



Women Refugees at Risk in Europe

NOBEL WOMEN'S INITIATIVE'S ASSESSMENT



Advocating for peace, justice & equality

About us

The Nobel Women's Initiative uses the prestige of the Nobel Peace Prize and courageous women peace laureates to magnify the power and visibility of women working in countries around the world for peace, justice, and equality.

Our advocacy is organized around three main pillars:

Women Forging Peace—The inclusion of women in peace making and supporting nonviolence and other alternatives to war and militarism.

Women Achieving Justice—Accountability for crimes committed against women and an end to widespread impunity.

Women Advancing Equality and Human Rights—Support for human rights defenders, those working for women's equality and those on the frontlines of civil society—including those addressing climate change.

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Delegates with volunteers at Miksalište distribution centre in Belgrade, Serbia

Introduction

In November 2015, the Nobel Women's Initiative and the International Campaign to Stop Rape & Gender Violence in Conflict led a delegation of Nobel Peace Prize laureates and human rights experts to Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia and Germany along the route of the refugees heading to Western Europe.

Delegates included Nobel Peace laureates Tawakkol Karman (Yemen), Shirin Ebadi (Iran) and Jody Williams (USA), as well as women leaders from the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Physicians for Human Rights, Kvinna till Kvinna, American Friends Service Committee and Hand in Hand Syria.

The goals of the delegation were to assess the impact of the war in Syria and the refugee crisis on women and children and to highlight women's contributions in forging solutions to the crisis, particularly in addressing the root causes. In the lead-up to this fact-finding mission, staff interviewed and met with almost 100 representatives from human rights and humanitarian organizations, government and international agencies.

The delegation moved along the refugee route in the Balkans with stops at refugee reception centers and camps in Serbia (Krnjača and Miksalište), at the Serbian-Croatian border (Adaševci and Šid), inside Croatia (Slavonski Brod) and inside Slovenia (Dobova). Along the way, delegates spoke with refugees, met with dozens of volunteer and civil society organizations, women's organizations, representatives from UNHCR and humanitarian organizations, local government officials, and the Interior Minister of Croatia, Ranko Ostojić. In Germany, delegates visited a reception center and home for refugees and met with a wide range of women refugees from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Eritrea. Delegates also met with Chancellor Merkel's Foreign Affairs and Security Advisor, Mr. Heusgen, and Commissioner for Human Rights and Humanitarian Aid, Dr. Christoph Straesser.



Root cause of the refugee crisis: The war in Syria

The war in Syria, which started in 2011, has become one of the worst humanitarian crises of the modern era.

What started as nonviolent protest against one of the world's most repressive regimes has morphed into a complex and especially cruel war, killing more than 250,000 Syrians in the last five years. Civilians are not only caught in the crossfire of the violence, they have become targets. President Assad's forces, along with opposition forces, have used deliberate starvation as a war tactic, depriving entire towns of not only food but also heat and medicine. Schools and other public or community spaces have also been deliberately bombed. Aerial bombardments have extensively damaged infrastructure; an estimated 80% of Syria's population has no electricity or water.

One of the most striking features of this war is the way government forces—along with the Islamic state and various opposition armed groups—have deliberately bombed hospitals, field clinics,

ambulances and medical supplies. As of December 31, 2014, 599 medical personnel had been killed since the conflict began, including 195 doctors, 117 nurses, 114 medics, and 56 pharmacists, among others. According to the Syrian American Medical Society and Physicians for Human Rights report, there is only one remaining OB-GYN in the city of Aleppo. Pregnant women are not receiving pre or post-natal care, putting themselves and their babies at great risk.

The war in Syria has displaced more than 10 million Syrians. Over 4.3 million Syrians—at least half of them children—have fled, most of them residing in the neighbouring countries of Turkey (2.2 million), Lebanon (more than 1 million) and Jordan (about 630,000) while another 6.6 million Syrians are internally displaced within Syria. While neighbouring countries have made great efforts in

accommodating millions of refugees, the situation of the refugees has become increasingly destitute over the past two years.

Driven by a loss of hope and worsening living conditions across the Middle East, thousands of Syrian refugees have made the decision to risk migration to Europe over the past year.

A joint inter-agency briefing paper by several international humanitarian organizations identified two key elements causing the mass exodus of Syrians from the Middle East to Europe:

- National legislation and policies in some of the countries neighbouring Syria makes it increasingly difficult for Syrians to live in those countries legally and significantly impedes refugees' access to assistance and public services.
- It is often impossible to meet basic needs because most refugees have by now depleted their savings and sold their original assets, and there are very few legal ways to earn an income.

