasising that *“Gender equality, peace, security, development and human rights are closely linked. This means that the EU must prioritise conflict prevention as one of several ways to prevent conflict-related and calamitous security, economic, environmental and social consequences of violent conflict on women, men, boys and girls.”*<sup>6</sup> The EU states that it will play an active role in conflict prevention globally, regionally, nationally and locally, including monitoring and reporting of human rights violations against women and girls, and applying a zero tolerance policy to end impunity, as well as in supporting legal reforms and transitional justice processes. One of the fulfilment criteria mentioned is that the EU’s early-warning mechanisms and subsequent actions will be gender-responsive; and that there will be an improved understanding of the root causes of violence.<sup>7</sup> Major gaps detected in Austria include the need for the enhancement of information for asylum-seeking women and men on gender equality provisions in Austria, including sexual and reproductive health and rights, as well as the absence of research and knowledge of asylum-relevant stakeholders in gender-specific reasons for flight and migration.

Recommendations for the pillar of *Prevention* include capacity development for gender analysis in conflict prevention, as well as filling in gaps in research regarding gender-specific reasons for flight and migration, including for refugee women. Importantly, more funding and implementation of courses for asylum seekers and refugees on engaging men for gender equality and women’s empowerment (also including sexual and reproductive health and rights) is required. Furthermore, a great need was detected for improvement in intercultural understanding, as well as in the understanding of conflict dynamics and related gender-specific concerns. In this regard, the training of staff working in accommodation centres, as well as those managing and facilitating services – including health professionals, legal advisors and interpreters – about the cultural settings

and gender perceptions in the countries of origin of asylum seekers is also a major recommendation. The WPS NAPs of Ireland and Germany present good practice examples.

The pillar of *Protection* is closely linked to protection from sexual and gender-based violence. Under the principles of the *EU Strategic Approach to WPS*, it is underlined that *“The EU will ensure that the protection of refugees, internally displaced people, stateless people and asylum seekers meets the different gender-related protection needs of women, men, girls and boys.”*<sup>8</sup> Under *Protection*, the *Council Conclusions* mention the importance of analysis of the different experiences and backgrounds of women, men, girls and boys in the context of armed conflict. All face the risk of trafficking, and although women and girls face a higher risk of SGBV and becoming domestic and sexual slaves of combatants, as well as of forced marriage, men and boys can also become victims of SGBV, and may face a higher risk of forced recruitment and targeted killings. Findings suggest that in general, successful access to justice at national and international courts for victims of serious forms of (conflict-related) forms of violence can be improved and must be ensured. It appears that there is a lack of information for victims of serious forms of (conflict-related) violence about how to access national criminal courts and claim compensation. Women interviewed suggested that mandatory courses on relevant protection mechanisms for all asylum-seeking women should be organised. These should include information about their rights as victims in criminal procedures, including their rights to effectively claim compensation. Again, awareness-raising training sessions for men and boys were also deemed to be very important, as well as trainings for translators and interpreters working with Austrian authorities and courts, along with mechanisms to control and ensure a high quality of translation. Also, it is recommended that regular trainings on conflict-related forms of violence and on the transnational dimensions of such crimes, etc., are provided for decision makers in asylum procedures, and also for law enforcement authorities, including police, as these are crucial for the identification of potential victims of serious, conflict-related crimes. Further, the development of strategies aimed at improving cooperation between all state and non-state actors (police, law-enforcement, courts, victim support organisations, etc) involved in

6 WPS Council Conclusions, 2018, p.22.

7 EEAS (2019), 747, p.10. See also indicators 5, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13, 15, 17, 23, 25.

8 WPS Council Conclusions, 2018, p.21.



the protection of victims (survivors) should be actively promoted, including the development and active use of referral pathways by all actors. Good practice examples can be found in the NAPs of Ireland, Finland, and Spain.

