‘THEY DON’T KNOW HOW MUCH STRESS WE HAVE’

WOMEN IN THE ASYLUM SYSTEM AND THE INTEGRATION PROCESS

MICHALA CLANTE BENDIXEN

REFUGEES WELCOME

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‘They don't know how much stress we have’
– women in the asylum system and the integration process

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THANK YOU!
The main characters of the report are the many women who, over the years and during the work on this text, have told the author their stories and contributed with their own experiences. They are almost all anonymized, both for their safety and their integrity. In addition, a number of named and quoted experts have contributed, mostly through interviews. Nanna Giobbi has had an important role as an assistant throughout, especially with the collection of data. The author also owes a big thank you to Nanna Vedel-Hertz for journalistic proofreading, to Lene Mølgaard Kristensen and Elna Søndergaard for legal proofreading and to Rajesh Holmen for proofreading the integration sections.

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References:
To take up less space, no footnotes have been used and source references are abbreviated. E.g. a quote from Amnesty International's report “You're going to your death. Violations against Syrian refugees returning to Syria” from 2021 will be referred to as “(Amnesty2021)”. The reference can thus be found in the alphabetical list at the back.

"There is a tendency to understand 'culture' and 'ethnicity' in certain minority groups as the cause of violence and lack of gender equality. This overshadows the structural causes that increase the vulnerability and inequality of migrant and refugee women in Denmark."

– from MOVE Shadow report to the UN Women's Committee 2019

"Discrimination can be defined as unreasonable differential treatment which leads to a person receiving worse treatment or protection than others. (…) It is not illegal to treat people differently. On the contrary, that is often necessary to ensure that everyone is treated equally."

– from the homepage of the Danish Insitute for Human Rights

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INTRODUCTION

Although we are dropping further and further down the world rankings on the measurable indicators, Denmark has a self-image of having achieved almost total equality between the sexes. We are currently in 29th place, while all our Nordic neighbouring countries are stable in the top five.

Danish women have undeniably achieved a very high degree of independence and self-determination compared to other places in the world. Regrettably, women who come here because they have been forced to leave their homeland are often completely dependent on men, and many of them have been so since they were born. Fathers, brothers, husbands – and patriarchal authorities who have excluded them from their own rights and have not given them equal opportunities. The dependence continues on the journey to Denmark in the form of smugglers, border guards, interpreters and drivers.

This report describes all the conditions and mechanisms which in practice discriminate against the women who come here as asylum seekers, refugees or family members reunified with refugees, as well as trafficked women. We have left out women who come as workers or marry a Dane – because slightly different problems apply to them.

The women, who to a large extent speak for themselves in the report, often have an intersectional vulnerability in Danish society, which leaves them at the bottom of the hierarchy. Eg. Binta, who is described on page 77: She is not only a woman, but also a lesbian, illiterate, black, Muslim, poor and a rejected asylum seeker.

These women are not a homogeneous group, and it is important to be aware of the great risk of generalizing and falling into stereotypes. The Danish system finds it difficult to cope with their differences. The individual woman also contains a duality: she is, for example, a vulnerable victim of violence, made dependent on others, but at the same time a tough, strong woman who takes on a great responsibility and stubbornly works towards independence, despite her bad odds.

In many areas, the Danish state maintains women in continued dependence on men, while at the same time it does not contribute to giving them security, nor does it recognize their risk in their home country at the same level as men's. Women are met with the same demands as men, despite the fact that they often have less chance to live up to them. It is a structural discrimination that has received very little attention.

In this situation, the discrimination consists in treating everyone the same and meeting them with the same demands, despite their very different capacities.

Many legal measures have been introduced regarding ethnic minority women in Denmark, aiming at getting them into the labour market and trying to put an end to oppressive cultures and patterns from their home countries, e.g. forced and arranged marriages and social control. It is an important focus, but harsh sanctions are rarely the best solution.

The discrimination these women are subjected to by the state and society is not intentional. It comes from a mixture of ignorance, denial and a one-sided focus on negative elements in the women's own families.

Hopefully this report can contribute to a better understanding and recognition of structural discrimination and how we can combat it in the future.

Michala Clante Bendixen

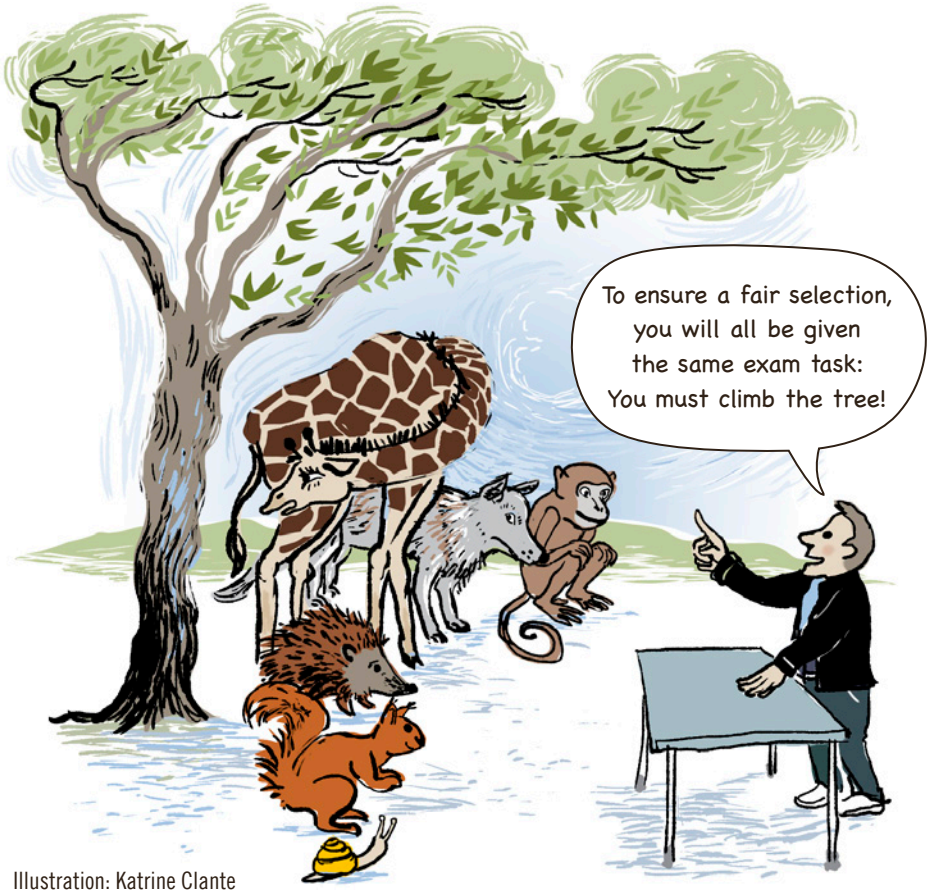


Illustration: Katrine Clante

1. CATEGORIES: WHO IS THE REPORT ABOUT?

This report deals with a smaller group of women in Denmark: those who, for various reasons, cannot be in their home country, and now reside here, with or without permission. Some have left their homeland alone, others with family members. Some have arrived after a perilous journey with the help of people smugglers to apply for asylum, others have waited for permission to be reunited with a husband or father who traveled ahead and was given asylum. Still others have been lured here with false promises but have ended up in abusive marriages.

The women fall into the following categories::

- **Asylum seekers**
– women and girls who have arrived alone or with family, who have applied for asylum and are either awaiting a response or have been rejected.

- **Recognized refugees**
– women and girls who have been granted asylum in Denmark, either after having traveled here themselves with or without family, or as UN resettlement refugees.

- **Displaced persons from Ukraine**
– women and girls who have come here because of the war, the vast majority of whom fall under The Special Act for Ukrainians.

- **Family members reunified with refugees**
– wives and daughters of recognized refugees who have been granted family reunification and arrived subsequently.

- **Undocumented, e.g. after rejection of asylum**
– women and girls who live "underground" for various reasons, in fear of being sent back to their home country: this can for instance be after rejection of asylum, an expired tourist visa or an expired au pair residence permit.

- **Trafficked women**
– women who pay smugglers to come, in the hopes of employment and a better life. They often end up in modern slavery under terrible conditions in the sex industry with massive debts, and even the worst cases do not lead to a residence permit.

There are many other women in Denmark with minority background, e.g. women who have come as students or workers, or as family members to immigrants or Danish citizens. Although there is some overlap, these women face slightly different problems, as in many cases they have the opportunity to leave, and are therefore not included in this report.

The category “non-Western” is used in all Danish statistics, but it is Denmark's own definition and has been criticized by the UN for being discriminatory and stigmatizing. Therefore, we have chosen not to use it in this report. Most other EU countries only distinguish between EU citizens and third-country nationals. The women in this report are subsets of the Danish category of non-Western and the European category of third-country nationals.

The think tank Justitia has published the report “Invisible vulnerable persons in Denmark”, and the women in our report fall into at least 3 of the 15 identified categories: trafficked persons, persons without legal residence or with procedural stay, and ethnic minority women in divorce or cohabitation termination – some also fall under the category single parents in a vulnerable situation or victims of economic violence, and some fall into several categories at the same time (Justitia2022).

Henna decoration by Aisha Hussain.

2. FROM THE HOME COUNTRY TO DENMARK

CONDITIONS IN THE HOME COUNTRIES

The countries from which the largest groups of refugees have come to Denmark in the past 30 years are naturally enough countries with civil war, war, ethnic cleansing, dictatorship and religious oppression. They are also countries where women are very disadvantaged. The oppression and discrimination against women with a refugee background often starts in their country of origin, and goes all the way back to when they were born. CEDAW regularly publishes reports on the conditions of women in the countries mentioned below.

The incidence of violence against women, both domestic and outside, increases dramatically during war and conflict. This has also been the case in Ukraine, where two out of three women over the age of 15 had already been exposed to some form of violence, often from their partner, before the start of the war. Since the war broke out, the number of inquiries from women has exploded at the organizations that help. Another important factor is that systematic rape, sexualized torture and kidnapping are used as weapons in many wars and conflicts, including Ukraine. The UN Security Resolution 1325 was adopted 22 years ago, and emphasizes the particularly vulnerable role of women during armed conflicts (UN2000).

In some of the countries, women are severely oppressed: Afghanistan, Somalia and Iran. In other countries, women are not oppressed to the same extent, but still do not enjoy the same rights and in practice have far from the same opportunities as men: Iraq, Lebanon, Sri Lanka, Syria, Eritrea, Myanmar. Only Bosnia-Herzegovina and Ukraine can be said to treat women and men more or less equally, but even there women are often subjected to violence. The countries mentioned here are far from the only ones where women are massively oppressed, they are just the countries from which most have come to Denmark.

Trafficked women come from very different countries, where there is predominantly peace but poverty, e.g. Nigeria, Thailand and the former Eastern Bloc countries. These women often grew up in poverty, in orphanages or in a home with alcoholism, incest or violence and early responsibility for their own children. They see themselves as migrant workers and not as victims, but often pay off huge debts to agents.

TRAFFICKING

Worldwide, women and children make up 95% of trafficked people. Until now, a large majority of those identified in Denmark have also been women, however, the proportion of men has been increasing in recent years, and now makes up almost half. In 2021, 80 people are assessed as victims of human trafficking by the Danish authorities. They come from 26 nationalities, with Nigeria and Thailand being the most common (source: humantrafficking.dk).

TOP 5 NATIONALITIES, ASYLUM SEEKERS IN DENMARK (ALL)

2011	
Afghanistan	906
Iran	462
Syria	429
Serbia	321
Russia	300

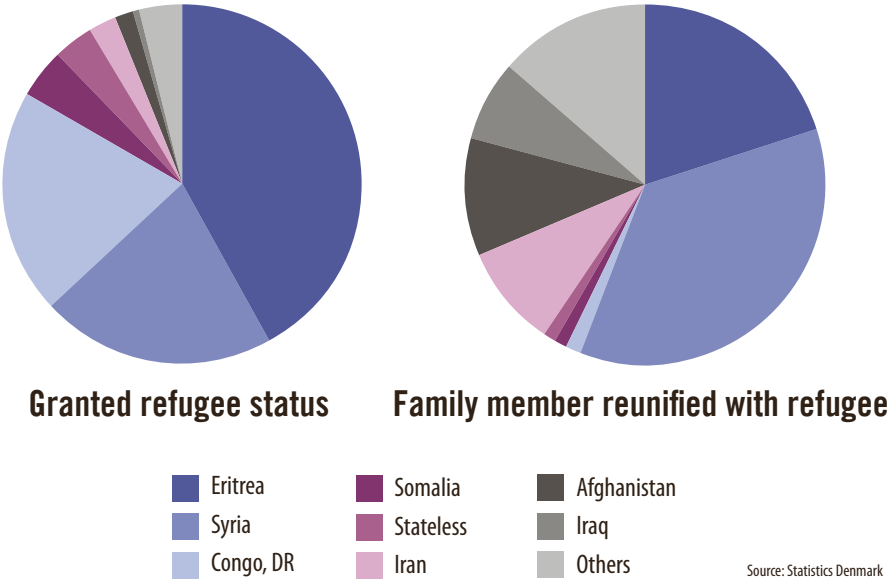
2016	
Syria	1.253
Afghanistan	1.127
Stateless	491
Iraq	452
Morocco***	353

2021	
Afghanistan*	557
Eritrea**	379
Syria**	325
Iran	67
Morocco***	67

Source: Danish Immigration Service

The numbers are total applicants, incl. Dubin cases and remotely registered.
*) The majority evacuees.
**) Among these a large part remotely registered, meaning people who already had legal residence.
***) Almost all unaccompanied minor boys.

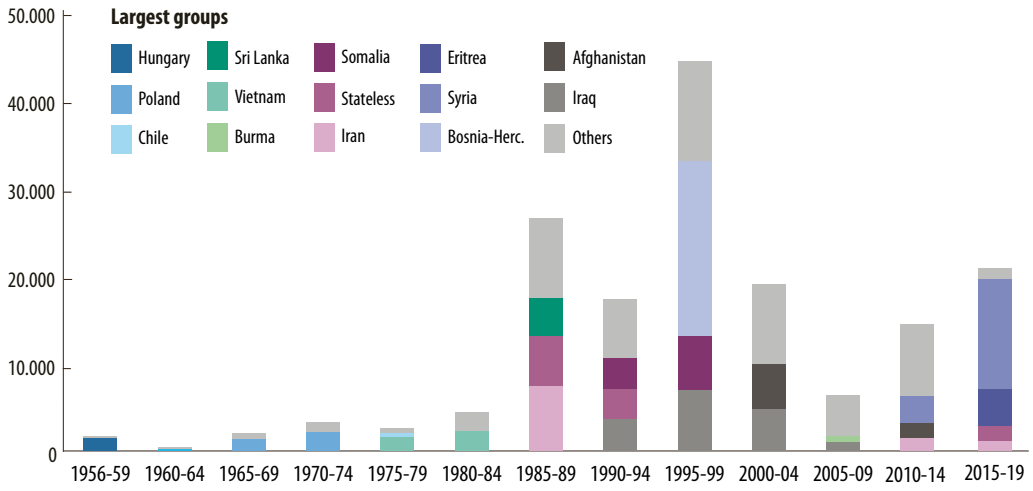
TOP 8 NATIONALITIES, WOMEN 2021



Source: Statistics Denmark

Family members reunified with refugees naturally mostly come from the same countries as those who receive asylum. A number of Syrians and Eritreans came via family reunification and have later applied for asylum, and can thus appear in both groups. The Congolese women, however, are selected as single women or widows, and therefore appear only as refugees. Women from Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq, on the other hand, have rarely applied for asylum subsequently and appear only as reunited family members.

REFUGEES GRANTED ASYLUM IN DANMARK 1956-2019



Sources: Danish Immigration Service and DRC Danish Refugee Council

The graph shows both men and women. As can be seen, some nationalities have only arrived in a single period, while others have arrived over many years. Only the largest groups are selected separately.

Somalia, Iran, Afghanistan

In these countries, the country's legislation gives women **limited legal rights**, and are required to varying degrees to cover their bodies and faces. In all three countries, violence against women is widespread. In Afghanistan and Somalia, abuse and coercion in the form of premature and forced marriages are common traditions, against which the state does not even attempt to protect the girls. In Somalia, almost all girls are subjected to the most mutilating form of circumcision, and women generally cannot cope without a male network for protection.

In Afghanistan, the oppression of women under the Taliban has reached a level that amounts to gender-based persecution, and women and girls are now granted asylum based on their gender alone. Women are not allowed to go to school or work, they are completely dependent on their fathers, husbands and sons, and are not even allowed to walk on the street without a male family member. According to the UN, 90% of all Afghan women have been exposed to gender-based violence, the majority in the form of intimate violence by their partner.

In Afghanistan and Somalia, women rarely have their own bank account, and they do not keep their own personal documents. In Iran, many women receive a high education, but they do not have the same rights when it comes to inheritance and custody, and domestic violence is not punishable. In a number of Muslim countries, citizenship can only be passed on through the father, and he must be married to the mother. In some countries, women can lose their own citizenship by marriage or divorce.

Iraq, Lebanon, Sri Lanka, Syria, Eritrea, Myanmar

Here, women have slightly better legal rights, but are constantly exposed to gender discrimination from both the family and the surrounding society. In Syria, a rapist can marry his victim and thereby go free of punishment. Young women cannot live alone, they cannot openly have a boyfriend before marriage, divorced women can be ostracized, women are expected to take care of children and the household, and if they do study or work, it is often in traditional “women's professions". Beating your wife is also widespread and generally accepted in these countries.

Worse conditions of possibility

Women who come from one of the countries mentioned have obviously not had the same possibilities and opportunities as men, or as Danish women. Nevertheless, many of them have fought stubbornly for their independence, to get an education, and to be respected as equals. They are not just victims, but also rebels. The journey to Denmark is in many cases part of the struggle to achieve freedom. And often the women have overcome the most incredible obstacles along the way. Afghan women, perhaps the most oppressed in the world, are at the same time described as some of the strongest and bravest people on the Earth. In Iran, the latest courageous uprising against the regime has focused on women's rights and self-determination, also supported by many men, under the slogan Woman Life Freedom.

THE JOURNEY TO DENMARK

Many women and girls have come to Denmark risking their lives, and many have been exposed to unimaginable suffering during their flight. As many as **44% of refugee girls and women are exposed to abuse on their journey,** often of a serious sexualized nature (MMC2018). It is not uncommon for newly arrived women to be pregnant as a result of being raped on the road. However, there is no systematic investigation after arrival in Denmark of whether the women have been subjected to abuse and whether they need help. Instead, they have to draw attention to it themselves at the general medical examination, and even if they do, there is very limited access to therapy and a psychologist (Munk-Andersen2021).

Abuse on the journey

Most refugee families choose to let the husband leave first and let the wife and children follow later via family reunification. They do this because the journey is so dangerous – especially for women and children. However, it is often misunderstood as if the men are saving themselves and leaving their families behind, but in reality it is the other way around. They themselves run the risk so that the family can arrive safely later.

The journey to Europe can take many months, and often involves physical hardships such as long treks through mountains, desert or snow, and sea crossing in unsafe

boats. Food and drink are usually very limited, and many die of hunger and thirst, especially on the African routes. By virtue of their physique, men are better equipped to survive such a trip than women, although both sexes die of hunger and thirst, and men also suffer terrible abuse along the way.

Along the way, women are often subjected to sexual abuse, including rape, either by smugglers as "payment" or by other refugees who take advantage of a vulnerable woman. They can also be kidnapped, which is a big risk on the journey via Libya – "get your family to send money or we'll kill you." The kidnappers often call the family while torturing the victim. Border guards, prison guards and other authorities also commit rape and sexual assault against refugee women, or take advantage of their position to make the women "provide sexual favors".

Most recently, there have been reports of Ukrainian women being exploited by random men under the guise that the men would transport them or give them shelter. A survey of 1,000 displaced women from Ukraine showed that many had been subjected to violence and abuse, and in addition many had received offers of sexual services, to become surrogate mothers, to appear in pornographic films or work in the sex industry (OSCE2022).

Even when the women arrive in Europe, abuse continues at the borders, in transit camps and in the homes of smugglers. In the overcrowded camps, there are neither separate toilets, lights in the evening, doors with locks or staff. A camp on a Greek island can, for example, house 800 refugees and have only two toilets, and you can imagine how a woman feels. There is also no access to menstrual pads or contraception. **"These women and their children have fled some of the world's most dangerous areas, and it is shameful that they are still in danger on European soil,"** said Tirana Hassan, crisis response director for Amnesty International in 2016. And the situation has not improved since (Amnesty2016).

Tedros from Eritrea, *who came to Denmark in 2015, tells the following from his 4,000 km long journey through the Sahara desert to Libya and across the sea to Italy: "We were all exhausted after a six-day trip through the hot desert in an open truck, with 80 people crammed close together. We got almost no food or drink along the way. There was a woman on the trip who was seven months pregnant. There was still an hour and a half to walk before we reached the boat. First she started vomiting. Then she screamed. And then she went into labour. Neither of us knew what to do. The child was born in the middle of the road and it was not breathing. Together with three other men, I buried the baby in the sand, lifted the debilitated woman onto a sheet, and carried her all the way to the boat. There we were crammed together 200 people in a boat which had room for 50. After six hours the engine stopped. Fortunately, we were saved by the Italian coastguard, but other boats were not so lucky, many hundreds have drowned on that trip" (Berlingske2015).*

In 2018, Mixed Migration Center published the report “No choice but to keep going forward…” about women's experiences of fleeing from Africa and Afghanistan (MMC2018), and in 2020 they together with UNHCR published the report “On this journey, no one cares if you live or die” (UNHCR+MMC2020) about the path of African refugees to Europe through a hell of endless deserts and overcrowded boats. Many die on the road, and both men and women are subjected to massive abuse from people smugglers, kidnappers and border guards. The traffickers keep people in large warehouses for weeks or months before they can move on, exploiting the women at will. It continues in the detention centres of the police, militias and coast guards. A large proportion of women are subjected to rape and other sexual abuse. When the women are raped by the guards in the detention centres, all the prisoners can hear it. Most centres have no female guards.

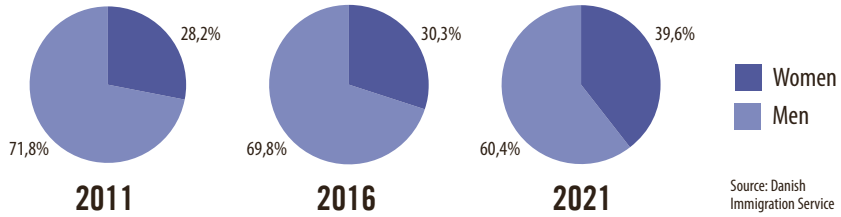
Samuel, *who was evacuated from Libya in 2018, says: “The warehouse in Kufra was big, maybe 1300-1400 people. It was worst for the women. The human traffickers… they came at night, drunk or on drugs. They came and took the women. It was hard to watch, you think about your own family. It got worse and worse, we could hear them screaming. I tried to defend the women but was just beaten. The women were the strongest on the journey. They even took care of us. But after this, after what they did to them, they changed. I can't even talk about it now, it hurts so much. It was hard to see how the women changed. I was with my cousin, she went through a much worse hell than me” (UNHCR+MMC2020).*

Safe pathways

The fact that the road to Europe is so dangerous and that refugees are dependent on people smugglers is because all legal avenues to seek asylum have been effectively shut down. Airlines and ferry companies face heavy fines for taking a passenger on board without a valid passport and visa to Europe. It has not been possible to apply for asylum via a Danish embassy since 2002, and it is almost impossible to get a visitor visa to Denmark if you come from an “asylum-producing” country. Some people from the unsafe countries manage to get an entry permit due to study or work, but it is mostly men who apply and get them. Women's best chance of getting to safety is family reunification – and here the requirements and criteria can also be difficult to meet. Some women marry a man they barely know just to get away from a country where they are in danger.

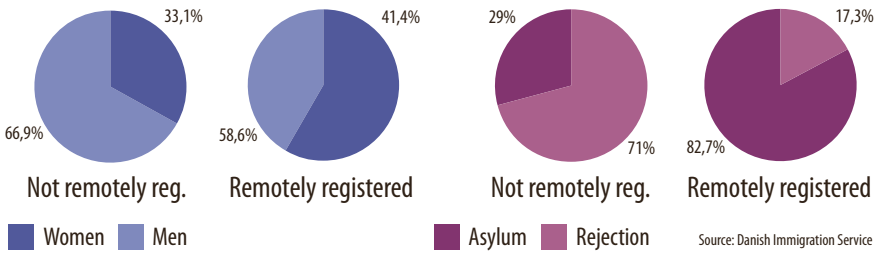
Statistics Denmark clearly shows that families use the safe route via family reunification for women to a much greater extent than for men: 70.8% of family reunifications for a refugee in 2021 were women, whereas the majority of asylum seekers are men. However, women are increasingly seeking asylum after they have been granted residence as reunified family members, they are the so-called “remotely registered”.

GENDER OF ASYLUM SEEKERS IN DENMARK



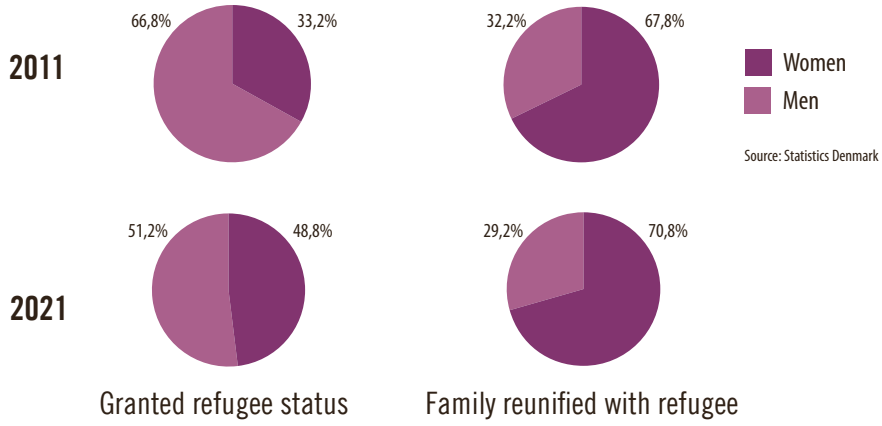
Among the asylum seekers who arrive in Denmark on their own, so-called spontaneous asylum seekers, there are always more men than women; as a rule, women make up only 25-35%. The increase in the number of women after 2016 is due to the so-called “remotely registered". Among the unaccompanied minors there are always very few girls.

REMOTELY REGISTERED: GENDER AND RECOGNITION RATE 2021



Many women from Syria and Eritrea apply for asylum after arriving legally through family reunification, which skews the numbers for asylum, as their chances of getting asylum are far better than average.

GENDER, TYPE OF RESIDENCE PERMIT



In general, women are granted residence permits through family reunification to a far greater extent than men, and men are more often granted asylum. In 2011, two-thirds of those who obtained asylum in Denmark were men, which has been the general trend, but in 2021 there were almost as many women. This is because many of the women who were granted asylum in 2021 were remotely registered.

Family reunification is recommended as a safe travel route for refugees, e.g. by the OECD and UNHCR (OECD+UNHCR2021), and the recipient countries are encouraged to facilitate access and expand the very narrow definition of "family", which does not include all the family members one has actually lived with and supported, but only the spouse and own children under 18 years. The requirements for documentation are difficult to meet for many, and the long case processing times are a problem – both because the family is not safe during that period and because the wife falls behind in terms of integration. Another major problem is that, being family reunified, she does not have the same rights as if she had been granted asylum. She depends on her husband, and she can more easily lose her residence permit (see chapter 3). In addition, it can be difficult to obtain a nationality passport as family reunified to a refugee, and Danish authorities will rarely issue a foreigner's passport.

The normal processing time for family reunification at the Danish Immigration Service is 8-12 months, and a complaint to the Immigration Appeals Board takes up to 2 years. Some families struggle for many years before they succeed. Eritrean refugees in particular have been met with impossible demands, and more than half have been refused. Two typical cases are described here, where the women are hit even harder than the men.

HIWET

Hiwet was engaged to Werede in 2013, and they were married in Eritrea in 2014. Just two months after they moved in together, Werede was drafted for the military and had to flee. He arrived in Denmark in autumn 2014 and was granted asylum in 2015. Shortly afterwards he applied for family reunification with Hiwet.

They were rejected, like many other Eritreans, because they only had the marriage certificate from the church and not the civil certificate that the Danish authorities require – but noone has that. Because Werede had to flee when he was conscripted, the couple had also not lived together long enough for them to get family reunification due to cohabitation.

Refugees Welcome wrote a complaint to the Immigration Appeals Board, but the board upheld the rejection. Meanwhile, Hiwet had also fled Eritrea, and Werede visited her several times, first in Sudan and later in Ethiopia. Their daughter Kokob was born in the summer of 2018. Life as a single mother, and even a Christian refugee, is not just hard, but downright dangerous in Sudan.

Werede applied several times again to bring his family to Denmark, but was refused – even when he obtained a civil certificate from his family in Eritrea. In 2020, Werede and Hiwet got married again in Ethiopia, where Hiwet and Kokob had managed to get to. But due to Covid19, the marriage office was closed for a long period, and when Hiwet was finally handed the certificate, they had written a new administrative date on it, and not the day the couple had actually been married. Therefore, the Danish Immigration Service rejected the marriage, as Werede was not in Ethiopia on the day the certificate was issued.

