



Doc. 14284
07 April 2017

Protecting refugee women from gender-based violence

Report¹

Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination
Rapporteur: Ms Gisela WURM, Austria, Socialist Group

Summary

Many refugee and asylum-seeker women and girls who came to Europe in recent years have been exposed to gender-based violence taking the form of coercion, survival sex, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, domestic violence, harassment or extortion. In transit and upon arrival, they face common problems, such as the lack of safety, the absence of separate bathrooms, little information on assistance services available, the absence of female interpreters and in general a lack of general and post-trauma medical care.

The protection of refugee women from violence has however not been considered a priority in the management of the refugee crisis and the overall gender dimension has been largely overlooked in the response. The provision of protection from gender-based violence to all women, irrespective of their status and of where the violence occurred, should be made a priority, in line with the provisions of the Istanbul Convention, which should be ratified and implemented without further delay.

Council of Europe member States should take concrete measures to ensure the protection of refugee women from violence, by for example providing separate secure sleeping areas and well-lit bathrooms reserved for women in transit and reception facilities, creating safe spaces, ensuring the presence of a sufficient number of female staff members among security personnel and social workers, as well as providing information on rights and assistance services in an understandable language. Specific training on detecting and preventing gender-based violence for staff working in transit and reception facilities, including guards, should also be provided. Resettlement and relocation programmes, which represent the safest way for asylum seekers and refugees to come to Europe, also need to be supported.

1. Reference to committee: [Doc. 13890](#), Reference 4161 of 27 November 2015.



Contents	Page
A. Draft resolution.....	3
B. Explanatory memorandum by Ms Gisela Wurm, rapporteur.....	5
1. Introduction.....	5
2. Aims of the report and methodology.....	5
3. Women victims of gender-based violence in transit.....	6
4. Support to refugee and asylum-seeker women victims of gender-based violence and discrimination in destination countries.....	9
4.1. Situation in Germany.....	9
4.2. Situation in Sweden.....	11
4.3. Situation in Austria.....	12
4.4. Situation in Greece.....	13
4.5. Situation in Italy.....	14
4.6. Situation in Turkey.....	14
5. Responsibility to protect refugee and asylum-seeker women from violence.....	14
6. The challenge of integration.....	16
7. Main recommendations.....	16
8. Conclusions.....	17

A. Draft resolution²

1. In the past two years, more than one million asylum seekers came to Council of Europe member States looking for protection and opportunities for their children to grow up in peace. They left war-torn countries after suffering violence and witnessing atrocities. They took serious risks to come to Europe, where their presence has been at times welcomed but often criticised, making them the targets of hate speech and scapegoats for any problem arising.

2. In their countries of origin, during the journey, in transit and in destination countries, many refugee and asylum-seeker women and girls have been exposed to gender-based violence taking the form of coercion, forced prostitution, harassment, survival sex, sexual slavery or various forms of extortion. However, their protection from violence has not been considered a priority in the management of the refugee crisis. While the Parliamentary Assembly praises the countries which have to date taken high numbers of refugees and asylum seekers, it regrets that the gender dimension of the refugee crisis has been largely overlooked and has left protection gaps, increasing risks for many women.

3. The Assembly is convinced that providing protection from gender-based violence to all women, irrespective of their status, should be a priority, in line with the provisions of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (CETS No. 210, "Istanbul Convention"). The responsibility to help and protect asylum-seeker and refugee women is not limited to cases of violence perpetrated in destination countries. They should receive adequate assistance to overcome the trauma they have experienced in their countries of origin or during transit. Against this background, the Assembly recalls its [Resolution 1765 \(2010\)](#) and [Recommendation 1940 \(2010\)](#) on gender-related claims for asylum which advocate gender-sensitive asylum procedures.

4. The Assembly also stresses that the arrival of asylum seekers in Europe represents an opportunity to promote and uphold tolerance, diversity and openness, and to take a strong stance against multiple forms of discrimination. In addition to ensuring protection from violence and assistance to victims, States should invest in integration programmes to provide prospects for the coming years and help women refugees find their place in our societies.

5. In the light of these considerations, the Assembly calls on Council of Europe member and observer States to take the following concrete measures to address protection gaps and mitigate risks:

5.1. sign and ratify without further delay, for the States which have not yet done so, the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, and ensure its full implementation, which includes the recognition of gender-based violence as a form of persecution within the meaning of the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, as well as the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (CETS No. 197);

5.2. with regard to women's safety in transit and reception facilities:

5.2.1. ensure the presence of female social workers, interpreters, police officers and guards in these facilities;

5.2.2. provide separate sleeping areas for single women with or without children, and separate well-lit bathrooms for women;

5.2.3. create safe spaces in every transit and reception facility;

5.2.4. when needed, ensure access of refugee and asylum-seeker women to shelters for women victims of gender-based violence;

5.2.5. organise training on identifying and assisting victims of gender-based violence for social workers, police officers and guards working in the facilities;

5.2.6. provide information material in languages of the countries of origin on assistance services for victims of gender-based violence, including on reporting and complaint mechanisms;

5.2.7. provide, in transit and reception facilities, counselling, psychological support and health care, including sexual and reproductive health care and specific post-rape care, for victims of gender-based violence in their countries of origin and in transit or destination countries;

2. Draft resolution adopted unanimously by the committee on 20 March 2017.

5.3. with regard to asylum procedures:

5.3.1. implement gender-sensitive asylum procedures by ensuring the presence of female asylum officers and interpreters, if this has been requested after being proposed, give the opportunity to hold separate interviews for women and men from the same family and guarantee the confidentiality of the interviews;

5.3.2. ensure that asylum officers and interpreters receive training on how to detect gender-based violence and use gender-specific information about countries of origin, including the prevalence rate of female genital mutilation and forced marriage;

5.4. with regard to the overall management of cases and refugee policies:

5.4.1. participate in resettlement and relocation programmes, which represent the safest way for asylum seekers and refugees to come to Europe;

5.4.2. fund specific assistance and humanitarian resettlement programmes for women victims of gender-based violence, on the model of the Special Quota Project of the *Land* of Baden-Württemberg in Germany;

5.4.3. support family reunification;

5.4.4. set up cross-border protection mechanisms for victims of gender-based violence;

5.4.5. ensure the respect of protection standards for victims of violence by private service providers contracted to deliver services and accommodation to asylum seekers, by putting in place a monitoring mechanism foreseeing regular visits by migration officials;

5.5. invest in social and economic integration programmes specifically targeting women refugees, in particular by providing language courses and facilitating the recognition of diplomas as well as access to employment, and by informing women refugees of the rules of good conduct in the host country, particularly with respect to gender equality;

5.6. with regard to combating discrimination against refugees and asylum seekers, including women:

5.6.1. launch awareness-raising campaigns on the positive contribution of refugees and asylum seekers to our societies;

5.6.2. strongly condemn and punish any form of discrimination and violence against refugees and asylum seekers, including women.

