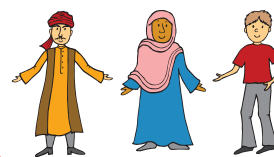




Six Viewpoints on Migration and Integration

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Opportunities and Barriers in Integration of Refugees into the Czech Society from Men's and Women's Perspectives

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A summary of findings selected from a research project “Discrimination of Refugees in the Czech Republic from a Gender Perspective” [„Diskriminace azylantů a azylantek v ČR z genderové perspektivy“] conducted by a non-governmental organization European Contact Group in the Czech Republic in 2007–2008.

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The following article is a summary of selected findings and recommendations derived from a qualitative survey which were released in a publication titled “Discrimination of Refugees in the Czech Republic from a Gender Perspective”. The publication is an output of an eponymous research project conducted by the European Contact Group in the Czech Republic from July 2007 to June 2008.¹

The aim of the research project was to find out about and disseminate the experience and opinions of refugees in the Czech Republic in the period after they were granted international protection (asylum). We were interested in male and female refugees' personal views and in their perception and conception of discrimination and their experience with unequal treatment in all vital spheres of human life within the context of the integration process into the Czech society.

The research project was based on qualitative methodology of data collection and data analysis. Our intention was to map out the situation of male and female refugees in its wholeness therefore we interviewed people who found themselves in different conditions and different phases of the integration process; i.e. people who had been in the Czech Republic for less than a year as well as those who had been dwelling in the country for several years; refugees having private accommodation or living in integration asylum centres in various regions, cities or villages in the Czech Republic.²

Topics discussed during every interview conducted were concerned with cardinal issues in the integration process: integration to the labour market, social security and healthcare, access to information and education, relationships with the majority society, housing, institutional and legislative spheres. During the interviews we also learned about the reasons for and the course of forced migration and about the living conditions in the Czech Republic in the period after applying for international protection.

The open manner and flexibility of the qualitative approach were reflected in the way individual interviews were conducted. The interviews were always adjusted to the particular respondent or, rather, to the topics he/she considered important and relevant. They were in-depth interviews conducted with respect to the specific experience of the respondent and were based on his/her choice and the significance the interviewee ascribed to concrete situations. The output of such qualitative data collection and

¹ The publication is available free of charge (excluding shipping and handling) from: Evropská kontaktní skupina v České republice, Žitná 45, 110 00 Praha 1; or at andrea.krchova@ecgnet.cz. You may also call +420 222 211 799. For more information visit: www.ekscr.cz.

² In total, we conducted 30 in-depth interviews with male and female refugees and 5 interviews with Labour Offices officials in various regions of the Czech Republic. The gender dimension of the project was taken into account in the process of choosing the respondents; we interviewed 15 women and 14 men (one interview was repeated).

analysis are records of subjective experience, reflections on problematic issues and acquirement of profound, detailed and complex images of experience, opinions and living conditions of a selected group of interviewed individuals.

In order to complement such images with viewpoints by people who work with refugees, we conducted a secondary research. We interviewed Labour Offices officials – representatives of an important institution of the state administration that offers support to refugees in the sphere of employment.

Gender perspective of the research

Our research emphasized the analysis of the gender aspects of forced migration and the integration process of male and female refugees into the majority society. Foreign study and research call attention to the necessity of incorporating a gender perspective into the investigations of experience of refugees – people who were forced to leave their country for a variety of reasons. Such views of forced migration and asylum holders' integration are not sufficiently taken into account in the Czech context. This fact manifests itself considerably both in the legislation and practice that influence refugees' living conditions.

A gender perspective is a perspective of a life change which looks into and takes into account interests, needs, problems and strategies pertaining to women and men. The goal of such research is to bring forward the fact that women and men may encounter different barriers during migration and the integration process and may experience specific problems and/or discrimination based on their sex.

The fact that male and female refugees experience forced migration and the process of building of a new life under the conditions of a foreign country in different ways reveals itself in situations related to the public and working spheres as well as in the refugees' private lives. The conducted interviews often address the theme of shifts in the organization of gender roles in partnerships and families as well as the necessity to deal with the duties, labours and responsibilities derived from these gender roles. The experience of living a different way of life in a different socio-cultural environment causes such shifts. Men's and women's roles and standings in the Czech society may differ from the acknowledged traditions and social norms prevailing in the respondents' countries of origin. Cultural influences take effect simultaneously with economic pressure as men and women from refugee families enter the labour market.