Displacement has had severe impacts on women and children.

Women, especially between the ages of 15 and 49, represent one million of the over four million refugees. In the refugee camps, they often lack adequate access to health services, including sexual, reproductive and maternal health, and are highly vulnerable to violence and sexual assault. On top of that, refugees have a precarious legal status in host countries and thus their opportunities for earning a legal income are severely limited. The result is that Syrian refugees have been forced to adopt a range of negative coping mechanisms, such as child labour or early marriage. According to humanitarian organizations, marriages involving teenage refugee girls are increasing at alarming rates and now make up about a third of marriages in the camps.

Women also worry about the future for their families. Over one million children between the

ages of 5 and 17 are not enrolled in school, putting an entire generation at risk of not having any concrete employment options in the future. Many of the refugee children are suffering from trauma. A 2014 report from UNICEF cited a survey that found that a third of Syrian children at the Za'atari refugee camp in northern Jordan displayed unusually aggressive behaviour and engaged in self-harm. The report warned that without help, these children were at risk of drifting into crime, addiction and violence, and that some were joining criminal gangs or armed groups.

It is these conditions that are driving ever increasing numbers of women, including pregnant women, and children to risk their lives on the dangerous journey to Europe, often on their own.



THE SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS

A TREACHEROUS JOURNEY FOR WOMEN & CHILDREN

Women and children make up the majority of refugees and internally displaced persons in Syria. Those who escape the Syrian conflict still face threats of sexual violence and harassment along the refugee route with nowhere to turn for protection.

WHERE ARE REFUGEE WOMEN MOST VULNERABLE TO VIOLENCE?

REFUGEE RECEPTION CENTRES

Women and children are still vulnerable once they reach refugee reception centres—often cramped, without separate washrooms for men and women, and without secure sleeping areas. German women's rights groups have been particularly vocal in calls for their government to address reports of sexual violence and exploitation in temporary refugee shelters around the country.

DETENTION CENTRES

Women and children refugees who are stopped and detained in prisons—as has happened to individuals crossing into Hungary—may be forced into close quarters with a mostly male prison population, exposing them to even greater risk of violence.

BOTTLENECKS & INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS

Many European countries are closing their borders to refugees, creating bottlenecks along The Balkans region, where thousands of people are now stuck. Women and children—particularly those travelling alone—become even more vulnerable to attack at these bottlenecks and along the refugee route, where they are often forced to camp out or crowd into hostels with little protection from robbery, violence and exploitation.

TRAVELING WITH ABUSIVE PARTNERS

Some women along the refugee route are fleeing war alongside abusive partners whose violence may escalate with the stress and instability of their journey. There are few supports in place to help these women escape their abusive partners or to hold their abusers accountable.

BOAT CROSSINGS

Those who attempt the dangerous journey to Europe on boats are often met with more danger once they arrive on land. The informal settlements that pop up at the other end of refugee boat crossings—such as those on the Greek island of Lesbos—do not provide separate accommodation or protection for women and children as they wait to be processed by government officials, increasing their vulnerability to abuse. Exploitation by boat smugglers is also common.

VIOLENCE & EXPLOITATION ALONG THE JOURNEY

Threats of violence, robbery and exploitation by smugglers—including being forced into survival sex to pay smugglers off and continue the journey—are ever present for refugee women and children. Many threats to women and children on the refugee route come from other refugees competing for scarce resources or taking advantage of the women and children traveling alone.

Map source: Europol and Emergency Response Coordination Centre [ERCC]



Impact of the refugee crisis on women

As the daily news reports hauntingly demonstrate, one of the most dangerous parts of the journey for refugees is the crossing between Turkey and Greece.

Over 3,600 people are known in 2015 to have drowned on treacherous sea crossings in overcrowded, dilapidated and abandoned boats and dinghies. Yet despite the known risk, refugees keep coming—as legal routes are unavailable to them.

According to UNHCR, close to one million people attempted to reach Europe by sea in 2015 alone. Of the total number of refugees, about 50% are Syrians while another 30% are from Iraq and Afghanistan. Smugglers have grossed millions of dollars taking advantage of people's desperation by exploiting refugees financially, physically and sexually.

From Greece, the route overland to Western Europe is typically through Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia—and then through Austria to Germany or further, to Sweden and other northern European countries. But since the beginning of the refugee crisis, the overland route has changed—determined in large part by the politics of border crossings and the inclination of local governments to accept the passage of refugees.