6. The Assembly calls on members of national parliaments of Council of Europe member and observer States and parliaments which enjoy observer or partner for democracy status with the Assembly to speak out against the discrimination and stigmatisation of refugees and asylum seekers.

7. Finally, the Assembly pays tribute to the tremendous courage shown by refugee and asylum-seeker women, as well as internally displaced persons, such as the Yazidi advocates Nadia Murad, who received the Václav Havel Prize from the Assembly, and Farida Abbas, who escaped violence and who shared their stories so as to raise awareness throughout the world about the situation of women victims of gender-based violence and the need to ensure their protection.

B. Explanatory memorandum by Ms Gisela Wurm, rapporteur

1. Introduction

1. Women, men and children fleeing war-torn countries and persecution and looking for a safe haven have come to Europe in large numbers in recent years. They have travelled in difficult conditions and undeniably faced hardship before and during their journey to Europe, and once they arrived. At the beginning of what is now called the refugee crisis, most of them were men. On 8 March 2016, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR) reported that there had been a shift and that women and children were starting to represent the majority of arrivals.³

2. We should remember that personal tragic stories lie behind numbers. I will try to convey stories of violence, separation, war and threats, thanks to the asylum seekers and refugees who accepted to meet with me in the framework of the preparation of this report. They are too often ignored and are unable express their concerns and fears. It is our duty and responsibility to listen to them and to try to provide the best support possible. I consider this our duty as parliamentarians and our responsibility as citizens.

3. I decided to look into the specific situation of women and girls, who are particularly vulnerable and exposed to a high risk of abuse, discrimination and violence before, during and after their journey. Some women were already victims of gender-based violence in their country of origin, with sexual violence used as a weapon of war. Others fled the threat of forced marriage. I would like to stress that in this report, all references to women also include girls. Women's vulnerability and exposure to violence is increased by the lack of legal and safe routes to Europe. They have to be more dependent on traffickers and smugglers.⁴

4. In transit or upon arrival, women are at risk of violence, which can take the form of coercion, survival sex, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, harassment or various forms of extortions. They face common problems, such as the lack of safety, the absence of separate bathrooms, the absence of female interpreters, little information on assistance services available and in general a lack of general and post-trauma medical care. However, tackling these problems can represent specific challenges depending on the situation.

5. The need to protect women asylum seekers and refugees from gender-based violence is not widely covered by the media. It is not considered a political priority and is sometimes even ignored in the current handling of the refugee crisis. For the countries which accepted to receive asylum seekers during the refugee crisis, priority was given to a humanitarian response: finding accommodation for the family, putting the children in school and handling the asylum requests.

6. Women asylum seekers tend to be invisible. They are not the first ones to be spoken to or to be interviewed, they are not the ones speaking in the name of the family and they systematically put first the interest and well-being of their families. Too often, refugee and asylum-seeker women victims of gender-based violence aren't ask for help, are afraid of stigmatisation and are unsure of the response they would receive. Talking about sexual violence still remains taboo. It can be difficult for victims to speak about it to people they do not know and whom they may not trust immediately.

7. Action can be taken to ensure that women asylum seekers and refugees receive adequate support. This action does not necessarily require large financial resources but mainly political will. Governments should ensure that the gender dimension is taken into account and apply a gender-based approach to the refugee crisis, while guaranteeing protection and support to all women victims of violence.

8. Although this is not a common practice for reports presented to the Assembly, I would like to dedicate this report to all refugee and asylum-seeker women who have the courage to share their stories in order to raise awareness and call for action.

2. Aims of the report and methodology

9. This report aims at raising awareness about the vulnerable situation of women refugees and asylum seekers and the widespread discrimination against them.

3. Speech to the European Parliament, Debate on the situation of women refugees and asylum seekers in the European Union, report by Ms Mary Honeyball (United Kingdom, S&D), Strasbourg, 8 March 2016.

4. Rachael Reilly, Women's Refugee Commission, Workshop on violence against refugee women, European Parliament, Brussels, 3 March 2016.

10. Throughout the preparation of my report, I had the opportunity to meet with key interlocutors working on the protection of women refugees and asylum seekers from gender-based violence, in Strasbourg and during fact-finding visits. I participated in the Inter-parliamentary meeting on women refugees organised by the European Parliament on 3 March 2016 in Brussels and co-chaired a side event dedicated to preventing and combating violence against women refugees and asylum seekers. The Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination held a joint hearing with the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons on discrimination and violence against women refugees on 22 June 2016 in Strasbourg with the participation of Ms Mina Jaf, women refugees rights activist, Mr Arne Treves, protection officer, UNHCR Bureau for Europe in Geneva, and Dr Richard Matis, Vice-Chair of Gynaecology without Borders (France). We also heard a testimony by Ms Baldé, refugee victim of forced marriage, domestic violence and female genital mutilation in her home country.

11. I carried out a fact-finding visit to Berlin on 19 and 20 September 2016 where I held meetings with women refugees, parliamentarians, government representatives, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and social workers. This visit made me feel and experience the commitment of all those I have met who are engaged in preventing and protecting women refugees from violence and facilitating their integration into German society. I also met with refugee women who told me about their relief to be living in Germany, in a safe environment, and who were grateful for the actions taken by the German Government and the support received so far. I went on another fact-finding visit to Stockholm on 8 and 9 December 2016 where I held meetings with the Minister for Gender Equality, the State Secretary in charge of migration, parliamentarians, NGOs, the Swedish Migration Service and women asylum seekers victims of gender-based violence. I discussed the support received by refugee women and measures taken to welcome a high number of asylum seekers in 2015. These visits gave me an insight into the challenges faced by these two countries, which have welcomed the highest numbers of asylum seekers in the past two years. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the people who took the time to meet with me, and to commend the action taken so far for the protection of women from gender-based violence.

12. The committee also held a hearing on Yazidi women and the rehabilitation of victims of violence on 25 January 2017 in Strasbourg, with the participation of Ms Farida Abbas, Yazidi survivor of violence by Daesh, and Dr Michael Blume, who heads the Special Quota Project in the *Land* of Baden-Württemberg. They called for the setting up of similar assistance programmes in other States for women refugees and internally displaced victims of gender-based violence.

13. I received information from several UNHCR field offices and the UNHCR representation to the Council of Europe. I would like to thank them for the information provided and for our excellent co-operation.

14. With fact-finding visits, bilateral meetings, desk research and hearings, I collected an important amount of data which I will try to reflect to the extent possible in this report. The refugee crisis is not in the news headlines as much as last year, but the situation of refugee and asylum-seeker women still needs our utmost attention. I sincerely hope that this report will contribute to shedding light on the need to step up efforts to better protect asylum-seeker and refugee women from gender-based violence, provide assistance when needed in transit and destination countries, and to advocating for gender-sensitive asylum procedures and support services. Protecting them from gender-based violence means protecting one of the most vulnerable parts of the population in Europe. Ensuring their protection from violence is a first step towards ensuring their successful integration.