In the chapter on *Relief and Recovery*, the *EU WPS Council Conclusions (2018)* focus on ensuring that relief, recovery, and reconstruction are inclusive and take the specific needs of women and girls into consideration.<sup>9</sup> Special attention is paid to the most vulnerable groups in processes linked to peace-building, such as repatriation, resettlement, rehabilitation, reintegration, and post-conflict reconstruction, including several aspects which meet the needs of forcibly displaced asylum-seeking and refugee women and girls within the EU. This includes the provision of medical, psychosocial, legal and safety support to all victims/survivors of conflict-related SGBV, as well as ensuring that they have the rights and access to comprehensive health-care information, shelter protection and services, as well as to restorative justice and reparations; and to support the relief, recovery and rehabilitation of women and girls affected by conflicts in third countries and within the EU. Asylum laws, policies and procedures must respect and guarantee that all women, girls, and all survivors of conflict-related SGBV benefit from equal rights and standards during procedures; as well as to ensure that EU policies on development, and their implementation, build on women's local experiences and priorities during the relief and recovery phase.

The gaps identified by this research project lead to the following recommendations: Better monitoring of the provision of adequate reception conditions in accommodation centres for asylum seekers, which addresses individual (gender-specific) requirements, is necessary. In addition, the need to ensure that access to information on asylum procedures and legally guaranteed services (including legal representation) is available as soon as possible after arrival, and for as long as procedures are ongoing in Austria, in a language which can be understood, is a priority. Another key recommendation is the urgent need for scaling up the availability of psychosocial services and (mental) health services, while endeavouring to increase the number of trained (female) interpreters, in order to ensure effective access to health services. The scaling-up of labour market integration for recognised (female) refugees is also an urgent need. On the legal side, a high quality

of assessments of applications for international protection must be ensured, including a high level of professionalism by case workers and interpreters, taking gender-specific needs and contexts into account. With regards to applicants who have claimed to be victims or survivors of serious forms of conflict-related violence, it is crucial that their special (procedural) needs are addressed professionally and that they are adequately supported. Good practice examples of related provisions in the WPS NAPs are Belgium, Finland, France, Italy, and Germany.

During the FGDs and interviews with asylum-seeking and refugee women from Afghanistan and Syria in Austria, a strong conviction and engagement for participation in Austria and for gender equality was noted. There is huge potential for integrating refugee women's organisations and experts into broadening and implementing the WPS agendas. It would be beneficial and necessary to update the current version of the *Austrian NAP on WPS (2012)* in line with the new *EU RAP on WPS (2019-24)*. The aim of ensuring the human rights of women and girls affected by conflict, who are now forcibly displaced in Europe, is necessary to comply with the *EU RAP on WPS*. To develop these amendments, it is highly recommended that the responsible state actors of the IMAG should consult with developers of the NAPs in best practice countries such as Ireland, Germany, Finland and/or France. Furthermore, asylum experts, migrant women's organisations in Austria and the EU, refugee women and relevant ministries, including departments which are not yet part of the IMAG, but which work with refugees and asylum seekers should be invited.

It is highly recommended that practitioners who work either in the field of WPS, or with asylum-seekers and refugees, especially women and girls, include the contents of this study and its recommendations in consultations with responsible state institutions and refugee (women's) organisations, as well as in practice. The findings and recommendations of this research intend to inform the linking-up and harmonisation of policies, Austrian law, activities, the strengthening of expertise in relevant fields, and to support cooperation in fields such as asylum (Ministry of Interior) and WPS (under the leadership of the Ministry of European and Foreign Affairs). The authors of this study hope to contribute to a fruitful discussion on these important topics, and to support a win-win approach based on human rights, for all stakeholders.

9 EU WPS Council Conclusions, Brussels 2018, p. 40f.



## RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING PARTICIPATION

**Humanitarian sector and development cooperation, reception centre management:** Ensure that all state- and non-state service providers and institutions involved in the reception and accommodation of asylum seekers facilitate access for women to participate in the setting up of facilities, and mechanisms to ensure women can voice their concerns about the management of reception and accommodation centres.

Meaningfully include female applicants for international protection at all stages of design, implementation, and monitoring of humanitarian programs which contribute to social cohesion between communities, and ensure that they are represented in all coordination and leadership mechanisms (*Vienna Declaration 2020*, 16).

**Promote research projects** aiming at analysing possible implications of activities which address peace-building in (post-) conflict countries on the social and

cultural life or the promotion of gender-equality in Austria.