Hiwet went to the Ethiopian office with the Danish refusal, and they agreed to issue a new certificate, backdated to the day the wedding actually took place – before the Covid19 shutdown.

On a Monday evening in September 2022, Hiwet and Kokob landed at Aalborg Airport. The couple had then been separated since Werede fled Eritrea eight years before, and Kokob had only seen her father on a few visits in her four-year-long life. Hiwet had lived alone all these years, first in Sudan and later in Ethiopia, living off the money Werede sent her.

Photo on opposite page from Hiwet's and Kokob's arrival in Denmark.

AKHBERET

Natnael arrived alone in Denmark in 2015 and was granted asylum the following year. In Eritrea, he had had no girlfriend or wife. Although he was happy with Denmark, he would prefer to marry and have children with a girl from his home country. In 2018 he got in touch with Akhberet through his cousin, she came from the same village. Akhberet had recently fled to Ethiopia and was living in a refugee camp. She was 15 years younger than him. They talked over the internet for a year, fell in love and decided to get married.

Natnael traveled to Ethiopia for a month and they were married there. As soon as he came back to Denmark, he applied for family reunification. However, it was refused, as the Danish Immigration Service believed that the relationship had been initiated mainly with the aim of her obtaining a residence permit in Denmark.

The Danish state is only obliged to protect a family life that was established before the flight. If you have not been married or lived together for a long period in your home country, you can be refused on the grounds that you could not have a legitimate expectation of living together in Denmark, or that the relationship was established solely with the aim that she gets a stay. Establishing and maintaining a cohabitation afterwards is practically impossible, as Natnael cannot be out of Denmark for more than six months at a time, and Akhberet cannot get a visiting visa to Denmark – and if she could, it would only be for three months.

Many couples in similar situations decide to have a child together, because in some cases it can have a postive impact. But that does not change this type of decision. If a DNA test shows that the resident is the father, the child can come to Denmark alone and live with his father. Some couples have chosen this, but the child may then be separated from their mother for many years.

Both have ended up in an unhappy situation, but Natnael is after all in a safe country where he has a good everyday life. Akhberet, on the other hand, is alone in one of the world's most unstable and impoverished areas, completely without rights, and according to her culture, it is unthinkable to divorce Natnael and subsequently marry another man

Waiting time and delayed arrival

As family reunified, the women arrive several years after their husbands. His journey and the processing of his asylum case takes at least a year – often more. And then there is about a year of processing time for family reunification. If the case is refused, the appeal process takes several years. In addition, some of the Syrian refugees have had an additional statutory waiting period of three years. It has now been reduced to two years after a judgment by the European Court of Human Rights found that three years was too long.

The total waiting time thus typically amounts to at least two years. Some families can end up with four to five years of separation, and in the worst cases up to seven to eight years. During all that time, the wife has stayed in the home country or in a third country close to the home country, often under very bad conditions, where she is completely dependent on her husband in Denmark sending money for survival. The wife often begins to doubt whether her husband has applied at all, since the process takes so long, even though he does everything in his power. This is of course a heavy burden on the relationship. In some cases, the husband has regrettably fathered a child with another woman during the waiting period.

WAITING TIME AND MENTAL HEALTH

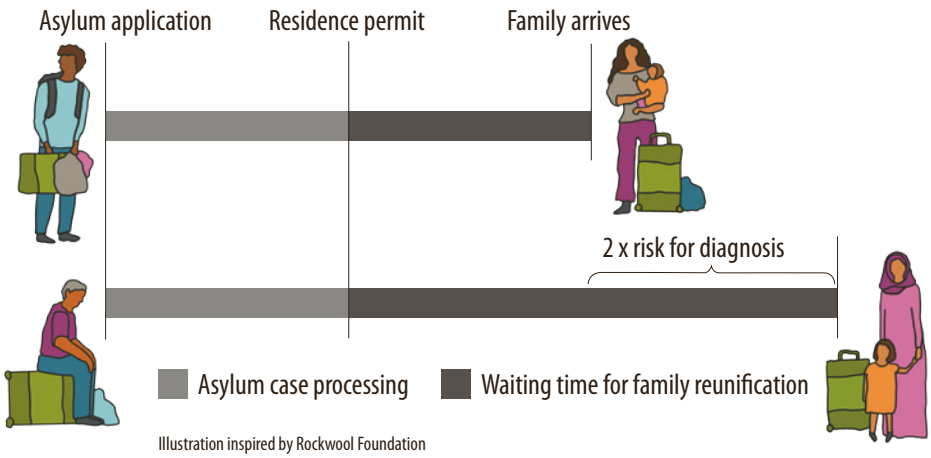


Illustration inspired by Rockwool Foundation

The man typically has to travel in advance and leave his wife and children in their home country or in another country on the way. This means that the family is separated, while he travels on alone, gets his asylum case processed and applies for family reunification. The waiting time constitutes a great psychological burden for all parties. A study from the Rockwool Research Foundation examined 120,000 refugees over 24 years, and found that fathers who had to wait for family reunification had twice the risk of a psychiatric diagnosis compared to other refugee fathers, and that the risk increased the longer the wait. Since the mothers were not in Denmark, it was not possible to examine how much the situation burdened them (RFF2021).

When the wife arrives, the husband has often learned Danish and already found a job. She is thus behind on points from the start, and still dependent on his help. Their relationship has often suffered during the long separation, but if she wants to move or divorce, she could risk losing her residence permit. Denmark is criticized for this by the UN, as discussed on page 80.

Alone or together

Some women arrive with their husbands and children; this mostly applies to families from the Middle East and Southeast Asia, as the journey from these countries is not quite as dangerous and expensive as from Africa. They are better off as they have been relatively protected and have been able to support each other along the way.

A smaller proportion of the women arrive completely alone without a man. They have either fled for the same reason as the men: political or ethnic persecution, or they have actually fled from their own husbands: forced marriages, abuse, ostracism. They may also have fled due to an LBGT+ asylum motive, e.g. because they are lesbian or transgender. These women are some of the most vulnerable in every way, and many have been abused on the journey here.

Zuleka, *who fled with her husband and children from Afghanistan via Iran, Turkey and Greece, says: "Another bad experience was a baby, 7-8 months old, who cried a lot while we were on board the boat. The smuggler took the baby from the mother and threw her into the water and we watched the baby sink and no one said anything. We were a large group of people and we didn't want to be caught by the police, we had to cross the river without noise. The smugglers beat men and women, especially the women who were not used to walking far and lagged behind" (MMC2018).*

Luwam *left Eritrea alone with her 3-year-old son after her husband died during military service. She found that more consideration was given to her because she had a child with her. But often she gave him her own portion of food or water, and she cared more for him than for herself. They traveled for several weeks through the desert and various collection points, and they saw many other refugees die along the way. Before boarding the ship to Europe, all women with children were sorted out because the children could not be quiet, so they could be discovered by guards when they hid on the beach at night. Luwam hid with her son and was still allowed to come along because her son could be quiet. To get him on board the ship, she had to lift him up high, and it went wrong many times, no one helped her. He was the only child on board. They ended up spending 6 days at sea and she was sure they were going to die, but they were lucky. Today she works in a Danish nursing home, and her son is in the 6th grade.*

RESIDENCE AND PROGRAMMES IN ASYLUM AND DEPORTATION CENTRES

As an asylum seeker, you are forced to live in an asylum centre, even if you have family or friends you could stay with. After six months, you can apply for private accommodation, but you don't always get permission. If you are rejected in the asylum case, you are forced to live in a deportation centre. Living in a centre itself poses an even greater problem for women than for men. The centres are generally quite large and are often isolated, set up in buildings that have previously functioned as military barracks or sanatoria. The atmosphere is not inviting, with long corridors in dilapidated buildings, sparse interiors and poor cleaning. In the past, the residents could cook for themselves in communal kitchens, but now most places have switched to canteen operation as part of the tough policy towards asylum seekers.

At the time of writing, there were a total of 2,305 housed in asylum centres, of which 1,025 were women. The predominance of men has been much higher in the past, and the relatively equal number today is mostly due to the fact that the majority of Ukrainians are women.

Ukrainians have had the right to private accommodation from the start, so the vast majority of them have never lived in an asylum centre. A smaller proportion of them lives in the asylum centres because they have not had the means to support themselves, or because they have been refused according to the Special Act.

Entrance to police and Return Agency offices in reception centre Sandholm, 2022.

Shared toilets in departure centre Sjælsmark, 2022.

Outdoor area in departure centre Kærshovedgård, 2022.

Mixed centres

In general, Denmark does not separate by gender. Even at secondary schools and boarding schools, gender segregation typically only consists of separate rooms for girls and boys in separate buildings or floors. The asylum centres are also not segregated by gender, apart from individual sections in certain centres, and most residents are single men. Rooms are not shared with the opposite sex unless it is a couple, but in some places kitchens and bathrooms are shared, and all canteens, offices and outdoor areas are shared.

Prisons in Denmark have also so far been mixed from a kind of equality perspective, but with separate sections for men and women. This year, however, Jyderup has been transformed into the first purely women's prison. Psychologist and prison researcher Charlotte Mathiassen is happy with the division, and says to Politiken (2022): "Where is the equality in letting 20 women serve time with 200 men in institutions that are set up and run with a focus on men's needs?" The same assessment has not been made around asylum centres.

Newcomers are temporarily accommodated in reception centre Sandholm, and moved to one of the residence centres while the case is being processed. If rejected, you are moved to one of the departure centres, depending on whether you cooperate with the departure or not, and whether you are a couple or single with or without children. The division by asylum phase was introduced in 2013, and means even more relocations than before. There are also centres for unaccompanied minors and for people with special needs of both sexes. Only three centres have special departments for women: Kærshovedgård, Avnstrup and Jelling.

At the **departure centre Kærshovedgård** outside Ikast, single women without children must live if they have been refused asylum, or have had their residence revoked, and do not want to return home voluntarily. This also applies even if a woman's husband and children have legal residence in Denmark. The women live in a special ward which is locked. Read more on page 36.

At the **departure center Avnstrup** near Lejre, rejected mothers with children and families with children must live, and rejected singles of both sexes also live here if they cooperate in returning voluntarily. A special, locked corridor for single women with and without children has only recently been established, where the women share the kitchen and bath, and there is a safe atmosphere with efficient cleaning determined in weekly schedules.

Asylum center Jelling near Vejle today has two special barracks for women who meet the criteria of having been exposed to violence, threats or human trafficking, or are LGBT+ persons. The barracks are locked, but there is no 24-hour staff at the centre. Previously, there was a small, partially secured department for endangered women in Center Sandholm, but it was closed a few years ago.

Women's centres?

Throughout the years, there has only been one asylum center reserved for women, with and without children. It was **Centre Fasan**, which was located in Frederiksberg in a beautiful, old building, and there was a good and safe atmosphere. When it was closed in 2008, the women moved into a separate part of **Centre Kongelunden** close to Kastrup airport. The women's ward in Center Kongelunden consisted of smaller barracks with 8 rooms and a shared kitchen, where the women built strong networks with each other across language and culture in each barrack, and with the many volunteers who came to the centre. However, one of the former residents points out that although part of the centre was only for women, the reception, office, clinic and employees were shared by the entire centre, and nothing prevented men from entering the women's barracks, which were not locked.

In 2017, the entire centre had to be demolished because it was attacked by mould. The women were dispersed to other centres, and no actual women's centres have since been established.

There were only approx. 50 places for women in Kongelunden, so it was never an offer that all single women got – and it is not today either. The number of asylum centres and places fluctuates a lot, depending on how many arrive. Right now there are only 17 centers, but even when the number in 2016 was up to 96 centres housing 17,000 residents, not a single women-only centre was established. On the other hand, there were several centres with only single men, because they were so many.

On the part of many single women, there is a desire to escape the men on a daily basis, and it would not cost extra to set up asylum centres just for women. But it is not as simple as it sounds, and women's centres will not solve all problems. Women can be exposed to threats and feel unsafe, but they can also threaten others themselves and make them unsafe. If all the single women are taken away from the mixed centres, the married women will be even more outnumbered among the men, and logically pure male centres will arise, with which there is bad experience. The presence of women has a positive effect on conflicts, the level of cleaning and the amount of outside volunteers – and the mixed environment also has other positive effects. Over the years, many men have learned to cook from the women they lived in the asylum centre with, and many have become lovers at the asylum centre.

It is a complicated calculation to take into account vulnerable people, and at the same time ensure that the composition of residents does not have a negative effect. A resident can belong to different categories at the same time, e.g. woman, trafficked and troublesome – at once vulnerable and problematic in relation to the security of other residents. Another example is the unaccompanied minors who live in special centres – but there are very few girls, so they form a small minority among the boys. The group of LGBT+ people is also difficult to place, and too small to fill its own centre.

The responsibility for distribution of different groups, e.g. by gender, lies partly with **the politicians,** who set out the general guidelines, partly with the **Danish Immigration Service**, which has overall responsibility for the centres and oversees them, and partly with **the operators** (Red Cross and two municipalities), who are responsible for the day-to-day operations and distribution of residents to the individual centres.

The Danish Immigration Service's head of this area replies to the questions about women's conditions in the centres that they try to balance the various considerations in the best way based on the rather narrow framework that both the political and economic conditions give them. They would very much like a dialogue with the women about their wishes, but it is difficult to gain the women's trust as authority figures. From the political side, a division of centres according to asylum phase has been adopted; the option of placing special residents in annexes or individual housing has been abolished; and Kærshovedgård was deliberately chosen because of its isolated location – all factors which make it much more difficult to find good and safe solutions, i.a. for vulnerable women. The division by phase also limits the options: if both the threatened and the threatening have been rejected and do not cooperate, then the agency has very few options to move them away from each other.

The Red Cross has run centres for 38 years, and for many years they were the only operator. The management answers the question of purely women's centres a little vaguely: "We have focused on furnishing the existing centres for which we are responsible in a way so that it is also safe for women to live there." And that has indeed happened in Avnstrup and Jelling – but only within the last few years, and Sandholm has conversely lost its women's section. Regarding the women's own wishes, the Red Cross replies: "We look forward to reading your report, and will then consider carrying out a survey of the single women's assessment of safety at the centres and their wishes for accommodation. We are in ongoing dialogue with the Immigration Service and will also raise the subject with them."

It has been a big problem for both the Immigration Service and the Red Cross that the politicians did not allow any empty beds in the system. Previously, the occupancy rate had to be 95%, which was completely impossible when the number of residents rises and falls quickly and unpredictably. This necessarily led to many relocations and unfortunate combinations of residents. Thankfully, these requirements are less rigid today. But there is still a tight economy, which does not allow many, small centres, each with its own profile – and from the political side, it is agreed that asylum centres should be located outside densely populated areas (which in itself makes them difficult to access), and that private accommodation must be limited.

The Immigration Service and the Red Cross would both prefer more smaller centres close to the local environment and public transport options such as centre Jelling and the former centre Brovst, as well as access to small annexes and external

housing for residents with special needs. But from the political side, there is no will to improve conditions for asylum seekers, and there is often fierce opposition from the local population when a new asylum centre is to be opened in the area.

Kalima from Morocco *lived for two years at departure centre Avnstrup with her daughter, who was then 12-13 years old. Only three women lived in the long corridor, the rest were single men. They all shared toilets and showers – a situation which the Danish Immigration Service says they would have reported to the Red Cross if they had seen it during an inspection visit. Every time the daughter had to pee or take a shower, Kalima had to go with her because they felt insecure about men. One elderly man in particular was very pushy, but she didn't report it because he didn't do anything, just followed them and looked. Another of the women in the hallway experienced a man entering her room one day while she was sleeping and had forgotten to lock the door. Kalima never took a walk in the beautiful area around the centre unless they were a group of women together, nor did she go to the canteen alone. When they lived in the women's centre in Kongelund, she felt much more secure and did not have the same problems at all.*

Sections for women

In Centre Jelling, which is run by the Red Cross, two special barracks were set up a few years ago for trafficked women, women who have been exposed to crimes of honour or violence or threats from family members/partners, as well as LGBT women who need special support. You must be assessed by a social coordinator and approved by the Danish Immigration Service to move to the special women's department, where there is access to counselling, support and more offers.

The day-to-day manager of the department points out that issues of honour are often overlooked because it may concern young women who outwardly seem well-functioning, but can be very vulnerable. If it's a case where she's accused of dishonouring the family, there might be a bounty to report on her whereabouts – so she's not safe anywhere, not even among other women. It can be far more serious and harder to get away from than an abusive husband.

Trafficked women often have another woman as their backer, a so-called 'mama'. And she can easily get access to a women's centre. Gender-separated centres do not solve everything, and you might also consider whether it makes most sense to divide residents by gender or by the situation they are in? E.g. there are both women and men trafficked. Should they be accommodated together? And for LGBT+ people there is also a special problem – especially transgender people.

A barracks only for women in asylum centre Jelling, 2022.

Single room in departure centre Kærshovedgård, where a mother and daughter have chosen to stay together, 2022.

Dr. Victoria Canning, *associate professor of criminology at the University of Bristol, has investigated the conditions for for women seeking asylum in Denmark, Sweden and England. She writes, among other things: "Equality was mistakenly perceived as treating everyone the same, especially in Denmark and Sweden. For example, a Red Cross employee who worked in Sandholm and Sjælsmark said: 'We are not going to build special houses for women, they are no different, and can live in the same buildings'" (Canning 2019).*

To this report, she says: "In centres I visited, women in particularly vulnerable positions were often left unsupported. For example, I was present in one centre on the day a first-time mother was brought back from a hospital with her baby. She had limited care beyond her immediate friendship group, which risks the health of both mother and baby. On another occasion, a woman who had been sectioned after a suicide attempt had had her children left unsupervised with other residents and was left to get a taxi back to the asylum centre on release, with no-one from the centre having visited her in three days of her stay. Another woman I spoke with – a survivor of sexual trafficking – had never been offered any psychological support. These are examples of women's and children's rights being seriously undermined by competent authorities and the state."

Canning points out that the system itself leads to exploitation: "The structural set of the Danish asylum system leaves women vulnerable to further exploitation and abuse. The lack of recognition of economic dependency for those in relationships with violent men, as well as factors of forced dependence for women who have children, are not always taken into account in relation to placing women in centres or indeed in assessing claims for asylum independently. Economic dependency is deeply related to domestic abuse and vulnerability, and as such should be central in women's cases where exploitation or violence is disclosed or suspected."

Insecurity and abuse in the centres

The women feel very unsafe in the large centres among hundreds of men. Just picking up food in a canteen among a majority of men can be a struggle for a single woman – especially the younger ones. The centres are often isolated with long, unlit roads in the evening, and the women are afraid to walk home alone. Outside centre Sandholm, sparse road lighting has been established on the road to Allerød, following pressure from the Red Cross, especially out of consideration for the women.

There is both a real fear of being subjected to abuse, especially if the woman has already experienced it or is being threatened, but also a feeling of having her freedom of choice limited and her integrity violated, e.g. by being exposed to stares, comments and solicitations.

Council of Europe: New recommendations to protect the rights of migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women and girls from May 2022 state that: "47) Reception and accommodation facilities should be located in areas where women and girls are safe and can access relevant services and information with respect to health, including sexual and reproductive health, social and legal assistance, education and essential shopping facilities" (CoE2022).

Gerd Gottlieb, *who has been a volunteer support person for many women for more than 15 years: "When you talk to the single women in the centres in particular, sexual harassment and fear of abuse is a recurring theme. The women talk about gropes and gross offers when they stand in the eternal queues. And they prefer not to walk alone in the evening in the often poorly lit common areas in the centres. In Sjælsmark, it is also associated with great anxiety to be referred to the shared toilets."*

Rapes and harassment take place and are not always reported, e.g. because the abuser threatens the victim into silence. Sexual services can also become a necessary payment to get help from the men, e.g. a lift in his car or a new mobile phone.

In reception centre Sandholm, there used to be a small, secured department with eight places for trafficked women or women whose lives are threatened by family members. Here the entrance door to the ward was locked, and the women were not allowed to have men visit them. That department was closed a few years ago. The Danish Immigration Service says that threatened women are now either sent to a women's shelter or to the special section in centre Jelling. However, it can be a longer process to get a woman to a shelter, as the law is unclear about the rights of asylum-seeking women on that point, and it also depends on which asylum phase they are in. It may happen that the shelters will not accept, or that they have no room. The women should be able to be sent to a shelter if they need it. In practice, however, this does not always happen, and e.g. the Danner shelter replied to our inquiry that they had no experience with that target group.

Saba Khalaj *wrote a report on her own initiative in 2019 about violence and threats at the asylum centres (Khalaj2019). She says: "If you ask asylum seekers whether they feel safe in the centre, most have either experienced or witnessed being subjected to threats, violence or harassment. But if you ask the centre staff, they often have the impression that it is peaceful at the centre because nothing "happens". If you dig into the reports of violence, threats or abuse that the centre's management must send to the Danish Immigration Service, you can see a discrepancy between the reports received by the police about the same. There are far more police reports than internal reports. In my report, I found that the residents have limited or no insight into legal rights in Denmark or the general notification procedure with the police. Finally, women and children will hesitate to file a report, as they fear that they will continue to live in the same centre as their perpetrator".*

The Red Cross gives the following answer to the question of what is being done to secure women who feel threatened in Sandholm: “During the reception phase, the employees at Centre Sandholm will support women who feel unsafe. They are accommodated in the village houses among the families and are encouraged to contact the employees if they are concerned.” See photo on next page.

The operators' general response in relation to violence and insecurity is that residents are always encouraged to contact the staff if they have problems. As several of the quotes below show, however, it is far from always that the women do it.

During the work on this report, several stories have come to light about employees and volunteers at the centres who have taken advantage of their position vis-à-vis the women to pressure them into sexual services. The janitor in Laila's story below preyed on another woman whom he had invited to his home after consuming quite a bit of alcohol. A middle-aged man, who several years ago was in charge of special computer courses for women in Sandholm, tried with varying success to initiate sexual relations with several of the women.

Laila from Iran *came to Denmark alone as a 24-year-old. She had grown up in a very protective family, and was scared out of her wits to be all alone in an unknown country. She didn't speak English. After a short time in Sandholm, where she was almost in shock and threw up all the food, she got a ticket and an itinerary printed from the office, and had to find her way from Allerød to Hanstholm herself. It took her a whole day to get there, and she arrived at half past eleven in the evening at the station, where a sort of janitor from the centre picked her up. He was an older man who was “very fond of women” and made passes at her. It turned out that she had to live in the ward for singles – and that she was the only woman among 24 men! Laila is even an unusually beautiful woman. Fortunately, the men were kind and helpful, but showed a constant interest in her. She was stressed and could not live like that at all, and was moved to the family ward, where she calmed down a bit. Later she became friends with one of the young men, and she found that it gave her more peace from the others, but he was violent towards her, and she broke up with him.*

Estella from Uganda *has lived in the asylum system for 5 years: “No, I wouldn't report it to anyone if I was abused, what would I get out of it? I'm actually here because the system doesn't believe in me. I don't trust the police, I've seen them come and pick people up in the middle of the night when they're going to be deported. And the Red Cross, they don't care if we live or die. If I report some problem, they just say 'okay', they don't find a solution, they don't care about us. They don't want to know, they don't believe us.”*

Bushra from Iraq *was traumatized by an experience in a Jutland asylum centre which is run by a municipality. She lived with her husband and two teenage sons, and wore a hijab and full-length dress. One day she was in the building where the laundry machines are, it is by itself and is poorly lit. A strange man suddenly pushed her against the wall and tried to rape her, but she kicked and got away. She did not tell her husband about the incident because she was afraid that he would kill the man or have a heart attack (he had a heart issue). She managed to be moved from the centre, but afterwards she was afraid of strangers and afraid to leave the room. She made her sons do laundry, shopping, etc. It wasn't until 4 years later that she told a friend and a contact person what had happened. They reported it to the centre, but it was too late.*

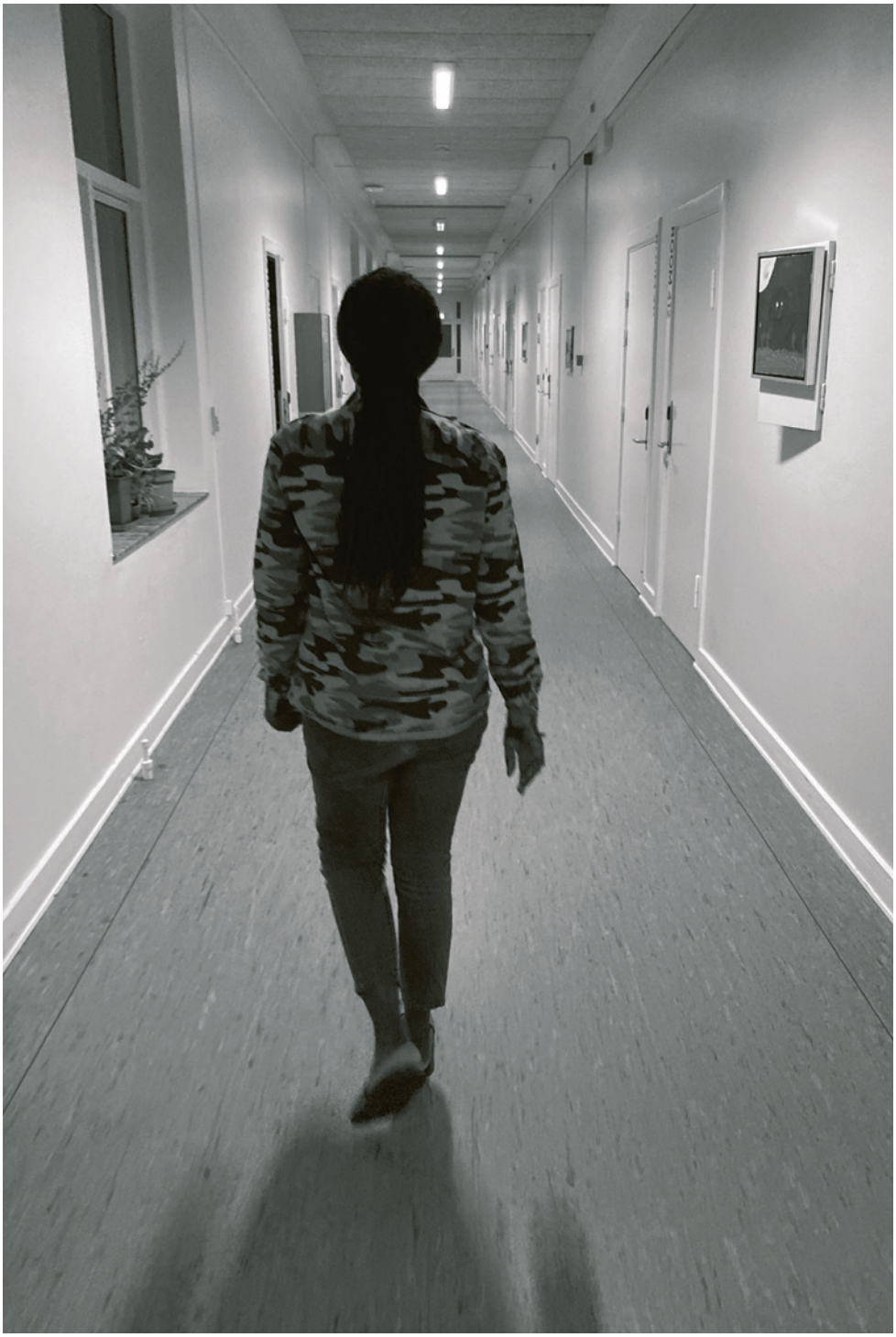
Sahra from Iran *talks about an experience she had in centre Sandholm many years ago: "Sandholm was completely overcrowded, so we lived in the kind of wagons that craftsmen use, and the walls were very thin. I lived with my little daughter, and a woman from Somalia lived next door. One night I heard that she was raped. It was clear – she cried and begged, but some man had his way with her. I ran up to the guard at the other end of the centre and left my sleeping daughter behind. One of the Red Cross men quickly drove me back in their little van, and knocked on my neighbour's door. When she opened the door, she was alone. We asked her in English what had happened. She looked very scared and just shook her head: "No problem, no problem!" The Red Cross man offered her to come with him to the office, but she would not. After that, she always looked down at the ground when we met."*

In the foreground, the so-called "village houses" in reception centre Sandholm, 2022.

Tone Olaf Nielsen *was a manager for over 10 years in Trampoline House, a community centre for asylum seekers and refugees, where she was also responsible for the women's club in the house. She tells about a woman who had been gang-raped in Sandholm, and ended up just being moved to another centre. She was told that the shelters can only accept a certain quota of women without a residence permit, and the quota was full. "Women have told me about several incidences of abuse in the centres, and often no reports are made, because the women do not perceive the Red Cross or the municipality as people who would protect their interests, and because they fear that it could have negative consequences. They might choose to move her to protect her, but that means she loses her network, and her children may have to change schools. She may also be exposed to further threats and harassment because she was a "snitch". The women generally feel bad about living in the large centres, where there is a majority of single men, and the location of the centres combined with the fact that they have no money at all makes them very isolated and vulnerable."*

Aisha from Palestine, *who has lived in many different centres with her family for 10 years, talks about being a woman: "Shortly after I came to Denmark, in centre Sandholm, I experienced that a man, whom I perceived as a friend, tried to kiss me and hold me against my will. I didn't report it, it wouldn't have made any difference. Ever since then I have avoided being alone with men, as many younger women in the centres do. This means that our options are more limited, for instance we don't use a living room or sit on a bench outside if we don't have our husband or several other women with us. It's something else out in society – you can go somewhere else there. In the centres you are forced to stay with the men who constantly look at you, make unpleasant offers and comments, and maybe you even meet the person who did something to you."*

Haya from Syria *traveled alone from Syria via Lebanon, Egypt and Turkey, and arrived in Denmark when she was 21 years old. She wanted to find a place where she could live in peace and have a career as a woman. Her parents had raised her that there was no difference between girls and boys. She lived for nine months in an asylum centre set up in a hostel in Thisted before she was granted asylum. Living there is the worst thing she has experienced – worse than leaving her family, worse than the boat trip to Greece. In the camp there were 30 men and seven women. "The men had not seen women for a long time. It didn't feel safe to be there, and even though I asked to be moved, I was told there was nothing to do", she tells Femina magazine (2022).*



The locked hallway for women in deportation centre Avnstrup, 2022.

