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Asylum Seekers' Trajectories of Exclusion: An Analysis Through the Lens of Intersectionality

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Abstract

The recent increase in asylum seekers in Portugal has drawn attention to the need for effective social integration. The experiences of asylum seekers reveal the existence of social exclusion before migration and the need for them to be included to participate in host societies. This research employs a qualitative methodology, analysed through the lens of intersectionality. In 2021, twenty-six semi-structured interviews were conducted with asylum seekers, detailing their trajectories to Europe from their countries of origin in the Global South. The interviews explored their experiences and the reception they encountered in their final or intermediate destinations. The findings indicate that the departures from the countries of origin are associated with contexts of human rights violations—discrimination and persecution due to respondents' religious, social, ethnic, or sexual orientation. The routes to Europe involved long and perilous journeys by land or sea facilitated by smugglers who charged exorbitant amounts without ensuring protection. The results also reveal that the exclusion asylum seekers experience continues even after requesting international protection in a European country. The findings of this empirical research are important because Portugal has been identified as a safe alternative for the secondary movements of asylum seekers. However, structural issues associated with a struggling welfare state push migrants into new contexts of social exclusion. Our analysis helps to identify trajectories of exclusion among new waves of asylum seekers with implications for decision-makers and policy actors.

Keywords

asylum seekers; intersectionality; Portugal; social policy

1. Introduction

The increasing number of migrants and requests for international protection received by Portugal in recent years has raised new issues that should be addressed by scientific research. Immigration has become a politicized issue in Portugal, with a political impact, mainly on far-right politics. Although Portugal hosts fewer asylum seekers than many other European countries, requests for asylum have risen sharply, going from 1,750 in 2017 to 2,115 in 2022 (Oliveira, 2022). There was a record number of requests for temporary protection (56,599) in 2022 in part due to the displacement of people as a result of the war in Ukraine (Oliveira, 2022).

The recent increase in asylum seekers in Portugal has drawn attention to the need for effective social integration. Intersectionality emerged from different theories and was first applied in the late 1980s by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality goes beyond examining individual factors such as biology, status, sexual orientation, gender, and race. It focuses on the interactions between such factors across many levels of society, shining a light on important differences within population groups like migrants and explaining how inequities are shaped by interactions between multiple factors.

The aim of theories of intersectionality is to facilitate multifaceted analyses of diverse experiences, acknowledging fluid and context-dependent identities. The theories illustrate how these identities intersect to generate both disadvantages and privileges for individuals (Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 2013). Collins (2015) stated: "Race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather as reciprocally constructing phenomena" (p. 41). The use of an intersectionality framework enables the identification of systematic discrimination within refugee reception policies and programs, highlights disparities in accessing sustainable solutions, underscores the dual impact of oppression and emancipation resulting from refugee status, and challenges rigid labels and classifications (Hill, 2023). Indeed, intersectionality has been integrated into policy initiatives in an acknowledgment of multiple intersecting inequalities (Anthias, 2012, 2013; Savaş et al., 2021; Taha, 2019).

Asylum seekers find themselves in a contentious position; on one hand, they have exercised their legal right under the 1951 Geneva Convention to apply for asylum, and yet they remain noncitizens while awaiting the outcome of their case. They face stringent immigration regulations influenced by deterrence policies (Williams, 2006). This legal framework creates a hierarchical system of social entitlements that limits asylum seekers' access to public services, marking them as a distinct group in need, separate from the broader societal context and with uneven access to welfare (Sales, 2002).

The vulnerability felt by each asylum seeker is often exacerbated by a migratory experience and this can be further accentuated by a combination of factors. In other words, each individual has a different response to vulnerability and the levels of vulnerability can vary even more following a migratory experience, which can be further accentuated by a combination of factors in a continuum process. In this context, Baumgärtel (2020) defines migratory vulnerability as "a cluster of objectives, socially induced and temporary characteristics that affect persons to varying extents and forms" (p. 28). Based on this, he concludes that migratory vulnerability should not be defined solely as belonging to a group or as an individual characteristic.