**Ensure that access to information related to language courses and institutions which offer such courses, as well as to integration programs, is provided as soon as possible**, and at a minimum once an application for international protection is admitted to proceed on merit (“inhaltliches Asylverfahren”). The non-existence of language skills upon arrival has been identified by the participants of this study as a major concern, in addition to the long waiting period for asylum decisions, during which there is inadequate access to language classes. Consequently, in order to facilitate the precondition of participation at all levels, it is highly recommended that all asylum seekers are offered language classes as soon as possible after arrival.

**Institutionalised consultative process with civil society:** In line with the policy recommendations from OIIP and CARE (2019) we state that an institutional-



ised consultative process with civil society is required in Austria, in order to include civil society perspectives in the implementation of the WPS agenda. This process should be structured, regular and professional. In addition to the annual meetings of the Inter-ministerial Working Group on 1325 (IMAG) for the elaboration and monitoring of the annual report on WPS, currently existing platforms should include refugee women and diaspora organisations, as well as organisations working with female refugees and asylum seekers, for a professional operational exchange which includes CSOs, academia and the IMAG. The currently existing platforms (IMAG on 1325, Platform EU, Internationales und Gender, 3 C Jahreskonferenz, Friends of 1325, etc.) do not as yet actively **include affected women in the consultation processes**. This process should include support of human rights defenders and be based on the understanding that diaspora and refugee organisations are valuable resources. Such activities of the IMAG on 1325 and CSOs should be integrated into the annual Austrian NAP reporting procedures (e.g. ADA, Ministry of Interior...) and could be reported under EU RAP Indicator #1 (Good practice examples include the German NAP (work with *DaMigra*), the Belgium NAP, with its established inclusive consultative process, as well as the Dutch NAP (work with MWPNN)).

**Establishment and regular review of a list of cross-generational and cross-community women's organisations, including migrant and refugee groups and other civil society actors focused on WPS across Austria, to be included in WPS outreach events** (good practice Irish NAP).

**Actively involve diaspora organisations in the design of projects which support their communities**. In this context it is further recommended to clarify the concept of diaspora and understand the various contexts in which it can be part of peacebuilding and development processes in Austria. Consequently, the role of the diaspora should be enhanced in areas of particular interest, such as justice initiatives, the formation of strategic development initiatives and (transnational) cooperation. Support from host states for transitional justice processes in countries of origin can also be deeply significant for diaspora groups.

**Develop international electoral guidelines for the involvement of diaspora in political and electoral pro-**

**cesses in countries of origin** while using technology to overcome financial and logistical obstacles associated with voting from abroad.

**Funding for refugee women's and diaspora organisations**: In line with the *Vienna Declaration (2020)*, it is highly recommended that coordination with women's rights and refugee women's rights organisations be improved, as well as funding for these organisations to support their work in implementing the WPS agenda both in and from Austria be increased. This is a long-standing request from both the VIDC and diaspora organisations. (Good Practices: The Irish NAP supports the access of migrant and refugee women's organisations to the "Reconciliation Fund", and supports their activities on local, regional, and national levels in Ireland. Also, Germany and Denmark are proactively financing diaspora engagement).

**Media work to change stereotypes about refugee women**: In order to change stereotypes about refugee women in Austria, a media campaign to portray refugee women as a positive resource is recommended. Such a campaign would be directed both towards changing the perceptions of the Austrian public, as well as presenting role models for refugee women communities themselves.<sup>10</sup> (The Irish NAP promotes media work to inform the public about the WPS agenda.)