15. I would like to clarify that this report will not deal with specific cases of violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) refugees and asylum seekers. However, I would like to encourage the Parliamentary Assembly to work on this issue and recommend that the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination hold a preliminary hearing, which could lead to the preparation of a motion for a resolution. This represents another important aspect of the refugee crisis and I would most welcome work of the Assembly on this topic in the future.

3. Women victims of gender-based violence in transit

16. On the road, on a boat, in transit camps or centres, or when working in a transit country in order to pay for the rest of the journey, refugee and asylum-seeker women are particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence. They live in dire conditions and often do not have access to health care and counselling. "After living through the horrors of the war in Iraq and Syria these women have risked everything to find safety for themselves and their children. But from the moment they begin this journey they are again exposed to violence and exploitation, with little support or protection", stressed Tirana Hassan, Crisis Response Director for Amnesty International.⁵

17. Refugee women in transit are not always considered a priority in global refugee policies, which focus mostly on reception facilities. Women refugees and asylum seekers in transit themselves tend to put the well-being of their families before their own. They disregard the difficulties they face and the violence they are victims of with one objective in mind: reaching a safe destination country quickly. During our hearing held in June 2016, Arne Treves, UNHCR protection officer, stressed that there was a sense of urgency among populations on the move, who would rather continue their journey or proceed with an asylum request than seek help when victims of violence. I am of the opinion that it is essential to ensure the protection and well-being of women refugees and asylum seekers throughout their journey. There can be no effective protection from violence if we disregard the dangers they face on the way.

18. For women refugees and asylum seekers, going to Europe can mean becoming, for the first time or again, a victim of gender-based violence. As suggested by Doctors Without Borders, the price of the journey to Europe can be much higher than money. Smugglers may rape the women candidates for departure in exchange for a place on a boat, in addition to the fee they have already paid.⁶ Doctors Without Borders also received reports of sexual violence and forced prostitution in Libya, through which many women have been transiting. It reports kidnappings and ransom demands, up to the amount already paid to cross the Mediterranean. If a woman's family cannot pay the ransom, she is sold for prostitution or marriage. The UNHCR also reported on violence women had suffered in Libya and on the way from Libya to reach Italy.⁷

19. As highlighted by the Nobel Women's Initiative, the refugee route to Europe presents many risks for women. Violence and exploitation along the way, travelling with abusive partners and lack of safety in transit settlements are unfortunately common.⁸ Perpetrators of violence can have different profiles: smugglers, other refugees or asylum seekers, sometimes guards or staff working in camps or family members. Women can be shamed for daring to leave their country and their family behind. Some are robbed during the journey and forced into survival sex to get food for their families or themselves or to pay off smugglers.

20. Within couples in transit, tensions can be exacerbated by uncertainty and tiredness. Domestic violence is not rare, but is seldom reported. Women refugees in transit tend to stay with their husbands until they reach the destination country, even when they are victims of violence, fearing additional separation after the trauma of leaving their country. In their determination to reach a safe haven, they put aside the violence they have experienced.

21. Already in October 2015, the UNHCR expressed concern with regard to the situation of women refugees on their way to Europe: "Refugee and migrant women travelling on their own are also at heightened risk as they move through Europe, sometimes at night, along insecure routes or staying in places that lack basic security."⁹ Transit facilities, when they exist, can be rudimentary and not offer separate sleeping areas for women and men, which can put women in a vulnerable situation. A climate of fear has been reported in transit facilities, where women are afraid of walking alone at night and of using the sanitary facilities without being accompanied.¹⁰ Taking a shower can be dangerous in a place with no separate sanitary facilities or without lights. The Women's Refugee Commission reports that some women avoid eating or drinking so as not to have to use the toilets, where they do not feel safe.

22. It has also been reported that security is deficient in sites where women are transiting in Greece, with no identity check at the entrance and holes in the fences around facilities allowing people to pass through easily.¹¹ In its assessment of Serbia and Slovenia, the Women's Refugee Commission found that "there is virtually no consideration of gender-based violence along the route to ensure safe environments, identify survivors and ensure that services are provided to them. ... The lack of clear information and inability to access interpreters, especially female interpreters, hinders women and girls from accessing services and leaves them vulnerable to smugglers and other opportunists".¹²

5. Female refugees face physical assault, exploitation and sexual harassment on their journey through Europe, Amnesty International, 18 January 2016.

6. "En Méditerranée, la violence inouïe contre les femmes migrantes", *Le Monde*, 7 September 2016.

7. Information provided by the UNHCR office for Southern Europe.

8. Women refugees at risk in Europe, Nobel Women's Initiative, March 2016.

9. UNHCR concern over testimonies of abuse and sexual violence against refugee and migrant women and children on the move in Europe, Melissa Fleming, UNHCR spokesperson, press briefing at the Palais des Nations in Geneva, 23 October 2015.

10. Rachael Reilly, op. cit.

11. EU-Turkey Agreement failing refugee women and girls, Women's Refugee Commission, August 2016.

12. No Safety for Refugee Women on the European Route: Report from the Balkans, Women's Refugee Commission, January 2016.

23. In addition, Amnesty International has received reports of women being beaten or verbally abused by security officers in Greece, Hungary and Slovenia.¹³ Following an assessment mission to Greece and “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”, the UNHCR, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Women’s Refugee Commission found that States needed to “strengthen protection mechanisms and services across borders to adequately address the protection threats”.¹⁴

24. I also received information about cases of gender-based violence in Calais before and during the dismantlement of the camp, as well as cases of sexual violence perpetrated by truck drivers promising to take women from Calais to the United Kingdom in exchange for sex.¹⁵ Some women are reportedly wearing adult nappies so as to avoid going to the toilets at night where they feel unsafe.¹⁶ At our hearing in June 2016, Dr Richard Matis, Vice-Chairperson of Gynaecology without Borders (GSF), presented the situation of women refugees and asylum seekers in two camps in the north of France (Calais and Grande-Synthe). After receiving information about women victims of sexual violence, domestic violence and forced prostitution, GSF decided to intervene and provide assistance via a mobile clinic in a small truck. The support provided by mobile clinics can be invaluable for women refugees who are victims of violence in transit or reception camps and this kind of initiative should be supported by authorities. They allow post-rape medical kits and counselling to be provided in a setting that offers some privacy. In the camp in Norrent Fontes (northern France), Dr Matis informed us that support groups had been put in place to encourage women to discuss birth control, abortion, violence and relationships between women and men, with the help of interpreters. Such support groups can help to lift the taboo of harassment and sexual violence. They can encourage women to speak about the violence they were victims of during the journey or in their country of origin.

25. I would also like to welcome the initiative taken by Doctors Without Borders to have a safe space on board the boat “Aquarius” which rescues migrants in the Mediterranean. In this space, women victims of violence can see doctors and have meetings with counsellors and lawyers, without the presence of their families. However, the Aquarius today lacks funding.

