

# **Engendering Security at the Borders of Europe: Women Migrants and the Mediterranean ‘Crisis’**

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The dangers facing migrants attempting to reach the EU by boat have been highlighted in many reports and media articles. However, although more and more women are among those trying to reach Europe, little attention has so far been paid to the gendered nature of the insecurities facing these migrants. This article examines the experiences of women arriving in Kos, Greece, as part of a journey to seek protection in Europe, and analyses the ways in which gendered forms of violence, gendered divisions of space and relations of power create specific insecurities for these women.

Keywords: Gender, migration, Europe, violence, women

## **Introduction**

Since the start of 2015, European and world attention has turned to a ‘crisis’ unfolding in the Mediterranean: that of the thousands of migrants risking their lives to try and reach Europe from the opposite shores, and many of them dying in the process. Although media and politicians have portrayed this as a new problem facing the EU, in fact this Mediterranean ‘crisis’ is not a completely new phenomenon. Migrants have been attempting to cross the Mediterranean to reach Europe (and dying on the way) for many years. What is new is the scale of the influx of migrants—the current conflict in Syria, together with ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan, Eritrea and Somalia, have certainly swelled the number of those arriving across the Mediterranean—and also a more diversified demographic spread amongst the migrants, with more and more women and children on the boats crossing to Europe. Although it is impossible to get accurate statistics for the number of migrants trying to reach Europe, let alone accurate gender-disaggregated statistics, due to the irregular nature of this migration, it seems that, while previously those crossing the Mediterranean by boat were in the majority men, there are now more

and more women undertaking the crossing. This article will attempt to explore some of the gendered aspects of this Mediterranean migration, analysing the experiences of women migrants and the particular insecurities which they may face as well as their strategies for resistance and survival. The article will look particularly at the experiences of Syrian migrants, who now form a large percentage of those who are trying to reach Europe across the Mediterranean, and will examine the experiences of women to see how gendered forms of insecurity are created and how these are negotiated by these women. It is perhaps ironic to note that, whilst many European leaders have recently called for increased action to prevent violence against women, current immigration and asylum policies are pushing some groups of women into situations in which they are at greater risk.

Research for the article was carried out primarily on the Greek Island of Kos, where thousands of migrants, mostly from Syria, are currently arriving daily on boats crossing from the Turkish coast near the city of Bodrum. Interviews were carried out with Syrian, Afghan and Iraqi women and men who had landed in Kos and were intending to carry on their journeys to other countries in Europe. Thirty women were interviewed in Kos in July 2015, some at the Captain Elias 'hotel', and others where they were living and sleeping in parks and open spaces. I also conducted interviews with representatives of *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF), who are working to provide health services to the migrants arriving on the island, and with Greek volunteers from the Kos Solidarity organization who provide solidarity, food, hygiene essentials and clothing to the migrants.<sup>1</sup> Additional research was carried out through interviews with Greek immigration officials, staff of the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) and email exchanges and interviews with representatives of FRONTEX, the European border control agency.

### **Gender, Migration and Security**

The interconnections between gender, migration, violence and insecurity have been highlighted by research in various regions of the world (Marchand 2008; Freedman 2012). Different push and pull factors, migration control regimes, as well as social and economic conditions in countries of origin, transit and destination create varying types of insecurity and violence for men and women, depending on their varying social and economic positions and the relations of power between them. As Marchand argues:

It goes without saying that the migration–violence nexus is gendered. Men and women are affected in different ways and the violence to which they are exposed is related to their position with respect to the migration–violence nexus (Marchand 2008: 1387).

Recent research has also highlighted the physical risks of border crossing for women, and the higher rate of mortality at the borders for women than for men (Pickering and Cochrane 2012). Despite these risks, however, women continue to try and cross the Mediterranean to reach Europe despite to escape conflict, violence and persecution in their home countries and to find a safer home for them and their children.