Each asylum seeker may experience a qualitatively different situation of vulnerability due to the intersection of the different vulnerability factors they face (Flamand et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the diverse profiles of asylum seekers reveal that their experienced vulnerabilities often surpass pre-existing vulnerability categories, as they consist of intersectional vulnerabilities created by the interaction of various personal, situational, and administrative factors (Flamand et al., 2023). It is also important to emphasize that these vulnerabilities are accompanied by the attribution of specific characteristics that combine to form stereotypes reflecting attitudes towards immigrants, which can be ambivalent, and vary according to time and context (Ceobanu & Escandell, 2010). Discussions about immigrants and immigration often trigger strong public reactions, particularly when politicized or intertwined with other urgent matters, such as concerns about globalization and terrorism (Ceobanu & Escandell, 2010; Hill, 2023).

The literature review emphasizes migration and refugee research employing intersectionality as a crucial framework that challenges the homogenization of experiences and categories in the global refugee context. Intersectionality aims to facilitate the analysis of diverse experiences and to acknowledge multiple and fluid identities that are context-dependent; it illustrates how these identities intersect to create both disadvantages and privileges for different individuals (Aberman, 2013; Crenshaw, 2013; Vervliet et al., 2014) and gives voice to the oppressed and invisible groups (Vervliet et al., 2014). An intersectionality framework not only has the potential to uncover systematic discrimination in refugee and migration policies and systems, but also to identify disparities in accessing durable solutions; it highlights both the oppression and emancipation resulting from the refugee status and questions rigid labels and categories (Joseph, 2015; Vervliet et al., 2014).

2. The Lens of Intersectionality Matters

The lens of intersectionality gives us a better understanding of how a combination of different factors can create and increase vulnerability in the experience of asylum seekers on their migratory journey (origin country, transit country, and destination country). These elements may be personal (such as ethnic origin or certain forms of disability), situational (due to experiences related to persecution in the country of origin or during the migratory journey, for example), or administrative (linked, for example, to procedures for obtaining legal status in the host country; see Flamand et al., 2023).

Research shows that asylum seekers have escaped perilous circumstances in their country of origin, including oppression and violence (Neumayer, 2005). Moreover, they have frequently endured traumatic events such as the loss of family members through murder, instances of sexual violence, rape (Goodman et al., 2014), and torture (Benham, 2004).

Other vulnerabilities besides those associated with gender, age, and nationality are difficult to systematize as they are likely to overlap and accumulate. Therefore, an intersectional approach is crucial to a comprehensive assessment of vulnerabilities and to glean a better understanding of the condition and needs of asylum seekers (Anthias, 2013; Flamand et al., 2023; Savaş et al., 2021).

The intersectional approach can also help deconstruct stereotypes. For example, single adult men may not be perceived as vulnerable individuals and are therefore expected to react differently, but they may also

receive less favourable treatment, such as accommodation in hostels with limited access to amenities and catering conditions (Flamand et al., 2023). Thus, the intersectionality lens allows us to deconstruct the homogeneity within a group generally considered vulnerable, notably that of asylum seekers. Examining vulnerabilities through the intersectionality lens allows a case-by-case approach and a more complex and comprehensive individual analysis, highlighting possible intersections that may be invisible at first glance. It is also important to note that vulnerability is not static and can naturally arise or intensify depending on time and space, that is, the context and situation in which each applicant finds themselves (Flamand et al., 2023; Vervliet et al., 2014).

On their physical entry into a member state, asylum seekers are subjected to racialized and gendered border processes that compound pre-existing positions of disadvantage, resulting in conditions of socioeconomic impoverishment as well as diminished rights and opportunities. Decolonial theorists have emphasized the enduring significance of race as a primary organizing factor in the accumulation of violence and disadvantage experienced by asylum seekers, but other systems of oppression and hierarchical structures also lead to distinct consequences for asylum seekers based on their gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity (Grosfoguel et al., 2015; Hill, 2023). Moreover, the judicial systems of member states examining asylum cases are not neutral and can be influenced by various political and constitutional factors, racialized logic, gender dynamics, and other vulnerabilities. Research by Hamlin (2014) and Spijkerboer (2018) demonstrates that asylum adjudications are often impacted by the geopolitical interests of the host countries, perceptions of the asylum seekers' countries of origin, and existing racial and gender biases. For example, asylum seekers from countries deemed "safe" are more likely to have their claims discounted, regardless of individual circumstances (Hill, 2023).