**Enhanced talent management for refugees – detection of resources**: A talent management focal point/department should be established within the AMS, which detects potentials and qualifications of persons who have received positive asylum decisions. Very often, highly-talented and educated refugee women feel unable to utilise their potential, due to inadequate and/or non-existent capacities within the AMS to understand their professional profile and to support them in a way which could be beneficial to both the women and to Austrian society. A study shows that within the first year of receiving a positive asylum decision, 20 % of recognised refugees begin to work. By the fifth year, 35 % have found employment. Ten years after having been granted refugee status, the participation of refu-

10 As positive examples, the "Integrationsbotschafterinnen" program of the ÖIF-Initiative ZUSAMMEN: ÖSTERREICH, and the „Mentoring für MigrantInnen" by the ÖIF, WKO und AMS can be mentioned.

gee women in the Austrian labour market is still 10 % lower than persons with Austrian citizenship.<sup>11</sup> 42 % of refugee women in Austria had prior work experience in their country of origin, compared to 90 % of male refugees. Although Syrian women often have good educational backgrounds, 70,5 % remained unemployed in 2019.<sup>12</sup>

**Endeavour to identify role models and/or experts among applicants for international protection** who in

light of their personal background (relevant work-related experience in countries of origin, relevant educational background, etc.) might be able to actively contribute to activities relevant to peacebuilding or conflict resolution/prevention and involve them in (ongoing) initiatives. Such activities might focus on strategic areas of interest, such as strengthening rule of law, prevention of transnational crime, transitional justice processes, etc.

11 Manahl, Caroline: Was wissen wir wissenschaftlich fundiert über den Prozess der Arbeitsmarktintegration von Flüchtlingen? Eine Übersicht über aktuelle österreichische und internationale Studienergebnisse, Arbeitspapier okay.zusammen leben / Projektstelle für Zuwanderung und Integration, Dezember 2017.

12 Zusammen – Das Magazin zu Integration in Österreich, Selbstbestimmt Chancen ergreifen, Frühjahr 2020 #08, p.16.

# RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING PREVENTION

*“Trainings for men and boys are extremely important. They should focus in particular on the topic of birth control. [...] Unfortunately, in our country [...] nobody is talking about this. Even the mothers are not talking to their daughters and sons about these issues.”*

Young expert from Afghanistan working for refugees on gender sensitisation and the prevention of violence

**Capacity development regarding gender analysis and conflict prevention:** In line with the *Policy Paper* from OIIP & CARE, it is recommended to strengthen capacity in Austria for gender analysis regarding conflict prevention, including staff of involved institutions and NGOs (relevant ministries, organisations working in humanitarian action including in accommodation centres), actors in development cooperation in post-conflict regions, as well as Austrian civil servant staff working with asylum-seekers and refugee women.<sup>13</sup>

**Fill gaps in research regarding gender specific reasons for flight and migration:** Strengthen capacities by supporting experts in gender analysis and conflict prevention, including qualified women from refugee/diaspora communities and academic institutions. Research projects may consider gender-related aspects in conflict-related phenomena in receiving countries, such as recruitment for conflict-related activities, trafficking in human beings or harmful traditional practices.<sup>14</sup>

**More funding and implementation of courses for asylum seekers and refugees in engaging men in gender equality, empowering women and SRHR:** According to the women interviewed for this study, the acceptance of women's rights and gender equality is relatively weak within the male population of refugee communities, as the cultural setting of the host community is very different from the countries of origin. To

facilitate a better understanding of the basic democratic values and laws of Austrian society, gender equality and women's rights, it is recommended that cultural orientation courses be expanded to include all asylum seekers, as soon as possible after their arrival, in order to avoid and prevent (S)GBV and other forms of gender-based discrimination in the host country.

It is highly recommended to provide more gender sensitisation trainings for men, as well as empowerment workshops for women. Good practice examples can be found in the Irish and German NAPs. The study participants strongly suggested making such courses mandatory for all refugees and asylum seekers as early as possible in the asylum procedure, especially for women who arrive via family reunion programs. Often these women are very isolated, with limited or no access to information, as they stay within their families and typically patriarchal structures.

Study participants also recommended that **orientation on sexual and reproductive health and rights** – with information about family planning and birth control – should be included in this package. This issue is not discussed openly in their countries of origin, and therefore there is a lack of appropriate information about timing and spacing of children and SRHR. Syrian (with 4.3 children) and Afghan (with 3.2 children) women have the highest fertility rates in Austria, as well as the highest unemployment rates. If they can better control the timing and spacing of their children, their opportunities to access the labour market could increase.