When listening to the stories of migrants and studying their experiences, it does seem clear that migration does entail considerable threats to human security and that individual security is particularly threatened by the contemporary efforts to control migration. This seems to support an argument for a 'reconceptualisation of security in multidimensional and multilevel terms' (Tickner 1992: 128) and of a reanalysis of the relationship between migration and security beyond that of the threats that migration poses to states. To move beyond a state-centric approach to the insecurities of migration, a gender-informed approach to human security such as that proposed by Hoogensen and Stuvoy (2006) seems a productive one. This type of approach can, its proponents argue, 'offer a great deal in opening human security up to voices from below' (Hoogensen and Stuvoy 2006: 217), stressing the need to make visible relations of dominance and to identify the ways in which insecurities develop as a result of these relationships. The prioritization of an epistemological approach based on a concern with 'peopling IR' (Pettman 1996) and with dealing with contextually dependent practices and relationships also seems to us highly relevant in the study of migration. As Hoogensen and Stuvoy explain:

The theoretical concern with the activities and experiences of average people, referred to as 'everyday feminist theorizing' (Sylvester, 1996: 236), institutes an empirical focus of gender IR on the experiences of marginalized people, among them women, for the purposes of bringing new insights on the inter-connections between everyday practices and international politics (Hoogensen and Stuvoy 2006: 223).

In studying the experiences of women attempting to migrate across the Mediterranean to Europe, this article will attempt to shed light on the ways in which contemporary European and national migration policies impact on their security.

### **The Mediterranean Crisis and the Securitization of European Borders**

The current migration 'crisis' in the Mediterranean is not new and has not developed out of nowhere but is the culmination and combination of, on the one hand, the growing restriction of legal channels of migration and securitization of the European borders (de Haas 2007) and, on the other hand, huge instability and conflict in certain areas of the Middle East and Africa, and in particular Syria which are causing more and more desperate people to flee their countries and seek refuge in Europe. Whilst some European leaders

have been quick to point to the existence of trafficking and smuggling gangs as the cause of the increased numbers of migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean, in fact it can be argued these traffickers and smugglers are only gaining more work as the regular and safer routes to Europe are progressively blocked, leading migrants to take riskier journeys and to pay more to do so. As the EU countries have increasingly tried to restrict entry through more regular means, and have closed down previous routes of 'irregular' migration, migrants who are trying to reach Europe have been forced to find new and more perilous routes. As Lutterbeck points out: 'Plugging one hole in the EU perimeter quickly leads to enhanced pressure on other parts of its external borders' (Lutterbeck 2009: 123).

The outbreak of conflict in Syria has magnified migratory pressure as millions of Syrians are displaced beyond their own borders and are trying to reach the EU. Since the beginning of the conflict in Syria, millions have been displaced, either becoming Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), fleeing to neighbouring countries or seeking asylum in Europe or one of the other industrialized states. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that, in 2014, there were over six million people displaced within Syria, and over three million Syrian refugees dispersed throughout the Region (concentrated mainly in Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey and Iraq). In 2013, Syria became the main country of origin of asylum seekers in industrialized countries for the first time in its history. UNHCR's provisional data shows that 56,400 Syrians sought asylum in industrialized countries in 2013—six times more than the 8,500 asylum claims recorded two years earlier in 2011 (UNHCR 2014).

Faced with the scale of the refugee crisis in Syria and its neighbouring countries, some have criticized the EU for failing to do enough to help cope with this crisis. Whilst the majority of the asylum applicants from Syria in European states have been granted some form of protection (either refugee status or temporary protection), this still represents only a very small fraction of the total number of Syrian refugees, and the level of protection and legal status they are granted is not the same in all EU member states (Fargues and Fandrich 2012). Between March 2011 and December 2013, the 28 member states of the EU received 69,740 asylum claims from Syrian citizens and made 41,695 positive decisions. However, whilst this figure is large in proportion to refugee claims from other countries, it still represents only 2.9 per cent of the total Syrian refugee population (Fargues 2014). Moreover, figures show that an increasing proportion of Syrian asylum seekers are taking hazardous routes and employing the services of smugglers to arrive in Europe, rather than arriving through officially sanctioned channels:

The ratio of Syrians smuggled by sea to Greece or Italy, compared to those regularly seeking asylum in the EU28, has jumped from 14.7 per cent in 2011 to 40.9 per cent in 2012 and 44.7 per cent in 2013 (Fargues 2014: 3).

This use of smugglers and of insecure migration routes can cause specific insecurities for women. Although there is no sex-disaggregated data for asylum applicants from Syria across the EU member states, the European Asylum Office reports that many Syrian asylum seekers have come in families, which means that the gender balance among Syrian applicants is more equal than among applicants of other nationalities (EASO 2014). Some EU member states have begun to find difficulties in reception of these families, however, as they do not have enough suitable reception centres and housing (EASO 2014).