The women at Kærshovedgård

Kærshovedgård is a departure centre for single rejected asylum seekers who do not cooperate on returning home, and who must be pressured to return home voluntarily via the "motivational measures". The women make up only a very small group among the men: at the time of writing, there were **193 people, 17 of whom were women,** aged 20 to 75. Most of the women came from Iran, the rest from Syria, Afghanistan, Palestine, Myanmar, Somalia and Cameroon.

Many of the men are simply rejected asylum seekers, but the proportion of those sentenced to deportation for criminal offences is increasing. Figures from 2021 showed that out of the then 257 residents, 97 of them had a total of 266 convictions for serious crime, including 86 convictions for violence, three for terrorism and 160 for "other crimes dangerous to persons" (FT2021).

Some are excluded from asylum due to suspicion of war crimes. Conversely, almost all of the women are just rejected asylum seekers without a conviction, and a few are trafficked women. A single woman has been convicted of human trafficking, and another was on *tolerated stay* until recently for being a "foreign fighter" (in Syria), but has now got her residence permit back. The women live in a special part of the large centre with room for 30, and they have single rooms unlike the men. However, they have to share 3 toilets and 2 showers, one of which does not always work. They have to go to the common canteen three times a day and stand in line with the men, and then eat in a corner of the canteen. They have made a rule of always going there together. They are not allowed to cook, but after coffee machines and toasters were confiscated in the first years, a small kitchenette is now available. Some women complain that the canteen does not offer diets for diabetes and high blood pressure.

Access to the centre is very difficult: the nearest public transport and the nearest shops are in Brande, which is seven km away. The road goes through a dense forest and open fields with almost no buildings. It's bad enough for the men to have to cycle that way if they don't have friends or family to pick them up by car. But for the women it is completely impossible – they usually cannot cycle, and they are afraid of the long, lonely road. The only way they can leave the centre is by paying DKK 50-100 to one of the few male residents who has a car – and these few cars are now confiscated under the "jewellery law". They get no money, so the woman's family has to pay if she is lucky enough to have someone like that.

Several mothers live in Kærshovedgård, even though their children have residency or are even Danish citizens and live with their father. The mothers have very limited opportunities to be with their children, because the centre is so isolated and there is a rule of staying in the centre. They are only allowed to spend the night outside the center two x two days a month upon application.

In the agreement binding the members of the coalition government from December 2022, it is stated that they will "reduce the number of residents at Kærshovedgård – for example by moving some of the female residents to another location." But concrete steps have not yet been taken.

Council of Europe: New recommendations to protect the rights of migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women and girls from May 2022 states: "104) In relation to returns, due regard should be given to relevant human rights obligations, notably the right to family life, in accordance with international law and the case law of the European Court of Human Rights, and to the vulnerable situation of the person, particularly with regard to their state of health, including, for example, pregnancy. In relation to returns of girls, the best interest of the child should be a primary consideration" (CoE2022). The recommendations do not match the narratives below:

Gerda Abildgaard *lives in Ikast and is a retired school teacher. She has been a volunteer among the women since Kærshovedgård opened. Her heart bleeds especially for the mothers who are separated from their children. Gerda talks about one of the mothers who leaves the centre several days a week at 7 in the morning and travels all the way to Northern Jutland to be with her three children, and must be back before 11 at night. But a few times it has gone wrong, e.g. a few years ago, when there was a strong snowstorm, and everyone was advised not to drive out. The trains did not run, so her husband had to drive all the way to Kærshovedgård, risking life and limb. The woman was refused family reunification due to a bad advice to divorce in order to improve her chances of asylum.*

Nahid *is a middle-aged woman from Iran who has lived at the centre ever since it opened 6 years ago. She is regularly allowed to visit her adult daughters in Copenhagen, but it can be very difficult to get back to the center before 11 in the evening. Even on the occasions when she has tested positive for Covid19, she has not been allowed to stay with her daughters, despite the risk of infection on the train. If you miss one night, you risk 40 days in prison, she says.*

Sahar, *a 21-year-old Syrian girl, who lost her residence permit after living seven years with her mother and siblings in Denmark, describes her stay in Kærshovedgård like this in Politiken: "They look, and when I look straight ahead, they keep on looking. It is as if they have never seen a girl before". She has never spoken to any of the men and doesn't know if they are nice or the opposite. She also does not know who has committed rape and who is completely innocent. She just knows she's insecure.*

Mariam *from Syria, aged 20 and pregnant, had her residence permit revoked and was sent to Kærshovedgård. She was only 13 years old when she left Syria with her parents, but as the only one in the family was told to return to Syria in late summer 2021 – even though her husband and future child's father still had a residence permit. She was granted a residence permit again when she was eight months pregnant.*

ANGEL

Angel is 26 years old and comes from a West African country. Today she lives at the deportation centre Avnstrup with her child. She lived at Kærshovedgård for six months while she was pregnant. She was supposed to move from Kærshovedgård to Avnstrup in the eighth month of her pregnancy, but with the help of the Red Cross, she was allowed to move in the sixth month.

While she lived there, the 35 women shared two toilets. It is not so easy when you are pregnant and have to pee very often and at short notice.

She says that she never walked around Kærshovedgård alone, but just got the food from the canteen and went back to her room. If she wanted to go for a walk, she always went with some of the other women. In the canteen there were sometimes disturbances, and the men threw plates of food.

Angel has not been exposed to anything herself, because she never walked around alone, but she heard about someone who had been raped – she believed that they had reported it, but that no action had really been taken on it.

As mentioned earlier, there is no public transport to Kærshovedgård, so you are dependent on getting a lift by car from the centre to the train station, which is far away, and it costs DKK 50-100 each way. Angel had once agreed to be picked up by a resident by car, but he had gone out for the weekend, and she therefore waited at the station for two hours in the evening in the cold. She called the centre but they wouldn't pick her up. In the end, she took a taxi and spent all her money paying for it, but it was better than risking 40 days in jail for violating the rule that prohibits staying outside at night.

The women's section is located almost directly inside the gate. There were always police and there was a video camera in the entrance to the women's section, otherwise, according to Angel, the men would just come in and do whatever they wanted.

Sale of sexual services

Residents in departure centres receive no money at all, and are also not allowed to work. A train ticket to Copenhagen from Kærshovedgård costs many hundreds of DKK, and in addition there are expenses for phone, clothes, hairdresser, hygiene items, cigarettes, or whatever else you need. For women, the only way to raise money may be to sell their bodies, inside or outside the centre. A volunteer in centre Sandholm says that you could buy sex for DKK 50 when she used to come to the centre for approx. 10 years ago and it's probably still going on. However, this has never been studied systematically. Some men also promise the women that they will marry them and grant them residency, and then disappear.

When sex work is not a free choice, but something the women have to, it often leads to severe guilt and shame and self-hatred, and at the same time it is quickly rumored among other residents, leading to stigma. Trafficked women often continue their sex work while living in the asylum centres, other women are pressured to sell their bodies because the system gives them no alternatives, and others again are suspected of doing so even if they do not.

Woman in her mid-20s: *"I'm alone in this camp. People look at a single woman in a camp and talk, they say she goes out to do something dirty, to make money. After all, they only give us food. It is extremely difficult to be a single woman in a camp, the way people look at you and talk about you. Being a single woman is the same as being a bad woman" (Jaffarson2021).*

A young girl from Somalia *who lives at Kærshovedgård says: "I saw an article in the newspaper about women at Kærshovedgård selling sex. Now everyone thinks we all do it, both my family and the men at the centre. None of us do that, it was several years ago, and it makes me really angry that they write something like that."*

Aisha from Palestine *tells about a young, Asian woman she got to know in Sandholm. She was well educated and a political refugee. In the crowded centre she had been placed in one of the temporary barracks at the far end. There was an elderly man who always walked back and forth looking through her window. When she asked the woman about him, she said that's what it was like to be an Asian woman – all men think you're a prostitute. The woman had mental problems and was depressed, so she had an addiction to cigarettes, pills and drugs. To finance it, she ended up giving in to the offers, after several years of waiting in the asylum system, to give the men certain benefits in exchange for money. It was the start of a serious deroute. When she was refused asylum, she went underground and lived as a homeless person, where she was subjected to violence and abuse. When she reentered the asylum system, she was imprisoned and deported.*

Isolation and pacification in the centres

In addition to the insecurity and the desolate location, women also experience other reasons for a more isolated and more empty existence in the asylum centres than the men. Women often have responsibility for children, and this ties them to the centre on a daily basis. There are no childcare facilities for children under the age of three, and if there is a nursery in the centre, the children must be picked up for lunch, so the mothers cannot leave the centre. In addition, the economic situation is very difficult for women with children – in the regular asylum centres they receive a very modest benefit apart from food, but in the departure centres they do not receive a penny. Food can be ordered online for a certain amount, and clothes and shoes are delivered a few times a year from the recycling warehouse. Transport is only covered if necessary (school, doctor, lawyer etc.).

Katrine Syppli Kohl, *who has researched programmes at the asylum centres, describes how women are more affected, and points out that women are not offered courses and activation to the same extent as men: "An example is the conditions women are offered in the centres' scrapped activation programme. Among other things, there is no possibility of looking after children and other dependent relatives to the extent that would enable full participation in adult education and activation. This affects women harder than men, as more women have and take on the caregiving role. They are therefore activated as home-based carers instead of being guaranteed Danish language courses and the opportunity to start gathering experience and networks, which in the long term would help them to gain a foothold in Denmark and meet the requirements for permanent residence" (Syppli2021).*

The National Audit Office concluded in a report in 2016 that 81% of the women in Danish asylum centres with children of nursery age were not offered Danish courses and activation to which they were entitled. The government had not set aside money for childcare for children between 1-3 years old, which is why the operators (Red Cross, Tønder and Vesthimmerland municipalities) had to put the responsibility on the mothers. In the subsequent Return Act, women's care work was also not taken into account – on the contrary, an option has been introduced to exempt them from participation. It must then be added that the teaching and programmes are extremely limited, so the women do not miss out on that much (Rigsrev.2016).

In the departure centres there are no activation programs at all, because the purpose is precisely to make life as unbearable and meaningless as possible. Here again, the women are worse off because they find it more difficult to leave the centre, especially if they have children. It's easier for the men to find a bit of menial work through friends, and get back to the center in the evening before the time limit.

There are volunteers who visit the women in most centres and invite them outside. The women are good at creating networks, and they often help each other to translate, look after children, etc. But that is to the credit of the women and civil society, in opposition to authorities and rules.

Dr. Victoria Canning *points out in her studies of women in the Danish asylum system, among other things, that even some of the women who actually have the opportunity to participate in activities or leave the center choose to isolate themselves. She quotes two employees at the departure center Sjælsmark as saying: "Some of the women actually hide in their rooms and don't come out." The self-isolation can be due to a number of factors such as insecurity and anxiety about the men, lack of language skills, mental and physical problems (Canning2019).*

Furthermore, Canning points out that the repeated moves between the centres pose a problem: "The impacts of moving women between centres adds to relational harms for them and – if they are mothers – their children. Whilst no centres are fit for sustained living, safety and security are fundamental to Maslow's hierarchy of need. These are undermined when families, friendships and routines are removed or broken, creating repeated cycles of isolation and emotional harm." Women are moved for several reasons: if they move to another phase of the asylum process (the centres are reserved for one phase), if a centre has to be closed or used for other purposes, or in response to harassment or problems with another resident.

Being a mother in the asylum system

Many women come to Denmark with their children, or have children while they are asylum seekers. Some have also had to leave children behind in their home country or a third country, have experienced children dying along the way or have lost contact with their children, and do not know if they are well. For all the mothers, the children preoccupy them, both the worries about them and the responsibility for them. But the system is set up in a way that makes it impossible for them to provide the care and be the role models they would like to be.

As an asylum seeker, you are deprived of all self-determination as a parent. You cannot decide where you will live or where the child will go to school, and in many centres you cannot even cook for your child, but must eat what is served in the canteen at fixed times. You cannot buy clothes, toys etc. yourself, you have to receive them as alms. Even volunteers and Red Cross employees contribute – with the best intentions – to depriving parents of their parental role.

Raising children is often a point of conflict, especially for those women who don't act subservient and keep a low profile. Often they are suspected of being violent towards their children or of having a bad influence on the children in other ways. Some have experienced children being removed by the municipality, or have undergone psychological examinations regarding their parenting ability. An absurd angle is that if a child is removed because the parents (usually the mother) cannot provide sufficient care, this can in certain cases trigger a residence permit. In other words: If the asylum system succeeds over the years in breaking down a rejected mother effectively enough, she and the child can be allowed to stay – but not together.

The children react strongly to growing up in the asylum system, and often develop psychological problems and reactions that certainly do not make being a good mother any easier. A psychologist's report from the Red Cross documented the condition of the children in the Sjælsmark departure centre in 2019. It found that 61% probably met the criteria for a psychiatric diagnosis, and that approximately half of the older children had symptoms of PTSD. A follow-up study from Avnstrup this year confirms the same picture (RødeKors2019+2023).

In the families where there is a father, you see a gradual dissolution of the roles of the family members: In the first period (phases 1 and 2), the father succumbs because he is deprived of his role as provider and responsible. In the next period (phase 3), the mother succumbs because the forced canteen food and the lack of benefits deprive her of the work in the kitchen and the care she could show through shopping and cooking. At the same time, the children take on the role of those who, through language and their schooling, understand the system better than their parents.

Gerd Gottlieb, *who has been a volunteer support person for many women for*

more than 15 years, says: "The pain of the weakened, even lost, parental role is probably what I have felt the most over the years. It pains not least the women that they cannot ensure their children proper security when they cannot decide for themselves about their own existence. They also lose authority in the eyes of the children. And in relation to the slightly older children, it is painful that she cannot give them a perspective on the future, just as it pains the parents that they cannot help their children to go to regular school. The problems change with the age of the children. Mothers of the little three- to five-year-olds are struggling to manage them in a tiny room in the centre, and mothers of the youngsters are wildly nervous when their older children steal away on the train hoping to find excitement and romance in the Copenhagen nightlife."

Aisha fra Palæstina, *mother of five-year-old Ahmed: "We manage in the centre because we have many friends from outside who support us. But that means nothing comes from me, everything my son needs comes from others – all his clothes, toys, etc. He has learned to ask for things when he meets strangers. But he should see that things came from his parents – not from strangers. When children do not experience that their parents have strength and power over the situation, they become insecure."*

Ahmed, five years old, *has lived for two years in the departure centre Sjælsmark: "I am not afraid of anything – only God. And then the police, they want to take us – also the municipality. They take children from their parents."*

Estella from Uganda *has lived in six different centres during her five years in Denmark, and now lives in Avnstrup with her child:*

"They are very concerned with us not hitting our children and what is best for the child. And it's also true, I've learned a lot about how to be a better mother. But how can it be okay for children to watch when the police come 20-30 men to pick up one mother and her two children? With tear gas, and they put a trampoline under the window in case she had to jump out! After I experienced that, I never felt safe for a moment. I always wonder if they will come and get me.

At one point the municipality took my child away from me and I felt completely lost. Luckily I got him back after a week because a lawyer complained and there was no evidence that I had done anything wrong… No one understands how we feel here. ***They don't know how much stress we have.*** *If you've never experienced being forced to do things against your will, so you really feel vulnerable, then you can't judge."*

SHARAREH I

Sharareh from Iran arrived with her daughter, who was 16 at the time. They were only granted asylum 10 years later. She tells Gerd Gottlieb:

“It was a big shock for my daughter to turn 18. Normally that age means new opportunities, but in the asylum system it's the opposite, the opportunities are closed down. She went to an asylum school for the first two years until she turned 18, but after that she could not continue, neither education nor youth club. As a girl, it was extra difficult for her to get anywhere, and she only had a few friends, who always moved out of the centre again. She had no opportunities to get to know Danish girls. She was deprived of her youth.

The staff comforted her by saying that she had her mother after all. But which mother? The mother was an asylum seeker, had no money for activities, smart clothes or fun. I couldn't see that she had a mother in me. I lost my role as a mother, but gradually I also could not be allowed to be a sister or just a friend to my daughter. I have been stripped of all roles; even my relationship with my husband and my son who are both in Iran is lost after all these years when it was dangerous for them to maintain contact with me.

After a few years I got worse mentally and I was diagnosed with cancer. When I was moved to a care centre, the Danish Immigration Service would not let my daughter move in with me. It was a great pressure for a young girl with a big heart that she could not care for her sick mother. We lived separately for four years, and could only rarely afford to visit each other. The separation made us afraid to talk to each other, the conversation fell silent between us. We wanted to spare each other our sufferings, and neither had much to tell from our empty rooms.

I was unable to give her hope, it was like a light that was fading more and more. It was not Iran that prevented my daughter from developing into an independent woman. It was the Danish asylum system that prevented her from doing so.”

Mother and child in deportation centre Avnstrup, 2022.

BEING UNDERGROUND AND IN PRISON

An unknown number of women stay outside the system for periods of time, either before they register in the asylum system or after a refusal – and some never apply for asylum. In Denmark, the rules are very black and white in this area, where many other countries have a gray zone giving certain rights and opportunities to be legalized over time. Internationally, the term "undocumented" or "paperless" is used, but in Denmark it is a bit misleading, since the person often has a thick case file, but just no legal residence, and no registered place of residence.

Reasons to be under ground

Trafficked women usually start their lives in Denmark by living underground, as they arrive with false papers. They are only registered in the system if they contact the authorities themselves, or if they are "caught", e.g. in a raid. Women who actually have an asylum motive, but arrive in other ways, also often start with a period underground, as they do not always know their options. Women who are refused asylum may feel forced to leave the centre for fear of deportation. And finally, there are those who have been here legally but lose their residence permit and go into hiding while they look for a solution.

Life underground can be very different. It could be an elderly, sick woman who came on a visa, was refused family reunification, but has been living in a nice apartment with her adult daughter for many years. It could be a young girl who came as an au pair and fell in love with a Danish man, who then persuaded her to move in with him, even though her visa expired. And it can be a rejected asylum seeker who has developed an addiction and sleeps on the couch with changing acquaintances, earning money through prostitution. Many sex workers also live underground for years, in constant fear of being discovered and sent back to their home country.

No access to rights

Human rights apply to everyone, regardless of what papers you have. But if you live underground in Denmark, you are practically without rights. The only thing you have the right to use is emergency medical care – you can call an ambulance, and you can get emergency and necessary treatment in a hospital. But there are many who do not even dare to do that because they are afraid that the staff will call the police when they do not have a health insurance card – this has in fact happened, even though the staff are not allowed to do so.

Being pregnant, giving birth and being a new mother poses a big risk for both women and their children due to the lack of access to a midwife, hospital and wet nurse. It has been criticized repeatedly, e.g. in a report from the Danish Institute for Human Rights from 2013: "Health rights of unregistered migrants – focus on pregnant women and children" (IMR2018). Around 2015, there was a great deal of

debate on the subject, but then the discussion died down after it was finally established that a hospital birth is an emergency event that everyone has a right to. Midwife visits, scans and supervision of the newborn are still only accessible via the Red Cross health clinics for undocumented people in the three largest cities in Denmark. They are operated by voluntary staff and financed by private funds.

There are special hostels for homeless women, although there are far fewer places than for men. However, most do not accept foreign homeless people, as they would otherwise lose their public subsidy. And in any case, most hostels are only open for overnight stays, not during the day. This naturally leaves women in an extra vulnerable situation, where they are completely dependent on others – and do not dare to report anything to the police, for fear of being imprisoned themselves. Violence, rape and abuse cannot be reported if you fear the authorities – and even the staff at the asylum centres do not always have the trust of the residents.

Imprisonment

If you are apprehended without legal residence, or report back to the system, there is a high risk that you will be sent to what is called the "immigrant centre Ellebæk". Ellebæk is one of the worst prisons in Denmark, and it is used exclusively for asylum seekers who have not done anything criminal, and foreigners without legal residence. The stay is extended by a judge every four weeks, up to 18 months in total, if the police believe there is a risk that the person will disappear. Any criminal sentence will be served in other prisons.

Council of Europe: New recommendations to protect the rights of migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women and girls from May 2022 states "101) Migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women and girls in administrative detention should preferably be accommodated in centres designed specifically for that purpose. Care should be taken in the design and layout of the premises to avoid, as far as possible, any impression of a prison-like environment" (CoE2022).

The Committee for the Prevention of Torture of the Council of Europe visited the site in 2019 and wrote an extremely critical report. The leader of the delegation stated that the place was unfit for humans and one of the worst places he had seen in Europe. The criticism went, among other things, on dilapidated buildings, unsanitary conditions, very limited opportunities to get outdoors or contact a lawyer, overcrowded cells with multiple occupants, and widespread use of solitary confinement for several weeks for using a cell phone. The committee also pointed out that cell phones should be allowed since they are not serving time. The Danish government's answer was that it was not meant to be a nice place – but the buildings were partially repaired afterwards (CPT2020).

There is a separate department for women in Ellebæk, but virtually no staff in that department, as there are usually only few women inmates. There are se-

veral examples of pregnant women being detained, and children may also be detained with their mother for several days in connection with deportation, just as unaccompanied minors may be detained for periods of time. Trafficked women are often locked up behind bars, and while this report was being written, a trafficked woman from Nigeria had been in Ellebæk for 12 months, according to the Ellebæk Contact Network. All these categories of people are considered vulnerable, and should not be incarcerated at all.

VIOLENCE AND EXPLOITATION IN DENMARK

According to the Istanbul Convention, violence against women occurs in four main forms: **physical, sexual, psychological and economic.** The women that this report deals with are often exposed to several of the forms, and it can be both from family/spouse or from authority figures in their home country or Denmark – or indirectly, structurally.

Some women are lured with the promise of marriage or good jobs in peace and security, but end up in an everyday life with violence and abuse. In some cases, the violence and exploitation only occurs after they have arrived in Denmark, but the women cannot or dare not break out of the situation and seek protection from the authorities. It may be because the abuser has leverage on her (e.g. threatens to harm her child in her home country), other times simply because she could be kicked out of Denmark and returned home to an even worse situation than the one she was trying to get away from. It can also be quite simple financial exploitation due to the woman's lack of skills, such as Mouna on page 50.

A study of 113 abused ethnic minority women from Denmark in 2018 showed that 54% of the women's perpetrators were ethnic Danes with Danish citizenship, the other 46% were non-ethnic Danes with or without Danish citizenship. The women came from 44 different countries, with the three most common nationalities being the Philippines, Syria and Rwanda. The violence is thus often carried out by ethnically Danish men, but such couples are not included in this report (Danner2018).

Another study from 2020 showed that mainly two groups of women were exposed to social control in relation to the labour market: newly arrived spouse-supported reunified women who lived relatively isolated and had poor knowledge of Danish, and long-term unemployed over 30 years of age, typically reunified in arranged marriages, who had lived in Denmark for many years. There seems to be a certain overlap with women who are exposed to violence and exploitation (KVINFO2021).

The group of women that this report deals with is strongly over-represented at shelters. Almost half of the women in the Danish shelters (47%) had an immigrant or descendant background in 2020. Overall, female immigrants and their descendants make up only 14% of the population. The largest proportion of women at the shelters with a country of origin other than Denmark was from Syria with 5%, while 3% came from Turkey, Iraq, Somalia and Pakistan respectively (DS2021:2).

Limited help in legislation

A large number of au pairs, family reunified and trafficked women who are subjected to violence or exploitation end up in the asylum centres or underground. The Danish immigration law contains virtually no help for these women, and they receive neither protection nor residence permits. If you divorce a man who turns out to be violent and oppressive, you risk being deported if you cannot meet the requirements for evidence of the violence and have not shown "willingness and ability to integrate."

A trafficked woman from Nigeria, who has been raped and exploited for years doing sex work for minimal pay, cannot get witness protection if she testifies, and all she gets out of it is 90 days of "reflection" in a shelter and some financial support for six months when she is deported to Nigeria. But she usually has a huge "debt" to the agents and fears what they will do to her family or herself, and she often has a responsibility to provide for the family at home. Therefore, the vast majority disappear again and continue life underground, without papers and rights. The Danish state does not in any way help women out of this situation. Even those who return "voluntarily" express that they only consented because the alternative was to be forced on board the plane (Plambech2022).

The UN Women's Committee CEDAW criticizes Denmark in its ninth periodic report from 2021 for insufficient protection of trafficked women, and recommends that the state "… revise immigration legislation with a view to ensuring that policies regarding the deportation of foreign women are not carried out in a discriminatory manner, does not scare victims from reporting trafficking, and does not undermine work to prevent trafficking in persons, identify victims, protect witnesses and prosecute perpetrators" (CEDAW2021).

Emily *comes from a West African country. She is a rejected asylum seeker and lives in the departure center Avnstrup with her little son, who was born in Denmark. At one point, she received threats by text message from her home country, from someone she owed money to. They knew she had given birth to a child here and threatened to kill him. She got very scared and turned to the Danish police and showed them the messages and asked them to find out who it was. They just said it was from another country and they couldn't do anything about it.*

MOUNA

Mouna is one of the women who come to FAKTI at Nørrebro in Copenhagen, a cultural centre for women with refugee and immigrant backgrounds. She is in her 40s and a divorced mother of five. She visited the house's social worker because she had received a reminder for non-payment of rent. Mouna is illiterate and has very little knowledge of Danish. She did not understand why she had received the reminder, as her adult daughter always used to pay the rent for her via online banking.

Mouna could not log into online banking herself, but with FAKTI's help it turned out that the amount for rent had not been sent to the housing company, but to the tax department – to cover taxes related to the ex-husband's shop, where the daughter works. It also turned out that money was transferred continuously from Mouna's main account to another account she did not know about, which was used to cover expenses for the ex-husband's shop. She had no idea, and had just gotten used to getting by on very little. Thus, her immediate family and those she should be able to trust subjected her to financial violence by taking her money and exploiting her.

FAKTI's social worker also found out that the ex-husband did not pay child support to the children living at home and that he had power of attorney for her main bank account. FAKTI helped Mouna to close the extra account, canceled the husband's power of attorney, set up a payment service for fixed expenses and applied for child support, and also offered to contact her again if she receives letters in her digital mailbox that she does not understand.

NALA

Lene Kjær, who is an activist in what she herself calls “Asylum Hell Denmark", has helped many girls who have been exposed to negative social control and abuse. She says:

“The girls I've met have in common that they don't get any help from society! The atrocities they have been subjected to cannot be blamed on their religion, but on a rotten culture that I am sure the vast majority of Muslims distance themselves from.

One of the girls I have met was reunited with her family in Denmark in 2012, when she was nine years old. On arrival, she had been so badly mistreated that it is surprising that no one reacted to it. There were marks from cigarettes on large parts of the body, marks from severe torture under the soles of the feet, smashed knuckles in both fingers and toes, smashed kneecaps.

She grows up under strong social control, and since the abuse is perpetrated by the father, she does not dare to tell anyone about her home situation. No one raises concerns, even though the father cuts the girl off from all forms of social life outside of her school hours. She lives in constant fear and has absolutely no one she dares confide in.

When the girl is 18 years old, she contacts me and asks for help to get away from her family. She never told anyone what was going on. I naively think that my country will agree to help such a girl, but I quickly realize that is not the case.

The girl is left to rot in an asylum centre for a year, after which her asylum case is rejected. The Red Cross refuses to document the girl's many serious injuries - the reason being that the torture was carried out by the father, and so it is not torture in their terminology, but torture-like. So we ourselves have to stand with a camera and document the many injuries to the Refugee Appeals Board.

With the help of a good lawyer, she ends up getting residency, and today she lives at a hidden address somewhere in Denmark. But it has been uphill to get professional help for her afterwards, and she is far from the only one.”

Wall painting at shop in Griffenfeldtsgade, Nørrebro, Copenhagen.

3. CRITERIA FOR RESIDENCE PERMIT AND RESIDENCE STATUS

This report concerns foreign women who are at present in Denmark and for various reasons, cannot live in their homeland. The possibility of getting a residence permit and legal status often depends on the international conventions which Denmark has signed. However, in practice, Denmark does not always live up to its obligations.

The Council of Europe's new recommendations for the protection of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers of May 2022 states, inter alia: "21) An intersectional and gender-sensitive approach should be taken to female migrants, refugees and asylum seekers when determining their individual needs during civil, administrative and criminal proceedings, in particular when decisions have an impact on their legal status" (CoE2022).

UN Security Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security was adopted in 2000, and Denmark was the first country to make a national action plan. The resolution emphasizes, among other things, that women are particularly vulnerable during armed conflicts and that states must take women's special needs for protection into account. However, the Danish action plan only focuses on strengthening women's participation in international peace work and preventing violence against women around the world. The first evaluation of the action plan in 2019 was predominantly negative (FN2000).