26. Gender-based violence is not always considered a priority by officers providing support and assistance in transit camps or facilities: in addition, they do not necessarily have the means or the tools to provide assistance. They may not have received specific training to detect violence or may simply not be sensitised to this issue. This lack of capacity means that they do not necessarily propose adequate support to refugee women who are victims of gender-based violence. In addition, there are still too few sexual and gender-based violence protection officers, either in transit or reception facilities. As stressed by the European Women’s Lobby, “transit/accommodation sites should be built and staffed in a gender-sensitive manner, recognising women and girls’ need for safety”.¹⁷

27. Where refugee women wish to seek assistance or report violence, it can be difficult for them to receive information on complaints procedures in a language they understand or to communicate without the presence of female interpreters in transit facilities. They may also decide not to report violence, fearing possible reprisals and stigmatisation. Talking about sexual violence can be very difficult since it is widely considered as a taboo.

28. There have also been reports of forced and early marriages of girls in transit. There were also cases of young Syrian girls married by their parents in refugee camps.¹⁸ Families sometimes took the decision to marry their daughters before departure or when in transit with the view to trying to offer them some protection for the journey and to prevent them from enduring violence from several perpetrators. The issue of forced and early marriages, including in a context of migration, will be dealt with in depth in the upcoming report on forced marriage by Ms Béatrice Fresko-Rolfo (Monaco, EPP/CD).

29. I would also like to mention the situation of pregnant refugee women, for whom the journey presents many risks because of the lack of medical care, exhaustion and the dangers of violence.

13. Female refugees face physical assault, exploitation and sexual harassment on their journey through Europe, *ibid*.

14. Initial assessment report: Protection Risks for Women and Girls in the European Refugee and Migrant Crisis – Greece and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, UNHCR, UNFPA and the Women’s Refugee Commission, assessment mission conducted in November 2015.

15. Information provided by the Planning familial (France). See also Women and children “endure rape, beatings and abuse” inside Dunkirk’s refugee camp, Mark Townsend, *The Guardian*, 12 February 2017.

16. Women and child refugees face abuse in French camp, Nikolaj Nielsen, *The EU Observer*, 23 February 2017.

17. From conflict to peace? #womensvoices, Recommendations on preventing and combating violence against refugee women and girls on the move, European Women’s Lobby, June 2016.

18. Child marriage: a devastating effect of the refugee crisis, World Economic Forum, 22 October 2015.

30. Preventing gender-based violence against women refugees in transit means enhancing cross-border protection mechanisms. To this end, in its assessment, the United Nations called for the establishment of “a co-ordinated response system within and across borders that protects women and girls” and for the deployment of protection officers specialised in protecting victims of sexual and gender-based violence.¹⁹ I would also like to support the recommendation made by the Women’s Refugee Commission to set up a co-ordinated case management system across borders so as to share information about victims of violence and to avoid them having to report the violence to which they were subjected and tell their story several times.

4. Support to refugee and asylum-seeker women victims of gender-based violence and discrimination in destination countries

31. In addition to being at risk of violence on their way to Europe, refugee and asylum-seeker women can also feel unsafe when reaching their destination countries. Protection from violence has been a neglected aspect of the global response to the refugee crisis in Europe, which means that all the measures needed to prevent gender-based violence in reception facilities were not taken from the beginning. However, I would like to nuance this bleak picture since several concrete protection measures have been taken in the past few months to respond to this safety threat.

32. In this part of the report, I intend to focus mostly on Germany and Sweden, which welcomed the highest numbers of asylum seekers and refugees in the European Union in 2015. I would like to commend the extraordinary efforts made by these countries to welcome such high numbers of asylum seekers and refugees and would like to call for more solidarity by other States. I will also present some information about the situation in Austria, Italy and Greece, which are hosting to date an important number of asylum seekers and refugees.

33. I had the opportunity to meet with a variety of interlocutors during fact-finding visits to Berlin and Stockholm, which gave me a good insight into the situation. Both in Germany and Sweden, the authorities acknowledged that not enough had been done to protect asylum seekers and refugees from gender-based violence and to detect potential victims upon arrival and during the first months of their stay. I met with interlocutors who recognised that, at the beginning of the refugee crisis, priority was given to the overall humanitarian response, not necessarily taking into account a gender dimension or the specific needs of women. Sexual violence has been recently reported in several reception centres in both countries.²⁰

34. Asylum seekers coming to Europe are seeking safety. However, they do not yet feel fully protected in their destination countries since their future is uncertain. After many months in reception facilities (often more than 10), they may lack prospects, which can affect their morale. Changes and uncertainty can create tensions within families and at times lead to an atmosphere conducive to violence.

4.1. Situation in Germany

35. About a million asylum seekers have arrived in Germany since the beginning of 2015, with a peak during the summer and early autumn. The authorities dealt with the setting up of emergency reception centres and trying to find shelter for and provide food to all those who arrived. There were not systematically separate wash facilities or sleeping areas for women. The situation of women who had travelled alone to Europe was particularly difficult. Germany was criticised by human rights organisations for not ensuring the protection of women refugees from gender-based violence from the beginning. However, I received information that efforts were being made to ensure the presence of women security personnel, social workers and interpreters in the reception facilities in Germany. Women who travelled alone and families have priority to leave emergency reception facilities for longer-term accommodation. Women’s support groups have been set up. The police intervene in cases of violence, including domestic violence, in reception facilities.

36. Despite the presence of security guards, including female security guards, I was told that women are still afraid to walk around reception facilities at night. In addition, there are not enough women-only facilities in Germany and increased support is needed for women on their own. One major issue of concern is the attitude of security guards of reception facilities. Several interlocutors confirmed that there had been cases of violence by security guards against women refugees but I did not receive any information about the number of complaints made to the police. Guards receive training on inter-cultural competences without a specific part

19. Initial assessment report (see footnote 14 above).

20. Falling through the cracks: Refugee women and girls in Germany and Sweden, Women’s Refugee Commission, March 2016.

dedicated to preventing gender-based violence. Reception centres are managed by the *Länder* directly, which means that there is no general overview of protection measures taken. As an example, there is no systematic procedure for identifying victims of violence upon registration in refugee facilities.

37. With regard to asylum procedures, I was informed that each asylum seeker is asked whether he/she would like a female or a male interpreter and asylum officer. In addition, each asylum officer is asked to attend awareness-raising training on gender-based violence.

38. In Berlin, I met women refugees from Syria.²¹ One, a mother of three children, was a victim of domestic violence. She had decided to leave her husband after arriving in Germany and was living in a shelter for women victims of violence together with her children. She would not have had custody of her children if she had left her husband in Syria. She told me that she was rebuilding her life and was receiving psychological support. She had come through Turkey and Greece, and then walked to Germany. She herself had not experienced sexual violence or harassment on the way, but told me that women were afraid on the way to Europe.

39. The testimonies of women refugees were very moving. They showed tremendous courage leaving their country, crossing Europe seeking safety for their families. They told me how their houses had been bombed in Syria, how they had made the decision to leave. They all said that they would be ready to go back if peace was guaranteed, but for the time being, they were happy to be in Germany. Some had crossed the border to Turkey with smugglers who did not treat them well. One woman had left Syria after a member of Daesh killed someone in front of her and her children. A social worker at the Schöneberg shelter told me the story of a woman who had fled Raqqa because a member of Daesh wanted to marry her 7-year old daughter.