**Training of staff working in accommodation centres, managing and facilitating the provision of services, as well as health professionals, legal advisors and interpreters:** Training and information about local (conflict-related) contexts, conflict-related dynamics and actors, the use of new technologies and/or social media, might be useful to identify recruitment strategies of actors of conflict among refugee and/or migrant communities; thus preventing radicalisation.

13 Karen Knipp-Rentrop, Saskia Stachowitsch, Josefa Maria Stiegler: Policy Brief. Der EU-Aktionsplan zu Frauen, Frieden, Sicherheit Agenda – Chancen und Herausforderungen für die Umsetzung der Agenda in Österreich, Wien Jänner 2020, p. 3.

14 See for instance OIIP, Short Study: Foreign Fighters – Grundlagen für Österreichs Präventions- und Deradikalisierungsarbeit, 2018.





## RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING PROTECTION

*“There should be mandatory courses for Afghan women, so they will be able to leave the house [...]. So we can understand Austrian society better and be with people other than only our families. If the man works and the woman does not need to go to mandatory courses, the man will not let her go – with the argument that he is earning the money and we don’t need you to go to courses.”*

Afghan woman on courses regarding protection mechanisms

**Mandatory courses for refugee women to provide enhanced information on protection mechanisms in relevant languages:** In order to ensure improved and more accurate understanding for asylum-seeking and refugee women, mandatory courses on Austrian protection mechanisms, legal definitions of offences and procedures shall be introduced and added to the existing *Value and Orientation Courses* (“Wertekurse”), and/or other trainings. It is highly recommended to include refugee women’s organisations from the various

diaspora communities as culturally appropriate multipliers. A training of trainers (ToT) course for multipliers should be envisaged.

**More training for translators who work with/for Austrian authorities, as well as the establishment of control mechanisms to ensure a high quality of translations:** In order to guarantee accurate translation for asylum-seeking and refugee women, mechanisms for monitoring the quality of translation at meetings/interviews with police and/or authorities shall be established. Engaging female translators might be beneficial to facilitate interviews with asylum-seeking women.

**Training of decision makers and judges (in asylum and criminal procedures), police or other state actors on conflict-related (S)GBV involved in the context of asylum procedures, law enforcement, criminal procedures or reception:** It is recommended that regular trainings for decision makers and judges (in asylum procedures), police and other state actors involved in asy-

lum procedures or reception are ensured. These actors are crucial to the identification of potential victims of serious conflict-related crimes and their knowledge and expertise can be vital in developing strategies aiming at the prevention of violence and/or conflict. In order to support their responsibility to identify and respond, it is highly recommended that ongoing mandatory capacity building is ensured.

**Setting up a “network of exchange for effective protection”, including diaspora and refugee women’s organisations, NGOs, academia and responsible Austrian authorities:** In line with Indicator #29 of the EU RAP (on best practices and challenges, of the EU and its Member States policies and initiatives on protection measures and how they affect/benefit refugees and/or asylum seekers from countries affected by armed conflict): This indicator supports the exchange of best practices and challenges in protection measures for asylum seekers within the EU, thus including Austria. A “Network of exchange for effective Protection” including diaspora and refugee women’s organisations, NGOs, academia and responsible Austrian authorities should be established, and activities communicated in the annual Austrian reports on UNSCR 1325.

**Ensure and improve successful access to justice at national courts for victims of serious (conflict-related) forms of violence:** Consider increasing investigations and procedures in cases where crimes were committed outside the territory of Austria. Stronger transnational cooperation by law between state actors (such as law enforcement, police, courts and/or immigration authorities) and non-state actors (such as victim’s rights organisations) would improve the quality of investigations and increase the number of convictions.

**Actively pursue procedures against perpetrators suspected of having committed crimes which fall under international criminal law, in particular with regards to countries of origin which have not ratified the Rome Statute (such as Iraq and Syria).**

**Improve successful access to justice and compensation for survivors and/or victims of various forms of gender-based violence, including psychological violence, coercion, honour-related threats and crimes, and/or forced marriage.**

**Consider revising legal provisions with privileges for perpetrators who are family members:** By making the severity of punishment dependent on the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim, and/or placing the responsibility for criminal prosecution on the victim, the legislator gives the message that (violent) acts committed against family members are less grave than publicly-committed offences.