Female migrants, refugees and asylum seekers generally receive more precarious residence permits than men. This is because legislation and practice make it harder for women to obtain asylum because of their own situation. Most women have residence permits solely based on the situations of husband or children. Either in the form of consequential status (if they arrived at the same time as their husbands) or as a result of family reunification. Women seeking asylum for gender persecution are more often rejected, at the risk of being sent back to the men and the oppressive society from which they fled.

Women's weaker and more temporary protection is thus an unintended effect of existing legislation and practice, but it also means that they are often the first to be expected to return to an unsafe and perhaps completely devastated country. This is a paradox because, at the same time, it is recognized that women, especially single women, are more exposed and more vulnerable than men. The reality is usually that it is even harder for women than for men to return if, after several years, with or without a residence permit, they are deported. Their families in their home countries will often reject them if they have divorced or if they have lived an "immoral" life as

Danish women. Is it reasonable to demand that a woman return to a country where circumcision, forced marriage and impunity for wife-killing are the norms and where she is in danger simply by being a woman – regardless of whether she has received specific threats or not?

CEDAW (UN Women's Committee) writes in their ninth and latest report on Denmark that the committee is concerned that foreign women who have resided in Denmark as family reunified, risk losing their residence permit in the event of divorce (CEDAW2021).

Asylum-seeking women and family reunified refugees are afraid of being sent back to their home country, but nevertheless have a strong belief that the Danish authorities will protect them. Trafficked women and foreign, undocumented sex workers, fear the Danish authorities. They are here to work, earn money and pay off their debts. Being sent home means starting over. Trafficked women know that they have almost no chance of being granted asylum in Denmark, nor do they have a real chance of obtaining humanitarian residence. This applies regardless of their being threatened by the criminal network or having sustained extreme violence. Nor does section 9c (1) of the Aliens Act, which covers “very special grounds", trigger residence for this group. For them, the police and the authorities are their worst enemy.

In general, the women in this report can be granted residence for four reasons:

A) Asylum, risk of persecution or abuse in the home country.

B) Family reunification, i.e., as the wife or mother of a resident.

C) Special grounds and independent attachment to Denmark.

D) Special laws (Afghanistan and Ukraine).

All types of residence permits require detailed applications, either by the applicant filling in forms or being interviewed. Permits are granted by caseworkers based on an overall assessment. The Immigration Service handles both asylum and family cases in the first instance, and a refusal can be appealed to the Refugee Appeals Board or the Immigration Appeals Board, respectively. Applications for humanitarian residence and citizenship are processed directly by the Ministry of Immigration and Integration. Some women meet the criteria for several types of residence, others are refused according to all the procedures.

Looking at the history of each woman, for example many of the cases in this report, there are several problems, each of which falls under different sections and must be assessed by different authorities. The law and the systems are complicated, and women almost never have an idea of their own opportunities and rights and find it very difficult to understand their own cases. Women do not always know what the terms “asylum” and “family reunification” mean when they arrive – they are often not familiar with these concepts from their home country.

Advice and assistance in connection with a woman's case is provided at her own expense or through voluntary organizations such as Refugees Welcome, except for asylum cases continuing to the Refugee Appeals Board, where the state provides a lawyer. Misinformation and misguided advice from women's compatriots abound and may ruin their cases.

It is also important to point out that residence permits are always temporary and are typically only granted for two years at a time. The permit can be extended if the woman still meets the requirements. Read more about losing residence permit on page 79.

Below is a detailed review of the reasons for which women can be granted residence.

A) ASYLUM

The UN Refugee Convention (art. 7.1)

The Refugee Convention covers people who have left their own country and who cannot return because they would face persecution by the authorities of their home country or by someone from whom those authorities cannot or will not protect them. In the Danish Aliens Act, it grants asylum under art. 7.1, also called **convention status.**

The convention was written in 1951, when the world was different. Persecution because of gender or sexual orientation is not mentioned under the definition of a refugee, although the Danish authorities now to some extent include these aspects in the asylum assessment. However, the Refugee Appeals Board is very reluctant to grant convention status when the persecutor is not the authorities of the country of origin, and this creates gender imbalances. As a result, the Danish authorities give women a weaker status than men.

The classic refugee in the sense of the convention is a man. In most of the countries from which refugees come, it is the men who are politically active, are imprisoned, tortured and come into conflict with other groups in society. Men are being conscripted into the army or enlisted or forced into rebel movements. Men are most active in religious contexts, write critical articles or get into trouble because of their jobs or social position. As a result, men more often than women meet the demands for individual persecution and concrete threats.

Of course, there are also women around the world who are politically active or critical journalists, but they are a minority. When women flee, it is often due to situations in which they have had a much more passive role. They flee because of the problems of their husband, father or son, and are thus dependent on his application and explanation. Others flee simply because they are women, and their own family can pose the greatest threat.

Gender persecution can also trigger convention status in individual cases but is assessed differently depending on the country of origin. Single women and girls from Somalia without a male network are granted protection status. But if they risk circumcision, they are granted convention status. Single women from Afghanistan, who risk other forms of abuse, have for many years been rejected and referred to apply for humanitarian residence, which is completely wrong according to asylum law. However, the Taliban's takeover in 2021 meant that the Refugee Appeals Board first lowered the burden of proof for women and girls from Afghanistan, and soon after decided to give all women and girls convention status solely by virtue of their gender, more on that below.

LGBT+ people face persecution in most countries of the world, both from their home country authorities and from their own families and communities. Lesbian women are raped in some places as a form of “re-education". But it only triggers asylum if there is a real risk that she will be imprisoned, killed or the like – discrimination, violence and harassment are not enough. Although the country's laws criminalize same-sex sex, it does not necessarily trigger asylum if the greatest threat comes from civilians – although the authorities may support the persecution by civilians.

Women as a particular social group

The Refugee Convention covers not only individual reasons for asylum, but also persecution because of belonging to “a particular social group”. According to a 2020 DRC memo on Danish asylum practices concerning women, women should in many cases fall under this heading, e.g., if the conditions for single women in a country are so problematic that the very fact that a woman lives there, and lives alone puts her at risk of experiencing serious abuse or very serious discrimination, which the authorities cannot or will not protect her from. Or, she simply has no chance of survival without a male network (DRC2020).

Several countries have such oppressive laws and practices towards women, and it could be argued that all women from those countries should be granted asylum, as they are subject to persecution and human rights violations from their own state – the very worst examples are Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia. If a woman does not have the freedom to walk the streets, drive a car, go to a football match, cannot really support herself, cannot decide who she wants to marry, does not have free access to contraception or abortion, does not have custody of her children or inheritance rights, cannot report her husband for violence, and her testimony in a trial does not carry as much weight as a man's – then she is effectively persecuted by her own state by virtue of her gender.

In practice, however, it has never been enough to be a woman from a particularly oppressive country to be granted asylum. But at the end of 2022, a groundbreaking and historic change took place: Sweden's asylum authorities decided that all women and girls from Afghanistan would now fall under the Refugee Convention's

SHARAREH II

Sharareh is a trained journalist from Iran. Despite having been imprisoned and tortured in her home country, she was refused asylum, and it would be 10 years before she was finally granted asylum under art. 7.1. The text is an excerpt from an interview by Gerd Gottlieb 2010.

“When you ask me what characterizes women's lives as asylum seekers, I would say that language – or rather, lack of language skills – is the biggest problem for most people. Women are generally less educated than men and have also had fewer chances of learning foreign languages.

When they cannot speak other languages – English in particular – it is difficult to contact other people who can guide them as to their asylum case. And when one cannot get a lawyer or other official guidance when applying for asylum, one must wait passively for the process to take its course. After all, one has no idea how to approach one’s own case in the best possible way. One does not know when being called for interviews or when there'll be answers. I can't imagine how I would have made it through all these years if I hadn't found someone to talk to about my case.

At the same time, many refugee women come from cultures where, as women, they are used to being regarded as inferior and to not have the same rights as men. I have followed many women who I believe would have been granted asylum if their cases had been presented correctly, but who have instead become passive victims, bound by their own culture, because they neither could nor dared reach out for guidance in the new culture. Some allowed themselves to be exploited instead. I remember many men swarming around the women's section to offer so-called “help” in return for marriage. Some of the women whose asylum applications were rejected saw no alternative but to accept, and this often had tragic consequences. It has been hard to follow how these women ended up in the same kind of oppressive and violent relationships that they had just fled from.

It is also more difficult for women to get away from the isolation in the centres and experience some variety, or perhaps find undeclared work. A woman must be more careful because of her gender. A woman, needs extra protection and should have her case advanced because of being particularly vulnerable in the asylum system and doubly oppressed.”

“special social group” solely by virtue of their gender. The Taliban violate women's fundamental rights and discriminate against women through judicial, administrative, police and judicial measures (Migrationsv2022).

In response to Sweden's assessment and statements from the UN Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan, the Danish Refugee Appeals Board first decided to “apply a less strict assessment of evidence” in relation to women and girls from Afghanistan – regardless of whether she has male family members. This meant reopening the cases of all rejected Afghan women and girls in the system. Since then, the pan-European asylum agency EUAA aligned itself with Sweden, and shortly afterwards, the Danish Refugee Appeals Board was one of the first institutions in Europe to take the step fully and decide in January 2023 that all women and girls from Afghanistan are subjected to such massive gender persecution that they are all entitled to asylum solely because of their gender (FLN2023).

Until then, female genital mutilation (FGM) was the only form of gender-related persecution which the Refugee Appeals Board generally recognized. In the case of for example Somalia where almost all girls are circumcised, women are considered a special social group and granted convention status if the Board otherwise assumes that there is a real risk of circumcision. This has not always been the Board’s policy and practices have varied. It is finally falling into place after several complaints from stubborn lawyers to the UN Women's and Children's Committees. But even in cases where convention status is granted, it is usually a young daughter who is granted asylum – and thereby also the mother. Thus, it is more of a protection for girls than for women.

There are also examples of mothers getting asylum because their children would not be allowed to enter the home country, for example if they had been born outside of wedlock and could not be registered in the name of the father. In this case the child gets asylum because of discriminative legislation in the home country and the woman gets asylum deriving from that of her child.

DRC Danish Refugee Council generally criticizes the Immigration Service and the Refugee Appeals Board for hardly ever applying a so-called gender sensitive interpretation of the categories of the Refugee Convention (DRC2020:1).

The European Convention on Human Rights (art. 7.2 og art. 7.3)

Women and men generally have roughly the same chance of being granted asylum. But women are less often granted asylum based on the Refugee Convention and more often because of other human rights conventions that Denmark has signed. If this is the case, however, they would only get **protection status** (art. 7.2 or art. 7.3), which gives fewer rights and can more easily be lost again.

YASMIN

Yasmin fled from Somalia to Denmark in 2014 with her three children. She feared being killed by al-Shabaab because she was suspected of having had an extra-marital relationship with a man. In the spring of 2014, she was granted a residence permit under art. 7.2 (protection status), as removal to Southern and Central Somalia at that time would constitute a violation of Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights. In the autumn of 2014, she gave birth to her daughter Jamila in Denmark.

In 2017 Yasmin's residence permit was revoked by the Immigration Service, as they assessed that the human rights and security situation in South and Central Somalia had improved. Later that year, she applied for asylum on behalf of Jamila because her daughter would be in danger of being forcefully subjected to female genital mutilation (FGM) upon return to Somalia. The Immigration Service rejected her case, and the Refugee Appeals Board upheld the rejection in 2019. The board believed that Yasmin would be able to resist the pressure of the environment and prevent forced circumcision of her daughter. Yasmin's lawyer filed the case with the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, arguing that as a single mother, she would not be able to protect her five-year-old daughter from circumcision in a country where 98 percent of women have been subjected to the practice.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child stresses that member states in their national asylum status determination procedures should consider child-specific forms of persecution, as well as gender-based violence and harmful practices, including forced genital mutilation. The committee pointed out that the rights of the child cannot be made dependent on the mother's ability to resist social pressure.

Based on the committee's criticism, the Refugee Appeals Board decided to reopen the case in 2022. Contrary to their previous decision, they found that Jamila independently fulfilled the conditions for a residence permit under art. 7.1 (convention status) because of the likelihood that she would be at a concrete risk of being circumcised when she was sent to Somalia. Yasmin and the other siblings were also granted a residence permit under art. 7.1 because of Jamila's residence permit.

If a woman has fled forced marriage, extramarital relationships, divorce or other things that could put her at risk of so-called honour-related abuse, or has already been subjected to, for example, acid attacks or burns, the Refugee Appeals Board will typically describe these as private legal matters. And even if she is granted asylum, it will be under **art. 7.2**, with reference to the European Convention on Human Rights' articles on protection, in particular article 3, or because of the international ban on torture and risk of **refoulement** (return to a place where she is at risk).

If a woman with a "civil law" conflict is refused because her explanation is not believed (and this is the most common reason for rejection), she risks being sent straight back into the arms of the family members she fled from.

The European Council's new recommendations for the protection of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers of May 2022 states that:

57) Member States should ensure a gender-sensitive interpretation of the 1951 Convention, notably with respect to the grounds for asylum and with respect to the recognition of gender-based violence, including trafficking in women and girls, as a possible form of persecution within the meaning of Article 1A, paragraph 2, of the 1951 Convention.

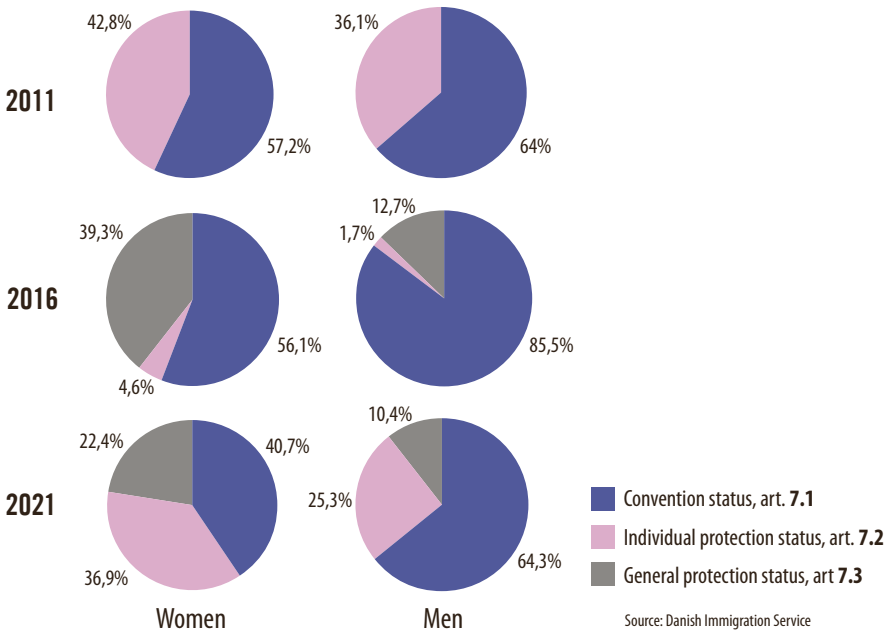
58) Member States should make efforts to develop comprehensive gender-sensitive guidelines at all stages of the asylum process, including reception and support services, screening, determination of "safe" countries for the purpose of accelerated or suspensive procedures, detention, status determination, adjudication and returns, and to train all relevant staff in respect of such guidelines.

59) Women asylum officers and interpreters should be available to women asylum seekers, who should be informed when this possibility exists (CoE2022).

Refugees who do not have an individual asylum motive, but simply flee due to the general conditions in the country – often violent acts of war – are granted the weakest status, art. 7.3, with reference to Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights on inhumane treatment. This status was only introduced in 2015. Before that this group was granted asylum under art. 7.2. Among refugees who are granted residence under art. 7.3, there are more women than men. In 2021, it was over 70%, as shown in the figure below.

The unintended gender aspect of asylum status art. 7.3 is, firstly, that more women than men receive it – and it represents a much weaker protection than the other forms of asylum. Secondly, these women will be the first to lose their residence permits when the general conditions in the country of origin improve slightly, in short, when there are fewer bombs and random attacks. Hence women are expected to return first to a bombed-out country and expose themselves to interrogation about why they have left the country and the whereabouts of their family members. We have already seen a predominance of single women from Syria who have had their residence revoked (approx. 60%). Married women are protected due to heir husbands' status or the number would have been higher.

ASYLUM STATUS FOR WOMEN AND MEN 2011, 2016 AND 2021



Despite large differences between the three years, a clear tendency is seen for men to a far greater extent than women to receive the strongest status (art. 7.1) and women to a far greater extent than men to receive the weakest and most insecure status (art. 7.3). Status art. 7.3 was first introduced in 2015. See more figures for women and asylum on page 17.

Another example of an unintended gender effect of the status under art. 7.3 was that it did not provide access to free higher education during the first five years. This was in force right up until the Radical Liberals took the initiative to have it changed, and succeeded in 2020. An example of the gender gap this created is a sibling couple from Syria who arrived together in Denmark in 2015. They had both fled the war, but the brother was granted asylum under art. 7.1 because he was at risk of illegal military service, the sister had no motive for asylum, so she was granted residence under art. 7.3. They were both in their 20s and had both had to interrupt their university studies in Syria due to the war. They were shocked when they were told that the brother could continue his education for free, but the sister had to pay tuition fees of several hundred thousand, which she could not.

The worst example of women's poor legal position, however, was until recently the 'single Afghan women without a male network'. For many years, the Refugee Appeals Board recognized that they are a particularly vulnerable group who cannot be sent back. Despite this, instead of granting them asylum, which they should have had, the Board referred them to apply for humanitarian residence via the ministry – which is the weakest form of residence permit. All Afghan women are now granted asylum under art. 7.1 (see the case of Sana page 62).

SANA

Sana arrived alone in Denmark from Afghanistan in 2011 with two of her five children, a son aged three and a daughter aged 11. She belongs to the persecuted Hazara ethnic minority and is illiterate. Her husband was killed by unknown assailants while she was pregnant with their youngest son, and she and the children subsequently had to live with the man's brother, where she kept the pregnancy a secret.

As tradition dictates, the brother-in-law wanted to take Sana as his second wife, which she did not want to accept, considering him cruel and violent. He beat her twice so violently that she lost consciousness. In addition, he had found an elderly man to marry Sana's then only eight-year-old daughter – which Sana was naturally unhappy about and did not want.

She therefore decided to flee with the money left by her spouse that her brother-in-law did not know about. She traveled with her two eldest sons, her daughter and her parents. At the Iranian border, the family became separated and she had to continue pregnant and alone with her daughter. She has never heard from her sons or her parents since then and doesn't know where they are.

She spent almost three years in Iran, where she gave birth to her youngest son. Afghan refugees are treated incredibly badly in Iran, so she finally decided to travel on with the help of agents, first via Turkey, then Greece and on to Denmark.

It is not possible for women to live alone and support themselves in Afghanistan, and her brother-in-law was the only male family member she had left in the country. She feared that if she returned to Afghanistan, she would be killed by her brother-in-law for opposing her own and her daughter's marriage and bringing shame on the family by running away. She could also be reported to the authorities for “zina” (lewd behavior) because she had fled, which can also lead to a death sentence. Finally, she feared that her youngest son, born abroad, would not be recognized as the child of her late husband.

On beginning her asylum case in Denmark, Sana did not mention anything directly about her brother-in-law's violence. Sana was refused asylum in 2012 because her story was not believed. She had “expanded her explanation” as she had not mentioned from the beginning the problem of who is the father of the youngest child. She had also mentioned late in the process that her brother-in-law had killed his first wife by setting her on fire and the two incidents in which she herself was attacked. Therefore, she was found untrustworthy. She was also refused humanitarian residency based on the Refugee Appeals Board's assessment that she was untrustworthy and had a male network. Soon after, she and the children disappeared from Denmark.

"Reviewing this case, the Ministry has not found that your client and her two minor children are included in one of the groups of Afghan nationals who may be considered particularly vulnerable upon return to Afghanistan (…) In doing so, the Ministry has assumed that your client has relatives in Afghanistan who are objectively capable of constituting a social network, and therefore your client cannot be considered a single woman without male family members and social network in Afghanistan."

In December 2022, the Refugee Appeals Board adopted a new practice that would have ensured that Sana would have been granted asylum today. The new practice is due to the massive and systematic repression of women after the Taliban takeover in 2021, but the case clearly shows that women were also massively persecuted before the Taliban took power.

AYA

Aya from Syria came to Denmark in 2015 as a 14-year-old with her mother and father. Her two brothers had fled to Denmark the year before to avoid serving their military service in Syria. In the spring of 2020, Aya and her parents were refused an extension of their residence permit and told that they had to return to Damascus, where they came from.

Since arriving in Denmark, Aya and her parents had had a residence permit under art. 7.3, based on the general conditions in Syria. The refusal was due to the Danish authorities' assessment that conditions in Damascus region had improved sufficiently for them to return. Her brothers, on the other hand, had been granted asylum under art. 7.1 (convention status), and could therefore stay in Denmark.

Aya, who received the rejection a few months before she was due to graduate from HF, chose to come forward and talk about her situation in the media. The media coverage and her critical statements about the Syrian regime resulted in the Refugee Appeals Board overturning the decision in 2021. The board found that upon her return to Damascus, she could risk being questioned and subjected to abuse by the Syrian regime, as she had aroused interest by making negative statements about the regime. Aya was therefore granted asylum under art. 7.1, like her brothers. The parents were also granted asylum after appearing in the media alongside Aya.

CEDAW and the Istanbul Convention

The UN adopted the **Convention on Women's Rights** in 1979 (CEDAW Convention). However, like the Convention on the Rights of the Child, it is about each state being obliged to respect the rights of its own citizens, and it does not actually contain a word about violence and abuse, but a lot about discrimination. When a state blatantly fails to look after women's rights, it can be considered persecution, and the Refugee Convention can thus become relevant. The CEDAW Committee, also called the UN Women's Committee, continuously monitors whether the signatory states comply with their obligations and has expressed criticism of Denmark many times in individual complaints. But it is extremely rare for Danish women to complain to the CEDAW Committee – most cases are about Denmark not protecting foreign women from the real villain, which is their home country.

Every four years, the committee prepares a report on the status of all signatory countries in this area. The latest report on Denmark is from 2021 and repeats some of the previous criticisms regarding the treatment of foreign women in Denmark (CEDAW2021).

In 2019, the Danish think tank MOVE (Migration, Obstacles, Violence and Equality) sent a shadow report to the committee in which the experts explained how the Danish state did not adequately protect foreign women from violence and did not sufficiently take women's asylum motives into account (MOVE2019).

From MOVE Shadowreport 2019 *to the CEDAW Committee: "There is a tendency to understand 'culture' and 'ethnicity' in certain minority groups as the cause of violence and lack of gender equality. This overshadows the structural causes that increase the vulnerability and inequality of migrant and refugee women in Denmark." The report thus points out how Denmark considers violence and oppression are more due to women's culture and ethnicity than to structural causes and vulnerabilities.*

The Council of Europe adopted the **Istanbul Convention** in 2011, which Denmark has also signed. It aims to protect women from violence and sexual assault and obliges states to recognize women's particular vulnerability to certain abuses and to ensure that all cases are examined from a gender-sensitive perspective. However, this is not always done.

The European Council also requires that the immigration procedures of the states must consider the specific situations, characteristics, needs and vulnerabilities of women and girls, and that they must be age- and gender-sensitive (CoE2022).

Furthermore, Denmark is bound by **UN Security Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security**, which obliges states to take special consideration of women and recognize their need for protection during armed conflicts (UN2000).

IVANA

Ivana came to Denmark from Albania with her husband for the first time in 2016 and again in 2018. Her husband had fled because he feared revenge from someone he had tried to kill. He had subjected Ivana to violence ever since they married, when she was only 17. Her parents had opposed the marriage.

During their stay in Denmark, things got worse, and he also beat their three children, leaving them with large bruises. The youngest daughter told the staff of the kindergarten, and finally Ivana admitted the truth to the social coordinator of the asylum center. She accepted help to get divorced, otherwise the municipality would have taken the children away from her. But she was very afraid her husband would take revenge and what would happen if they were sent back to Albania together. She had previously known a Macedonian couple where the husband was moved due to violence, but later the whole family was deported together – and Ivana thought that it was now even worse for the wife.

At one point Ivana's husband threw a knife at her, and when the police arrived, he was moved to another center. Two weeks later, she and the children were also moved, so he didn't know where they were. In 2020 he returned to Albania.

In the autumn of 2022, Ivana gave up on getting asylum in Denmark, she had tried everything in vain. The case was treated as Manifestly Unfounded, and the refusals stated that she had to seek protection from her husband from the authorities of her home country. But her husband threatened many times to kill her younger brother or their children if she reported him.

She accepted to leave voluntarily because she did not want to subject her three children to the forced deportation, she had witnessed several times. But she was terrified of returning to her village, where her husband could easily find her. With three children and without money, she had no choice but to seek out her family in the village for help. She was also very worried about how her children would cope – they spoke fluent Danish but no good Albanian.

Torture and rape

When women are arrested, detained and imprisoned in countries such as Iran, Eritrea or Myanmar, there is a very high probability that they will be raped and subjected to various forms of sexual assault (WorkingGroup2019).

Rape and sexual violence in prisons can often be considered torture according to the UN Torture Convention (Article 1), because there is either direct or indirect responsibility of the authorities. However, such assaults are usually not given the same weight in an asylum case as other forms of torture. But rape and sexual violence can be used deliberately and systematically to break down and humiliate the victim, and to make the victim pregnant against her will. In a case about a female Iranian journalist who had been thrown into prison and raped several times by her captors, it is referred to as "exposed to harsh treatment" in the Refugee Appeals Board's original minutes, even though it was in fact torture.

***"Alaa told Amnesty International** that intelligence officers arrested her and her 25-year-old daughter on the border when they returned from Lebanon. (...) They interrogated her and her daughter in the same room. "They took off my daughter's clothes. They handcuffed her and chained her to the wall. They beat her. She was completely naked. One put his penis in her mouth. (...) They asked, 'Why did you leave Syria? What did you bring?' They called me a whore, a spy and a terrorist" (Amnesty 2021).*

***Dr. Victoria Canning** cites: "(…) thus there is not always agreement on the ground on what constitutes torture, especially in terms of recognizing women's experiences of violence and terror outside of state mandates, which definitions of torture (…) usually rely upon. For example, whether sexual violence should be seen as a form of torture generally – in view of its impacts, potential for pain infliction, and inherent capacity to degrade and humiliate tends to be contested" (Canning2015).*

Trafficked women and undocumented sex workers are subjected to an incredible amount of violence and rape, but cannot report it, let alone document it. They can choose to get protection from someone in the environment, to whom they in turn must hand over half of the income – or fend for themselves, running the risk of violent customers and police. Their very lack of residence permit and the authorities' attitude to them make them easy victims of violence.

***Sine Plambech** writes: "Yet to meet clients in the street they had to be visible, and this visible versus invisible life situation was a dailky conflict. Indeed, two of the women came in contact with the police and were deported following allegations of shoplifting by security guards in grocery stores (in the UK and Spain). (…) For sex workers, this particularly affects their willingness to report rapes, violence, theft and assaults they encountered in fear that doing so would bring them to the attention of immigration authorities" (Plambech2022).*

Lesbian woman from an East African country: *in this case, it was LGBT+ Denmark who had to get a volunteer doctor to carry out a thorough examination of her, which in addition to symptoms of PTSD revealed 17 scars on her body that originated from: Cigarettes, beatings with belt, dragged on asphalt, cut with knife. The Red Cross' health examination had been inadequate, and the authorities had not initiated a torture investigation. The authorities almost never do this, so in practice it is left up to the lawyer.*

Even though the doctor's certificate was included as an annex in both the first and the second instances of the woman's asylum case, not a word was said about it. She was refused even though it was not denied that she was a lesbian and even though there is officially the death penalty for being gay in that country. However, her specific conflicts in her home country were considered untrustworthy, partly because she swapped two dates, and several elements of her story were described as "remarkable" and "striking."

B) FAMILY REUNIFICATION

A very large proportion of the women who come to Denmark from insecure countries come as family members reunified with their husbands. According to Immigration Service's figures, **women comprised 86.7% of the family reunified refugees living in Denmark in 2021**. They arrive with entry visas and residence permits because they already have a husband and/or children who have been granted asylum here. If they had arrived at the same time as him, they would have received stronger protection, even if they do not themselves have a motive for asylum, namely consequential status, and thus better rights in certain areas. But both as family reunified and with consequential status, their stay depends on the man's asylum motive.

See the figure in chapter 2: "Type of residence permit, gender", page 17.

However, some of these couples are refused, even though refugees are exempt from many of the strict criteria for family reunification. This is particularly true of Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights on the right to a family life. However, it is still required to document the marriage or a long-term cohabitation. Denmark also requires that both parties had reached the age of 18 when they were married, and that the marriage was not arranged. Two demands that are a clumsy attempt to guarantee women's rights, but in practice have the opposite effect: if the marriage has already taken place, either arranged or before the girl turned 18, then it is she who is left alone without rights in her home country or in a third country.

Some women from insecure countries with poor conditions for women also use marriage as a safe escape route. They say yes to an arranged marriage with a man who lives in Denmark, even though they do not know him, or they even seek out Danish men who visit their home country or online. The resident man may turn out to be violent or oppressive in various ways, and in some cases, he deliberately exploits the fact that they cannot leave him without losing their residence permit and being sent home in disgrace. See more about loss of residence permit on page 79. If they leave him and apply for asylum later, they will typically be refused because they left their home country legally and for another reason – the asylum motive is therefore perceived as something they come up with later, see, for example, the case of Binta on page 77.