Migrants are also arriving in large numbers from other areas where conflict is ongoing such as Afghanistan, Somalia and Eritrea. The numbers of migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean in the first eight months of 2015 was estimated at 381,412,<sup>2</sup> with 50 per cent of these being Syrians. And the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) estimates that 2,366 migrants died attempting to cross the Mediterranean between January and August 2015.<sup>3</sup> On 23 April 2015, the European Council held a special meeting in response to the crisis situation in the Mediterranean during which they acknowledged that the situation in the Mediterranean is a ‘tragedy’, and promised to take measures including strengthening the EU’s presence at sea, fighting against traffickers, preventing illegal migration flows and reinforcing international solidarity and responsibility.<sup>4</sup> The EU’s approach has been heavily criticized, however, by human rights groups and migrant support groups for its focus on repression of trafficking and prevention of illegal migration rather than that of protecting the rights and lives of migrants who are desperate to reach Europe (Giuffrè and Costello 2015).

Although they have apparently failed to limit or stop ‘irregular’ migration, the policies of the EU have arguably led to increasing insecurities for migrants, forcing them into new and more perilous routes and crossings, and increasing their chances of encountering violence on their way to Europe. Moreover, tighter controls seem to have had the paradoxical effect of increasing the market for smugglers and traffickers who the EU has tried to eradicate but who are ever more involved in the migration process (De Haas 2006). The difficulties in reaching Europe now mean that it is almost impossible to undertake the journey without the assistance of a smuggler or trafficker, and the demands of these traffickers are thus more onerous for the migrants, creating further sources of insecurity, as will be discussed further below.

### **The Migration ‘Crisis’ in Greece**

Greece, and in particular the Greek islands, have become one of the major points of arrival for migrants from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>5</sup> The closure

of the Northern Greek border with Turkey (near Evros) has led to increasing numbers of migrants arriving via this sea route from Turkey. UNHCR puts the number of those arriving in Greece by sea so far in 2015 at 258,365 people.<sup>6</sup> Migrants are currently arriving in large numbers on the islands of Kos and Lesvos, which are unequipped to deal with such large influxes of migrants. In the first five months of 2015, around 12,000 migrants arrived on the Island of Kos, compared with only 739 in the whole of the previous year, and thousands continue to arrive daily as this article is being written. Kos, like other Greek islands, has been unprepared for this massive increase in the influx of migrants, and there are no reception facilities in place for those arriving, whilst the police and coastguard officials seem overwhelmed by the number of arrivals. The economic and political crisis which Greece is currently undergoing is also contributing to difficulties in managing this huge arrival of migrants, meaning that there are even fewer resources available to help the arriving migrants, and that the migrants themselves have had difficulty receiving money which might have been sent for them from abroad.

All of the migrants arriving in Kos are seeking to move on to another destination, usually elsewhere in Europe, although a small minority say that they wish to remain in Greece. In order to be able to leave the island and take the boat to Athens, though, they need a permit from the Greek police. A renewable one-month permit to remain in Greece is given to migrants from all countries except for Syrians, who receive a six-month renewable permit. The migrants must wait in Kos until they receive this permit—a wait which can be up to three weeks in the current situation where police are understaffed and failing to cope with the demand for permits. Once they have their permit, most migrants who have enough money take a boat straight to Athens from where they intend to continue their journey to other European countries. Most of the migrants I interviewed were intending to travel on to Germany, Sweden or, in a couple of instances, France and the UK. The permit they receive does not allow them to travel anywhere near to the Greek border areas, so they must return to ‘irregular’ means to cross the Greek border with Macedonia and then travel through Macedonia and Serbia to cross into the EU in Hungary en route for Germany and other EU destinations.