The number of rejected applications for asylum is increasing; not only do individuals in this situation receive no form of protection but they are unlikely to be returned to their country of origin. Some of this group try to move to north-western Europe (Germany, Sweden, Denmark, and other countries), to France or the Iberian Peninsula (Fontanari, 2018; Kofman, 2019; Vianelli, 2017), while others choose to remain in Italy, facing situations of profound vulnerability, and experiencing social, residential, and employment marginalization. In the vast majority of cases, those choosing to stay put reside in precarious, informal, and unhealthy housing (Bolzoni et al., 2015; Netto, 2011), and work under conditions of extreme labour exploitation, largely in the primary sector (Talani, 2019). This means that access to refugee protection becomes more circumscribed; as a result, some potential or rejected asylum seekers may choose to go underground and become invisible (Czaika & Hobolth, 2016).

This article responds to the research question: What can we learn from asylum seekers' trajectories in Portugal? Following the above presentation of the theoretical context of intersectionality and asylum seekers, the methods and ethical procedures adopted in this research are described. The findings underscore the non-homogeneous paths and experiences of asylum seekers, highlighting the interconnection of various identities and hierarchies. The study advocates for an intersectional approach to refugee policies as well as for programs to address the diverse experiences and needs of asylum seekers, rather than applying a single universal approach.

3. Method

This article is based on research conducted for a doctoral thesis at the University of Lisbon, adhering to the institution's chart, code of ethics, and research integrity guidelines (ALLEA, 2017; ESRC, 2015). The study employs a qualitative methodology to capture the complexity of the experiences of asylum seekers. It involved 26 semi-structured interviews with asylum seekers of sixteen nationalities recruited through service providers. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were informed about the research aims and assured of anonymity and confidentiality.

Approval for the research was obtained from the university's Institutional Board before data collection. The interviews, conducted between May and October 2021 during the Covid-19 pandemic, were recorded and transcribed. No safety, health, or ethical concerns arose during the research.

3.1. Materials Used

The study comprised 26 interviews conducted in two phases: the first between May and June 2021 (12 interviews), and the second between September and October 2021 (14 interviews). The interviews lasted approximately 18 hours and 30 minutes in total, amounting to around 93,092 words. An informed consent document was used to ensure the authorization of the asylum seekers and compliance with ethical research standards.

3.2. Procedures

Prior to the interviews, the research objectives were verbally explained and interviewees were informed of their freedom to refrain from answering any questions. Although an informed consent form was translated into the language of the interview (Portuguese, English, Spanish, or French), interviewees had the opportunity to ask questions and for clarification. The freedom to refuse to discuss specific topics was reiterated during the interviews (Allmark et al., 2009; Hugman et al., 2011).

The interviews were recorded in the participants' preferred language and were all conducted without the need for an interpreter. The transcripts were translated into Portuguese for better analysis and discussion of the data. However, it is acknowledged that some information may have been lost as the interviews were not in the respondents' native language and due to the subsequent translation process.

3.3. Participants' Sociodemographic Characteristics

Table 1 provides detailed information on the gender, age, civil status, and country of origin of the 26 participants. This demographic overview offers insights into the diverse backgrounds, which is crucial for understanding their unique experiences and challenges. Although the sample includes both males and females, male participants predominate. The age range spans from 22 to 53 years but the majority are in their early to mid-30s. Most participants are single. The asylum seekers come from a wide geographical area, encompassing countries from the Middle East, Africa, South Asia, and South America. This diverse sample reflects the broad spectrum of asylum seekers' backgrounds, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of their social and demographic profiles.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characterization of interviewees.