A large proportion of the women who have come here as family reunified from Syria and Eritrea subsequently apply for asylum, even though they are already here legally (this is called remotely registered). Almost everyone from the two countries is granted asylum. Although other nationalities may also have benefitted, the practice has only become widespread in recent years, as discussed on page 17.

Obtaining asylum in addition to family reunification gives women several advantages: They can get divorced if they want, and they can get a passport from Immigration Service, thereby avoiding going to their home country's embassy. With refugee status, it is possible to gain access to citizenship a year earlier, in many cases the refugee is exempt from fees, and is better protected against deportation, for example in the event of having committed a crime.

Being reunited with children is also possible, but if they are over 15 years old, very special circumstances are required. The Immigration Service and Danish immigration law have a very rigid and narrow understanding of “family”. Few Danes would say that a child over 15 no longer has the same need for his parents, or that any dependency and any strong attachment between children and parents stops when a child turns 18. On average, young Danish people leave home when they are between 20 and 22, depending on the region. Close relationships may continue throughout life, not to mention the importance of participating in grandchildren's lives.

The UN Refugee Agency in the Nordic Region recommends facilitating access to family reunification for refugees, which has become more difficult in recent years. States are encouraged to improve the following areas:

- Extend the narrow definition of family to include the household.
- Remove short deadlines for applicants and shorten processing times.
- Remove financial obstacles, such as application and visa fees.
- Remove practical obstacles such as having to contact a Danish embassy physically (UNHCR2022).

ASMA

Asma came from Iraq to Denmark in 2002 through family reunification with a Danish citizen, whom she had married a short time before, but did not know well. She brought with her two daughters she had with her former husband who had died. The man in Denmark very quickly turned out to be violent, at one point he tied her up with ropes and threatened to kill her with a large knife. With the help of a neighbour, she fled the home with her daughters to a woman's shelter.

However, the shelter did not help her file a police report, and she did not speak a word of Danish or English herself. She lost her residence permit because she no longer lived with her husband and because she could not document the violence against her in the form of a police report. Nor had they acquired independent ties to Denmark. When Refugees Welcome contacted the shelter several years later, they no longer had any files on her case. Despite several written testimonies from interpreters and the two daughters about the violence the man had committed against Asma, the refusal was not reversed.

Asma could not return to Iraq. There was war, and the reason why she had so hastily married her husband in Denmark was that she did not want to marry her late husband's brother as the family wanted. The marriage in Denmark was thus an escape route that ended completely wrong. And now she even had threats from the violent man that he would get to her through connections in Iraq.

Asma applied for asylum, but was refused, and was now stuck as rejected along with many other Iraqis. When her daughters became adults, they both married men living in Denmark, were granted residence permits and had children of their own. After 19 years in different asylum centres, Asma has still not been granted a residence permit.

C) SPECIAL GROUNDS AND ATTACHMENT

Humanitarian residence (art. 9b)

If asylum or family reunification cannot be granted, there are some other options in the Aliens Act. Until 2010, art. 9b on humanitarian residence was much applied, and it lists criteria such as: Suicide risk, families with young children from countries at war, severe disability, subjective fear and torture consequences, as well as the so-called “survival criterion". It also states that although the individual elements are not enough on their own, a combination of several can trigger a residence permit.

Many of the women who are refused asylum meet one or more of these criteria, but in practice it is completely impossible to obtain a permit. Since 2010, only a few humanitarian residence permits have been granted each year, and solely due to life-threatening diagnoses for which there is no treatment in the home country (Bendixen2013).

It is quite bizarre that this paragraph also contains a section on single women from Afghanistan without a male network – a situation that obviously falls under protection and not humanitarian conditions, and therefore these women should rightly be granted asylum. Fortunately, the Refugee Appeals Board now grants asylum to all Afghan women.

Very special grounds (art. 9c para. 1)

The Danish Alien Act contains a clause that can be applied when all else fails. It can be both a special family relationship that falls outside the normal rules, or it can be the consideration of the child's best interests according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child – like a child's right to his or her parents. Very few people are granted residence under this clause each year, and it is not even recorded separately in the public statistics.

Attachment to Denmark (art. 19 + art. 26)

In case of loss of previous residence permit, e.g., as a reunited spouse, the authorities must assess whether the applicant has a strong, independent connection to Denmark that is sufficient for renewal of residence, for example if you have children. If cohabitation is terminated due to violence, it is also possible for the woman to obtain her own residence permit. In 2013, the conditions for victims of intimate partner violence was improved by removing a requirement of at least two years' residence, which had been in place until then. However, the violence still needs to be documented as well as an effort to integrate. This may be particularly difficult for these women.

In several of the above-mentioned options for residence permits, the length of stay in Denmark is included in the assessment. But it is only legal residence that applies and whether one could have a reasonable expectation of staying here. Hence,

trafficked women cannot use their residence time as grounds, nor can women who have lived in the asylum system or underground for years.

Part of the "paradigm shift" in 2019 was that the criteria for how attachment is assessed were significantly changed. This means that one's own efforts in the form of Danish, work, study, etc. do not count for much any longer, but attachment to close family members is still protected by the conventions.

AYAN

11 years ago, Ayan came to Denmark from Somalia via family reunification with her husband. They had a son, who is now 11 years old. Abdi has a developmental disorder, so he has had special support in kindergarten and attends a special school. Ayan has passed Danish Language Education 2 and 9th grade, she has had various part-time jobs, and has been active in her local area, including a diploma from the organization Neighbourhood Mothers. Her son requires a lot of time, so it is difficult for her to have a full-time job, but today she has been admitted to the basic course for the education as a medical assistant.

In 2019, the man divorced her and left Ayan and Abdi. He returned to Somalia and has not had contact with them since. When Ayan and Abdi's residence permits were to be extended, the Immigration Service discovered that the man had moved and that they had divorced – and therefore refused to extend their stay.

It was considered that 9-10 years of legal residence was not sufficient connection. For children, the years before school start are not really considered important, and adults have to have more than 10 years plus very “strong integration", that is full-time jobs and total assimilation. Immigration Service assessed that both the child and the mother had closer connection to Somalia, and it was not considered whether the child could receive a suitable school offer in Somalia. The fact that Ayan has no family network left in Somalia was also not considered important, but it could possibly be decisive if she applied for asylum.

Although Ayan's husband had in fact been violent towards her, and there are two notes from the police, in one of which she has said that she fears he will kill her, her status as a victim of intimate partner violence does not count for much, as it was the man who divorced and left her – thus she has not terminated cohabitation due to violence, as the law requires.

Refugees Welcome took over the case at the last minute before it was decided by the Immigration Appeals Board – and fortunately had the withdrawal overturned. The advisory organization that had previously represented Ayan had overlooked the fact that Abdi had also lost his residence permit – and it was he who was the strongest card in the case. He got his residence permit back when the board ruled in our favor that his connection to Denmark was sufficiently strong and that he has special needs. Consequently, his mother also got her residence permit back. Previously, she could stay because of her husband, and now she can remain because of her son.

THE ASYLUM PROCEDURE

In general, there are many weak points in the asylum procedure, including the use of interpreters and the interview form itself, which are described in more detail in the report “Well-founded fears” (Bendixen2019). Women and men all go through the same procedure. But women's situations are markedly worse than men's on a whole range of parameters, due to their backgrounds, their asylum motives and practical circumstances. The authorities claim to take this into account in their assessments, but it is difficult to see this in individual cases, where everyone is basically asked the same questions, and no one receives special support or help.

Language

The two most important elements of the asylum procedure are the asylum form and two-three personal interviews. As girls in many countries are not allowed to go to school, more women than men are illiterate and therefore cannot fill in the asylum form themselves. Fewer women than men speak English as a second language and are therefore completely dependent on the interpreter commissioned by the authorities. If she doesn't feel comfortable with the interpreter, or doesn't understand the interpreter completely, she can't express it. As an illiterate or non-Danish/English speaker, logistics are also extremely difficult, for example taking the right buses and trains from the asylum center in North of Jutland to interviews in Sandholm, North Zealand, and even being there on time.

Interviews

The interviews, which applicants experience more as interrogations than interviews, often last six to eight hours, interspersed with a half-hour lunch and short breaks as needed. It is incredibly hard for both applicant, caseworker and interpreter – regardless of gender. But for many of the female applicants, it is extra stressful. An Afghan or Somali woman may never have sat alone in front of two strangers (the caseworker and the interpreter) and had to answer all sorts of personal questions carefully and accurately. If a person has not attended school, she will also be less trained in answering questions clearly and briefly, and reproducing sequences of events chronologically and clearly.

The fixed questions for both men and women include e.g. military service and imprisonment, but nothing about gender-related issues. If it is her husband or son who have a motive for seeking asylum, the woman will often be unable to answer. The men have not informed her of all their activities, they may even have told her white lies about things they think she need not know.

If she has her own motive to seek asylum, it will often be about intimate relationships that are closely related to guilt and shame: forced marriage, bridal kidnapping, adultery, circumcision and rape. Topics that are difficult for all women to talk about, no matter where they come from. And which they have to bring forward themselves.

The asylum seeker has the right to ask for a caseworker and an interpreter of the same sex if this is relevant to the asylum motive. But no one informs women about this possibility, and there is no procedure for requesting it. Fortunately, most caseworkers are women, but interpreters are not – and in some small languages, there are only male interpreters on the list.

Mothers with young children must bring their children along to interviews, which is obviously extremely disruptive to their concentration. The child may become restless and stressed and react to the fact that the mother is nervous. It may also be overstepping the limits and indefensible to have to say certain things while the children are listening – for example, how the child's father died or that their mother was abused. The asylum centers only offer childcare facilities for children over the age of three, and dropping off a child at the asylum center in Southern Jutland when the asylum interview takes place in North Zealand and lasts from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. is not feasible. The kindergarten in Sandholm or other women may offer to look after the child/children, but this requires that a relationship of trust with an adult has already been established, and it is of no use at all if the child is breastfed. No fathers bring their children to interviews.

A single African woman says: *"I brought my baby to every interview. He was two years old. He sat on my lap, and they gave him an iPad and headphones so he could watch cartoons. But he couldn't look at it for so many hours, he cried and ran around. It was completely impossible for me to concentrate. And the interpreter was also completely wrong the first time. He spoke European French, but in my country, we use other French words, and mix with our local language, so there were many things he misunderstood. Next time it went better with an African interpreter, but then they say afterwards that you have changed your history..."*

It is generally recognized that traumatic experiences such as war, abuse and torture can have severe effects on memory and concentration. A natural defense mechanism is also to try to avoid thinking about the terrible experiences. It is a problem in the asylum procedure for both women and men that this is not sufficiently considered. For women, however, the traumas are even more hidden, as they are more often of a sexual nature.

Taken together, all these factors put a greater mental strain on the women, and at the same time an increased risk for her story to be judged untrustworthy, which is the most frequent reason for refusal. Gaps in memory, contradictions, illogical sequences of events, changes in details… all this can very easily lead to rejection of asylum.

BINTA

Binta was born in The Gambia, West Africa, and was never allowed to go to school like her brother, so she is illiterate but speaks reasonable English. The school statement from the Danish Red Cross says: “She is not alphabetized in her mother tongue. Needs a basic literacy course combined with pronunciation training/vocabulary/sentence structure.”

Her father beat her even for minor things and forcibly married her off when she was 20. She had two sons with the husband, and after four years she managed to divorce him, which caused her father to ostracize her. She moved to Senegal, where her aunt lived, to escape another forced marriage. Here she sold vegetables and rented a small apartment with a friend. The two began an intimate relationship, but they kept it very secret.

She moved back to The Gambia, where she got a job in the kitchen of a tourist hotel, and gradually rose in the ranks to become head chef of the hotel's restaurant. She could now pay for her sons' schooling and regularly return to Senegal to visit her friend.

But one day she was approached by a cousin who told her that everyone now knew she was lesbian and that her father had reported her to the security police. The Gambia follows Sharia law and there is a death penalty for homosexuality. Binta did not doubt that he would rather see her dead than bring further shame on the family.

At the hotel, she had become friends with a Danish man, and she persuaded him to invite her to Denmark on a tourist visa, but she did not dare to talk about her problems. After three weeks with him in Denmark, she went to Sweden, where she knew a compatriot, and lived underground until the police found her by chance and sent her back to Denmark because she had an expired visa from here. The police explained that if she did not apply for asylum, she would be sent back immediately.

During the first asylum interview, she had not mentioned the Danish man, so as not to get him into trouble, but it came to light, and that was one of the reasons why she was rejected as untrustworthy. She was also madly afraid that the interpreter would gossip to someone in The Gambia. During the interviews, she broke down many times and had difficulty explaining her case. The author of this report participated as a supportive companion.

Through her brother, she received a letter from her father promising to kill her himself if she returned, and that she should never expect to see her sons again. They were teenagers at the time, went to boarding school and lived with her father during the holidays.

She constantly felt ashamed and dirty about being a lesbian, and felt that she had ruined her own life and that of her sons and abused the trust of the Danish man. A few weeks after the final rejection by the Refugee Appeals Board, after 20 months in the asylum system, she disappeared from the center, and no one knows where she is today.

D) SPECIAL LAWS: AFGHANISTAN AND UKRAINE

In 2021 and 2022, two special laws were passed, which are quite unique in a Danish context. The two laws have no focus on gender, but the majority of those who fall under them are women.

Local employees in Afghanistan, many connected to the Danish embassy in Kabul, were evacuated to Denmark shortly after the Taliban took power in August 2021. A special law was passed for them the same year, and 828 Afghans were granted residence under this law. The vast majority of the women were given legal status as secondary persons under the special act, i.e. that they were granted residence because their husband, father, son or brother was the main person. According to the Red Cross, 60% of the adult evacuees were women, and approx. 25% of them were illiterate (predominantly women), just over half spoke English (primarily men).

The Special Act for Afghans does not contain a word about being at risk in the home country, it is based solely on a certain affiliation, often in the form of employment, with the Danish state, the EU, the UN or international organizations. Very few of the women were evacuated because they were active human rights defenders, journalists or the like, the vast majority because they were family members of a man covered by the criteria. The special law does not provide for an extension after the first two years, and therefore everyone must apply for asylum on the side, which almost all of them have received so far.

Although most of these women have no independent asylum motive, the new practice from the Refugee Appeals Board will ensure them residence – but this was not the case when the Special Act was passed. According to the Special Act, a 17-year-old daughter who came with her father would lose her residence permit when the two years expired. If she had an uncle or adult brother in Afghanistan, until recently she would be relegated to go back and live under his protection.

The special law for displaced persons from Ukraine has a completely different perspective. It was adopted in line with an EU directive that was activated even though Denmark is not subject to such directives due to an opt-out. Like the Afghan law, it does not say a word about dangers at home, but grants residency to Ukrainian citizens who have been living in Ukraine until Russia's large invasion in 2022. The general level of risk in Ukraine is not high enough for asylum legislation to guarantee protection, and Ukrainians do not have an independent asylum motive.

Since Ukrainian men are not allowed to leave the country, 75% of those who have applied for and been granted residency under the special law are women, and the vast majority have their children with them. Like the Afghan law, the Ukrainian law is also limited in time, so all residence permits will expire in March 2024, though the Danish Parliament may decide to extend. If Ukrainians want to stay when the special law expires, so far they must apply for an extension e.g. due to work.

In general, the reception and legal position for Ukrainians has been much better than for all former refugee groups over time. But the dependency on others that characterizes women on the run also applies to this group, although to a lesser extent. Many live privately with family members or friends, and a minority speak English. Being responsible for children makes it difficult to be self-supporting, even though they have succeeded to an astonishing degree. And if there is still a father at home in Ukraine, the mother will not receive increased benefits as a single parent – a kind of flaw in the legislation that only received attention when the Ukrainians arrived, but which has affected many others before.

THE RISK OF LOSING RESIDENCE PERMIT

All residence permits in Denmark are temporary at first, and are usually only granted for two years at a time. Until 2015, it was for four or seven years at a time. The requirements for obtaining permanent residence and citizenship have become very difficult to meet, as described on page 117. At the same time, the assessment of affiliation with Denmark has also tightened significantly. Therefore, many people with a foreign background live in constant fear of losing their residence permits, and again women are particularly vulnerable. As has already been mentioned many times, women's residence permits are more often of a temporary nature, more often dependent on their husband or their child, and women find it more difficult to meet the requirements for permanent residence and citizenship.

Returning home can also be much harder and more dangerous for women, alone in a country where they no longer have a network. They may be ostracized from their family, for example because of divorce or because they have been on the opposite side in a conflict. It may also be extremely hard for a man to return to a homeland that he left many years ago for good reasons, but for a woman it can be completely impossible to return alone.

Samira *is Palestinian and now lives in a deportation centre: "I came to Denmark four years ago because I got married. But he hit me, and I left him after four months. I cannot go back to Lebanon, where my family lives. They want to kill me because I'm divorced. Now I've been in Kærshovedgård for a year, and I can't get money or help from anyone. It's very tough."*

Asylum

As described in the previous chapter, female refugees are generally given a weaker status, which they can more easily lose again. This applies particularly to those who are granted asylum under art. 7.3 due to general circumstances. As soon as a slight improvement occurs in her home country, she will lose her right to asylum. Therefore, more women than men have been told to return to Syria – though some have been "saved" by the fact that their husbands still have asylum.

If she has been granted asylum under art. 7.1, she cannot have her residence permit revoked until there have been lasting, stable and fundamental improvements in her home country. However, she may lose it if the authorities find out that the stay has been obtained fraudulently, due to incorrect information, or if she has visited her home country, or if she is convicted of a crime. The same applies if she has asylum under section 7.2 for individual reasons.

If the woman arrived at the same time as her husband, she may have been granted consequential status due to the man's asylum motive and thus depends on him not losing his status, if he receives a deportation order. If she divorces him, it can also have an impact on her status as mentioned earlier.

"My ex-husband tells me: 'They are throwing you out because you only have one [residence permit under section 7.3'. He has five years as a political refugee. But I only have one year, so he says, 'You have to come back to me, or they'll kick you out – the government will kick you out'... I am afraid. Because if they send me back, they send me back to Hell. And what about my children? Would they stay here? Would I never see them again?" Quote from opinion piece in Politiken by researcher at VIVE Anika Liversage (Liversage2021:1).

Family reunification

As the vast majority of women have come as a result of family reunification, their stay is completely dependent on the fact that they are still with the man with whom they were reunited. See chart in chapter 2, page 17: "Type of residence, gender"

However, the **Council of Europe** obliges its Member States to ensure that women with a migrant or refugee background who are victims of violence and who hold a residence permit under international law can apply for and be granted their own residence permit if the relationship is dissolved, and they thereby lose their residence permit. This regardless of how long the marriage has lasted. Women and girls with a migrant or refugee background should be informed that they have this right. (CoE2022)

In its ninth periodic report on Denmark from 2021, the **UN Women's Committee CEDAW** expresses concern that women reunited with families may lose their residence permit in the event of divorce and recommends that Denmark remove legislative and administrative barriers to family reunification for refugee women (CEDAW2021).

Shirin *was granted a residence permit in 2013 through family reunification with her two daughters. Since then, she passed the DU2 Danish test, took an education and worked full-time. Both daughters still live with her, and they have obtained Danish citizenship.*

But eight years later, in June 2022, she suddenly received a letter in her e-Boks: "Your residence permit cannot be extended". The reason given was that now her youngest daughter had turned 18 and thus come of age so she no longer had any grounds for living in Denmark.

The lawyer who appealed the decision accuses the Immigration Service of having a completely wrong understanding of the concept "family life" and believes that the decision violates Article 8 ECHR on the right to family life. He refers to a ruling by the EMRD, and to a number of decisions in the Refugee Appeals Board where refugees have not lost their residence permit in connection with their children turning 18. The case had not been finally settled at the time of writing.

See the case of Ayan on page 74.

Although in 2013 legislation was adjusted so that victims of violence could more easily keep their residence permit (art. 19.7 of the Immigration Act), this is not always possible. It is still required that the divorce must be due to the violence, that the violence is documented, and that the woman has shown a certain will and ability to integrate. The most vulnerable women have not had a chance to integrate, and may find it difficult to document anything. In practice, the woman will often be rejected if there is no evidence of the violence in the form of medical reports about visible signs of violence, a stay at a shelter, statements from the municipality or even a verdict for violence in a case. If the woman does not move immediately, it will often be judged that the cohabitation was not ended due to the violence. And her willingness and ability to integrate is based on discretion. But there are many reasons why abused women often stay or come back to the abuser, and in these cases there is also the decisive reason that she will fear losing her residence permit if she moves.

There may also be a practical housing problem for a woman leaving her husband. She usually lives in his home, and although the municipality is actually obliged to find her another apartment, this is not always possible. The municipality's only option may be to send her to a shelter, even though she may not be threatened. If she then loses her residence permit, the responsibility for paying the shelter passes to the Immigration Service, which will ask the police for a threat assessment and often move her to an asylum center instead, as it is much cheaper. Thus, the woman finds that her decision to leave the husband has triggered an avalanche that destroys the fragile foundation she had.

***Abdallah** is Palestinian himself and has tried to help several women out of abusive marriages: "It is hypocritical that politicians always accuse all Arab men of oppressing women and being violent. When a woman wants to divorce her husband, she loses her residence permit, and then she finds herself in a completely hopeless situation."*

***Jamila:** In 2015, the Immigration Appeals Board upheld a revocation of Jamila's residence permit, even though she explained that her divorce was due to violence, and she had lived at a shelter for three months. She had explained that before that she had stayed with the man for fear of losing her residence permit. Her job center confirmed that she had told them about the violence. But there was no documentation of visible marks from the violence or medical opinion. The authorities did not believe that violence was necessarily the reason for the termination of cohabitation. In addition, it was emphasized that Jamila had retained a strong attachment to her homeland, and the fact that she had completed Danish Language Course 2 and commenced education as a medical assistant were obviously not sufficient on the integration side.*

Some men deliberately exploit this dependency to oppress and isolate their wives, and it can spill over into psychological terror and total control. Psychological violence is even harder than physical violence to document, and often the women themselves are not even aware of what they are exposed to. The women's shelters do not screen for psychological terror, even though it is now recognized in legislation at the same level as physical.

The husband may also threaten to take the children away from her. Since he is often the one who speaks Danish and earns money, and knows how the system works, the police and municipality may be more likely to believe him. Although she might win a custody case, the threat is often enough to scare her from trying.

Danner has published a report based on their experiences, which showed that especially lack of knowledge about the consequences for the women's children constitutes a major barrier to divorce or termination of cohabitation, as the women fear that the municipality or the father will take the children. In Danner's experience, this is precisely what the man has often threatened, exploiting the woman's lack of knowledge about the Danish system and rights in connection with custody (Danner2018).

The legislation is so complicated and unclear that even experienced lawyers may be in doubt, and the authorities may give downright wrong advice. In an article from 2021, researcher Anika Liversage describes the following case: "The social authorities mistakenly told her that she had to leave Denmark if her husband divorced her. She couldn't cope with the prospect of that situation, so shortly after the social workers' visit, she committed suicide." In addition to the complexity of

the rules, Liversage also points out that the tightening of immigration rules over the past two decades may make it even harder for ethnic minority women to leave a marriage, because the possibilities of obtaining an independent basis for residence have become increasingly limited. In addition, meeting the demands for language competence and the length and extent of employment may also be matters that a spouse can directly undermine, for example by preventing the woman from going to work. (Liversage2021:2)

Lise-Lotte Duch *is the head of FAKTI, a community center for women with refugee and immigrant backgrounds. FAKTI is a place for the women most affected by trauma, violence and isolation. She says: "The most vulnerable of these women live in a constant hell and they can't even put it into words. They themselves are not aware of what they are exposed to, so they put the blame on themselves. And even their children sometimes adopt the negative image of their mother when the father inflicts psychological and physical violence on her. She simply has a low status in the family and is not considered important."*

If both parents have regular contact with the child after a divorce, the mother can be granted residency for that reason – otherwise the child would be separated from one parent. Again, the woman's residence permit is attached to another person – in this case, her child.

After "the paradigm shift", a terrible situation has arisen that will affect several women in the future. If they are family reunified with their children or have been divorced and then granted residence because of the children, they will now lose their residence permit when the child turns 18. Previously, residence permits would not be revoked if a person had a certain attachment to Denmark, and the requirements for permanent residence were not so difficult to meet, but in the future, we shall see several women who have lived here for many years and have raised their children in Denmark now being told to leave the country. See the cases of Shirin page 81 and Aya page 64.

Women without children must return if their husband leaves them and they have not been able to meet the requirements for permanent residence despite many years of residence here, see the case on the next page.

GEETI

Geeti from Sri Lanka came to Denmark in 2008, family reunified with a Danish man who was much older than her. He had a holiday home in Sri Lanka where her mother was employed as a housekeeper. Although he was wealthy and lived in a large villa in North Zealand, Geeti took pride in working and earning her own money, some of which she sent home to her family. Among other things, she was employed at Bakken leisure park every summer, and passed the Danish Language Course 2.

In 2013, she divorced her husband, and a year later married an Irishman living in Denmark. Her residence permit changed from family reunification under the Danish rules to under EU rules. At the same time, she took an education as a medical assistant, and the education meant that her period in a full-time job was not long enough to get her permanent residence, even though she had supported herself all her time in Denmark. When her new husband disappeared – went back to Ireland without telling her about it – she simply lost her residence permit and was given 30 days to leave Denmark.

Danish newspaper Ekstra Bladet wrote about her, and 70% of the participating readers voted for her to be allowed to stay, but that didn't help. She was still missing a few months of her education, so she could not apply under the Positive List for a work permit. After 13 years in Denmark, she was kicked out.

Divorce

When a woman who came through family reunification with her husband gets divorced, she no longer meets the conditions and will therefore lose her residence permit as previously described.

For some women from Muslim countries, it is difficult to get a religious divorce, that is, to have their 'nikah' dissolved. Dissolving a nikah is far easier for men than for women, and in some environments only the man is considered capable of dissolving a nikah. If the man refuses, some women may end up being divorced according to Danish law for years, but still being restrained in a nikah. In practice, this may mean that he still considers her his wife, with all that that entails, such as access to her home, her bank account, and even her body. If she travels to her home country, the husband can get the authorities to deny her permission to leave because, according to her home country, she is still subject to her husband (FAKTI + VIVE2020).

***Professor Morten Sodemann**, Head of the Department of Immigrant Medicine, Odense University Hospital: "Divorced women are at risk of deportation and of being intercepted by the control group* because their ex-husbands seek them out, force sexual favors, or help (in the best sense) drive children to school/daycare, which is perceived as if they are not divorced in reality, but only to get higher benefits. There may also be serial rapes that cannot be reported because they are family reunited and out of fear of what will happen to the children if they do. They get no help from the municipalities (despite the tough rhetoric of politicians in this area)."*

**) Special units in the municipalities that investigate anonymous inquiries about social security fraud or caseworkers' own suspicions.*

Lapse

If a refugee moves away from Denmark for more than six or 12 months, depending on the time of residence here, she will lose her residence permit – even a permanent residence permit lapses after 12 months of residence outside Denmark. Children always have only temporary residence permits.

This can be gender-skewed because it is predominantly girls who are sent on a re-education trip to their home country – often because they have "become too Danish" in the eyes of their traditional parents. Previously, these girls automatically lost their residence permits, and therefore had great difficulty returning to Denmark, so the children were punished for their parents' actions.

Lately there has been more focus on preventing re-education trips, increasing penalties for parents and retaining girls' residence permits. However, there are many examples of young girls having to fight for years to get their residence permit in Denmark back again because the authorities believed that they had travelled voluntarily to their parents' home country and had not done enough to return to Denmark. Sending parents to prison will often just create new problems for the child.

NADINE

Nadine is Palestinian born in Lebanon and came to Denmark in 1990 with her mother. They were granted asylum when she was 13 years old. Despite her mother's warnings, she went to visit her father in Lebanon when she was 15. He had just been released after six years in prison and called to tell him he missed her. Moreover, he said that her grandmother was ill and might die – which turned out to be a lie.

When Nadine arrived, he tore up her passport and prevented her from leaving the house for years to come; for a time, she was locked in her room. She was very afraid of him.

After several years under constant surveillance, she was sometimes given the opportunity to go out alone, and she approached the Danish embassy and tried to get home, but they did not think they could help her. The same message was given to the mother, who turned to a lawyer in Denmark attempting to have her daughter brought home.

At one point, Nadine was abducted and mistreated by the intelligence service on suspicion of passing on information, but was left on a beach in a critical state after nine days. She went to her uncle's house and never saw her father again.

After 14 years, Nadine amazingly escaped the country by using another Dane's name during the evacuation from Lebanon in 2006, when almost 6,000 were flown directly home to Denmark – she still spoke fluent Danish. But she could not return to her life in Denmark so easily. The authorities revoked her residence permit because she had been out of the country for more than 12 months, and assessed that the stay had been voluntary and that she had not made any serious attempts to contact the Danish authorities for help to return.

She had to live in an asylum center for several years, where she met an Iraqi who was granted asylum. She ended up getting residency because of her relationship with him, and she has lived in Denmark ever since.

4. RECEPTION IN THE MUNICIPALITY AND INTEGRATION

Since 1999, the municipalities have been responsible for integrating newly arrived refugees into Danish society. The reception and support that refugees receive today is very different from 10-20 years ago. Today, the municipalities are better prepared, and experience and beneficial agreements with local business operators have been gained. In addition, today very high demands are placed on refugees to learn Danish and actively participate in job training if they want benefits paid, and this has had a positive effect on their resulting self-sufficiency.