40. I also would like to take this opportunity to shed light specifically on the situation of Yazidi women who have been abducted, abused and exploited as sex slaves. Some of them now receive assistance and support in Germany. Girls as young as 8 years old have been raped and sold between fighters. In refugee and displaced persons camps in the North of Iraq, there have been several cases of suicides of Yazidi women victims of gender-based violence who had been rejected by their community.

41. I had the honour of meeting with Ms Nadia Murad, who received the Václav Havel Prize from the Assembly on 10 October 2016. She told me her story, the violence she was a victim of and the support she received when arriving in Germany. Her voice represents thousands of Yazidi women who are still in the hands of Daesh. She asked me to advocate for the setting up of programmes of support and rehabilitation for women asylum seekers and refugees victims of violence, such as the one she follows in Germany. Such rehabilitation programmes are a condition *sine qua non* to ensure their safety and open the doors to a possible future in Europe. Nadia Murad also asked for concrete support for women living in difficult conditions in refugee camps, notably in Greece.

42. Some 1 100 Yazidi women are currently receiving psychological support and benefit from rehabilitation services in the *Land* of Baden-Württemberg in Germany, in the framework of the Special Quota Project. They are hosted in secret shelters together with their children, receive medical treatment when needed and psychological support, attend German classes and arrangements are made for all children to go to school. Often, they left members of their families behind, still in captivity. They are constantly thinking of these family members, which can postpone the rehabilitation process.

43. As highlighted by Dr Michael Blume, Head of the Special Quota Project, during our hearing, “every life saved counts”. He explained the importance of providing psychological support in a specific programme away from the country of origin. He stressed that Yazidi women victims of gender-based violence were at first ostracised for being victims of sexual violence. With his team, he managed to convince the religious Head of the Yazidi community to bless women who had been victims of gender-based violence and to stress that they did not lose their honour. He was pleased to state that women participating in the Special Quota Project were no longer seen as victims but rather as survivors and heroines, ambassadors of the Yazidi community.

44. Ms Farida Abbas and Ms Nadia Murad are beneficiaries of this programme and expressed their gratitude to the *Land* of Baden-Württemberg. Ms Abbas told us she did not know if she would still be alive if she had not left for Germany. She now felt stronger than Daesh, able to share her story in front of audiences so as to raise awareness and prevent further violence against the Yazidi community. I can only commend the

21. I met one woman refugee from Syria at the shelter in Schöneberg and five women refugees, also from Syria, at Marienfeld facility. A total of 718 persons are now living in apartments in Marienfeld and receive support and advice from 10 social workers.

courage demonstrated by the *Land* of Baden-Württemberg in going ahead with this programme and with this report I would like to call for the setting up of this kind of programme elsewhere in Europe. I welcome the fact that Canada will soon start a resettlement programme for 1 200 Yazidi women and children.

4.2. Situation in Sweden

45. On 1 December 2016, 131 903 people were living in the facilities of the Migration Agency, of which 28 674 had already been granted asylum. 162 877 asylum applications were made in 2015 and 26 929 were made from January to November 2016. The arrival of such a high number of asylum seekers represented an important challenge for Swedish society. Lars Westbratt, State Secretary to the Minister for Justice and Migration told me that about 140 000 asylum seekers had arrived in four months and all had received accommodation. In the summer of 2016, the Swedish Government decided to change the legislation to a minimal level so as to limit the number of arrivals, still in respect of European Union standards. The new legislation made family reunifications more difficult. 105 asylum seekers are currently arriving in Sweden every week.

46. I regret that I was not granted access to reception facilities by the Swedish Migration Agency, which explained that this kind of visit could be misinterpreted by asylum seekers. I am therefore not able to give first-hand information with regard to the situation in reception facilities and have to rely on what I was told by asylum seekers I have met, as well as representatives of the Swedish Migration Agency and of NGOs. I was told that when a family makes an asylum request, the asylum officer usually hears the man's story, which does not give the opportunity to the woman to talk about her story and experience privately. The interviewee is asked if he/she has a preference with regard to the gender of the interviewer.

47. The fact-finding visit to Sweden highlighted problems linked to the externalisation and privatisation of services for asylum seekers and refugees. Considering the number of persons that had arrived, the Migration Agency could not host all of them in State-owned and managed facilities and decided to externalise the provision of accommodation to private companies, mostly in apartments. Contracts were prepared with private companies which committed to guaranteeing the respect of certain standards. I was informed however that these contracts did not include gender-sensitive information which could be relevant with regard to the protection of women from violence. Officers of the Swedish Migration Agency visit asylum seekers in these facilities about twice a week to see if there are any difficulties. One asylum seeker I met told me these visits were not frequent or long enough to detect any possible problems. Interpreters are also often contracted externally, since there are not enough official interpreters to cope with the number of interviews. They do not necessarily have the experience and knowledge to detect violence in a story, which can be told with abstract images.

48. Representatives of the Swedish Migration Agency recognised they needed to improve their routine so as to identify vulnerable groups among asylum seekers and implement standards to identify and protect victims of violence. In the past two years, the Migration Agency grew from 4 000 to 8 000 staff members, often recruited on short-term contracts. Staff members are informed about gender-based violence in their introductory training programme.

49. In Sweden, officials of the Swedish Migration Agency acknowledged that protection of refugee and asylum-seeker women from gender-based violence had not yet reached the level of international protection standards. As in Germany, reception facilities are managed at the local level, which makes it difficult to have a national overview of the situation. There are not separate bathrooms for women in all reception facilities. With regard to the rationale behind the lack of separate bathrooms for women and men in reception facilities, I was told that the idea was to expose asylum seekers to the Swedish culture of non-segregation between women and men and to promote gender equality. I am of the opinion that sharing bathrooms could be difficult for asylum-seeking women, even more so if they have been victims of gender-based violence. They need to be able to access well-lit bathrooms reserved for women at any time of the day and night, without fearing for their safety. This is a basic standard for their protection from violence.

50. There are also no reception facilities reserved only for women asylum seekers in Sweden, which can be traumatic and difficult for single women who travelled alone and experienced violence in their countries of origin or in transit. I am of the opinion that women-only structures should be made available, considering the extreme vulnerability of refugee and asylum-seeker women who have been victims of violence. Women who have faced violence in their countries of origin or on the way to Sweden do not receive specific support. Assistance programmes need to be made available to all victims of gender-based violence, irrespective of the country where the violence was perpetrated, in respect of the provisions of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (CETS No. 210, "Istanbul Convention").

51. Several cases of violence against women asylum seekers in reception centres made the media headlines but I did not receive official police data with regard to the number of complaints. UNHCR Sweden expressed concern about risks of sexual and gender-based violence in reception centres.²² Following a monitoring visit in December 2016, UNHCR Sweden noted that single women were living in mixed housing with single men and it created a feeling of unease for women. I was told during my visit that the heavy bureaucracy and fear of stigmatisation could prevent women asylum seekers from making a complaint. Where violence has occurred, the perpetrator can be moved to another reception facility.