**Actively promoting and applying a victim-centred approach in investigations and evidence assessments,** taking into account the individual situation or personal circumstances of a victim (such as educational background, influence of social norms and the possible effects of trauma and/or the dynamics of a long-term violent relationship on the psyche of victims.)

**Consider developing strategies aimed at ensuring improved cooperation among all state- and non-state actors – including police, law enforcement courts – involved in the protection of victims of violence**

Strategies shall include *inter alia* the setting up of case conferences, developing and actively promoting the application of referral pathways and *Standard Operational Procedures* to be applied by all relevant actors.

# RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING RELIEF AND RECOVERY

*“We should not forget – if somebody is living for years and years in the asylum process, they are losing their motivation [...]. Sometimes people who came from other countries do not know how to raise their voice. Or they are really scared, as they think it might have a direct negative impact on their asylum process. [...]”*  
Afghan expert on improving reception conditions and support services

Overall, **better monitoring of refugee accommodation is necessary.** Some accommodation centre managers, particularly the smaller ones, take advantage of the fact that asylum seekers have insufficient information.

**Ensure that information on asylum procedures, legally-guaranteed standards in reception provisions and service providers, including legal representation, are available as soon as possible upon arrival and for as long as procedures are ongoing – in a language which can be understood:** Provision of information shall consider different (regional) contexts and the accommodation situations of applicants for international protection. It is important that information is made available in rural areas, as well as in urban settings. Additionally, those who are not living in an organised accommodation centre shall also receive information. It shall be provided in a language the asylum seekers can reasonably understand and shall comprehensively take into account gender-specific aspects, such as specific accommodation, health or protection needs of women and girls.

**Use of social media to access information:** The use of social media in the mother tongues of the refugee community could be an easy and effective tool to facilitate access to necessary information on options for protection in Austria. Cooperation with refugee women’s organisations is highly recommended.

**Scaling up labour market integration for recognised refugees:** Recent research shows that many refugee women are highly educated and have worked in skilled jobs in their countries of origin (especially in Syr-

ia). Better labour market integration is needed, which should include the offer of higher-level language courses (B2), improved access to childcare and more mentoring programs for refugee women (and older people). This would lead to a win-win situation.

**Scaling up of psychosocial services (PS) and (mental) health services in different languages:** Many forcibly displaced women and girls suffer from psychological distress, depression and trauma. Provision of psychosocial services is currently inadequate and Austria should invest in scaling up such services in different mother tongues of the refugee communities, as psychosocial health is a precondition for successful integration. In 2019, refugee women in Austria were, on average, at greater risk (35%) of having moderate or severe, i.e. clinically-relevant problems, as compared to refugee men (31%), and compared to Austrian women (10%) and Austrian men (6%).<sup>15</sup>

**Scaling up the number of interpreters, of females interpreters in particular, for medical services:** In order to overcome the lack of available interpreters for refugee communities accessing Austrian medical services a *Training of Trainers* program, in cooperation with refugee women’s organisations, should be considered across Austria.

**Ensure that access to health services takes a holistic, interdisciplinary approach, which considers the special needs of victims of gender-based violence and applicants for international protection:** As applicants for international protection might be victims of (S)GBV, it is crucial that their specific needs regarding health services are taken into account. In addition to overcoming language barriers, cultural issues, social norms, and/or different concepts of (mental) health, victims of violence might still be at risk of (ongoing) violence and/or

<sup>15</sup> WIIW Working Paper 169 (Sebastian Leitner, Michael Landesmann, Judith Kohlenberger, Isabella Buber-Ennsner and Bernhard Rengs): The Effect of Stressors and Resilience Factors on Mental Health of Recent Refugees in Austria, Vienna 2019, p.7.



under pressure from perpetrators. In addition to ensuring that sufficient resources – which require a high level of expertise from medical personnel – are available to respond to these complex needs, it is also crucial that support before – and follow-up after – treatment is available (e.g. psychosocial support from social workers, escorts, etc.).