Interview	Gender	Age	Civil Status	Country of Origin
I1	M	33	Single	Palestine
I2	M	36	Single	India
I3	M	34	Single	Sierra Leone
I4	M	29	Single	Iran
I5	F	25	Married	Gambia
I6	F	27	Married	Angola
I7	M	31	Married	Sierra Leone
I8	M	27	Single	Senegal
I9	M	37	Single	Iraq
I10	M	22	Single	Guinea-Conakry
I11	F	31	Single	Sierra Leone
I12	F	28	Single	Nigeria
I13	M	35	Single	Pakistan
I14	M	30	Single	Nigeria
I15	M	34	Single	Gambia
I16	F	34	Single	Morocco
I17	M	25	Single	Gambia
I18	M	24	Single	Senegal
I19	M	42	Single	Ukraine
I20	M	34	Single	Gambia
I21	M	34	Married	Guinea-Bissau
I22	F	33	Married	Angola
I23	M	31	Single	Angola
I24	M	26	Single	Afghanistan
I25	M	35	Married	Afghanistan
I26	M	53	Married	Venezuela

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis of narratives from 26 asylum seekers uncovered three central themes in their experiences: the occurrences of exclusion within their countries of origin, the obstacles and living conditions encountered during their journey to Europe, and the challenges and experiences of reception when applying for international protection. The trajectories of asylum seekers in Portugal reveal how asylum seekers confront exclusion predicated on intersecting identities that encompass race, ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, and social class within their countries of origin. The experiences of asylum seekers on their journeys are moderated by intersecting factors such as gender, age, socioeconomic status, and physical ability. Gender, age, nationality, language proficiency, and socioeconomic status are some of the influential factors shaping asylum seekers' access to resources, interactions with host communities, and overall experiences within reception systems. The focus of the data analysis is on the emergent themes from their narratives about

trajectories that provide insights into the following topics and how these individuals coped and overcame difficulties through personal resilience.

4.1. Experience of Social Exclusion in Their Home Countries

The experiences of exclusion endured by asylum seekers in their countries of origin are often linked to political positions and opposition movements against the incumbent power. The reasons for departure are directly correlated with the political and/or wartime contexts of the countries of origin, as evidenced by interviewees from Palestine, Venezuela, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Ukraine, Nigeria, Guinea-Bissau, Iraq, and the Indian region of Kashmir, and analysed in approximately ten interviews. The next interview quotes explore the political and religious exclusion and reasons for departure.

> Interviewer: Why did you have to leave your country?
>
> Interviewee: Because I had a problem with some people there who were against the government, against human rights. They were against people from all countries; they worked against the country. And I worked with the government. (I25)

One of the decisive reasons cited for choosing to leave the country of origin was persecution based on religion, ethnic group, sexual orientation, or membership of certain social groups, notably opposition movements, political parties, or governments in countries considered less democratic. Some interviewees mentioned leaving their country of origin because they belonged to movements that undertake organized social and political protests or simply because they refused to cooperate with practices imposed by dictatorial regimes. For example, a 26-year-old single man from Afghanistan explained:

> Interviewee: We would move from city to city. There has always been war in Afghanistan. I had a problem with my father and with the Taliban. That's why it was very…very….It's not possible to live in Afghanistan without religion. If the Taliban knew or someone else knew, they would kill me.
>
> Interviewer: You were very young when you left Afghanistan.
>
> Interviewee: Yes, because I didn't want to be like the Taliban, I wanted to be someone else. My religion wasn't good, it killed people, did wrong things, and everything was wrong. (I24)

4.2. Gender Exclusion in the Country of Origin

A gendered element is superimposed on this debate. The women interviewed spoke of situations of severe discrimination or other inhuman treatment, equivalent to persecution, due to their non-conformity with rigid social codes, some of which had religious origins. Out of the five interviewed women, three left their countries of origin due to family pressures to enter into marriages not of their choice:

> Interviewee: Yes, I knew a girl who decided to commit suicide because she wasn't allowed to marry the man she wanted. She said: "If they won't let me marry the man I want, I won't stay with the man I don't want."