52. Child marriage is being increasingly debated in Sweden. Families sometimes take the decision to marry their daughters to older men before departure or when in transit, trying to offer them protection and to prevent them from enduring violence at the hands of several perpetrators. However, this coping strategy is a violation of women's and children's rights. The Swedish Migration Agency conducted a study on child marriage among refugees and asylum seekers. It found 132 married children in reception facilities, most of them having arrived in Sweden during autumn 2015.

53. There has also been an increase in the number of cases of trafficking in human beings. The Swedish Migration Agency found 195 victims of trafficking in human beings, including 66 minors, in reception facilities in 2015, and more than 300 in 2016.²³ I was also informed that a person who had been exposed to trafficking in human beings in a country other than Sweden could not be granted asylum in Sweden and was thus at great risk of being re-trafficked.

54. I was able to witness the commitment of the Swedish authorities to combat violence against women in all its forms and provide information on support services to refugee and asylum-seeker women in several languages, and the plans for their further integration into Swedish society, with the provision of language classes, childcare and efforts made for the schooling of all children.

55. As in the visit to Germany, meeting with asylum seekers who accepted to share their story made me realise how much we need to do more to support them. I will always remember the story of an 18-year old girl whose father forced her to leave Iraq and head to Europe (her parents were divorced and her mother did not agree with her leaving). The father beat his daughter up every day whilst in transit and after arriving in Sweden. He also put her under enormous psychological pressure, forbidding her to interact with anyone. She was not identified as a victim by the migration services and not considered a vulnerable person since she travelled with a member of her family. She managed to escape, went to hospital where violence was detected and the social services contacted. She was brought to the shelter run by the NGO Somaya. She is still too afraid to make a complaint to the police against her father, is living under threat and is trying to rebuild a life for herself. She is still waiting for a decision with regard to her status and her mother has received death threats in Iraq by members of her father's family.

56. I also left Sweden with the story of an Afghan woman who married a man in Afghanistan against the will of her family. Following threats by the family, they left Afghanistan to go to Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Greece and then Sweden, where her husband became violent towards her. She left the household with her two children, one being autistic, and had her asylum request denied three times, which is the maximum number of requests an asylum seeker is entitled to make. She does not know yet what her fate will be and fears facing more violence if she is forcibly returned to Afghanistan.

4.3. Situation in Austria

57. In the reply provided by the Ministry of the Interior to my questions, I was informed that every measure had been taken to take into consideration the gender dimension of the refugee crisis and that specific attention was given to vulnerable groups throughout the status determination process. The Austrian Ministry of the Interior reported that 88 340 asylum requests were made in 2015, including 24 478 by women (27.7%).²⁴ In 2016, 13 866 asylum claims were made by women on a total of 42 073 claims. The State Office for asylum hired more than 400 additional officers so as to deal with the increase of the number of claims in past years.

22. Information received from UNHCR Sweden on 23 February 2017.

23. The situation of asylum seekers and in particular unaccompanied minors victims of trafficking was already addressed by the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA) in its report on the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (CETS No. 197) in respect of Sweden (GRETA(2014)11).

24. Information provided by the Austrian Ministry of the Interior on 20 February 2017 following a written request.

58. In Austria, reception facilities are managed at the federal level as well as in provinces, with varying accommodation conditions. At the federal level, reception centres are managed by the private company ORS. Security officers working in these centres receive specific training and are able to provide information on the prevention of gender-based violence.

59. Psychological support and medical care are provided to refugee women victims of violence. I was also informed that German courses for women only are organised, during which gender-related themes are discussed.

60. Women who travelled alone to Austria are accommodated in a separate house in the reception centre in the city of Traiskirchen. Security is ensured by female security officers and access to the house is reserved for women only.

61. In Austria, police officers also receive training on gender-based violence in their general curriculum. Since 2002, police officers take part in the training programme “A world of difference” during which they reflect on their interaction with minorities.

4.4. Situation in Greece

62. In her report on “Refugees at risk in Europe”,²⁵ Ms Tineke Strik (Netherlands, SOC), rapporteur for the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons, shed light on the situation of 46 000 refugees and migrants blocked in mainland Greece and 8 500 on the islands following the closure of the northern border with “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” and the EU–Turkey Agreement. She stressed that Greece was bearing a disproportionate responsibility for responding to the refugee and migration crisis because of its place on the map and was unable to ensure basic levels of protection.

63. Greece was considered at first a transit country. However, the UNHCR²⁶ reported that most of the asylum seekers and refugees who arrived in Greece in 2016 have remained in the country due to the closing of the northern border. Structures that were initially planned as transit facilities had to host people for extended periods, which represented a number of challenges. In many cases, reception conditions were not at minimum standards, mostly because of the high number of arrivals, but efforts have been made to upgrade the sites. The overcrowding of reception facilities in Greece has had an impact on the protection of women from gender-based violence.

64. The UNHCR reports that the risk of sexual and gender-based violence was not systematically taken into consideration when designing the reception/transit sites and that there is an overall perception of lack of security. There is insufficient lighting and sex-segregated wash facilities or sleeping areas are not systematically available. The UNHCR received several reports of sexual and gender-based violence in reception facilities including domestic violence, sexual assaults and survival sex. The police are present at the entrance of sites but are not patrolling inside. The UNHCR recommends the provision of training on the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence and increasing the number of female police staff.

65. The UNHCR proceeds with the identification of vulnerable groups upon arrival and works to accommodate them in suitable facilities. In many cases, women at risk of violence or survivors of violence are accommodated in UNHCR-funded accommodation facilities. Psychosocial and legal services are offered to survivors of gender-based violence in several reception and identification centres and in open accommodation sites. Prevention actions are undertaken by UNHCR partners to raise awareness on the risks of gender-based violence and available assistance services. The UNHCR co-operates with national authorities and some refugee women survivors of violence have been helped by the relevant national mechanisms providing assistance to victims.

25. [Doc. 14082](#) and [Addendum](#), and [Resolution 2118 \(2016\)](#) on Refugees in Greece: challenges and risks – A European responsibility, adopted by the Assembly on 21 June 2016.

26. Briefing information received from the UNHCR office in Greece on 24 February 2017, mentioned with its authorisation.

4.5. Situation in Italy

66. In the framework of the preparation of this report, I was in contact with the UNHCR Office for Southern Europe²⁷ and received information about alarming rates of sexual and gender-based violence among new arrivals in Italy. The majority of women arriving by sea are survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, including sexual assault during their journey, mainly in Libya but also during boat journeys. Men and boys were also identified among survivors of sexual and gender-based violence.