**Ensure a high quality of assessments of applications for international protection, including a high level of professionalism by case workers and interpreters, taking gender-specific needs and contexts into account:** It is recommended that more legal services in the mother tongues of the refugee communities be provided, as well as improved monitoring of the quality of translation provided during asylum procedures. More female translators should be engaged for asylum-seeking women in particular, so they feel more comfortable explaining their reasons for asylum, including their experiences of war-related violence and SGBV.

**Consider setting up procedures for assessments of special reception and/or procedural needs, taking specific gender-related aspects to identify possible victims of violence into account:** Under the obligations of EU Law, it is highly recommended that a system of assessments for special reception and/or procedural needs be established. This should take specific gender-related aspects to identify possible victims of violence into account. Such assessments shall be undertaken as soon as possible after an application for international protection is made and shall be conducted throughout the asylum procedure. As special reception or procedural needs (during asylum procedures) may

change, this should also be taken into account. Good practice examples are Belgium, Finland and Germany.

**Develop referral pathways to be actively applied by all (state- and non-state) actors in practice, which address different contexts in order to ensure a well-coordinated response and provision of reception:** Even though there are informal case-related referral pathways through professional networks in Austria, no formally established pathways exist. Referral pathways are a standard tool to ensure a professional, well-coordinated response and provision of reception, while addressing the individual needs of applicants for international protection. Referral pathways shall be developed to address different contexts: for example, referral pathways for victims of trafficking, which are applicable throughout Austria, along with referral pathways for victims of gender-related crimes, such as FGM, forced marriage or honour-related crimes. In addition, it is crucial that these referral pathways are regularly updated to indicate contacts for focal points and/or other responsible persons. Already-developed practical guidelines for suspected cases of child trafficking might be a leading example for developing referral pathways which take other contexts and crimes into account, and should be actively applied in practice.<sup>16</sup>

**Establish formal monitoring procedures throughout reception and ongoing asylum procedures in line with international standards:** It is highly recommended that monitoring throughout reception provision and ongoing asylum procedures be improved. This should also include the monitoring of the performance of persons involved in service provision, including interpreters and/or legal advisors.

16 BMFJ, Handlungsorientierungen Kinderhandel, available at [https://www.bmeia.gv.at/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Zentrale/Aussenpolitik/Menschenrechte/Handlungsorientierungen\\_zur\\_Identifizierung\\_und\\_zum\\_Umgang\\_mit\\_potenziell....pdf](https://www.bmeia.gv.at/fileadmin/user_upload/Zentrale/Aussenpolitik/Menschenrechte/Handlungsorientierungen_zur_Identifizierung_und_zum_Umgang_mit_potenziell....pdf)



## CONCLUSION

In commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the UN-SCR 1325 and thus the start of the international WPS agenda in 2000, this research examines the situation for forcibly-displaced women, who, although referred to in the WPS resolutions, are only mentioned marginally and inconsistently. This study focuses on the situation for asylum-seeking and refugee women and girls in Austria, with a view to the provisions of the new *EU RAP on WPS (2019-24)*, which includes the situation for forcibly-displaced women and girls within Europe.

The assumption that domestic aspects are neither sufficiently reflected in the Austrian NAP, nor in practice, was clearly confirmed, although due to financial limitations the study could not include a representative sample of asylum-seeking and refugee women and girls. To align Austria's NAP on the WPS agenda (second revised version from 2012) with the EU RAP along the pillars of *participation* and leading by example, *protection*, *prevention* and *relief and recovery*, several amendments need to be made in relation to the situation for refugee and asylum-seeking women and girls in Austria. When examining their experiences, perceptions and challenges in Austria, several issues with the implementation of

the domestic aspects of the EU RAP on WPS were detected, which indicate the need for improvement.

Under the pillar of *Participation*, the main findings include shortcomings in the involvement of asylum-seeking and refugee women in humanitarian aid as well as reception and accommodation centre, management; inadequate early access to information on language courses and programs; a lack of intercultural understanding between refugee and host communities and the non-involvement of refugee (women's) and diaspora organisations in any WPS platforms.

Under the pillar of *Prevention*, major gaps detected in Austria include the need for the enhancement of information for asylum-seeking women and men on gender equality provisions in Austria, including sexual and reproductive health and rights, as well as a lack of research and knowledge by asylum-relevant stakeholders of gender-specific reasons for flight and migration.