Regrettably, many other things have gotten worse and complicate the process. Today, benefits are so low that the municipalities find it extremely difficult to find housing that the new arrivals can pay for. Many live in gruelling poverty, and are hit by harsh sanctions even for minor offenses: e.g. if you have misunderstood something or are late for an appointment. The demands placed on digital communication are also difficult to live up to – especially for women. In today's digitized Denmark, you won't get far without MitID, nyidanmark.dk, borger.dk and AULA, but such platforms can be difficult to use, and there is very limited help available. In addition, digital communication requires a smartphone, computer and internet, which for many is a large expense.

Basically, the same requirements are made for men and women, which from an equality perspective immediately seems sensible. Women must of course also learn Danish, support themselves, and not be dependent on their husbands or public welfare. The problem is simply that the process is not sufficiently organized based on the individual person's capacities and wishes – and here women are the losers, as they often need a different and more long-term support than men. They are met with lower expectations of their abilities and motivation, but at the same time they have to live up to rigid requirements, which they find difficult to meet.

From the statistics, the integration of women is going relatively poorly. However, the word “integration” in a Danish context is both a dubious and unclear concept. The definable goals that both the municipality and the immigration authorities use in assessing whether a foreigner is “well integrated” are the following::

- Financial independence, preferably in the form of an unsupported full-time job.
- Acquisition of fluent Danish in writing and speaking.
- Cultural adaptation, including e.g. active participation in community activities, democracy and personal networking among majority ethnic Danes.

The original meaning of the word integration, where there is **a mutual adaptation between the newcomer and society,** has in practice been replaced by an expectation that the new citizen assimilates as much as possible, and gives up all traditions, religion, language, etc. from her own culture. This constitutes one of the many paradoxes of the 'paradigm shift'; you will only be here for a short time, but we expect you to become exactly like us.

Morten Sodemann, *senior physician, professor and research leader at the Immigrant Medicine Clinic, Odense University Hospital: "There are many cross-field problems or intersectional barriers at play for women. They often come to the country later than their spouses, and are more often family reunified and thus strongly dependent on their spouse and his (economic) situation. They rarely have any larger network of their own family members, and must live in an in-law's family without support from their own family. They are thus extremely vulnerable and susceptible to threats; if they do not behave as required, they can be threatened with being kicked out if they get divorced, or they may be threatened with the fact that the in-laws will report them to the municipality, etc."*

THE LABOUR MARKET

In Denmark, attachment to the labour market is very important, and this is also the most important aspect when trying to measure integration. Refugee women's connection to the labour market has indeed many advantages:

- Financial independence, both in relation to the Danish state and the spouse.
- Cultural integration in Danish society.
- Use and development of skills and knowledge.
- Self confidence.
- Network.

It is obviously good for as many people as possible to become self-sufficient. The workplace is also a good place to learn about social norms, culture, and not least to practise your language and make friends. But the current policy in the area is not logical. Although a part-time job or a job with a wage subsidy basically provides the same benefits as an ordinary full-time job, they are not counted on the same footing. And despite the fact that an education is far more integrating than an unskilled job, neither an education nor a part-time job counts towards obtaining permanent residence and citizenship. Read more on page 119 .

Overall, access to the labour market for women with a refugee background is very different from that of men. The differences can be summarised as stated below:

– that the women are less educated and have less work experience,

– that fewer women get jobs,

– that education in Denmark has a greater effect on women,

– that women's presence in the labour market statistically starts very far below men's and rises more slowly, but on the other hand continues to rise after 10 years, when men level off and even fall a little,

– that women have a greater risk of poverty at retirement age,

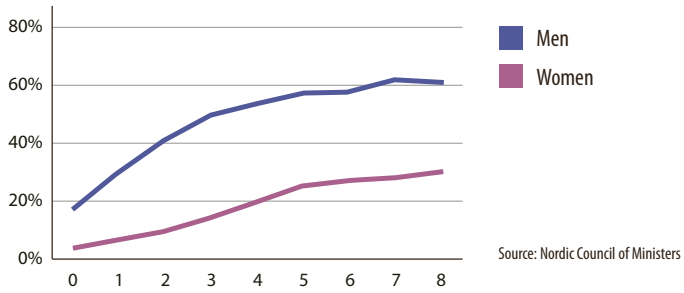
– that the mother's connection to the labour market has a greater significance for the children's future working life than the father's,

– that daughters of refugees are more likely to be educated and work than young ethnically Danish women, when adjusted for the parents' income.

The number of refugees and family members of refugees who have found work after three years in Denmark has doubled since 2016, so things have progressed rapidly – at least in the short term. But the gap between men and women remains: **69% of men are in work, while this applies to only 25% of women** (Integrationsbaro).

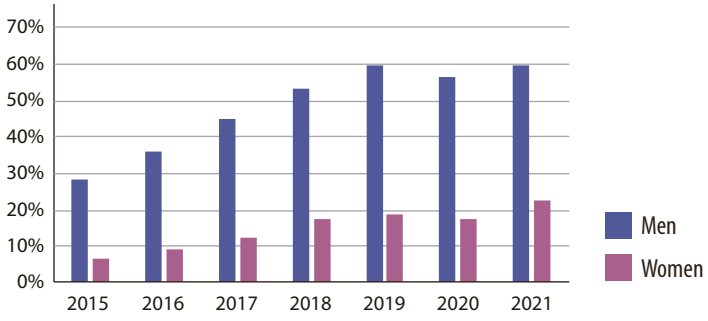
There are many reasons why women with a refugee background meet the requirements for full-time jobs to a lesser extent than men. Firstly, they have fewer opportunities to get a job due to less education and work experience. Secondly, studies have shown that women receive poorer job-oriented support in the municipalities, and that women who are married/cohabiting become the losers when their husbands go to work, because they thus become spousal dependents and lose the right to employment support. Thirdly, they have the greater responsibility for their children and home. Fourthly, they have poorer health than the men. And finally, studies show that minority women are more often facing discrimination, especially if they wear a headscarf. The introduction of special, modest benefits for newly arrived refugees had a small effect in getting men into work (also with major negative consequences), but **no effect at all for women** (RFF2020).

MALE AND FEMALE REFUGEES IN EMPLOYMENT, DENMARK, 0-8 YEARS AFTER ARRIVAL



Far more male than female refugees enter the labour market, but the men's curve almost flattens out after 5 years and even drops slightly, whereas the women's is rising more evenly. Figure from the Nordic Council of Ministers: Nordic integration and resettlement policies for refugees (2019).

REFUGEES AND FAMILY REUNIFIED WITH REFUGEES IN EMPLOYMENT AFTER 3 YEARS



Source: Integrationsbarometeret, based on numbers from Statistics Denmark

The same trend as in the curve diagram on the previous page is seen here already after three years of residence: far more men enter work, but the women begin to make gains toward the end of the period.

Reluctance to work

There is a widespread perception that refugee and immigrant women do not want to work and would rather stay at home. In studies where the municipal job centre employees are asked, they cite a lack of motivation as an important barrier – but this is at odds with studies where the women themselves are asked. When prejudices about female refugees spread to case workers at the job centres, it is particularly problematic, because studies show that the case workers's belief that the citizen can get work has an important impact on whether the citizen ultimately gets a job (Væksthuset2017).

In addition, their husbands are often blamed for not allowing refugee women to go out to work. This is simply a misunderstanding, as it is only a small minority of the men who express traditionally patriarchal attitudes. In a survey from 2019, **95% of men and 93% of women with a minority background answered that it is important for women to have a job.** However, the proportion would probably be smaller if you only ask newly arrived refugees (Integrationbaro).

Women with a refugee background often look with envy at the independence that Danish women have, and feel insecure and incompetent compared to them. The women who have good skills from home find that they cannot be used here. The Danish labour market is specialized, and almost all jobs require you to speak Danish or English at a certain level.

But all barriers can easily be overcome with the right approach. There are lots of success stories around the municipalities and in NGOs that have created special programmes to get refugee women into jobs. There are good experiences with using mentors and involving spouses in the process. Instead of forcing a woman into a full-time internship from day one, it can be far more effective to offer her a longer-term course, where she is introduced to Danish society and gets to clarify what she would like while receiving support in her self-education.

Esbjerg municipality *created a number of special positions as service assistants and hygiene workers for unemployed women with a non-Western background in 2021. Project manager Louise Fleron Holst says on the SIRI website: "The women show great commitment and say yes immediately. They are very interested in getting into these jobs. Getting a chance at a job allows you to show what you can do. There are many opportunities for this type of job in, for example, daycare centers, nursery homes and the like. The women have a lot of skills that they don't necessarily have on paper – if they get the opportunity to show it, they shine!"*

The Agency for International Recruitment and Integration (SIRI) *published a guide in 2020 for the recruitment of non-Western spousal dependent women. It says, among other things: "Two conditions in particular apply in relation to achieving a successful recruitment effort. The first is to establish a safe and meaningful relationship that, among other things, addresses the woman's concerns and the social gains they can achieve The second is that the organization of the course takes accessibility and flexibility into account, i.e. that the women have influence, self-determination and easy access to the relevant people and places.*

Despite great individual differences, the women share a number of characteristics. Many of the women live an isolated and marginalized existence with a lack of knowledge about Danish society. Some live under social control and have a limited network and lack of support to enter the labour market. Despite this, experience shows that these women have a strong motivation to participate in the employment-oriented offers in order to improve their own situation."

Integration = work

In recent years, in Denmark, there has been a focus on getting refugees and immigrants into jobs rather than teaching them Danish, even though several studies indicate that strengthened language skills benefits integration in the long term. The employment-oriented focus means that the municipalities today assume all refugees and family reunified people are ready for a job from day one, and the integration programme is organized as a continuous job-oriented effort. They must be involved in a job-oriented programme within 2 weeks of arrival in the municipality, and there can be a maximum of 6 weeks between each job-oriented programme.

The decision that the overriding parameter for integration in Denmark should be an "ordinary full-time job" is too simplistic. For example, 20% of ethnic Danes do not have a full-time job, and they can probably be said to be well-integrated. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, women with a refugee background have far worse opportunities for getting a full-time job than their male partners, which this requirement does not take into account. However, there are also large differences within nationalities, which are complicated and can be significant. In general, Iranians are e.g. more highly educated than Eritreans, but conversely, African women have more often been self-supporting in their home country than women from the Middle East.

The individual woman with a refugee background does not necessarily fare worse in the Danish labour market than men, but fewer enter work and they start later. In the first generation, fewer people enter work, but if you look at the figures from Norway and Sweden, it suggests that women just need more time and more education to catch up with the men. On the other hand, they are better able to maintain their attachment to the labour market once they have it. If you look at second-generation women, they are educated to an even higher degree than ethnically Danish women, when parents' income is taken into account.

A report from the OECD says that refugee women have **a triple disadvantage as a Woman, an Immigrant and a Refugee**; and that these three factors may even reinforce each other. In general, women work to a lesser extent than men. Immigrants work to a lesser extent than the majority population. And refugee women have poorer qualifications and lower attachment to the labour market than other immigrant women and than refugee men. At the same time, mothers' employment is more important for their children's future than fathers', so when they are in work, it not only has great advantages for them, but also for the children (OECD2018).

One thing that further complicates the process is the legal requirement that new arrivals must be enrolled in a programme with a view to achieving self-sufficiency as soon as possible. This really means that far too many refugees end up in unskilled jobs without investment in or consideration being given to their education, skills and resources. This has led to a new form of exploitation, where refugees are forced to work full-time in unpaid internships for many months, only receiving a very low benefit. Often it is even alone or together with other foreigners, so they do not even get to practise using Danish. In addition, the municipality receives a bonus of DKK 25,000 every time they get a foreigner in a job, but nothing to help them start an education – so it is clear where their focus lies.

"In this form of precarious inclusion, Afghan refugees are given help to enter the labour market, but they are not seen or treated as ordinary colleagues. They do not get a regular minimum wage and often have to accept the fact that they are ignored by their colleagues. Refugees may regret that they are stuck and parked outside the real labour market, but they cannot normally question and challenge the system because the integration program is mandatory and they often go from one internship to the next." Exerpt from an article by Mikkel Rytter and Narges Ghandchi about Afghan refugees in job training (Rytter2020).

Negative expectations and prejudices

The gender division in the labour market is apparently reproduced in Danish integration efforts. Studies in Norway and Sweden show that men receive more differentiated employment offers, while women are more often referred to the traditional 'women's professions' such as cooking, health and care, even when they have qualifications within technical and scientific subjects. At the same time, women who find work are often more overqualified than men (KVINFO2021).

The figures indicate that all refugee women suffer from the uniform and prejudiced reception they receive at the Danish job centres and in the labour market: they do not receive the long-term offers of education and support that could equip them to become self-supporting, and the ones with the strongest backgrounds are only offered jobs that do not match their qualifications.

The Danish Refugee Council *also points to a gender difference in Danish integration efforts: "There are indications that professionals' preconceptions 'disrupt' when meeting individual citizens – and especially in relation to women with a refugee background. This woman has not necessarily been a housewife, and does not necessarily dream of working in a canteen or in a kindergarten" (DRC2020:2).*

Rajesh Holmen, *former integration officer in Greve Municipality: "There are differences in both the municipalities' and the individual case worker's approach to integration efforts, including the efforts aimed at female refugees. This means, among other things, that although there may be a great desire and will from a case worker to take women's situation more into account, it may be difficult in practice due to a lack of resources or political prioritisation in that municipality.*

Regrettably, the municipalities have limited access to health information from the asylum phase, which means that it can be difficult to take separate account of e.g. traumatic experiences, if this is not expressed during the first meetings.

In Greve, there has been a desire from the political side not to give special treatment, understood in the sense that refugees must meet the same requirements in relation to cash benefits and employment as ethnic Danes on public welfare. It has largely been a one-size-fits-all model, meeting male and female refugees with the same expectations and approach in relation to language school, internships, digital solutions, etc.

As case workers, however, we have tried to be aware of the factors that may constitute barriers to the women's opportunity to participate, including health, limited level of education and experience, responsibility for children, maternity, family roles and expectations from spouses, etc."

Headscarves and discrimination

Some refugee women wear the Muslim hijab. This puts them at a disadvantage both in relation to getting a job and in relation to personal meetings and social inclusion. Many workplaces will not hire women with a hijab because they believe it gives the wrong impression of the company, or they think there will be tasks she will not do. Many majority-ethnic Danes perceive the headscarf as a signal that this woman is repressed at home and/or very religious, and will therefore be more reluctant to start a conversation or invite her to private gatherings. A number of women have experienced that strangers have shouted, spat at them or even tried to pull their headscarves off.

The same applies to young girls who wear the hijab at school – some teachers and educators will perceive them as "less-integrated". A ban on wearing the hijab in primary school has also been discussed, but was met by a massive chorus of women and girls who defended their free right to dress as they want. A ban against the hijab in Denmark would be just as wrong as the order to wear a hijab that many have experienced in their country of birth.

A research study from the University of Copenhagen has shown that, on average, women who wear a headscarf have to **send 60% more applications** than ethnically Danish women before they are called for an interview (Dall2020). It constitutes illegal discrimination unless a company has a general policy that employees may not wear religious symbols.

"When you reject applications from women wearing headscarves, it will typically be about their religion and ethnic background, and it will therefore often be a matter of discrimination on the basis of religion, gender or ethnic background", says Maria Ventegodt, head of equal treatment at the Danish Institute for Human Rights.

Equality?

Denmark prides itself on having achieved equality, but we really haven't. Twice as many Danish women work part-time as Danish men (33% women, 15% men) and women receive an average of 14% less in salary and earn far less in pension due to maternity periods. And it is only 78% of Danish women who are even in the labour market, whereas 81% of Danish men work. Mothers took an average of 297.5 days of leave with maternity pay and fathers 48.4 days in 2018 in cases where both parents took leave (Beskæftigelsesm2020). When Danish women have not succeeded in achieving equality in the labour market despite guarantees of full rights, how can we expect women who have not had equal opportunities in a number of areas to be able to match men?

Many of the women that this report is about do not fully know their rights. All new arrivals to Denmark could greatly benefit from going through courses such as those that the DRC (Danish Refugee Council) has developed together with ALS Research for the Equality Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the name Ret til Ligestilling (ret-til-ligestilling.dk).

The importance of children

Children also affect women's employment. Many newly arrived refugee women have postponed having children, and therefore often have children quite shortly after arrival. Others arrive with a large group of children that they may be alone to look after. The new arrivals will be less inclined to drop off small children at a nursery – it can feel completely wrong to leave your small children to strangers when you have not grown up with it yourself. Furthermore, refugees often have few or no family members in the country, and this makes it more difficult to get help to look after and pick up children. In general, however, the vast majority of immigrants and refugees share the attitude of ethnic Danes that mothers must also work:

The researcher Jørgen Goul Andersen *conducted a survey among nine minority groups in 2008. To the statement "Women with children should not work, but stay at home and take care of the children", 10% of ethnic Danes agreed, and 14% percent of the minority groups agreed "completely" or "partially". He concluded that there is not much pure 'housewife mentality' to be found among the immigrants.*

The employment rate of non-Western women falls by 6 percentage points when they have smaller children, while that of men increases by 6 percentage points. Each child in the family reduces women's employment by 2.5 percentage points, while men's employment increases by 0.4 percentage points. In short: the more children, the more the mother quits the labour market and the more the father works.

Fertility (average number of children per woman) among women with a non-Western background has typically been much higher than among ethnic Danish women, but it has plummeted over the past 30 years, and is now on average at the level of ethnic Danish women. Ethnic Danish women have an average of 1.7 children. Part of the explanation for Syrian women's low employment rate may be that their fertility is the absolute highest: 3.9. Somali women's is 2.9 and Afghan women's 2.2. But here it must be remembered that most Syrian women have arrived after 2015 and that the number of children falls with the length of stay (KVINFO2021).

Three out of four men with an immigrant background, which is almost the same proportion as ethnic Danish men, believe that it is important or very important that fathers take maternity and parental leave. But for both groups it is true that there is a long way from theory to practice.

Rajesh Holmen, *former integration worker in Greve municipality: "Women on maternity leave are not obliged to be available, and thus you can easily "drop" them out of sight, which is often not the most appropriate thing from an integration perspective. Here, we have paid particular attention to informing, offering and motivating them to participate in Danish lessons during their maternity leave as well as in other activities of a voluntary nature, in order to make it easier for them to stay active during their maternity leave and to make the return smoother, when they must again be available in the labour market after maternity leave."*

Rajesh Holmen also believes that the rule on mutual economic support for spouses is a huge problem for the women supported by their spouses. Both in terms of motivating women to continue participating in employment-promoting activities and in terms of being allowed to prioritise those efforts by the municipality. He recommends tailored efforts for spouse-dependent women, e.g. with the involvement of voluntary actors, language school, local programmes, etc., so that they are not let go and risk going backwards in terms of integration, but rather get the opportunity to maintain and strengthen their Danish language and achieve connection to the labour market, etc., even if the job centre has no obligation towards the women.

The paradigm shift

Since 2015, there has been a focus on getting refugees into employment as soon as possible, and this was cemented with the paradigm shift in 2019. Language school starts right after arrival in the municipality, and after a few weeks unpaid internships and job training. No resources are spent on improving the knowledge and experience brought from the home country, and only young people under 25 are informed about educational opportunities, even though everyone actually has the right to SU (study grant). As a result, the vast majority of refugees get an unskilled job on a low salary and on a short-term contract or as on-call. In addition, it is only men who benefit from the early intervention; it has had no effect for the women, shows a study from the Rockwool Foundation in 2019. It has even led to lower participation in Danish language education (RFF2019).

The paradigm shift's myopic and short-term focus on getting people to work as soon as possible will probably be harmful to integration in the future, especially for women. With the constant threat of being sent home again, the motivation to learn Danish and get an education becomes very small – especially because women have the greatest risk of having their residence permit revoked (see chapter 3). UNHCR has criticised the Danish Paradigm Shift for disregarding the principles of protection, and warns that the effect constitutes an obstacle to successful integration, and that young women in particular are affected by revocation of stay and the splitting up of their families (UNHCR 2022).

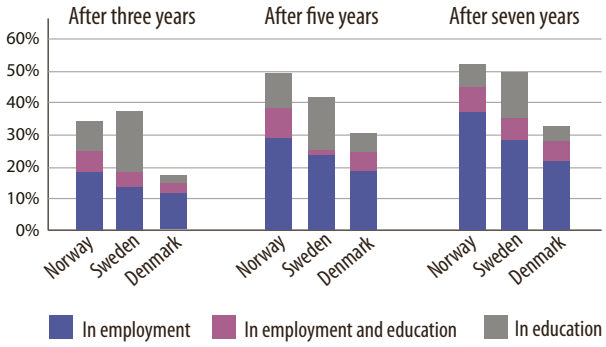
The Danish researchers Rytter and Ghandchi *have studied Afghan refugees in job training, and in the conclusion they write: "Finally, it should be emphasized that we recognize the ambition of the national Integration Act and the local integration programmes to help refugees enter the labour market and start a new life in Denmark. But based on our data, we question the way in which local integration programmes are linked to the current political aspiration of returning refugees to their home country as soon as possible" (Rytter2020).*

Sweden and Norway have better results

Female refugees often have less experience in working outside the home, and at the same time have the main responsibility for the children and the household. It is very difficult for them to pursue language lessons, take care of their homes and be at work at the same time. The short-term strategy is a very poor help in making the women self-supporting, whereas they benefit more from a long-term strategy, where you invest in more language and education before starting a job. Therefore, both Sweden and Norway have greater success in the long term in raising women to the level of men. In the first three years after arrival, there is not such a big difference between women's employment in the three Nordic countries, but after 8-15 years of residence, more than twice as large a proportion of female refugees from Syria are employed in Sweden (68%) compared to Denmark (30%), according to figures from 2016 (videnscenter2020:2).

A report from the Nordic Council of Ministers from 2019 examined the employment of refugees in Denmark, Sweden and Norway and concluded that refugees in Denmark have higher employment in the refugees' first year of residence, but are subsequently overtaken by Sweden and especially Norway. Denmark has the lowest number of female refugees in education among the three countries. In all three countries, the newer groups do better than in previous years, except for female participants in Denmark, where the opposite pattern is seen (Nordisk MR2019).

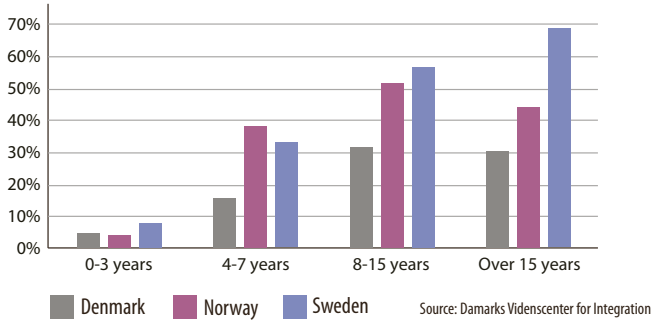
FEMALE REFUGEES IN EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION IN THREE NORDIC COUNTRIES, 2008-2013



Source: Nordic Council of Ministers

On all parameters and both in the short and long term, Denmark is clearly the worst in the Nordic region in helping refugee women in education and employment. Especially in the area of education, it looks bad for women in Denmark, and the Danish focus on getting to work quickly does not pay off in the long term.

SYRIAN WOMEN IN EMPLOYMENT OVER TIME. DENMARK, NORWAY AND SWEDEN, 2016



Source: Damarks Videnscenter for Integration

Denmark is once again incredibly poorly positioned in the Nordic region. Sweden's investment in education in the early years seems to pay off in the form of a strong work attachment for the Syrian women in the long term, even approaching that of the native Nordic women.

ANNA

Anna from Armenia came as very young with her husband, and they were initially refused asylum. It led to a tumultuous and horrific six-year period during which they had a daughter, were in Sweden and underground, and her husband was deported. When he came back again, they finally got asylum and could move to a municipality. In the meantime they had had a son.

They were moved to a nice house, which was quite expensive to pay on social benefits – and this was in the period before the reduced allowances for refugees were introduced. Anna's husband was very mentally damaged after prison time and torture, so he could not work. Soon after, they divorced but remained friends. Now Anna had to pay the rent alone with two children. Fortunately, she got good help from her integration worker in the municipality.

Anna started Danish language school, and soon after she was offered an internship at a nursing home. In her home country, she had worked as an unskilled nurse, and wanted to take the education in Denmark. But then she would have to start over with HF, so it would have long prospects, and she could not afford the house on study grants. At the beginning, she was very stressed and unhappy about how she was going to make ends meet for her family: she had to drop the children off at kindergarten and school, go to language school and do a full-time internship – and also take care of shopping, cooking, laundry, cleaning etc.

But she was really happy to be in the nursing home, and gradually she managed to get her everyday life going, e.g. getting a bike helped. The father and the eldest child helped pick up and bring the youngest, and the level of ambition for the household was lowered somewhat. A “Danish grandmother” helped to do shopping by car, and took her daughter to dance and choir. Anna completed the language school along the way, and it helped her to practice Danish with the elderly residents.

Today, Anna is a full-time employee at the nursing home and proudly says that many of the elderly have her as their favorite employee, and that she often receives flowers and chocolates from the elderlies' families as a thank you. She has recently submitted an application for permanent residence.

EDUCATION AND KNOWLEDGE OF DANISH

Danish education

Refugees' first important step is to learn Danish. It has a big, positive effect in many areas. Both the chance of finding a good job and the opportunities to get an education depend a lot on whether you speak the language. Several studies show that knowledge of Danish means more to an employer than professional competencies, and it thus has a great importance for becoming self-sufficient. Finally, being able to communicate in Danish is of great importance for creating social contacts, understanding important information and making use of access to health services.

Here, too, women have clearly worse conditions than men. Danish education is free and compulsory, but if you don't show up, you lose your benefits. The teaching can continue for up to five years, and can take place during the day or evening, and in combination with an internship or job. Still, slightly fewer women than men participate and complete, and more women participate at the lowest language level. However, the absenteeism rate is higher among men, and women are generally very motivated to learn Danish.

There are three parallel Danish courses which are organised based on the student's capacities to learn Danish. **Danish Education 1 (DU1)** leads up to an examination in Danish 1 (PD1) and is for students with none or very little schooling behind them or with trauma that limits their ability to learn. **Danish Education 2 (DU2)** is for students with regular schooling behind them, and **Danish Education 3 (DU3)** is for students who have a longer education from their home country and often speak several languages already. The three programs are made up of modules, which are completed in stages – the last is module 6, and there is also a special study test for Danish Education 3, which gives access to Danish higher education.

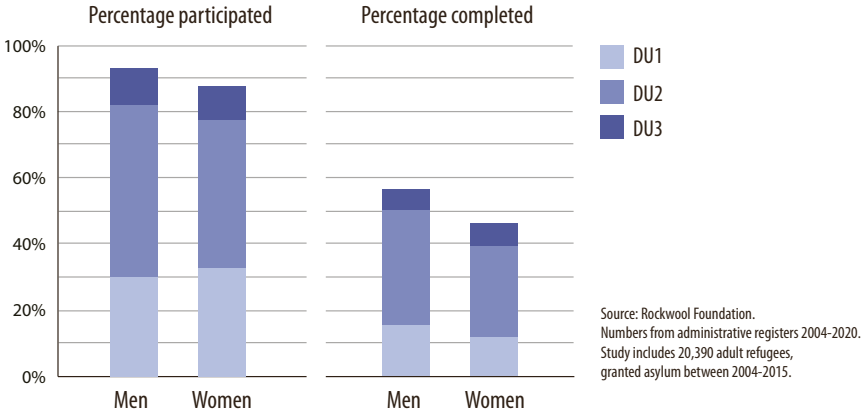
The municipalities have a duty to offer free Danish education to newly arrived refugees for up to five years, but can only pay for one of the three Danish courses. It is not the student herself, but the language centre that chooses which of the three programs you attend – and you do not progress from DU1 to DU2, but take the final exam from DU1. Some students, however, manage to switch from DU1 to DU2 along the way, or subsequently take Danish at VUC (Adult Education Centre) to improve. You can take DU2 after completing DU1, but not many people do so at their own expense. Some, however, continue on VUC or other courses after completing DU2, and can thus continue in the Danish education system. In general, however, it is difficult for refugees to rise above the level at which they are placed.

Logically enough, slightly more female than male refugees go to DU1, as there are more women who have none or very few years of schooling. At the same time, there are also more illiterates among women than men at DU1. When it comes to partici-

pants at DU2, there are quite a few more men than women. Overall, there are fewer women than men who complete a Danish education; in fact only 46% of women have completed the education after four years of residence.

Overall, the women therefore come out with an inferior Danish education than the men, which puts them at a disadvantage in relation to higher education, employment and permanent residence. In this way, the system ends up punishing the women for the fact that they have experienced discrimination in their home country, and that their schooling has either not been possible or has not been prioritised on the same level as men's.

PARTICIPATION AND COMPLETION OF DANISH LANGUAGE COURSE. REFUGEES, 4 YEARS AFTER BEING GRANTED ASYLUM IN DENMARK



More women than men attend DU1, which does not give access to anything, and fewer women than men complete a Danish education.

When requirements are set for passing PD2 to obtain permanent residence and passing PD3 to obtain citizenship, women are exposed to structural discrimination, as fewer women than men are statistically enrolled in the two programs that provide access. Illiteracy is recognized as a functional disorder, and illiterates are excluded in advance from obtaining full rights. Far more women than men are illiterate because, as girls, they have not been allowed to go to school, and this results in discrimination both in terms of disability and gender.