67. The lack of a safe environment at disembarkation and the often large collective reception facilities, combined with insufficient awareness with regard to sexual and gender-based violence and groups at risk, represent a major challenge. The UNHCR reported that identification and response to sexual and gender-based violence would need to be strengthened throughout the procedure and reception cycle in Italy, including by ensuring a systematic and standardised referral to existing national systems for victims of gender-based violence, female genital mutilation (FGM) and trafficking. To this end, there is a need for further training of staff working on the front line with asylum seekers so as to respond to cases of gender-based violence.

68. The UNHCR also reported an increase in the number of women, particularly from Nigeria, who are potentially trafficked and becoming victims of sexual exploitation in the past three years.

69. Nevertheless, several good practices can be mentioned with regard to Italy, such as existing national programmes on combating gender-based violence, FGM and trafficking in human beings; the presence of health and humanitarian organisations at disembarkation areas; and the existence of a web training platform on FGM (project implemented by the Associazione Italiana Donne per lo Sviluppo), with a module on refugees and migrants, to train the response sector services.

4.6. Situation in Turkey

70. The situation of refugee and asylum-seeker women in Turkey, currently hosting almost 3 million refugees, also deserves our utmost attention and I would recommend future work by the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination to specifically look at this issue, including cases of sexual violence, harassment, forced marriages, child marriages and trafficking in human beings.

71. The impact of the agreement between the European Union and Turkey on women should also be analysed. Turkey signed an agreement with the European Union stipulating it would take back refugees who arrived in Greece via irregular routes after 20 March 2016. The Women's Refugee Commission has expressed concerns with regard to the safety of those returned and in general about cases of gender-based violence against refugee women.²⁸

5. Responsibility to protect refugee and asylum-seeker women from violence

72. Providing support to refugee and asylum-seeker women victims of gender-based violence cannot be done overnight. It can take months for a woman to be ready to share her story and seek assistance. It is therefore crucial to establish confidence with the persons working in the reception facilities and those coming for visits in accommodation located away from reception facilities. Social workers, asylum officers, guards and police officers should all be sensitised on signs to detect cases of gender-based violence, how to respond to these cases and provide timely assistance. Providing training on preventing and gender-based violence to all professionals in reception facilities is part of our responsibility to protect refugee and asylum-seeker women from violence.

73. Refugee determination processes need to be gender sensitive. Each asylum seeker should have the possibility to ask for a female or male interpreter and asylum officer. Some women believe they would not be granted refugee status if they left their husband. They experience pressure from their families to stay with their husbands and sometimes decide to remain in a violent household. Having the possibility of being interviewed alone by a female asylum officer could put a woman more at ease to share her story, especially where sexual violence has taken place.

27. Briefing information received from the UNHCR office for Southern Europe on 24 February 2017, mentioned with its authorisation.

28. EU-Turkey Agreement Failing Refugee Women and Girls, Women's Refugee Commission, August 2016.

74. Access to information in several languages and the presence of female interpreters are also essential, as well as the creation of women-only shelters for women refugees and asylum seekers. Arne Treves, UNHCR protection officer, highlighted during our hearing in June 2016 that efforts should be stepped up to ensure the recruitment of a significant number of female interpreters who would play a fundamental role in supporting victims.

75. Key recommendations already exist at the international level for the protection of refugee and asylum-seeker women from violence. I would therefore like to promote the implementation of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Guidelines for integrating gender-based violence interventions in humanitarian action, adopted by the United Nations in 2015. There is a need to allocate sufficient means for their implementation. These concrete guidelines should serve as a guiding principle when establishing transit and reception facilities, wherever this may be. We need to acknowledge that the refugee crisis in Europe required emergency humanitarian action. These guidelines can help reduce risks and address the protection gaps by implementing safeguards.²⁹

76. Another key instrument is undoubtedly the Istanbul Convention, which foresees the protection of refugee women against violence and requires its States Parties to recognise gender-based violence as a form of persecution covered by the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention.³⁰ It requires a gender-sensitive interpretation of the grounds for asylum listed in the Refugee Convention.³¹

77. I would like to highlight that in its Article 4.3, the Istanbul Convention places an obligation on its Parties to implement its provisions without discrimination on the ground of migrant, refugee or other status. The convention therefore foresees preventive measures, support services for refugee and asylum-seeker women, as well as the prosecution of the perpetrators of violence. Another important element is the obligation to introduce gender-sensitive procedures and support services in the asylum process (Article 60.3). In addition, Article 25 requires Parties to ensure that rape crisis or sexual violence referral centres for victims of sexual violence are easily accessible and can provide full trauma support, irrespective of where the violence occurred. This is not yet the case everywhere, as I saw in Sweden.

78. The Istanbul Convention is the most advanced international instrument for the protection of all women, irrespective of their status, from gender-based violence. It also calls on Parties to respect the principle of *non-refoulement* (Article 61) which ensures that women victims of violence needing international protection are not returned to a country where their life could be at risk.

79. I intend to call on States which have not yet ratified it to do so and implement it without further delay. Protecting women refugees from gender-based violence does not equate to less protection for other women. The Istanbul Convention advocates a comprehensive protection mechanism for all.

80. Some refugee and asylum-seeker women have been or are at risk of becoming victims of trafficking in human beings for sexual exploitation. I would also call for a greater attention to this matter and for the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings. A gender-specific approach to prevent trafficking in human beings should be further encouraged.

81. No-one should risk their life to find protection. This report also provides an opportunity to advocate family reunification arrangements and resettlement programmes,³² which are one of the safest ways to ensure women asylum seekers reach their destination countries safely. There are few resettlement programmes in the European Union, with 28 540 refugees resettled between 2011 and 2015.³³ Family reunification arrangements, resettlement programmes and emergency resettlement schemes all contribute to the protection of women asylum seekers from gender-based violence and should not be limited, but actively promoted. I would also like to stress that these programmes should also be made available for internally displaced women at risk of violence.³⁴

29. The European Women's Lobby also prepared recommendations on preventing and combating violence against women and girls on the move, released on 7 June 2016.

30. Article 60.1 of the Istanbul Convention. See also the Human rights comment on "Human rights of refugee and migrant women and girls need to be better protected" by the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, 7 March 2016.

31. Article 60.2 of the Istanbul Convention, See also the Factsheet on the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention): Protecting migrant women, refugee women and women asylum seekers from gender-based violence.

32. Only 1% of refugees are resettled – why are we so threatened by them? Annabel Mwangi, *The Guardian*, 18 February 2017.

33. UNHCR, Better Protecting Refugees in the EU and Globally: UNHCR's proposals to rebuild trust through better management, partnership and solidarity, December 2016.

34. UNHCR, Conclusion on Women and Girls at Risk No. 105 (LVII) – 2006, 6 October 2006.

6. The challenge of integration

82. Women asylum seekers and refugees victims of gender-based violence face multiple challenges and we have the responsibility not only to protect them from further violence but to help them reconstruct themselves and find a place in our societies. Since the perpetuation of conflicts makes a return to their home countries unlikely in the short term, it is important for them to integrate in the destination countries.