While critics say that Europe, with a population of 500 million, could absorb many more refugees, most European countries have vigorously resisted

relocation and indeed European governments have been slow or even unwilling to respond to the immediate and critical needs of refugees. EU member states agreed in September 2015 to relocate 160,000 refugees, but by November merely 116 had been relocated.

The EU's failure to implement its asylum policy—and to distribute the responsibility for processing asylum claims fairly among its members—has contributed greatly to the insecurity of refugees crossing Europe and to simmering tensions between countries within Europe. Germany takes in the biggest share of refugees, 1 million in 2015, and continues to advocate for a joint EU strategy that includes an increase of support for Turkey and robust border control between Turkey and Greece. However, Germany has received little support from other EU countries. Even countries that were initially welcoming of refugees, including Sweden and Norway, are now citing a lack of capacity as a reason for reducing the number of refugees they will accept.

As of November 2015, the coordination between some countries in Europe, for example between Croatia and Slovenia, was starting to improve but humanitarian and other organizations providing support to refugees were still largely frustrated with



the lack of coordinated response to the refugee crisis.

The refugees' journey through Western Europe typically includes any number of challenges, including border closures, detention, robberies, beatings and a lack of food and shelter. With the onset of cold weather, all refugees face increased illness and the risk of dying from exposure. For women, the added burden of caring for children and elderly and the risks of rape, trafficking, and sexual exploitation has made the journey all the more traumatic.

There is little data and information available to help paint a thorough picture of how the refugee crisis is impacting women. As representatives from UNHCR and humanitarian groups have noted, this is a population of refugees that is "on the move". These organizations have little time to build trust with women whom they may only see for a few hours. On top of that, much of the service delivery is being carried out by local governments with little capacity to collect data or by citizen-led volunteer groups that are already stretched to their limit trying to keep up with the needs of a very transient and high-needs population.

Other reviews of the situation of refugee women in Europe include recent assessments done by UN Women and the Women's Refugee Commission.

Key findings:

- Despite the cold weather, humanitarian organizations and citizen-led groups report
- an increasing number of women and children, now making up at least one-third of all those attempting the dangerous journey to Europe. Women and children face physical danger and exploitation at the hands of smugglers, other refugees and local authorities.
- Humanitarian groups from Greece through the Balkans are reporting hypothermia, respiratory issues, pneumonia, the flu and gangrene as families are struggling to stay warm, and keep children dry and warm.
- The UN Population Fund estimates that
- twelve percent of the refugee women making their way across Europe are pregnant. Yet, women refugees have almost no access to basic pre and post-natal care, birth control and reproductive health services along the refugee route.
- Women and children, particularly those traveling
- alone, are most vulnerable at "bottleneck points" – at informal settlements or border crossings where they are forced to sleep at night with little protection from robbery, violence and exploitation.



- Women refugees report a very high incidence of robbery, and the lack of money is making them very vulnerable to further exploitation, including sexual trafficking as they travel the refugee route through Europe.
- Throughout the Balkans refugee women complain of inflated prices for basic needs; all too often local individuals are exploiting the situation of the refugees for their own gains.
- Basic security, which is supposed to be provided by local authorities in countries along the refugee route, ranges from very limited to almost nonexistent—and police sometimes are a part of the problem in that they ignore incidences of exploitation or violence or are themselves perpetrating these crimes.
- There is presently 100% impunity for sexual crimes and other forms of gender-based crimes committed against refugee women.
- Women and children are still vulnerable once they reach reception centers—many of which are cramped, without separate washrooms for women and men, and without secure and separate sleeping areas.
- The insecurity and trauma faced by the refugee population is leading to increasing levels of domestic violence, with women forced to stay with abusive partners.
- Women who have experienced violence, including sexual violence, at home, along the journey or in Europe do not have access to adequate protection and psychosocial services, unnecessarily prolonging the effects of trauma.
- A lack of adequate information for the refugees is one of the biggest challenges for refugees – starting in Turkey, and along the entire refugee route. The lack of information puts women and children at high risk for exploitation and greatly increases their insecurity along the refugee route in the Balkans. In Germany, refugee women reported high levels of confusion about the asylum processes.





Ensuring safe passage of refugee women through Europe

This crisis is unique in that tools and services usually employed in emergency settings to prevent sexual and gender-based violence are hard to apply in this context of constant movement.

As refugees move through Europe, they are in any one location for only hours or days at a time. Creative responses are required to address the urgent needs and risks faced by refugee women.