The one-sided focus on getting a job quickly has a negative impact on Danish education. The figures show, for both men and women, that when you start a job, there is a clear risk of dropping out of Danish lessons – and the same applies to women during maternity leave, where some do not return to school afterwards.

Rajesh Holmen, *former integration worker: "In Greve Municipality, we have made particular use of the "Tag fat skole", which is an educational programme for traumatised and vulnerable refugees and immigrants who cannot benefit from a regular language school, and where, in addition to Danish lessons, there is also the opportunity for psychological treatment. We have referred both male and female refugees, but there has been a predominance of female refugees. This is a school which largely takes the background, prerequisites and needs of the individual as a starting point, and organises the teaching according to the individual. This holistic approach should be far more widespread in ordinary language schools, but also in the form of more programmes similar to the Tag fat skole, which each municipality could refer people to."*

Education brought from home countries

In general, the education level of refugees is somewhat lower than that of Danes. Among refugees, 18% of women and 27% of men have a qualification-giving education with them, most of them vocational (RFF2018). But among the 45,000 highly educated refugees and immigrants in Denmark, only half use their education – the rest work as unskilled workers (Fagbladet3F2021). Since women generally find it more difficult to enter the labour market, women may waste the education they brought with them to an even greater extent than men.

An education from a home country cannot always be used in Denmark. It can be difficult to obtain documentation for it, and it can be difficult to get it approved according to Danish criteria. Language can be a barrier to using it in practice, and the lack of a network in Denmark can make it difficult to get a job. Refugees with a high level of education from their home country are, however, far more likely to get a job in Denmark – but they are often overqualified.

Zainab from Iraq *was a trained microbiologist, but lost her skills and her mental health during the 10 years she had to wait in the asylum system before she was granted residency. Today she is on early retirement.*

Diana from Kenya *had taken an expensive education in economics at New Delhi University, but could not use it for anything in Denmark, where she worked for 10 years as an unskilled worker and at the age of 40 took a new education as a medical assistant.*

Education in Denmark

Contrary to the figures for education brought with them, where men rank much higher than women, the reverse appears to be the case for refugees who take an education in Denmark: here there are approximately twice as many women as men.

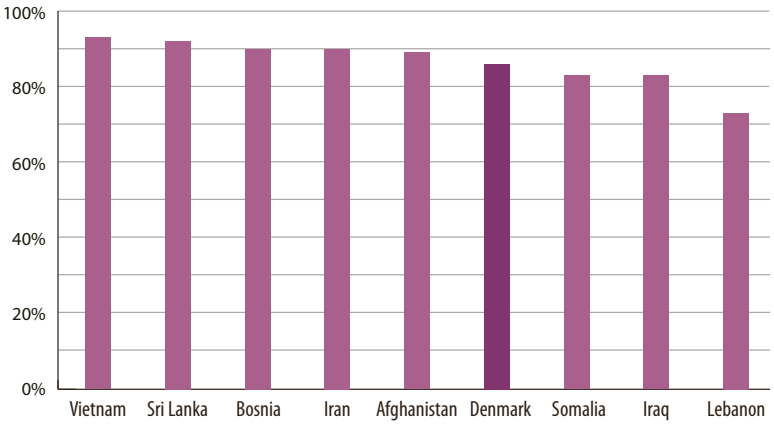
There is solid evidence that taking an education in Denmark increases the employment of refugees, whereas previous education from their home countries is not greatly determinative of employment. Among other things the Rockwool Foundation's Research Unit has found that female refugees who take an ordinary education have a 20-30 percentage point higher employment rate than female refugees who do not take an ordinary education (RFF2018:2).

When you look at how many refugees take a Danish vocational training course, the number is generally very low. But there are more women than men who study in Denmark: 12% of men and 18% of women (KVINFO2021). From 2015 until 2020, when it was changed, refugees with residence under art. 7.3 did not have the right to free higher education – and this group was largely composed of women. A number of women were affected by this in practice.

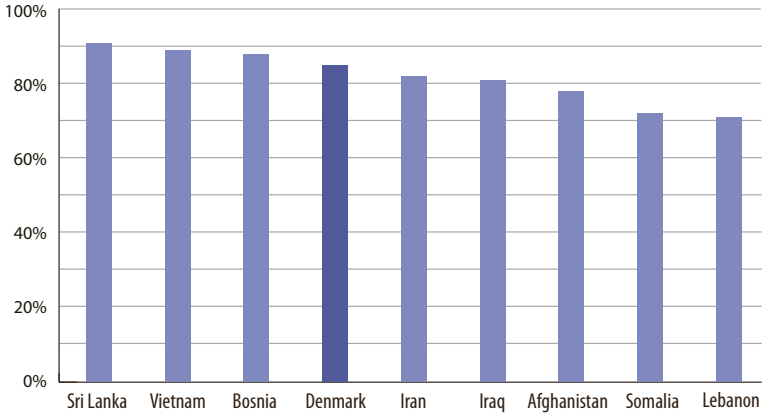
For refugees who arrive as children and young people, their age is decisive. A number of student and student organisations published the analysis "Refugees in education" in 2020. It was surprising how sharply the curve breaks if you arrive after the age of 13 – then the train has left the station, and you won't reach the level of the Danish young people when it comes to getting a primary education or a higher education. For the 14-17-year-olds, there is a greater percentage of women than men who start an education. Overall, women take a secondary education and subsequently a higher education to a greater extent. Men take vocational training to a greater extent (DSF2020).

When it comes to the next generation – i.e. children of refugees – the girls clearly overtake the boys. In fact, they also overtake the Danish girls, if you take into account the parents' level of education and income – which in other words shows that they are better at moving up the social ladder. Mothers' work background also has a greater influence on the daughters' working future than the fathers'. This points to the fact that the women would very much like to get an education and work when they get the opportunity. And the effort that a mother without education makes so that her daughter gets an education is often overlooked in the integration debate, see the case of Asha page 110.

FEMALE DESCENDANTS OF REFUGEES & DANISH WOMEN, 16-24 YEARS OLD, IN EDUCATION OR EMPLOYMENT, 2014



MALE DESCENDANTS OF REFUGEES & DANISH MEN, 16-24 YEARS OLD, IN EDUCATION OR EMPLOYMENT, 2014



Source: Danish Ministry of Immigration and Integration. Percentage who was under education or employed in 2014. Danish background compared to desendants from 8 large refugee groups.

The two graphs both show that descendants of certain refugee groups are more persistent and goal-oriented than Danish youth, and they also show that young women with a refugee background are more persistent and goal-oriented than their brothers.

FINANCES

In general, both refugees and immigrants have lower incomes, even if they are in work, and their opportunity to own a home and build wealth is limited. This means that their savings for their retirement are smaller. It is also difficult to take out a loan if you have not obtained permanent residence or Danish citizenship. Women's finances are even worse than men's, and moreover many women are dependent on their husbands' income.

Lower salary

The refugee women who enter work are exposed to the cumulative negative effects of being both a woman and an immigrant: women have lower hourly wages than men for the same work and they work in lower-paid and less stable industries for fewer hours per week. Immigrants have lower hourly wages than Danes for the same work, and they work in more lower-paid and less stable industries.

In 2020, KVINFO published an analysis on barriers to the labour market for women with immigrant and refugee backgrounds. It found that non-Western immigrants in Denmark consistently receive less in hourly wages at all levels of education. In 2012, the average hourly wage for persons with a Danish background was 15.4% higher than for immigrants who had taken an education in Denmark, and 21.5% higher than for immigrants with a foreign education. Seen in relation to majority-ethnic women with primary school education, majority-ethnic women with a long tertiary education receive 63% more in salary, while non-Western women with a long tertiary education only receive 46% more in salary (KVINFO2021).

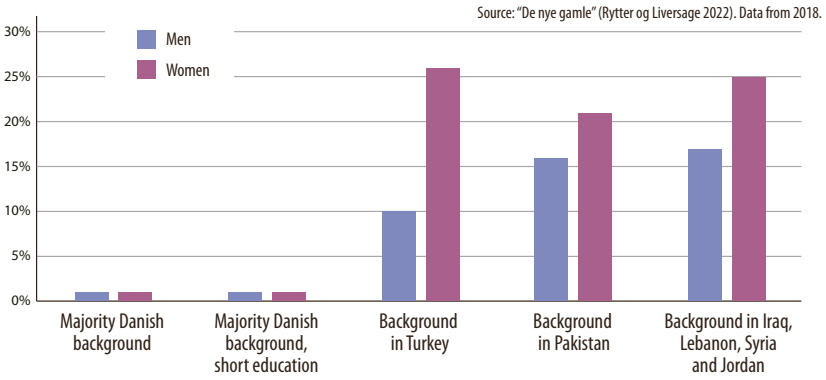
Poverty

Immigrants are poorer than Danes. Refugees are poorer than immigrants. And women are poorer than men – especially as they become older. Thus, elderly refugee women undoubtedly constitute the poorest population group in Denmark, because they are affected by a triple disadvantage, as mentioned earlier (OECD2018). The poverty line is calculated here as an income of less than 50% of the median income. The study “De nye gamle” (“The New Elderly”) found that among elderly Danish women (65-74 years) only 1% are poor, but among elderly women from Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan the figure is as high as 25% (Liversage-Rytter2022).

It is the following factors in particular that create poverty among the older refugee women: **less attachment to the labour market, shorter lengths of stay in Denmark, poorer health but longer life expectancy, and adherence to traditional family patterns.** The majority of those who are older today have the right to normal benefits, but in the future it will be even worse, as more people may be kept on the much lower self-support and repatriation allowances, and will not be entitled to a full state pension.

For women of all ages, poverty leads to isolation and often hinders integration – rather than being an incentive to find work. You have to decline invitations when you can't bring a gift, and can't invite new acquaintances home for a visit. Another example of important social contexts that can be difficult to participate in are mothers' groups. Even if the participation itself is free, the transport may constitute too great an expense, and refugee women may consequently choose not to attend.

POVERTY RATE, 65-74-YEAR OLDS



Poverty is defined here as an income of less than 50% of the national median income. Quite a few percent of elderly ethnic Danes can be described as poor, and the figure is the same for women and men. It looks completely different for some of the largest immigrant/refugee groups, where there are far more poor among the elderly in general, and where there are far more poor women than men.

Allowances

Among young and middle-aged refugee women, the most important cause of poverty is that, as unemployed persons, they receive a very low level of benefits, and no child benefits. The "self-support and repatriation benefit" that refugees with less than 10 years of residence receive is approximately half of the level of normal benefits available to others. The argument for the low benefits for newly arrived refugees is that it will give them an incentive to get into work. But research shows that the low benefit alone has only a small effect on getting newly arrived men into jobs, and no effect at all for women (RFF2020).

When fewer newly arrived women are in work than men, it is a logical consequence that more women than men have to live on the low benefits. In 2021, the number was 5,705 women and 3,731 men (persons, full-time).

A single refugee mother receives DKK 12,456 per month before tax (2022), regardless of how many children she has. If she lives with her husband, she only gets DKK 8,716 per month. The child benefit is awarded according to an accrual principle, so that you only reach the full rate after six years of residence in the country. After the first year in Denmark, a refugee thus receives only DKK 596 per quarter for a three-year-old child (16.7% of what a Danish parent receives), and only for the first two children. Although many receive housing support (under art. 34), the total benefit is well below the ceiling for allowances, and in practice below a minimum of survival.

In 2018, the Danish Institute for Human Rights published a report on families on integration benefits (as it was then called) and concluded that the poverty it led to was a breach of the Danish Constitution. Furthermore, one can argue that it is ethnic discrimination. Although Danes can also be affected, in practice only 2% of the recipients are Danes. 11% of recipients were single with children, and nine out of 10 of them were women. The report's most glaring examples among the families they studied were single mothers with many children (IMR2018).

A single mother with four children had one room, shared a kitchen and a bathroom with other residents in the basement, and her children could not go to the basement alone. All four children had to go down into the kitchen with her. An employee in a municipality told of a mother with seven children who all starved when they ran out of money.

Maria Ventegodt, *head of equal treatment at the Institute for Human Rights: "This is the lowest financial benefit in Denmark, and it greatly affects the lives of these families. Some struggle to get enough food, while others do not have the money for medicine, necessary transport, school equipment and winter clothes."*

An integration consultant *says: "I have, for example, this single mother and she has been hit with depression. We had a meeting, and the case worker said something like this: 'Now you have to start finding something where you have time for yourself. You can possibly go to the gym.' But there's just no way to do that. If they can afford anything at all, they prioritise the children first and foremost, and that also means that they don't really do anything" (IMR2018).*

Morten Sodemann, *senior physician, professor and research leader at the Immigrant Medicine Clinic, Odense University Hospital: "The control groups* do not have the necessary skills or information to understand these women's special situations, and women are therefore more often affected by unfair decisions from the control groups in the municipalities." These decisions can, among other things, be financial sanctions.*
**Special units in the municipalities that investigate anonymous inquiries about social security fraud or case workers' own suspicions.*

HAWA

Hawa from Somalia was received in her municipality in 2012. She had come to Denmark alone, had had to leave a large group of children behind, and had lost contact with her husband. Her case is described in “Asylum Center Limbo” (Bendixen2011). She was later reunited with her children and her husband. Her arrival in the new municipality is described here:

After 10 years in the asylum system, she was sincerely happy for her residence permit and was looking forward to her new life. She was installed in an expensive three-bedroom apartment with another Somali woman without being asked if they even wanted to live together.

The women moved into the apartment in April, and there Hawa's contact person from Grandparents for Asylum found them just before the Easter holidays in an icy cold and sparsely furnished living room, sitting with their duvets around them, without money (fortunately they had received DKK 1,000 from the Red Cross), without access to TV and without knowing how to get heat on the system or how to use the new installations in the kitchen and communal laundry.

The reception of recognized refugees in the municipalities is very different and at times completely inadequate, not everyone gets the necessary help to understand the Danish system. The refugee has not yet had access to Danish language classes and has lived a secluded life in the asylum system. What does à conto or deposit mean, which municipal employees are responsible for what, etc.? Hawa is illiterate and did not understand all the municipal papers that she received, and she could not attend to the summonses and ensure transport to check-ups at the hospital, physiotherapy and her own doctor. The result was that she missed several important appointments.

Hawa moved in in April, and she only started language school in October. She was very happy for the three days away from the apartment, to which she was otherwise chained for half a year. She could only take a short walk down the street with her walker, as she is severely affected by rheumatoid arthritis. She got permission for transport with Movia, but e.g. to go to the school, there was a self-payment of DKK 48 per teaching day. She had a hard time finding the money for that.

Unfortunately, the schooling did not last long, as Hawa's physique prevented attendance after a short time. Work was also ruled out, and today she receives an early retirement pension.

INTEGRATION RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE CHILDREN

The women that this report deals with come from cultures where you have children earlier than in Denmark, you often have more children, and it is to a greater extent women's responsibility to take care of children. Refugee women have often postponed having children because they have lived in unsafe conditions, and therefore often have children soon after they arrive in a safe country. It rather unfortunately coincides with the period when there is the most focus on integration – learning Danish, getting to work and getting to know Danish society.

In general, however, fertility rates have fallen sharply among non-Western women over the past 30 years, and are now in line with majority-Danish women, as previously discussed on page 96.

At the same time, it is a challenge to integrate children in Denmark, if you already have them. In many families, that task lies mostly with the mother, even though she usually might be less qualified for it. It is usually the mother who gets the children out of the door on time, brings them food, provides warm clothes, communicates with educators and teachers, buys the child's birthday present, etc.

Among refugees, there are very few men who are single fathers, and in divorced families it is almost always the mother who takes the main responsibility for the children. This leaves quite a few women alone with the responsibility of figuring out AULA (the Danish online system for communicating with schools), even though their digital skills are next to zero.

Very often, the children take over the responsibility for internet communications, reading letters from the authorities and from their schools, and interpreting at the doctor's office and with the municipality. This creates a completely unbalanced dynamic in the family, where the children gain insight and responsibility into things they should not have, and the parents' (often mothers') authority is undermined. Many women are motivated to learn Danish by having children, so that they can communicate with schools and institutions and better follow the children's lives – but if the mother is illiterate or has a short schooling behind her, it can be an insurmountable task for her.

Many of the mothers make a huge effort to support and raise their children to get the success and respect that they did not achieve themselves, and feel a great responsibility for their children's schooling and education. Regrettably, that effort is not recognized in society.

ASHA

Asha arrived as an asylum seeker with her six children from Somalia to Denmark in 2002, but was refused asylum. The children were then five, seven, 10, 12, 14 and 18 years old. The family was moved from centre to centre a total of eight times during the six years that their stay in the asylum system was to last.

During the stay, Asha developed a very serious and treatment-demanding illness, which in 2008 ended up triggering a humanitarian residence permit with the help of Refugees Welcome, and the family then got accommodation in a medium-sized provincial town, where they have lived ever since.

Asha started her integration as a patient in a long and intense course of treatment that required transports to hospital several times a week. It sapped her and her family's strength, and prevented her from participating in the municipal language and integration course. She has thus not learned much Danish, as she has not been able to enter the labour market since then either. In Somalia she had never gone to school, but her husband had taught her to read and write in Somali.

In 2009, the father was fortunately found. He had been granted residence in another European country meanwhile, and was reunited with his family in Denmark. Until then, the eldest brother Abdi had acted as a father in the family.

The children started their integration with a particularly poor school background from their home country and the six years in the asylum system, where only two of the youngest children hade been allowed to attend a regular primary school during the six years in the asylum system. Right from the start, however, it was an important priority for Asha and her husband that the children should be supported for schooling and further education as the most important investment in their future. And today the children's situation looks like this:

Yussuf: *Completed upper secondary education, STX. Studying to become a bio-analyst at Copenhagen University of Applied Sciences. Works concurrently as a laboratory technician at Herlev Hospital, and as a Covid19 vaccinator.*

Fatuma: *Completed upper secondary education, STX. Trained social worker with employment in a neighbouring municipality.*

Hamdi: *Completed upper secondary education, HHX. Studying to become a diploma engineer. Works concurrently as a student assistant in a soundproofing company.*

Farah: *Completed 2-year HF. Bachelor as a construction technician. Studying a bachelor's degree as a building designer. Works concurrently as a taxi driver.*

Maryan: *Completed the medical helper training. Continuing studies to become a medical assistant. Works concurrently at a nursing home in the municipality.*

Abdi: *Works as a bus driver, where he also has an important function as a mediator for the other foreign workers as he speaks Somali, Arabic and Danish. He completed HF, SOF and mathematics at A-level STX with a view to starting the computer science study in 2023.*

(Thanks to Gerd Gottlieb)

Birthday party, Eritrean family in Denmark

HEALTH

Non-Western immigrants and their descendants have a higher prevalence of diseases, including long-term and chronic diseases and poorer mental health, than the majority population. Furthermore, there are a number of challenges in engaging with healthcare services, e.g. lack of language skills, bad communication with health personnel and lack of knowledge of the system, as well as some cultural and social differences that can have a negative impact on their health, such as different notions about health and everyday habits. There is a lack of and a need for special health services (such as immigrant medical clinics) for immigrants with complex challenges who find it difficult to understand and cope with the Danish healthcare system.

Caroline Alsted Finck, *nurse at FAKTI: "A large proportion of the women we meet at FAKTI have very little or no schooling, because girls' education was not prioritised where they grew up. The systems in Denmark are designed for well-educated Danes, so women who are illiterate – also digitally – are deeply dependent on others, especially their children, for most things: logging in, booking an appointment, finding their way, asking questions and understanding treatment, etc.*

Many women in FAKTI lack basic knowledge about the body and its functions, which makes it difficult to read the body's signals and understand causal relationships. For example, some people stop exercising because their muscles hurt afterwards. Experiences of sexual or violentabuse and torture can mean for some that they have lost contact with their body and cannot "feel it".

For many, sexual and reproductive health and intimacy are particularly complicated. These are taboo subjects – also for health professionals, who may be particularly hesitant to start the conversation when they are sitting across from a woman wearing a religious head covering. In the case of taboo subjects, it is extra problematic not to have access to information, because you only gather knowledge from your own experience and other people's incomplete stories. Therefore, there are many misconceptions about hymens, sex, menstruation, fertility, menopause and incontinence. For some, sex is associated with discomfort and for those who want to learn about sex and intimacy, there is no material available for sexually active, illiterate adults. At the same time, misunderstood ideas about sex education in Danish primary schools abound, which means that some keep the children at home during those courses.

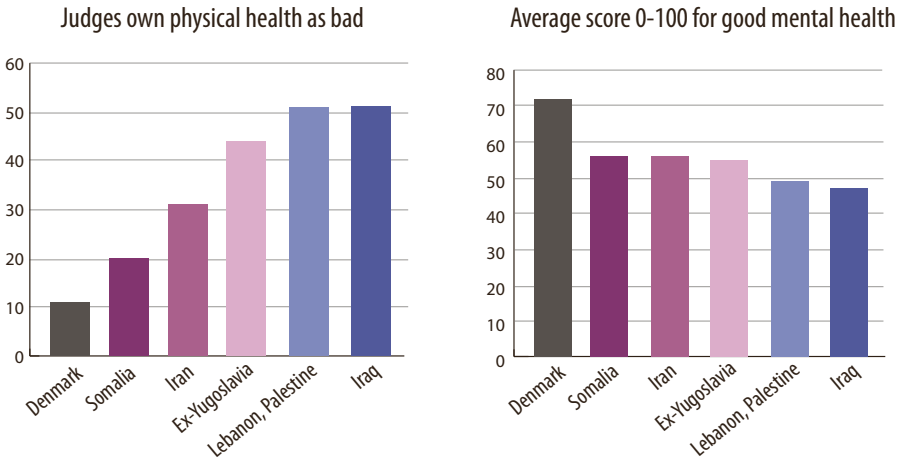
The collaboration with male doctors, nurses and interpreters can also be challenging for women who have never been, or have never been allowed to be, alone with men outside the family – especially if they have to undress. This is of course particularly problematic for women who live with social control and violence, or who in connection with flight, torture etc. have experienced sexual or violent abuse."

Differences in health status

A study of self-reported health from 2008 showed that a great many women from the countries where refugees typically come from assess that their physical health is poor. The proportion among female immigrants was: Iraq and Lebanon/Palestine: 51%, Former Yugoslavia: 44%, Iran: 31%, and Somalia: 20%. In comparison, only 11% of the ethnic Danish women answered the same.

Women with a refugee background also generally have poorer mental health. On a scale from 0 to 100, the average score for ethnic Danish women is 72, while it is much lower for women from non-Western countries: Iraq (47), Lebanon/Palestine (49), the former Yugoslavia (55), Iran and Somalia (56) (KVINFO2021).

WOMEN'S HEALTH IN DENMARK, 2008, SELECTED NATIONALITIES



Source: KVINFO: Barrierer for kvinder med indvandrer- og flygtningebaggrund på det danske arbejdsmarked (2021)

Only one in ten ethnic Danish women thinks she has poor physical health, whereas this applies to every second Iraqi woman. Ethnic Danish women score 71 out of 100 on indicators of mental health, but Iraqi women score only 47.

Many refugees have a reduced ability to work and learn due to trauma-related mental disorders. It is estimated that between 30 and 50 percent of refugees in Denmark have symptoms of trauma. A medical study carried out by Amnesty International in 2007 among 142 newly arrived asylum seekers in Centre Sandholm showed that 45% had been exposed to torture, 59% to war, 68% to persecution and 44% to imprisonment/detention.

Female refugees have a particularly high risk of developing mental illnesses due to traumatic experiences both in their home country and during their journeys to Denmark, where more than four out of ten are exposed to abuse, sexual exploitation and trafficking (see Chapter 1). It has also been shown that the long waiting times for asylum in Denmark increase the frequency of psychiatric diagnoses among refugees, and the women's experience of insecurity and isolation in the centres contributes to poor mental health.

Unequal access to treatment

Women living underground have practically no right to the health system, which is, among other things, a serious problem for pregnant women, as mentioned on page 46. Women in the asylum system have a limited right: only necessary, urgent and pain-relieving (NUS), and only via the asylum centre's clinic. Legally resident women have full rights, but may find it difficult to take advantage of those rights in reality for a variety of reasons.

According to a report from the National Audit Office, there is an extensive lack of diagnostic information in the municipalities, and many refugees only receive trauma treatment after 10-15 years. This is due to a combination of the fact that nobody is aware of the problem and that there is a year-long waiting period for treatment (Rigsrev2018). The Immigrant Medicine Clinic in Odense writes that 50% of the referred patients with severe complex and long-term courses are found to suffer from severe chronic Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and that 75% of these are not diagnosed at the time of referral, despite the fact that they have stayed on average more than 10 years in Denmark. People who have survived torture and trauma are often reluctant to talk about it, believing themselves that the after-effects will disappear with time. But they only get worse, and one of the effects can actually be that you lose the Danish language skills you have acquired.

Women are challenged by digital barriers to a greater extent than men, as mentioned earlier by Caroline Alsted Finck. Booking appointments, answering tests, renewing prescriptions, etc. today take place online, and many women are thus dependent on help.

The use of interpreters

As described earlier in this chapter, many of the women are linguistically at a clear disadvantage compared to the men, and this has a huge significance in the meeting with the healthcare system. Firstly, you must be able to communicate in Danish, and secondly, you must have a whole range of concepts in place, which require a certain level of education. If you have limited schooling, you also often lack the understanding of many concepts in your mother tongue, and this makes it difficult to communicate about abstract and complicated issues such as pain, feelings and sensations.

In 2018, a majority in the Danish Parliament decided that you must pay for an interpreter in the healthcare system yourself if, after three years in Denmark, you still need one. Doctors warned strongly against this bill following a short period where it had previously been in effect; the Danish Medical Association has repeatedly explained that it goes beyond the safety of patients and the professionalism of doctors. The cost, depending on whether it takes place via video/telephone or in person, is DKK 191 or DKK 343 for a single doctor's consultation, and DKK 975 or DKK 1,675 for hospitalisation (prices from the Capital Region 2023).

A scientific study from 2022 showed that patients almost unanimously chose to use a family member or an acquaintance as an interpreter, or to complete the conversation without an interpreter, rather than pay the fee. The doctors experienced that the family members posed a particular problem, both because of their relationship to the patient and the problems that could arise from non-professional interpreting. The result was that the doctors experienced great frustration, especially with patients with chronic and serious illnesses, and felt put in an ethical and moral dilemma (Davidsen2022). For women, the use of a family member as an interpreter often presents an additional problem, as embarrassment and taboo can come into play.

Even when the interpreter was paid by the state, the lack of use of skilled interpreters was often a problem: "Doctors often examine patients for suspected cancer, but mostly to rule it out, not because there is a concrete suspicion. However, this is often interpreted by patients as if they actually have cancer. Such a conversation must always take place with an interpreter. A patient travelled to the Middle East and had her gallbladder and part of her liver removed because she thought that was where the Danish doctor had said her cancer was" (Sodemann2011).

"Ethnic pains"

***Professor Morten Sodemann**, who founded the Immigrant Medicine Clinic at Odense University Hospital, finds that his female patients have some very special problems: "Women do not have the right to their own bodies: Women's organs are not their own – they belong to the family. Men (and the family) decide if and when they can go to the doctor, and whether the doctor's advice must be followed afterwards. Information about health and knowledge about the body is unavailable to them in Danish, and it is difficult/impossible to find translated material. Reproductive health in particular is a blind spot, and not all pregnancies are according to the woman's wishes."*

Ayan Yasin from Zetland Media has interviewed Morten Sodemann about 'ethnic pain' and wrong diagnoses, phenomena which particularly affect women from non-Western countries. He mentions a woman who had lived in isolation for 15 years, believing that she and her son had HIV. She had received the answer "negative" on a test, but after years in the Danish asylum system, negative in her world meant so-

mething bad. The psychiatrists, doctors and case workers described her as “lazy”, “depressed”, “difficult to activate” and “difficult to deal with” – without realising that she believed she was chronically ill and would soon die. Her pain and depression, they believed, were inexplicable.

For some patients, language, culture and body image can stand in the way of the health system providing them with the right treatment. They may be in pain in a way that does not immediately correspond to any diagnosis in the Western disease classification, or complain of ailments that cannot be explained on the basis of what a Danish doctor can observe. For some doctors, their ailments are downright strange and out of category. That is why they are described as ethnic pain – symptoms for which it is difficult to find the cause due to the patients' foreign culture.

***Marianne Østerskov**, chairman of the Professional Association for Cross-Cultural Nursing: “It is being downplayed. There is no doubt that those patients are in pain. The doctor may have examined them in many ways, but still not be able to find a physiological explanation – and then there are many in the healthcare system who come to call it ethnic pain.”*

"It's about brown people who have an accent and who say something strange about pain,” observes Morten Sodemann about the patients that some medical colleagues have to give up on. “Everyone in the health care system has an idea of what it is and will be able to say it without blinking an eye. But if you asked those doctors directly: 'What are ethnic pains for you?', they would roll their eyes” (Zetland2018).

ACCESS TO PERMANENT RESIDENCE AND DANISH CITIZENSHIP

Quite a few of the countries from which the women in this report come do not grant citizenship at birth unless the parents are married and the father is a citizen of the country. A child born out of wedlock thus risks becoming stateless. Conversely, Denmark has favoured the mothers in unmarried couples until 2014, but since then both parents have been treated equally in the matter of passing citizenship on to a child. However, the high requirements for obtaining Danish citizenship as an adult constitute a barrier that is more difficult for women to overcome.