> Interviewer: She committed suicide. But you don't think about doing that?
>
> Interviewee: Sometimes the situation makes me feel like it, but when I see my children, I forget about it. (I5)

Another interviewee, who originated from Sierra Leone, was placed under the care of her stepmother after the death of her mother, and compelled to marry a much older man. She flew to Europe while pregnant:

> I am from Sierra Leone. I left Sierra Leone because they wanted to force me to marry an older man, 60 years old. I lived with my family….She [the stepmother] wanted me to marry someone older than me. My mother had already passed away. I did not accept it and left home, sleeping on the streets. (I11)

Another woman left her Muslim country of origin in search of greater emancipation and liberation from practices and customs that deny women the possibility of social and financial autonomy. A 27-years old married woman from Angola stated:

> There were political conflicts and then I had to leave in a hurry….He (referring to her husband) had been kidnapped at the time and I don't know where he is. (I6)

In the case of Angola, the women interviewed had left the country due to political issues associated with their husbands and the need to protect the entire family.

From the analysis of the interviews, it emerges that vulnerabilities are accentuated by the interviewees' female status and experiences in the countries of origin. Similarly, their escape from the country of origin was hampered because they were women, often already mothers, without financial autonomy, and dependent on family or a husband. The women reveal in the interviews that the decision to flee was painful and that they were afraid of the challenges they would encounter both on the journey and upon arrival in an unfamiliar country.

4.3. Sexual Orientation and Exclusion in the Country of Origin

The interviews also identified asylum seekers who left their countries of origin due to offenses, inhumane treatment, or severe discrimination suffered as a result of their homosexuality, and whose governments were unable or unwilling to protect them. A 31-year-old man from Angola testifies to this:

> It was for other issues related to my sexual orientation and also my serological status because I am HIV positive. So, it was all related because I started dating someone whose family was from a very hostile background. It was during that time that I found out, and he also found out, and then I started receiving threats from his family. (I23)

A large majority of the interviewees recount traumatic events from their past, including experiences of war, persecution, forced marriage, sexual violence (rape, circumcision, forced prostitution), physical abuse, poverty, and involuntary separation from family and friends. These historical occurrences remain vivid, engendering substantial concern and distress. The following interview quotes exemplify this:

> Interviewee: Yes, I was forced into a marriage, so I…my wish was to continue my education, so I refused to agree to a marriage I did not want. First, he was older than me, his wife was older, he had daughters my age, I would not be well treated, and I felt that if I stayed there my abilities would….I wanted to continue my studies. I had to flee. (I5)

> Interviewee: I was tortured by bandits; they would find us walking on the street, capture us, and take us away to torture us….There were people who saw us walking on the street, chased after us and, when they caught us, forced us into hard labour in the fields [agriculture] without paying us, they would yell at us, insult us. (I10)

4.4. Facing Restricted Accommodation Conditions

Italy has become one of the main entry points into Europe for seekers of international protection. This geographical position poses a series of internal challenges for Italy in its response to the phenomenon and in reaching a consensus with other member states for the relocation of these individuals. Among the 26 interviews, six international protection seekers had entered Italy from Libya on boats operated by trafficking networks.

Interviewees who went through Libya speak about the precarious conditions in the country and the human rights violations. A 22-years-old male interviewee, who arrived in Libya as a minor in 2016, describes a perverse range of human rights violations in this country, from abuse and violence to slavery:

> No, I was not detained there [Libya], but I was subjected to torture….I was tortured by thugs who saw us passing on the street, they caught us and took us, and tortured us….They forced us to do heavy work in the fields [agriculture] without paying us, they would shout at us, insult us. That's how I lost contact with my brother….I never heard from him again. (I10)

The Western Mediterranean is another route commonly used by irregular migrants to reach Spain. This can involve crossing the Mediterranean Sea to the mainland of Spain or using land routes to the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in North Africa. Migration movements also traverse Morocco and Algeria to reach Spain. Four interviewees had taken this route with the "help" of smugglers to enter Spain.