Early on in the refugee crisis, local women's organizations in the Balkans as well as in final destination countries were quick to identify the specific challenges facing women. When governments and UN agencies were initially slow to respond to the needs of refugees, these grassroots organizations developed some ad-hoc tools and mechanisms to address the needs and risks of women. The knowledge and tools being employed by women's organizations in the Balkans in part derive from their experience gained during and after the Balkan wars of the 1990s.

One of the current concerns of women's organizations in the Balkans is that governments and UN agencies are sidelining them in humanitarian efforts along the refugee route. Almost none of the funding made available to the governments in the Balkans has trickled down to women's organizations, and they continue to operate with shoestring budgets and on the sidelines of the larger coordinated response, which does not adequately address women's needs.

Better strategies are needed to provide an adequate response to the needs of women, and local women's organizations must be part of the strategies. They have local knowledge and experience in dealing with local authorities and communities.

Based on the findings of the delegation, and consultations with an extensive range of global and local women's organizations as well as humanitarian organizations, the Nobel Women's Initiative is calling on EU member states and international agencies deployed within the EU for the following measures:

- The immediate creation of legal pathways to Europe to reduce women and children's vulnerability to smugglers, traffickers and drowning at sea.
- Greater protection of women and their children through the provision of adequate reception centers with separate facilities for men and women, proper policing of such sites, and gender-based violence experts who are working as part of the clinical teams.
- The allocation of 15% of overall funding for the refugee crisis for the prevention of gender-based violence.
- Availability of reproductive health services at all times for women along the entire refugee route.
- Training for police forces in Greece and the Balkan countries in the protection of women and the specific challenges facing refugee women.
- Training for first responders—including civil society volunteers—in early alert mechanisms and detection of gender-based violence and response.
- Proper documentation of women's experiences of gender-based violence as well as medically certified examinations as a basis for initiating legal action against perpetrators.
- Dissemination of information to refugee women about their rights, medical and psychosocial services available to them through female Arabic and Farsi speakers at every step of the refugee route – from the place of departure to final destination countries.
- Clear public statements by government authorities condemning attacks against women as deterrent against gender-based violence while also prosecuting such crimes committed against refugee women.
- Full access to transit sites and resources for local women's organizations supporting women refugees.



Spotlight on groups supporting women refugees in Europe



ASSOCIATION FOR COMBATTING HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND ALL FORMS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (ATINA)

The Association for Combatting Human Trafficking and all forms of Gender-Based Violence (ATINA) is a Serbia-based feminist organization founded in 2004 to respond to the problem of human trafficking in Serbia, and the lack of long-term support available to victims. ATINA provides psychosocial, legal, and medical services to victims, along with supporting them to meet basic needs, including housing. ATINA operates the only women's shelter for victims of sexual violence in Serbia, located in the capital city Belgrade.



Delegates meet with ATINA

ATINA has also been at the forefront of Europe's refugee crisis by providing services to women refugees. ATINA has established mobile teams at key border areas throughout Serbia to identify women victims of trafficking and provide immediate assistance through an extensive referral system. ATINA's referral system connects refugee women to victim services in Serbia, Greece and Macedonia. To date, ATINA has provided over 5,000 refugee women with information about support services and/or connected them to psychosocial support. ATINA's referral system extends beyond the Balkans—they work closely with partners in western Europe to ensure women victims of trafficking receive necessary support throughout their entire journey, especially once they arrive in their destination country.

In the field, ATINA is conducting essential research on how the state assesses women asylum seekers. When officials assess asylum seekers they are often assessed as a group, and the head of the group—often a man—reports the information. In these cases, women members of the group do not have an opportunity to share their experiences, and a chance to escape a violent situation may be lost. ATINA is working hard to change the approach in Serbia's refugee intake system.

Members of ATINA's mobile team regularly report being treated poorly by state security officials at key border crossing areas. Further, officials have failed to provide ATINA with permission to operate in reception centers. Despite these challenges, ATINA carries on with its work.

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MEDICA MONDIALE

medica mondiale is a German non-governmental women's rights and aid organization committed to supporting women and girls living in war zones and crisis areas all around the world. Since 1993, medica mondiale has dedicated itself to providing vital medical, psychosocial and legal services to women and girls who have been affected by sexualized violence. The organization also engages in political human rights work to address the problem of sexual violence in war at all levels. Through established partnerships with international and local grassroots organizations, medica mondiale is carrying out projects in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Africa.

Since December 2014, medica mondiale has been actively involved in supporting refugee women displaced as a result of the war in Syria. By funding the work of a Turkish women's organization, the Association of Legal Aid Against Sexual Violence, medica mondiale broadens access to medical, legal and psychosocial services for women and girls in refugee camps along the Syrian-Turkish border. medica mondiale also provides trauma-focused, psychosocial counseling trainings to volunteers and professionals working with refugee women in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany, home to more than one-fifth of the country's refugee population.