### **Dangerous Journeys**

The majority of the migrants arriving in Kos are men, although the proportion of women amongst the arrivals has been increasing. A representative of MSF based in Athens estimated that around 25 per cent of new arrivals are women, although she highlighted that there are no accurate sex-disaggregated statistics available from the Greek authorities.<sup>7</sup> An MSF representative working in Kos also put the figure of women amongst migrants as between 20 and 30 per cent, and said that he had seen an increase in women arriving since the end of 2014.<sup>8</sup> Previous research has pointed to the difficulties and obstacles

that may prevent women from migrating including lack of economic resources, responsibility for children and children's welfare, restrictions on women travelling alone both within their own country and outside of it, and fears of violence during migration. These obstacles mean that often women do not migrate until they have absolutely no other choice (Freedman 2015). Thus, the increasing numbers of female migrants risking the journey across the Mediterranean to reach Europe could be attributed to the worsening conditions in Syria, and for Syrian refugees in Turkey, as well as a realization that the Syrian conflict is not likely to end soon, which mean that these women are taking the choice of last resort. All of the Syrian women I spoke to on Kos had experienced violence directly in Syria or had a close family member who had experienced violence. They talked about violence from all sides in the conflict—both the official Syrian army and the Islamic State and rebel forces. One woman, for example, had lost her husband who had been killed in Aleppo and had fled with her two children, aged 20 and 12. She said that she no longer felt safe in Syria and felt that she had lost her home and everything she had. She explained that, in addition to the direct insecurities arising from the fighting, she experienced another layer of insecurity as a woman alone without a husband. Another woman, travelling with her husband and two baby sons, had had her house and all her possessions destroyed by a bomb blast, and the family had decided to leave straight away to seek safety for themselves and their children. There were many similar stories of women and families who no longer felt safe and had fled to protect themselves and their children, determined to reach Europe to find a place where they could be safe and re-start their lives. Many had little hope of ever being able to return to Syria. 'I feel as though I have lost my home for ever,'<sup>9</sup> said one woman, echoing the feelings of many others.

All of the migrants interviewed had travelled through Turkey, some taking longer than others to finally reach Greece. Some of the Syrians had stayed in Turkey for several years and had attempted to 'settle' there, but had then moved on due to a deteriorating situation for Syrian refugees in Turkey (Amnesty International 2014), and lack of opportunities for employment and for their children's education. Turkey currently hosts nearly two million Syrian refugees—far more than can be hosted in the 22 refugee camps constructed by the Turkish government—and thus the majority of these refugees have to fend for themselves. And, although the Turkish government has adopted an 'open door' policy to allow Syrian refugees into the country, they are not allowed to work and there are many stories of exploitative work and housing conditions (Özgür Baklacioğlu 2015). In addition, many families are worried that their children are not going to school, and are missing out on vital years of their education. One family I talked to had been living in Turkey for five years and the two children had learned to speak fluent Turkish. The mother explained, however, that they had encountered increasing hostility from the Turkish authorities and population, and that she could not find any work, meaning that they were living in squalid conditions.

She wanted to move to Europe to try and find a better future for her children. She said:

I want my children to go to school, to have an education. And I want to work. There was nothing left for us in Turkey, and I can't go back to Syria.

There are demographic differences in the migrant populations arriving in Kos so that, whilst Syrian and Afghan women arrive mainly accompanied by their husbands (although the number of Syrian women travelling alone is increasing) and often children, women from other countries such as Eritrea or Ethiopia may arrive alone. And the migrant populations from Pakistan are composed entirely of men. Travelling in family groups may provide some degree of security for Syrian and Afghan women migrants, as we will discuss below, but it may also bring other problems, such as lack of housing, worries about the conditions of children, inability to make independent decisions concerning their migratory journeys. The EASO's report for 2014 suggests that the tendency of Syrian migrants to arrive in families has caused difficulties for some EU states who do not have adequate reception facilities or housing for these families. It does seem that there are now increasing numbers of Syrian women travelling without a husband or male partner, in particular those women whose husbands have been killed in the conflict, or women who are sent ahead by their families to try and claim asylum in a safe country, before trying to bring other family members across to join them. Those women who were travelling without a husband or male partner spoke of the particular difficulties and insecurities they faced. As one woman, whose husband had been killed in Syria and who was travelling with two teenage children, attempting to reach her brother in Hamburg, Germany, said:

It is certainly very difficult to be a woman alone. It is hard to cope on my own, people look badly at me, I have to protect my children and do everything for them on my own.<sup>10</sup>