The financial capacity of each asylum seeker is also a vulnerability factor as it determines the country where they will seek international protection:

> But I didn't choose Portugal, it was the trafficker. I paid him $3,500 for Germany, instead of the usual $5,500. When the boat stopped at the port in Spain, he the smuggler said: "Here we are in Portugal, you take a taxi and go; your money only gets you this far." And I said: "Really?" He said: "Take a taxi and go to Portugal, Portugal is good." (I2)

Various European countries, especially those facing high influxes of asylum seekers and migrants, have hotspots where the initial registration, identification, and processing procedures take place. These facilities serve as the first point of contact for individuals seeking asylum or irregular migrants arriving in Europe. Hotspots aim to streamline the asylum application process, conduct security screenings, and provide

essential services such as medical assistance, shelter, and food. Under current procedures, individuals should remain in centres for the shortest time possible but, in practice, they stay there for days or weeks. This was revealed in six interviews and is described in the following testimony:

> Interviewee: I stayed in an emergency camp, a camp with tents. So, I stayed there for about three months, but it was too cold.
>
> Interviewer: Were your fingerprints taken?
>
> Interviewee: Yes, when I got off the boat, at the port. Then I went to the tents, I was there in October, November, and December, but it was very cold, I couldn't stand it, so I left. (I7)

The interviewees reported that it is common for individuals applying for asylum in France to spend their first nights sleeping on the streets, having to find accommodation on their own. They emphasized that financial resources are not always sufficient to cover the cost of accommodation, leading to intermittent periods between housing and nights spent homeless: This situation is mentioned by seven of the interviewees who had crossed French territory. For example, this interview explained:

> Sometimes on the streets [in France], they provide some financial support, but it's not easy to find accommodation, so sometimes I slept on the streets. But I never got anything, it's the same everywhere, they take your fingerprints, you go to court, they open a case, you appeal, and you can't go back, it's this and that. (I13)

In Portugal, some entities provide accommodation free of charge but it is always a temporary solution; the goal is for asylum seekers to find housing autonomously in the free rental market. However, it was found that some asylum seekers frequently change accommodation over a short period; eleven of the interviewees reported doing so. In Portugal, there are currently no provisions for asylum seekers to be granted separate accommodation due to their sexual orientation:

> I first went to a hostel because I didn't have a Covid test, and then I went to the Portuguese Council for Refugees [CPR]. I stayed at the CPR for two or four weeks and then I moved to Alameda; these are apartments with links to CPR. I think I stayed there for about a month or almost two months, and then I came here [a hostel of the Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Lisboa]. (I6)

The conditions currently found in reception centres to accommodate asylum seekers can exacerbate pre-existing vulnerabilities, both personal and those resulting from their journey. Applicants report that there is often a non-peaceful outcome when asylum seekers from different backgrounds and ethnicities are lodged in the same space. Many participants state that asylum centres are unable to meet their needs. Consequently, the transition to a European country does not guarantee a secure environment; asylum seekers continue to face obstacles that may exacerbate mental health issues and can trigger feelings of despair:

> Interviewer: Have you seen anyone commit suicide?
>
> Interviewee: Yes. Yes. People destroying the camp out of hatred, grabbing hammers, or punching windows and everything. You wake up to police and ambulances. Fights, especially among Arabs,

> Palestinians, and all nationalities. You wake up to fifteen or twenty police cars inside the camp because someone punched someone and hurt them. That's the asylum world, it wasn't easy. (I6)

4.5. Experiencing the Black Labour Market

Asylum seekers often gravitate towards entry zones to Europe such as Greece, Italy, and Spain, yet this trend is not the sole explanation for their concentration. Typically, countries in Southern Europe (including Portugal) have more opportunities for irregular work in poorly regulated sectors of the informal economy (such as agriculture and construction). The research underscores that asylum seekers frequently find themselves in precarious working conditions upon arrival in Southern Europe. For instance, asylum seekers in Italy often engage in clandestine agricultural work, where they face exploitative practices and live in substandard accommodation, such as makeshift housing in fields or derelict buildings (Dimitriadis, 2023; Dines et al., 2014).