Under the key objective of *Protection*, findings suggest that in general, successful access to domestic courts for victims of serious forms of (conflict-related) forms of violence can be improved and must be ensured. It appears there is a lack of information for

victims of serious forms of (conflict-related) violence on how to access national criminal courts and/or how to claim compensation. Women interviewed suggested that mandatory courses be organised on relevant protection mechanisms for all asylum-seeking women; more trainings for translators and interpreters be provided, as well as more awareness-raising trainings on gender equality for men and boys from Austria's refugee communities, in order to help them to overcome their cultural gender stereotypes.

Under the chapter of *Relief and Recovery*, this research found that monitoring of the provision of adequate reception conditions in accommodation centres for asylum seekers – which addresses individual (gender-specific) needs – appears to be insufficient. There is a need to improve access to information on asylum procedures and legally-guaranteed services, as well as to ensure that service providers (including legal representation) is available as soon as possible upon arrival in Austria, and for as long as procedures are ongoing, in a language which can be understood. A huge gap was also detected with regards to the availability of psychosocial and (mental) health care services in different languages, as well as the number of trained (female) interpreters available to ensure effective access to health services. Integration into the labour market for recognised (female) refugees at the level of their professional potential was also reported to be a significant issue by the interviewees. With regards to the legal aspect, interviewees reported that the taking of gender-specific needs and contexts into account during assessments of applications for international protection also has potential for improvement.

In general, the study shows that core obligations deriving from the WPS agenda, along with the objectives as defined in the EU RAP, are strongly interlinked with obligations under international human rights law and – in view of the European context – with obligations deriving from the instruments of the legal framework of the CEAS, as well as other EU Directives, such as the EU *Victim of a Crime* Directive. In this regard the study shows that national implementation of binding international law and EU law might be improved, in particular with regards to the obligation to assess (document) the nature of specific needs (e.g. specialised health care, adequate living conditions which address the needs of women, adequate translation services) throughout the entire asylum procedure. Additionally, access to information for applicants for international

protection regarding ways in which they can effectively access their rights and legally-guaranteed (reception) services appears to be problematic. Furthermore, it seems that information on protection (mechanisms), including opportunities to access domestic courts as a victim of a serious (gender-based) crime, seems to be insufficient. In this regard, paying attention to developments regarding procedures at domestic courts aiming at prosecuting persons suspected of having committed crimes which fall under international criminal law, will be important.

During the FGDs and interviews with asylum-seeking and refugee women from Afghanistan and Syria in Austria, a high level of dedication and desire to participate in Austrian society and for gender equality could be noted. There is huge potential to integrate refugee women's organisations and experts into both the WPS agendas, and their implementation. It would be beneficial and necessary to update the current version of the *Austrian NAP on WPS (2012)* in line with the new *EU RAP on WPS (2019-24)*. The aim of ensuring the human rights of women and girls affected by conflict, who are now forcibly displaced in Europe, is necessary to comply with the *EU RAP on WPS*. To develop these amendments, it is highly recommended that the responsible state actors of the IMAG should consult with developers of the NAPs in best practice countries such as Ireland, Germany, Finland and/or France. Furthermore, asylum experts, migrant women's organisations in Austria and the EU, refugee women, and other relevant ministries, including departments which are not part of the IMAG, but work with refugees and asylum-seekers, should be invited.

It is highly recommended that practitioners who work either in the field of WPS, or with asylum-seekers and refugees, in particular with women and girls, include the content of this study and its recommendations into consultations with responsible state institutions and refugee (women's) organisations, as well as in practice. The findings and recommendations of this research aim to inform the linking up and harmonisation of policies, Austrian law, activities, strengthening of expertise in relevant fields, and to support cooperation in the fields of asylum (Ministry of Interior) and WPS (under the leadership of the Ministry of European and Foreign Affairs). The authors of this study hope to contribute to a fruitful discussion on these important topics, and to support a win-win approach based on human rights, for all stakeholders.



[www.vidc.org](http://www.vidc.org)