All the aspects of these women's lives described so far, giving them a worse starting point and poorer opportunities, and where Denmark makes no serious effort to remedy the inequality, are crystallised in access to the ultimate right: Danish citizenship. Therefore, it is not rare to meet families where everyone has a Danish passport – except the mother.

Overall, there are roughly the same number of men and women who obtain Danish citizenship. But that doesn't say much about the challenges of getting it. It is likely that women more often wait to apply until they meet the criteria and that they prepare more carefully to pass various tests. No one knows how many and which women give up in advance.

A study from 2021 reviewed the various barriers to obtaining Danish citizenship, and concluded that the following factors are most decisive: **age on arrival, gender and level of education.** Women find it more difficult to meet the language and work requirements than men, and an older age on arrival is a further obstacle. On the other hand, women are less likely to have criminal convictions, which is an advantage (Jensen2021).

The Council of Europe's new recommendations for the protection of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers of May 2022 states: "94) Member States are encouraged to provide pathways to naturalisation and to take measures to ensure that migrant and refugee women and girls are not faced with gender-related obstacles in this regard" (CoE2022).

"Certain groups – for example refugees from less developed countries, or women from these countries more particularly – may have a harder time qualifying for citizenship, but are more likely to choose to naturalise if they do. There might thus be significant differences between group determinants of naturalisation capacity that do not appear in analyses of propensity alone" (Jensen2021).

Denmark has the strictest requirements for citizenship in Europe; only Austria and Switzerland come close. But in order to meet the requirements, it is not enough to buckle down and do your best. For some, their best will never be enough, as the requirements exclude certain people based on their limited abilities and opportunities, which constitutes discrimination. Furthermore, there is a direct political influence on the outcome, which is antithetical to the rule of law.

Before you can apply for citizenship, you must first obtain permanent residence. The requirements for the two applications are similar, but the procedure is very different. Permanent residence is assessed by the Danish Immigration Service based on objective but very rigid criteria. Applications for citizenship are only processed administratively in the first stage by the Ministry of Integration. The next stage is processed by the Danish Parliament, where the names are presented in a bill that is voted on in the chamber – and applications for exemption are decided by the elected members of the Citizenship Committee, voting on each individual application separately.

Among the many requirements for both **permanent residence (PR)** and **citizenship (CS),** the following are particularly difficult for women to meet:

- Passed exam in Danish PD2 (PR) and PD3 (CS).
- Passed permanent residence test (PR) and citizenship test (CS).
- Full-time work for three and a half years (both PR and CS) and continue to be in work (PR).
- No receipt of public benefits in the past four (PR) and five years (CS).

Since women generally have a lower income than men, the fees are respectively 4,800 / 6,700 and DKK 4,000 (2023 prices) also a greater expense for women. The citizenship test also costs DKK 800 in fees.

Language requirements and knowledge test

As the researchers behind "Roadblocks to citizenship" (Jensen2021) quite rightly point out, motivation and opportunities only go so far when it comes to acquiring skills in a new language – it is also a matter of abilities and background. Schooling, age and mental health set limits to how far you can go. As mentioned, more women than men are placed on DU1 (which does not grant admission to higher education opportunities), and more of them are illiterate. Fewer women than men take the final exams for DU2 and DU3 (which will grant them access to higher education opportunities if passed), see page 101.

The researchers have calculated that the probability that a refugee who has attended DU1, after 13 years of residence in Denmark, will be able to meet the language requirement for citizenship is only **2.5%** (Jensen2021).

"(…) the age and gender barriers for refugees are most strongly linked to the language requirement. Older and female refugees have a much harder time satisfying the language requirement. ***Especially for women,*** *the self-support requirement also constitutes a barrier. Again, this suggests that reducing the language requirement is the most effective way of improving access to citizenship and reducing the impact of age, gender and education among refugees – at least in those cases where additional or higher quality language training does not increase the chances of meeting the requirement" (Jensen2021).*

Knowledge of Danish also has an indirect effect on the chance of passing the two tests about Danish society: history and culture.

The test to qualify for permanent residence consists of 25 questions and can, if necessary, be passed by a woman who has attended DU2, but the learning material consists of 25 chapters distributed over 118 pages.

The Citizenship Test is at a much higher level and consists of 40 multiple-choice questions, and even high school students with an ethnic Danish background fail it. The learning material is 216 pages long, and has a relatively high level of vocabulary. In 2021, only 40% passed, even though most have prepared thoroughly.

If the goal was to equip new citizens better to become active in society and understand their new country better, it would probably be more expedient to hold educational courses and workshops with mandatory participation. Here you could be inspired by the DRC Danish Refugee Council's courses "Ret til ligestilling" (ret-til-ligestilling.dk). Many of the questions in the citizenship test seem mostly like a cunning obstacle. It is e.g. difficult to see why it is necessary as a new Dane to be able to answer the following questions, which are taken from the citizenship test 2021:

- When was the first law on public pensions adopted?
- Which party emerged in the 1870s as part of the labour movement?
- What problems in society was the Kanslergadeforlig in 1933 supposed to solve?
- When did the Cold War end?

Work requirements

The requirements for self-sufficiency and labour-market connection also go beyond one's own effort and will. Whether you can find and keep a full-time job also depends on changing economic conditions and employers' willingness to hire, as well as your age, education and health. As with the language requirement, one should therefore not limit access to the successful elite and the lucky ones, but recognize everyone who has made an effort – including people who work part-time, in flexjobs, in wage subsidies or in temporary employment.

Again, women are at a disadvantage – and refugee women are worst off. Read more on page 88 about why the women covered by this report have a markedly worse connection to the labour market.

Disability and dispensation

If you are illiterate or traumatised, you will have incredibly poor chances of meeting the requirements mentioned above. At the same time, it is very difficult to get an exemption from the requirements, regardless of how long you have lived in Denmark, even if you have made an effort over the years to learn Danish and support yourself. People who have attended classes for years, and tried in vain to acquire the Danish language, should fall under the UN's Disability Convention and thus be exempt from requirements that have to do with learning the Danish language.

"It is the National Board of Health's assessment that illiteracy constitutes an intellectual disability regardless of the cause of the disability. The functions that enable a person to read and write have not been developed.

At the same time, it is assessed that ***being illiterate in Denmark constitutes a disability*** *(reduced functional ability), as it prevents the person from fully and effectively participating in social life on an equal footing with others.*

However, it will always depend on a concrete assessment whether the inability to read and write is permanent/long-term, or whether the person can learn to read and write with a relevant educational offer" (SST2015).

Fairly clear rules for exemption apply when the Danish Immigration Service processes an application for permanent residence. But it requires a doctor and a language teacher to write that the applicant does not have a chance to learn better Danish, regardless of the effort – and it is a harsh judgement destroying any hope for the person concerned.

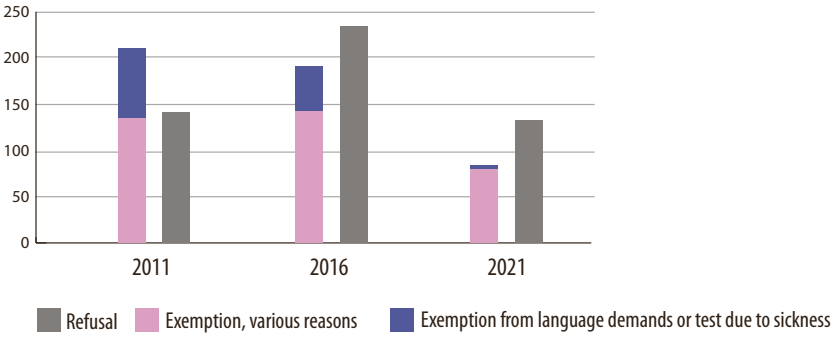
The situation is worse with citizenship. If you do not meet the requirements, you end up in the pile that the Danish Parliament's Citizenship Committee must approve – even if you e.g. have been granted early retirement due to PTSD. Each of the 16 members is supposed to read through the pile of statements from doctors, teachers, social workers and employers – and vote either yes or no to grant a dispensation behind closed doors. This is a crazy system harmful to rule of law in Denmark and it should have been changed a long time ago.

Over time, both chairmen and members of the political parties Danish People's Party and the New Right have stated publicly that they always vote against people from Muslim countries, as they believe that we have too many Muslims in the country. They thus allow themselves to dismiss the individual's reasons for not being able to meet certain conditions, based solely on their own prejudices and discriminatory at-

titudes. This should be nothing less than a scandal for a country that has signed the UN Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights.

The number of exemptions has decreased considerably over the years, and in particular it has become much more difficult to obtain an exemption from the requirements for language skills and the citizenship test on the basis of medical certificates. This affects the weakest women particularly badly. At the same time, the requirements have been raised many times; for example, the language requirement was raised from passing the PD2 to passing the PD3 in 2015.

OUTCOME ON APPLICATIONS FOR EXEMPTION, DANISH CITIZENSHIP



Source: Reply from minister to question from parliament committee

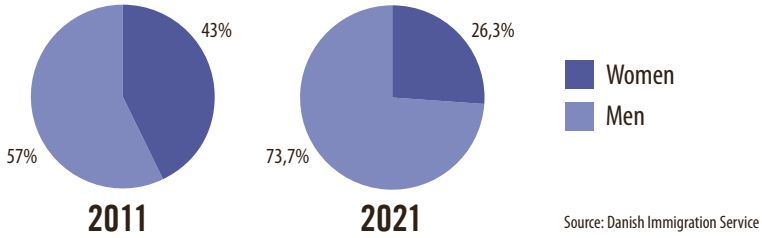
The proportion of refusals for exemption has been increasing sharply, and at the same time the requirements have been raised in the same period. This gives a double effect, which cannot be read here. A woman with little or no schooling and poor health had a fair chance of getting a dispensation in the past, but is now virtually out of the question. In 2021, there were 4 people who were exempted from the language requirement/nationality test due to illness.

Excerpts from medical reports in two cases where exemption was refused:

- "The patient has persistent personality changes following war and disaster situations. The patient is plagued by psychotic symptoms, including auditory and visual hallucinations. The patient carries on conversations with deceased persons. The patient's ability to learn language will not be improved by treatment. It must be considered hopeless to try any further with regard to Danish education, the Danish Exam and the Citizenship Test."

- "It is assessed that the patient is in no way capable of taking any kind of exam. I cannot see that the intellectual level – despite aids – in any way allows the patient to participate in or take any tests in Danish or the Citizenship Test" (dr.dk 2021)

GRANTING OF PERMANENT RESIDENCE PERMITS TO REFUGEES, GENDER



Source: Danish Immigration Service

The proportion of women who receive a positive response to applications for permanent residence has plummeted between 2011 and 2021. In both 2012 and 2015, the criteria were tightened enormously, which has clearly set the bar too high for many female refugees. An additional reason may be that more young women than men with a refugee background choose to take longer educations, which puts them many years behind, since only full-time jobs count.

If you look at how many succeed in being granted Danish citizenship, the numbers are roughly the same for men and women. But the unknown factor is how many women give up beforehand and don't apply at all. One of the requirements is, among other things, to have permanent residence – and as can be seen above, there is a decreasing number of women who achieve this. In the study "Roadblocks to Citizenship", the researchers have therefore instead looked at how many in different groups would be able to meet the requirements – and there they find a clear preponderance of women who do not have a chance (Jensen2021).

5. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

SYSTEMIC OR ARBITRARY DISCRIMINATION?

Non-Danish women who come to Denmark because they cannot remain in their country of origin are far worse off than men in similar circumstances in a wide range of areas. Many of the demands that these women meet in Denmark are difficult to fulfill simply because they are women – and this constitutes gender discrimination.

Discrimination against women is practised both by women's own families, private actors, such as employers, the authorities, including case workers in the municipality and state, and by politically elected legislators. It is rarely a case of deliberate discrimination, and neither authorities nor politicians wish to treat women detrimentally compared to men, yet it continues to happen, again and again.

When the Danish state does not take the background and individual situation of women into account, and treats both men and women the same, women end up receiving worse treatment or less protection than men in practice. To ensure that outcomes for both men and women are equal, some level of differentiated treatment is necessary.

It is far from an unknown or undocumented phenomenon that certain non-Danish women are particularly vulnerable in several respects in Denmark. Many of the consultation responses about restrictions on immigration have often warned against an unfortunate gender effect, and several studies and reports have described the challenges faced by women. There has been an increasing focus on domestic violence and negative social control in families and in local communities. There has also been a great deal of political focus on getting more non-Western women into the labour market. However, the responsibility has up until now been placed on the individual women themselves and their relatives, and the political focus has never been on the Danish state's share of the responsibility.

In other words, solutions presented by politicians do not take into account the content of relevant reports and appropriate recommendations. Sanctions, reduced benefits, warnings and, in the worst case, deportation are not solutions, but often contribute to making women's lives even worse.

The limits of the Danish state's influence

Outside Denmark, the Danish state is only able to influence women's right to a limited degree by providing support for the development of democracy, human rights work and the development of women's rights through development support, partner projects etc. in other countries. It does not have control over the discrimination that

women have been exposed to in their countries of origin, which is in fact the primary reason why they end up exposed to worse conditions than men in Denmark.

But the Danish state - even from the moment a woman makes the decision to leave her home country - can improve her situation, and particularly when she sets foot on Danish soil; there are plenty of ways to support her in order to take advantage of her potential and her strengths, rather than keeping her in a position of oppression and dependency.

Practical recommendations include:

- Providing safer access routes.
- Offering advice in the asylum phase as well as family reunification.
- Making asylum centers safer for women.
- Recogning women's particular asylum motives to a greater extent.
- Ensuring that conditions and requirements are appropriate for a woman.
- Organising a long-term integration policy with a focus on upskilling rather than just unskilled jobs.
- Teaching both men and women about equality and human rights.

RECOMMENDATIONS

ARRIVAL AND RECEPTION:

1. Legal entry:
– easier access to visas and reunification can prevent dangerous journeys

The abuse that women are subjected to on the journey here would not take place if they were able to gain legal entry. Unfortunately, controls at Europe's external and internal borders are enforced with increasingly inhumane and illegal methods, leading to dependence on smugglers and far greater risks along the way. The debt that trafficked women are forced to pay off under inhumane conditions is also a direct result of the fact that access to Europe can only succeed with the assistance of smugglers and brothels.

This danger and suffering could be avoided by expanding the safe pathways, as both the UN Refugee Agency and the OECD recommend (OECD+UNHCR 2021).

Legal and safe access can, among other things, be achieved by extending the right to **family reunification** for refugees so that it also includes unmarried sisters, parents of adults, and children that the family has effectively supported in addition to their own. The application process should also be made faster and more flexible. It can also be achieved by increasing the number of quota refugees via the **UN re-settlement programme**, and by offering special **study visas** to female students from selected countries, such as, via **sponsorship programmes**, which are commonplace in many other countries.

2. Health examinations and support:
– need for improved screening, transfer of data and help

Shortly after arrival, all asylum seekers are called to a short interview about their health where they are asked about any current pain, chronic or hereditary diseases, and medication. If it is deemed relevant, a special questionnaire will be filled out in order to disclose possible torture. But, at this examination, little or no attention is given to **rape, sexual violence or other gender-based persecution**. This should be introduced as a **fixed procedure for women** and it should take place in a safe environment performed by a member of female staff and with a female interpreter. Traumatised women should have access to psychological counseling, also while they are in the asylum system. **Medical journals from asylum centres should be handed over to general practitioners** when a person moves out to a municipality.

3. The asylum procedure:
– gender and mothers should be considered more in the asylum procedure

All asylum seekers should have **access to independent legal advice and support** during the asylum process (in the form of a companion at asylum interviews, for example). This would be particularly beneficial for the most vulnerable women. All women should be clearly informed that they can choose a female caseworker and interpreter if they wish, a recommendation that has also been highlighted by the Council of Europe (CoE2022).

Information meetings should be organised in smaller groups and divided by gender, so that it can be ensured that everyone knows their rights and knows where to seek help. Information on video and provided at larger gatherings is more difficult to remember and process.

Asylum interviews should be organised in such a way that mothers do not have to sit with a child on their lap for hours while having to answer difficult and intimate questions. It can be difficult to avoid if the mother is breastfeeding or if the child has not achieved a trusting relationship with other adults who can step in. But it must be made possible, and the asylum interview must take place in a way that the mother can complete the interview without her child being present.

4. Asylum criteria:
– need for more focus on gender-related issues in asylum decisions

The assessment of credibility and risk by the authorities should be thoroughly considered from a **gender-sensitive perspective**. Classic grounds for men to be granted asylum are traditionally given more weight than corresponding female grounds. In recent years, however, there has been a positive development in the granting of convention status to women at the Refugee Appeals Board level in Denmark, but there is still room for improvement – also in the first instance by the Danish Immigration Service (DRC2020:1).

Sexual violence and abuse should be recognised as torture to a greater extent – regardless of whether it is committed by private individuals, para/military groups or a partner. Torture survivors are not necessarily granted asylum, but the recognition of torture often means that the case should be seen in a more favourable light by the authorities.

Trafficked women should have a real chance of obtaining a residence permit – especially where they testify against perpetrators. Often they find themselves in a catastrophic situation, both from an economic and personal point of view, even if they have cooperated with the police (CoE2022, Plambech2022).

5. Asylum centres:
– better gender segregation and access to women-only centres

There is a great need for **women-only centres**, and not just a corridor for women in a mixed institution. All single women, with or without children, should be offered a place in a women-ony centre if they wish - without having to meet any special criteria.

Women's centres do not solve all problems, however. For example, some trafficked women can still be pursued by female criminals, the so-called “Madams", even here. There may also be young women who want to live in the same centre as their brother, and mothers who want to live in the same centre as their adult son. But it is important that women are offered the opportunity to live in a women-only centre if they want to.

Additionally, women and men should never share kitchens and bathrooms unless they are related to one another. As a comparison, there are always separate corridors for girls and boys at Danish ’efterskoler’ (live-in schools for pupils around 15 years of age), boarding schools and at most live-in colleges.

Creating **smaller centres in urban areas,** rather than large centres in sparsely populated areas, would generally make it safer for women and vulnerable people, and would at least make it easier to get to and from the centre itself. The Danish Immigration Service is itself calling for the use of annexe housing, which was previously an option for particularly vulnerable people. The option of living separately, as has been possible for Ukrainian refugees, would also contribute to more security and peace of mind for women.

Being forcibly moved between centres should be avoided as it is extremely stressful and ruins the ties both adults and children build up with other residents as well as local communities. The division between reception, residence and departure centres in itself creates a large number of relocations; this division serves no particular purpose for the residents, but has been implemented mainly for political reasons.

Deportation centres should be completely closed down since they do not fulfill any purpose, but conversely come at a great cost – both from a human and financial point of view (Bendixen2021).

RESIDENCE AND RIGHTS:

6.The risk of losing your residence permit: – women should more often be granted residency on their own grounds

A large proportion of the women in this report have a residence permit which is entirely **dependent on them staying married to their husband.** Although it has become easier for women to obtain their own residence permit if they are divorced due to violence, it is still far from sufficient – and some men deliberately use this power over their wife, both to threaten them and in order to prevent their independent integration (Liversage2021).

Danish legislation has been heavily influenced by the assumption that, if you are able to separate from your spouse after arrival, you will use it as an easy access to residency. However, this approach overlooks the extremely difficult situation that women from a wide range of countries will find themselves in if they are forced to return to their country of origin. A divorced woman is often seen as a failure and as disloyal to not only her husband, but the family as well. In practice, she will be dependent on other family members for housing and maintenance, and she will thus be even worse off than before she left.

At the same time, the requirements to obtain permanent residency have become so onerous, especially for women, that many of them are forced to stay with their husbands forever.

One of the effects of the so-called 'paradigm shift' is that women who have been granted residence due to their children lose it when the child turns 18. It is a completely inhumane situation for both mother and child. **The assessment of attachment and length of stay has become far too restrictive** and should be rolled back.

7. Integration and the labour market: – barriers for getting women into work should be removed

A great number of studies and research have been carried out to uncover why so few non-Western women are part of the labour market in Denmark. Their conclusions and recommendations are relatively similar, and it is thought-provoking why they have not been followed. Instead, decision makers continue to insist on a system of coercion and punishment.

Barriers to getting women into work are mostly about the **women's lack of basic skills: language, education and experience**. Next, their family and health situation

often come into play, with a great deal of responsibility for their children and the household, as well as trauma and/or chronic illness. Finally, both job centre employees and employers have lower expectations of women, and therefore do not offer them the same opportunities (KVINFO2021).

To remedy these barriers, both researchers and practitioners point to a combination of **long-term up-skilling and a holistic approach** in which the whole family is involved. Targeting job opportunities in sectors where there is a shortage of labour, rather than those within what are traditionally seen as women's professions, has also seen effective results. Lastly, particular consideration should be given to woman's position and organising support around that, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach – and this applies to Danish language classes, courses, as well as any employment programmes (DRC2020:2).

Refugees up until 30 years of age should be encouraged to education, such as young people under 25 are today. This will give women a greater opportunity to educate themselves, which will allow them a greater chance of finding work in the long run (RRF2018:1).

Women on parental leave often fall out of 'the system'. They ought to be offered a tailored scheme, for example, with the involvement of voluntary actors/day centres/a health coach, so they have the opportunity of maintaining and strenthening their Danish and other skills during their leave period.

Many women are supported financially by their spouse, which has a range of disadvantages. The earlier rule that pensioners should **finanically support one another** has been repealed, and this rule should also be repealed for all those who receive unemployment benefits from the state. Women who are financially supported by their husbands should be provided with a tailored scheme to maintain and improve their Danish langage skills and to integrate them into the job market and society – and this should be the case even though job centres do not have any formal obligation to these women.

Economic sanctions will, as a rule, just make it even worse for the woman, and there are often misunderstandings or social problems behind infractions. Single parents are nearly always women, and they are hit particularly hard by the reduction of allowances for refugees (IMR2018). **The reduction of benefits has absolutely no effect on getting women into work** (RRF2020), and should as a general rule be abolished, as it leads to poverty rather than encouraging people to work.

The state pension should not be calculated based on how many years a person has been in the job market – this puts especially women and refugees in a much worse situation than others, and leads to an old age in poverty (Liversage2022).

8. Danish courses:
– special measures can help more women complete Danish language courses

It has been recommended by different actors that Danish language courses should be more particularly tailored to women, preferably with women-only groups to make them feel less insecure and shy, and more comfortable sharing personal experiences. In addition, greater consideration should be given to the fact that women often have responsibility for children.

There are three parallel tracks for Danish tuition where a teacher will place a student depending on their background in their home country. **All three courses end in a test and these should be given the same status** when it comes to fulfilling the requirements for permanent residence and citizenship. A completed Danish course from whichever track shows that the student has made an effort based on the skills and educational standard they arrived in Denmark with. It should therefore be the effort and not the result that is recognised.

The current system, in which only PD2 and PD3 gives access, favours men and discriminates against illiterate women in particular. Many women who have had no or very little formal education will never be able to pass Danish at the 9th grade level, which is a requirement in order to become a Danish citizen.

9. Health and wellness:
– the interpreter fee should be abolished and focus put on women's health

In general, female refugees have significantly worse health than ethnically Danish women, as well as that of male refugees. There is currently a lack of **targeted and effective policy** to deal with this issue.

The fee for using an interpreter after being in Denmark for three years should be abolished, as it has been shown to have extremely negative consequences, which both the Medical Association and the Immigrant Medical Clinic have strongly warned against (Sodemann2011).

Health information from the asylum phase should be **passed on to the municipality and general practitioner** so it is not lost. All newly arrived refugees should be offered a special health examination and interview, as there is often a need for a thorough investigation. The result must be considered in the integration efforts, and treatment must be offered for any trauma from the start. Trauma is often only recognised many years after arrival (Rigsrev2018).

Sexual violence should be more widely recognised as torture, and women should be offered treatment for the trauma it may have caused (Canning2015).

Asylum seekers and people living underground should have **full access to health services**, including pregnant women and new mothers. This has been implemented in Sweden for a long time, and Finland has just adopted this policy, which is also recommended by the Institute for Human Rights among others (IMR2013).

10. Permanent residence and Danish citizenship: – all requirements should take into account the applicant's starting point

All requirements for both permanent residence and Danish citizenship should be **carefully reviewed with a view to gender bias** – the same requirement can affect men and women differently, and increasingly strict requirements have led to a sharp decline in the proportion of women obtaining permanent residence.

As mentioned above, any passed Danish language exam should be sufficient for everyone, since a person has no choice which of the three levels they are placed on. No matter how hard you try to learn Danish, age, schooling and health will set a limit on how good you become.

Any involvement in the labour market for a certain number of years should be considered sufficient. Part-time jobs, flex-jobs or wage subsidies are not an expression of a lack of effort, but a lack of skills, poor health or insufficient qualifications. As with the Danish tests, one should look at the effort the person has made and judge it based on where the person started, instead of setting universal requirements that will be absolutely impossible for certain people to fulfill (Jensen2021).

The procedure for dispensation should be made purely administrative and should be removed from the remit of the Danish Parliament's Citizenship Committee, where politicians today sit and vote for or against each individual applicant.

11. Rights and equality courses – a need for dialogue and increased awareness of rights

The women that this report is about have predominantly been brought up in countries where, simply because they are women, they have had limited rights. In order to be able to take advantage of equal rights in Denmark, **these women as a bare minimum should know what these rights are** – as should their male family members.

There is plenty of good practice and demonstrable outcomes from civil society projects from which the state and municipalities can learn and that can in the future be offered to all those who are newly arrived in Denmark. Among these, the campaign 'RIGHT TO EQUALITY' (RET TIL LIGESTILLING') can be mentioned, which includes free courses conducted by the Danish Refugee Council and ALS Research on

behalf of the Department for Equality at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. There is also the association BABA, which has had great success with involving fathers actively in children's everyday life. Kringlebakken equips mothers of young children with an immigrant background to be positive role models balancing two cultures, and FAKTI gives the most vulnerable women peace and strength through a loving and safe environment. The list is long... and the common lesson is that **you get the best results with information, dialogue, support, respect and consideration** – while you don't get very far with punishment, sanctions and threats.

Women do not want to stay at home alone and live off men's financial resources, but they also do not gain anything from an unpaid 37-hour-a-week internship in a warehouse, or the threat of losing their residence permit if they get divorced. Women ask for information and relevant job opportunities which allow them to contribute fully to society with pride – an opportunity they rarely had in their country of birth.

12. Initiatives by mosques and Muslim associations: – vulnerable Muslim women need support from other Muslims

Several of the Christian communities in Denmark carry out a large and committed effort in the reception of new citizens, and often provide crucial support for vulnerable people. Some Muslim organisations are also in close contact with local communities and carry out important work – but there is a need **to involve them much more in structured collaboration** with local municipalities and the state regarding Muslim women and girls who are facing problems.

Lene Kjær, activist: "What the young girls have in common is that if they leave their families and have to stand on their own two feet in a completely new world, they really struggle to create their own identity. They experiment with all kinds of things, which is completely natural, but they often find peace in their religion.

It is therefore very unfortunate that the only "support" you can throw at these girls often comes from people who have left the Islamic faith, those who detest the religion and clearly also blame it for the girls' suffering.

If there is something these girls need, it is acceptance and understanding from their Muslim brothers and sisters, and a helping hand to assist them to get on well in life. They do not need an environment that denigrates the faith in which they find comfort. The Muslim community in Denmark should strive to do a better job in this instance."

SUMMARY

As this report shows, the group of non-Danish women in question have been subjected to extreme repression and often a series of abuses in their home countries and on the journey to Denmark. Unfortunately, the discrimination continues unintentionally in Denmark in a number of areas, as does dependence on the men that these women have grown up with – only in a new and invisible form. In order to deal with these issues, the Danish system must be adjusted to take into account women's circumstances, which are often completely different than men's.

The aim should be to support women in both utilising their own strengths and to enjoy the equal rights that they should be able to expect in a country like Denmark. Therefore, all corners of the Danish system should be reviewed from a gender perspective, particularly when it comes to women who have come to Denmark because they cannot be in their home country.

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“It was not Iran that prevented my daughter from developing into an independent woman. It was the Danish asylum system that prevented her from doing so.”

Sharareh, Iranian journalist who spent 10 years in the asylum system with her daughter before they were granted asylum.

There are many thousands of women in Denmark who were born and raised in patriarchal societies oppressing women. They have not had the same opportunities as their brothers and as Danish girls. They have sought refuge in this country on various grounds, most often through asylum or family reunification.

But Danish society exposes them to invisible, structural discrimination and keeps them in a state of dependency on their husbands and their children. They cannot return home, but they receive weaker human rights protection than men, and they have a greater risk of losing their residence permit.

The report describes how these women are disadvantaged compared to men all the way from their home country, on the journey to Denmark and through the integration process. The discrimination is not intentional on the part of Danish society, and it could largely be avoided if people were aware of it.

The report is addressed to everyone who is interested in refugees and equality – either through their work as journalists, politicians, integration workers, language teachers – or as voluntary contact persons, neighbours, activists.

About the author:
Michala Clante Bendixen has dealt with refugees since 2006. She has built the organization Refugees Welcome, which offers legal advice to refugees, and the information site REFUGEES.DK. She is also the Danish country coordinator for the European Commission’s integration website EWSI. In 2014, she was the first recipient of The Human Rights Award in Denmark. This is her fifth report on topics within the Danish asylum system.

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