The following interviewee reports staying in Spain for about one year in Andalusia, specifically in Lepe:

> In Lepe, I worked in agriculture….I lived in a room in a container in an open field….I worked clandestinely in agriculture. (I8)

Similar dynamics are observed in Portugal, where asylum seekers often face barriers to accessing formal employment due to legal restrictions and bureaucratic hurdles. This forces many into informal sectors where labour standards are lax and oversight is minimal, exacerbating their vulnerability (Triandafyllidou & Spencer, 2020). There are still entities in Portugal that illegally employ workers in an irregular situation. This makes asylum seekers potentially easy targets for work on the black market, exploitation, and precarious conditions.

The following testimony from an Indian national reveals he is aware he can work in the Portuguese informal economy:

> Interviewer: But with this document, can you work?
>
> Interviewee: No, but you don't need documents to work in Portugal. (I2)

4.6. Facing Discrimination From Host Societies/Language and Cultural Difficulties

Participants also spoke of the challenges they faced on arriving in a European country. They experienced distrust, hostility, and discrimination from host societies, be it openly or subtly. Such experiences have a detrimental impact on their well-being, often triggering feelings of helplessness, anger, frustration, and general distrust:

> In Germany, they don't even let you approach them. But here [Portugal], it's not quite like that. Here, you can, especially because the language is also easier. People are more open here; you can socialize more. I've never experienced a direct act of racism here. (I6)

The narratives of the interviewed asylum seekers generally reveal a more positive adaptation to Portugal compared to their experiences in other European Union Member States. They feel more integrated and supported in Portugal than in other EU countries. They describe the favourable reception and social connections established with the general population. The welcoming attitude of the Portuguese population is a facilitator even though a lack of fluency in the host country's language poses a constraint for some asylum seekers, as can be seen from the following quote:

> Yes, yes, I feel accepted. I don't experience racism in Portugal, for example, if I'm on the street and need to find a destination, I approach a police officer and they help me find the place using a mobile phone. They try to help me, turn right or left, I feel comfortable here. (I8)

The sense of illegitimacy in the host country affects daily mobility and the way asylum seekers perceive and access public services and housing. Although asylum seekers are in a legal situation during the asylum application process, the accommodation they can access and their easy entry into informal labour markets without social protection are the same as for undocumented and irregular migrants:

> No, it wasn't easy at all. People don't want to rent houses to refugees. I was struggling because many people don't want to help refugees. Most landlords prefer to rent houses to those who are working. (I1)

Discriminatory attitudes and behaviours within society may deter asylum seekers from seeking out legal, social, and health services, even when they are needed, and this can make them project their negative sentiments onto assisting professionals. A young man explained:

> Every time I asked to go [to the doctor], for example, when I had a dental problem, it didn't lead to anything. Once, I had a tooth pulled out, I was in pain, and they didn't even give me medication to calm down. That's why I say that even though I had the right to go to the doctor, when I did go, it didn't amount to anything. (I10)

In the European context, the lengthy asylum procedure and its unpredictability mean asylum seekers constantly struggle with a sense of uncertainty about their legal status and feel trapped in limbo. The lack of information about the asylum procedure and limited support are also sources of distress.