European leaders have blamed smugglers and traffickers for the 'migration crisis' in the Mediterranean but, as argued above, the role played by smugglers in the migrants' journeys is more complex than that of simple 'exploitation' and any analysis of the relationship between migrants and smugglers thus needs to be more nuanced. All of the migrants interviewed had used the services of smugglers to cross borders and to cross the sea to reach Kos. For some, this was a 'normal' part of the journey, whilst others complained about being victims of exploitation. The price of the passage varied but some quoted prices of up to 1,000 Euros for the short crossing between Turkey and Kos. For many, the prices were unexpectedly high and had eaten into the money they had saved for the journey, making them fearful of running out of money before they reached their final destination. The worry about money meant that they were reluctant to buy anything other than very basic

necessities from the shops in Kos, and were even limiting the amount of food they bought for themselves and their families. They complained about the high prices on the island which were driven up by the fact that it was a tourist destination. They were also worried about the price they would have to pay to complete their journeys and to travel across the borders from Greece on their onward trips. The Greek economic crisis of 2015 and the closure of banks for several weeks in June and July had also affected migrants badly, meaning that they were unable to access money transferred from abroad or to change their currency or withdraw Euros, thus creating even greater economic insecurity for them.

Apart from being worried about the price they had to pay to the smugglers, some migrants felt that they had been cheated by these smugglers, or had suffered violence or harm. There were several families who complained that the smugglers had thrown all their possessions into the sea because there was no room in the boat, or because they thought the boat might sink. One woman told me she had lost everything, including all her clothes and her children's clothes, money and papers during the crossing, and was now relying on the help of local people to clothe and feed her family.<sup>11</sup> Others had been promised passage in a 'real' boat but had found themselves in a small rubber dinghy overcrowded with too many people. One Syrian family with two young children had paid 1,000 dollars for the crossing on the assurance that they would be making the crossing in a proper fibreglass boat. They found themselves in a three-metre-long rubber dinghy with 14 other people. Halfway across the 5-kilometre stretch of water, the motor stopped working and they found themselves floating helplessly until they were eventually rescued by the Greek coastguard after nine hours at sea. This woman, close to tears as she recounted her experience, told me:

I would never do that again, I thought I was going to die, and my children too. It was the worst experience of my life. I would never do that again.<sup>12</sup>

The women I met all seemed very distressed by the memory of the journey and the sea crossing, and indeed the MSF psychologist to whom I spoke told me that, in her experience, women seemed more traumatized by the experience of the journey and the crossing than men did. Or, in any case, women expressed their feelings of trauma and fear more readily.

Women travelling alone, or just with children, are particularly vulnerable to attack, and there were several accounts of women who had been raped or sexually assaulted on their journeys. One woman was travelling with a woman friend who had been raped by smugglers and badly injured. She expressed fear about continuing their journey in case this type of incident occurred again. Danger comes not only from smugglers, but also from police and military in the countries that the migrants have to cross to reach Europe. Women alluded to attacks and harassment by police and military in Turkey. A psychologist working with MSF and providing psychological support and

counselling to migrants on Kos recounted how one Syrian woman had told her of her experience of being separated from her husband and children and held in a Turkish prison for 45 days on her own. The woman would not talk about the detail of the abuse she had suffered, but was showing signs of severe trauma from this experience.<sup>13</sup>

### **Living in Limbo**

Whilst waiting for their permit to leave and travel onwards to Athens, migrants face extremely difficult living conditions on Kos. The living conditions for all migrants are precarious and insalubrious in the extreme. Kos has no official reception facilities and provides no basic services (such as food or health care) for migrants. Basic health and psycho-social support is provided by MSF, whilst a local support group, Kos Solidarity, provides food (one cooked meal a day plus milk and other essentials for children), clothing and basic hygiene necessities such as toothbrushes and soap for the migrants. The local authorities have requisitioned an abandoned hotel, the Captain Elias, on the outskirts of Kos Town, to house the arriving migrants. As they land on the island, and once they have been registered by the coastguard and police, they are led out in a procession and left there. The building, which has 25 bedrooms and was originally built to house approximately 100 people as the maximum, is now 'home' to around 700 men, women and children. Mattresses line the floor not only of the bedrooms, but of all the corridors and communal areas, and more tents and mattresses are crammed into the garden outside. Still more migrants have made camps in the nearby fields, apparently worried about the security for their families within the crowded 'hotel'. There is no electricity in the building and no cooking facilities. Some migrants make fires outside in the garden to cook, while others eat only cold food and the meal distributed in the evening by local volunteers. There are only two working toilets and running water comes from standpipes outside in the garden. MSF have also installed a few shower cubicles outside the building in order to try and provide some private washing facilities for the migrants. MSF provide basic health services, sanitary services and psychological support to migrants but, faced with the huge numbers of people arriving in Kos every day, the support that they can offer is limited. Local people, formed into a group called Kos Solidarity, collect clothes, food and sanitary supplies which they distribute to migrants but, as one of the local volunteers explained to me, they are a small group who are also overwhelmed by the number of people needing help.<sup>14</sup> The volunteers are angry that the local authorities on the island have not done more to help meet the needs of migrants.