83. Empowering women refugees at the economic level will contribute to protecting them from violence in the future. This is why their economic integration is essential. Access to language classes for women refugees will be necessary to this end. It will allow the recognition of their skills and competences and give them the opportunity to look for employment. As highlighted by Lawen Redar, member of the Swedish Parliament, refugee women must be in the labour market so as to ensure their integration in society, their independence and protection from violence. They will be less likely to stay in a violent household if they already have a job.

84. States welcoming refugees should not hesitate to invest in empowerment and both economic and social integration programmes. The first steps to this end are the provision of language courses, childcare services and the recognition of professional skills. Successful role models should be promoted so as to show positive stories of women refugees who have a career. I look forward to the report by Ms Gabriela Heinrich (Germany, SOC) on "Migration from a gender perspective: empowering women as key actors for integration", which will provide us with concrete recommendations on this essential issue.

85. I welcome the fact that the Office of the German Federal Commissioner for Migration, Refugees and Integration has received 20 million euros of funding to map out the needs for integration, prepare recommendations and start integration programmes. One of the objectives of these programmes is to help women refugees realise their potential. Refugees receive a 600-hour integration course about life in Germany, including information about gender equality. Childcare is provided during the course so as to facilitate the participation of women. The provision of these courses represents a positive first step.

86. Refugees bring in their skills and competences, together with the willingness to make the destination country their new home. I can only warn against populist comments presenting them as a burden for Europe. I am convinced Europe can learn and gain a lot from the experience of refugees and put into practice the respect of its fundamental values when welcoming them to protect them from the atrocities of war. Helping the social integration of refugees is therefore crucial to overcome prejudice and ensure harmonious living together.

87. We should also keep in mind the fact that refugee women can be victims in Europe of multiple discrimination based on their gender, ethnic origin, status or religion. They are still too often looked down by the majority of the population, who does not see the benefits of diversity for our society. Protecting them from gender-based violence is only a first step. Combating and condemning multiple discrimination is an increasingly important element for future integration at every level. I would therefore encourage awareness-raising campaigns on the richness that refugees represent for society.

7. Main recommendations

88. Practical measures can be taken to enhance the protection of women from gender-based violence. They include separate secure sleeping areas and well-lit bathrooms reserved for women in transit and reception facilities. The creation of safe spaces in every transit and reception facility should be encouraged and supported and the presence of a sufficient number of female staff members among security personnel ensured in collective accommodation facilities. Separate shelters for refugee and asylum-seeker women victims of gender-based violence and for unaccompanied women should be available, with sufficient security. Not considering the safety of women as a priority is a mistake with long-term consequences for the victims.

89. The provision of information on rights, complaints mechanisms and assistance services in an understandable language is also essential. Specific training on detecting and preventing gender-based violence for staff working in transit and reception facilities, including guards, should also be provided. Police officers, guards in camps, border guards, asylum officers and social workers working in transit and reception facilities should demonstrate exemplary behaviour and make clear that there can be no impunity for gender-based violence. They need to receive clear indications on how to identify vulnerable groups and potential victims of violence.

90. In order to better detect and respond to cases of violence in transit, cross-border protection mechanisms for victims of violence should be put in place. Reporting of violence should be encouraged, irrespective of the legal status of the victim.

91. In addition, access to sexual and reproductive health care should be facilitated, as well as to legal aid, free of charge. General and post-trauma medical care should be made available, as well as psychological support. The setting up of women's support groups in refugee camps, reception facilities and shelters for women victims of violence is a good practice which should be encouraged.

92. Migration officials should pay frequent visits to asylum-seeker and refugee women living in accommodation outside State-managed reception facilities. The respect of protection standards should be guaranteed irrespective of the kind of accommodation.

93. In cases when the externalisation and privatisation of services for asylum seekers and refugees is necessary due to a high number of arrivals, a solid monitoring mechanism should be put in place to ensure close follow-up and detection of cases of violence. Whenever possible, a UNHCR monitoring officer should be present. Quality controls of privatised services, including accommodation and the provision of language courses are essential to ensure the respect of standards.

94. Resettlements and family reunification should be encouraged and supported wherever possible. They represent safe pathways for women asylum seekers victims of gender-based violence to reach their destination countries. I regret that there are to date only a few resettlement programmes in place, despite calls from the UNHCR. In addition, emergency resettlement schemes, such as specific humanitarian programmes for women victims of gender-based violence travelling alone or only with their children, should be put in place so as to facilitate their journey to a safe haven.

95. Gender-sensitive asylum procedures need to be further advocated, since they provide an opportunity to have a separate interview without any family members. In this respect, I would like to recall [Assembly Resolution 1765 \(2010\)](#) and [Recommendation 1940 \(2010\)](#) on gender-related claims for asylum. The presence of female asylum officers and interpreters should be proposed to women and the confidentiality of information guaranteed. Asylum officers need to receive systematic training on detecting gender-based violence and use gender-sensitive country of origin information. Independent residence permits should be provided to women, so that they would not fear leaving a violent household and losing their status.

96. The ratification of the Istanbul Convention represents a concrete commitment to the protection of all women from gender-based violence. This report is another opportunity to call for its ratification and implementation without further delay, since it can greatly contribute to protecting all women from gender-based violence, including asylum-seeker and refugee women. The convention clearly requires its Parties to recognise gender-based violence as a form of persecution within the meaning of the 1951 Refugee Convention.

97. The provision of language classes, recognition of skills and competences and access to the labour market are keys to the empowerment, rehabilitation and protection from violence of refugee women. In the long run, I am convinced that the integration of refugee women will be the most efficient response to gender-based violence.

8. Conclusions

98. We need to acknowledge that more needs to be done to protect refugee and asylum-seeker women from gender-based violence. We have the responsibility to ensure a life free from violence in the safe havens they have chosen. They face multiple difficulties and discrimination and we should help them reconstruct themselves and find their place in our societies.

99. There is an urgent need to ensure the protection of refugee and asylum-seeker women from gender-based violence at every step of their journey. It can be challenging for a country to be prepared for a significant number of arrivals of asylum seekers, but practical protection measures can be taken without necessarily involving high costs.

100. Our handling of the refugee crisis reflects our readiness to stand up for the fundamental values of the Council of Europe. I feel encouraged by popular movements such as the mass demonstrations on 18 February 2017 in Barcelona asking the Spanish State to welcome more refugees. I was also reassured by demonstrations of concrete solidarity by the population towards refugees in several member States and sincerely hope that such actions will continue developing in the coming years. I would like to praise the generosity expressed by Mr Prokópis Pavlóoulos, President of the Hellenic Republic, telling refugee children that Greece would be their home as long as their country of origin remained unsafe.³⁵ As members of the

Parliamentary Assembly, we bear a responsibility to act. We should not only call for more solidarity towards refugees and asylum seekers from our governments but also speak out every time we hear that refugees are used as scapegoats and targets of hate speech.

35. En Grèce, les réfugiés sont “chez eux”: le discours exemplaire du Président, Maria Malagardis, *Libération*, 20 February 2017.