WOMEN IN EXILE

Women in Exile was formed in 2002 by women asylum seekers living in social housing in Germany. They recognized that women and children living in social housing often face unique struggles, such as lack of privacy, sexual harassment and violence. They also saw a lack of awareness about these issues among organizations that support asylum seekers across the country. As a result, the women mobilized a forum where they could express their fears and needs as asylum seekers living in social housing, and seek political and social solutions.

Since its inception, Women in Exile has been active in political struggles for the rights and safety of women asylum seekers. The group engages in a variety of activities aimed at mobilizing political action to address the problem—including documenting and reporting on the situation of women asylum seekers, hosting discussions with political leaders and organizing public demonstrations. Women in Exile also hosts workshops and seminars to teach women asylum seekers about their human and political rights. Above all, Women in Exile seeks to empower women asylum seekers to become active in the struggle against discriminatory laws which may impede their emancipation.



Ending the war in Syria: The solution to the refugee crisis

As the experience of refugees in Germany, Sweden and other final destination countries indicate, resettlement is not a panacea for the problems facing Syrian women.

As a recent survey carried out by the German-Syrian organization Adopt a Revolution indicated, only 8% of the Syrian refugees in Germany want to stay indefinitely while the majority would return to Syria under certain conditions. The only certain way to stop refugees from coming to Europe is an end to the conflict in Syria.

Evidence has shown that women's participation in peace processes is critical. Syrian women have been active in peacebuilding efforts since the Syrian crisis began in 2011. Through four years of horrendous conflict, women have negotiated local ceasefires, including a 20-day truce in a violence ravaged Damascus suburb, secured the release of detainees, combatted child recruitment and arms proliferation, and promoted co-existence, transitional justice mechanisms and women's

political empowerment. Women have also documented human rights abuses, opened temporary schools, and exposed local officials who failed to hand out donated food and medical supplies. The Swedish organization Kvinna till Kvinna has mapped the work of close to 50 women's organizations inside Syria working in a peacebuilding capacity in their latest report "Peacebuilding defines our future: a study of women's peace activism in Syria."

Women who have had to flee Syria are continuing their peace activism despite displacement. For example, the Syrian Women's Network and Syrian Women's Initiative for Peace and Democracy consists of experienced women activists, such as former political prisoners and women's rights activists, who were ready to present their peace



Members of the Syrian Women's Network and Syrian Women's Initiative for Peace and Democracy

plan during the peace negotiations in Geneva in January 2014. Since then, they have been in constant dialogue with key policy-makers, including UN Special Envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura, to ensure women are heard and included in political processes.

Despite women's key contributions to peace and democracy inside Syria and in exile, they have so far been largely excluded from any peace processes. Not only does this represent a missed opportunity but a clear indicator that these peace talks will not succeed in bringing peace and democracy to Syria.

The Nobel Women's Initiative is calling for a holistic plan to bring an end to the conflict through the following actions:

- Enforce an immediate end to all aerial bombardments and a shift in strategy that has the protection of civilians at its center with an increase in humanitarian assistance.
- Ensure a peace process for resolving the conflict is inclusive of civil society and women in particular.
- Devise a comprehensive regional development and reconstruction plan, which includes sustainable development projects, education, livelihood programs and reconstruction – and draws upon the expertise of civil society, including women's organizations.
- Increase funding for grassroots women's organizations working for peace and reconciliation at the local and national level.

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DELEGATION PARTICIPANTS

Jody Williams
Nobel Peace Laureate, USA, 1997

Shirin Ebadi
Nobel Peace Laureate, Iran, 2003

Tawakkol Karman
Nobel Peace Laureate, Yemen, 2011

Donna McKay
Executive Director
Physicians for Human Rights (PHR), USA

Giovanna Negretti
Middle East Regional Director
American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), USA

Lena Ag
Secretary General
Kvinna till Kvinna, Sweden

Madeleine Rees
Secretary General
Women's International League for Peace and
Freedom (WILPF), Switzerland

Rola Hallam
Medical Director
Hand in Hand for Syria, United Kingdom

Liz Bernstein
Executive Director
Nobel Women's Initiative

Rachel Vincent
Media and Communications Director
Nobel Women's Initiative

Diana Sarosi
Policy and Advocacy Manager
Nobel Women's Initiative

Ashley Armstrong
Online Media and Outreach Coordinator (Acting)
Nobel Women's Initiative

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