More recently, following a big fight in the Captain Elias between groups of Afghan and Pakistani migrants over the food that was being distributed by volunteers, some families have chosen to move out and are now sleeping in nearby fields or in a park in the centre of the town. One Afghan family

sleeping in a field with their three daughters told me that they felt it was unsafe for their daughters to sleep in the Captain Elias with all the other migrants, especially the single men whom they saw as a threat to the girls. In the local park, several Syrian families were sleeping on pieces of cardboard, with a few blankets donated by local people. There are no toilets or running water, and one interviewee told me that they had been using water from the park's irrigation system to wash, and even drinking this, until some local volunteers provided bottled water for them.

This lack of access to basic facilities and services provides a source of insecurity for all migrants, but women may be particularly affected, particularly by the lack of sanitary facilities and lack of cooking facilities. Women I spoke to who were living in the Captain Elias complained about the fact that they felt unable to take a shower because the shower facilities that existed were not private enough and they felt scared going to wash in front of the men. Those who were 'lucky' enough to have been able to find a room to share with their family could ask husbands or male friends to bring buckets of (cold) water upstairs for them to wash in the relative privacy of these rooms, but others sleeping outside or in corridors were not so fortunate. Women also complained about the lack of cooking facilities and the fact that they could not provide meals for their families. One woman said:

We have to wait for the local people to bring us food. It is only one meal a day, not enough for my children. We are hungry all the time.

There seems to be a *de facto* division of space, with women migrants trying to remain in bedrooms or other more 'private' spaces and to avoid the more crowded 'public' areas of the Captain Elias. Women spoke of their fear of being attacked or harassed when they tried to use the toilets or the showers outside, and most said that they refrained from using the toilets or from going outside of their rooms at night-time because there was no lighting and they were very scared of moving around in the dark in case they were attacked. One young 17-year-old Afghan woman, travelling with her mother and young sister, described how she and her family spent their days and nights barricaded in their room with another two Afghan families, only venturing out when they were desperate to use the toilets, or when they had to walk into town to the police station to see if they were on the list of migrants who could go and collect their permits to leave.

Migration can also lead to changes in relations of power and gender relations within families and couples, and in some cases to increasing incidences of domestic violence. MSF reported cases of both psychological and physical violence within families, and women had spoken about the fact that they were victims of violence from their husbands during their journeys. These women suffered the insecurities of both their journey and their own husbands, who not only protected them, but also offered a threat. Women in this situation find it almost impossible to leave their abusive husbands or partners because

the idea of continuing the journey alone, or just with their children, is too difficult. So they find themselves stuck in a violent relationship.

### **Gendered Strategies of Migration**

Having spoken of specific sources of insecurity and violence for women, it would be wrong to paint these women merely as passive victims without their own migratory strategies and their own systems for coping with insecurity. In some cases, women expressed the feeling that migration had in fact improved their security and wellbeing despite the difficult conditions in Kos. For some, this had meant escaping from family violence and constraints in their countries of origin. One Afghan woman, who had travelled from Kandahar with her children, told me that she felt much freer in Kos, despite the difficult living conditions (she was sleeping with them in a field). She was also very positive about the possibilities for her children's schooling, explaining that the school in her village had been destroyed by the Taliban and that she was enthusiastic about the opportunities for her children in Europe. Another Syrian woman explained that she was pleased to be alone with her husband and children, and no longer 'controlled' by her husband's family.