In the following interview quote, the asylum seeker describes receiving a letter from his lawyer with information about his asylum process, which he could not understand due to the language and legal terms used:

> They gave me a lawyer, but my lawyer recently wrote to me [he takes the letter out of his pocket and reads]: "We are awaiting the final decision of the Court, the last movement in your process, the process is ongoing, but the SEF contested the decision of the Court." I do not understand this. (I3)

For a balanced picture of asylum seekers, it is important to highlight not only their victimization but also their agency, courage, and strength. Many asylum seekers refuse to give up on finding a country that will offer them refuge despite the risks they face. Research by McAuliffe and Jayasuriya (2016) shows that asylum seekers often exhibit remarkable resilience and determination, actively seeking and often securing

employment despite facing numerous barriers. They navigate complex bureaucracies, learn new languages, and adapt to new cultures, all of which demonstrate their agency and proactive efforts to rebuild their lives. This approach ensures that asylum seekers are not viewed as a homogenous group of victims but as individuals with diverse experiences and capabilities. The testimonies of the trajectories of these asylum seekers revealed great courage, strength, and optimism as well as the resilience to overcome adversities encountered along their migratory journey. This is exemplified by the following quote:

> If it's denied, I will insist yet again. I know a solution will come one way or another, maybe I'll even work, I don't know what I'll do with my children, but I know a solution will come. Finding a job to get residency….I will fight until I succeed, I will not give up, no, I will not give up, I will keep fighting until I succeed. (I22)

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The article has given an in-depth picture of asylum seekers' narratives and experiences on their journey to Europe and the reception system on arrival. When we analyse the interviews in terms of vulnerabilities, we find that the asylum seekers' paths and experiences are not homogeneous and that the different identities and hierarchies related to gender, age, country of origin, and financial resources are interconnected. Thus, intersectionality contributes not only by drawing attention to multiple forms of oppression but also by challenging the idea of homogeneous and essential social identities, categories, or labels (Anthias, 2012).

The generalized nature of exclusion within asylum seekers' countries of origin, driven by intersecting factors such as political affiliation, ethnicity, religion, and social class is a key finding of this study. The narratives reveal how individuals face persecution and discrimination, often stemming from their alignment with opposition movements or their non-conformity with rigid social norms. Importantly, the experiences of exclusion are gendered, with women often facing severe discrimination, forced marriages, and limited autonomy over their lives.

The journey to Europe presents its own set of challenges, marked by perilous land or sea crossings, exploitation by smugglers, and harsh living conditions in transit countries. The analysis underscores how intersecting factors like gender, age, and financial capacity influence the migration routes chosen by asylum seekers and their experiences along the way.

The study also sheds light on the conditions within reception systems, where asylum seekers continue to face exclusion and marginalization. Asylum seekers encounter numerous obstacles ranging from inadequate accommodation and limited access to essential services to discriminatory attitudes and behaviours within host societies, all of which exacerbate their vulnerabilities and contribute to feelings of uncertainty and despair.

This study highlights the importance of an intersectionality framework to an understanding of asylum seekers' experiences and the design of responsive refugee policies and programs. By recognizing the intersecting identities and social structures that shape asylum seekers' journeys and reception experiences, policymakers can develop more inclusive and holistic approaches that address the diverse needs and vulnerabilities of this population. For instance, tailored support programs that consider gender-specific

needs or provide language and vocational training can enhance the integration prospects of asylum seekers in Portugal.

Furthermore, this study underscores the need to pay greater attention to the voices and experiences of the asylum seekers themselves as they are often marginalized and excluded from decision-making processes that directly affect their lives. By amplifying their voices and placing their experiences at the center of policy discussions, policymakers can develop more effective and humane responses to the global refugee crisis.

Overall, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities of asylum-seeking and underlines the importance of refugee research and policymaking seen through an intersectional lens. This article strives to offer insights when thinking through diverse approaches to asylum seekers. This knowledge contributes to a more evidence-based view of asylum seekers and the process of integration; it raises important issues that can lead to evidence-informed policy developments of relevance to civil society, local communities, academia, and the private and public sectors.

Moving forward, it is essential to continue interrogating the intersecting factors that shape refugee experiences and to develop strategies that promote equity, dignity, and social inclusion for all asylum seekers.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The data used in this article are available in the appendices of the first author's doctoral thesis, which can be accessed through the repository of the University of Lisbon at http://hdl.handle.net/10400.5/27538. The authors are open to correspondence with interested parties and encourage further research utilizing the available qualitative data.

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