And, although, in the division of space, women migrants seemed to be more relegated to private and 'safer' spaces, they also proved to be taking initiatives in some areas, and to be more central to some areas of their families' wellbeing. The MSF psychologist noted, for example, that women are far more willing than their husbands to come and ask for medical and psychological help. Whilst Syrian men are constrained by norms of masculinity and are reluctant to admit trauma, illness or weakness and to ask for help for this, their wives are much more forthcoming in requesting help for themselves and their husbands. So, in some ways, these women are ensuring the health and wellbeing of all of their families by seeking help, particularly for illness and stress.

Women also had definite strategies for onward migration, and had clear ideas about where they wished to go and what they wanted to achieve through their migration. Nearly all of the women whom I spoke to were hoping to reach Germany with their families, although a few said that they were just aiming for countries in the north of Europe. All planned to continue their journeys as soon as possible via Athens, and then through Macedonia, Serbia and Hungary to reach Germany. None of the migrants interviewed intended to stay in Kos or to remain in Greece at all, citing the lack of facilities and welcome for migrants, as well as very limited opportunities for integration and employment. One of the women remarked that 'Greece has its own crisis, there is nothing here for us, we need to go elsewhere where we'll be safe and have a life'.<sup>15</sup> The choice of destination seems to be governed by several factors including the presence of family or friends already living in Germany (or another country), the idea that other countries have better reception conditions for migrants, including fairer and more rapid

asylum procedures, and perceptions about the economic conditions in other EU countries where migrants may more easily find work to support themselves and their families. The issue of language was also raised, as, although the migrants did not speak German, many spoke some English (in some cases quite good English) and hoped that this would help the process of settling and integration in northern European states.

Some women also played on the idea of their vulnerability to advance their migratory strategies. There were families, for example, who planned to stay in Athens and send their wives on ahead to Germany or other European destinations. They believed that the women would have an easier time negotiating with border guards and immigration authorities because of their perceived vulnerability, and that an asylum claim made by a woman on her own would have more chance of success than a claim by a man. These families hope that their wives/mothers will be able to obtain refugee status and will then be able to safely bring their families to join them. The perception that women are more 'vulnerable' and in greater need of protection can therefore be used strategically by migrants to help them to further their goals of securing protection for themselves and their families within the EU.

## **Conclusions**

The current migration 'crisis' in the Mediterranean is exposing the failure of EU countries to offer real protection to those fleeing from conflict, including the thousands of Syrians who have been forced to flee their homes and who are seeking refuge in Europe. The journey to Europe can provide particular insecurities for women, who appear to be affected in specific ways by the dangers of the journey and the lack of facilities in countries of reception such as Greece. However, these women also show resilience and have in many cases adopted their own strategies for coping with the insecurities of migration. There is little real analysis of the gendered experiences of migrants, and thus stereotypes of the 'dangerous' migrant male<sup>16</sup> or the 'vulnerable' migrant woman prevail both in media and political discourse. In order to move beyond such stereotypes, a more careful analysis of the experiences and needs of female and male migrants and refugees should be undertaken, including an analysis of the ways in which gendered relations may change during the migratory process. The EU must now react to ensure that those seeking protection are able to access this and, rather than blaming smugglers and traffickers, must look to the root causes of migration and see how they can offer regular and safe routes to Europe for those who can no longer remain in their home countries, and safe places to stay and live for both men and women once they arrive in the EU.

1. Since my last visit to Kos, the Kos Solidarity organization decided in August 2015 to stop providing food to migrants, arguing that it was the responsibility of the

- local authorities to do so and that they should step in and take on this responsibility.
2. UNHCR, <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.html>, figure as of 10 September 2015.
  3. IOM Missing Migrants Project, <http://missingmigrants.iom.int/>.
  4. European Council Statement, 23 April 2015, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/04/23-special-euco-statement>.
  5. As well as smaller numbers of migrants from Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, Pakistan and various other African countries.
  6. UNHCR, <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.html>, figures as of 10 September 2015.
  7. Telephone interview, July 2015.
  8. Interview, July 2015.
  9. Interview, July 2015.
  10. Interview, July 2015.
  11. Interview, July 2015.
  12. Interview, July 2015.
  13. Interview with MSF psychologist on Kos, July 2015.
  14. Interview with a member of Kos Solidarity, July 2015.
  15. Interview, July 2015.
  16. See, for example, the debates over the risks that migrants/refugees would in fact commit terrorist offences in Europe, or the debates over 'migrant' sexual attacks on women in Cologne in Germany on New Year's Eve.

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