“The most difficult was, well, we changed, I can't say what was the most difficult for me. For me, that we changed some inner, well, approach and habits among each other in the family because they had some other traditions there: I worked, like, more and made some money there and [my] wife was at home and looked after children and me. (...) And here, of course, everything changed because I couldn't fulfil the role and one should work and earn money, like, well, for living and, like, the wife would sit at home and look after daughters etc., etc. Of course, [there is] this kind of pressure here that we must both work, of course, all the time. (...) Simply quick, radical change and only a few can endure. Well, women, maybe, manage a bit better because you are trained that way, you manage these changes better. But men, me, when I look, not only at myself, but at my friends, well, they simply deal with the changes with difficulties, like, in relationships among each other etc., they change.”³ (a male refugee from Russia)

The research focused mainly on the respondents' experience in the period after they were granted an asylum. In the interviews, however, we also learned about the ways men and women experienced the decision making process regarding their departure from their country of origin, their arrival in the Czech Republic and the time after they had requested international protection, i.e. the course of the asylum procedure.

³ Translator's note: the English translations of the interview excerpts reflect the respondents' answers given in Czech as they are transcribed in the Czech version of this article; where necessary brackets were inserted for comprehension reasons.

We came across burdensome issues in the respondents' testimonies, such as difficulties single mothers face in camps, limited access to healthcare or periods of passive waiting with no possibility to work legally in the course of the first year after submitting the request for international protection. It becomes difficult to satisfy vital needs and habitual men's and women's roles under such circumstances.

Perception of discrimination

The lack of awareness about one's rights that ensue from the refugee's status contributes to the majority's greater opportunities for discriminatory behaviour. Refugees themselves are frequently unaware of their being treated unequally and thus do not reflect on the problem of discrimination. Not only is such a situation the consequence of the refugees' lack of familiarity with their rights, it is also the result of the experience generated by the escape from the country of origin and by the life lived while waiting for the asylum and, finally, by having succeeded in the asylum application process. The criteria for assessing their equal and/or unequal standing within the society shift as some refugees show feelings of gratitude, reconciliation or resignation. Although some respondents pointed out moments in which they were denied their access to resources and services to which they were entitled, it was difficult for them to defend and enforce their rights.

Respondents' testimonies provide evidence that they encountered some forms of unequal treatment, for instance from representatives of public authorities. Such an approach is the result of prejudices and stereotypical perception of foreigners held by the majority society and it is also the consequence of insufficient public awareness about refugees' rights and duties in the Czech Republic.

The outcomes of the research also point to the interconnectedness and accumulation of acquired or ascribed statuses such as age, sex, ethnicity, somatic characteristics or nationality. Refugees find themselves in the position of multiple disadvantages.

Linguistic barrier

Mastering the language of the country granting the asylum status is one of the most important steps towards integration for all refugees. It is a prerequisite for finding one's position within a new society and understanding the meanings and implications of situations in which one finds himself/herself. Proficiency in the Czech language makes entering the labour market easier, facilitates establishing contacts and communication with the majority in everyday life and helps when dealing with public authorities.

Our respondents often accentuated the significance of their ability to communicate in Czech, especially in situations pertaining to their integration into the labour market. At the same time, however, they mentioned obstacles that thwarted their further education in a given field. Refugees' evaluations of the courses organized within the State Integration Programme (SIP) see the most burning problem in the insufficient number of lessons within a course and in the fact that the language courses focus only on mastering basic Czech. There is no offer of advanced courses and/or professional Czech courses; moreover, there is no training available for acquiring language skills essential for dealing with public authorities and institutions.

“Well, so the courses where we were, they were, well, the vocabulary we learned was Czech, which we must contact the people outside with, like, in a shop or so, or, like, at work or something like that. And the words that they use in offices, we [did] not understand [those], like, we [did] not study them. And when [we] got a paper from an office, well, we understand one half [of it] and we [did] not understand [the other] half of what was there. (...) Because [there] are many words, like, those from the office, which we [do] not understand.” (a female refugee from Moldova)

An important question of integration politics that needs to be answered is whether to urge asylum seekers to learn Czech already in the period of submitting their request for international protection and whether to motivate asylum seekers to master the language during the time when they have no certainty that they will remain in the Czech Republic. These ideas have both advocates and opponents and both parties have developed arguments to support their reasoning. In their retrospective evaluations of

the period before the granting of international protection, respondents openly state that they should have learned Czech, that even partial knowledge would have helped them get acquainted with the Czech society faster and better. Many of our respondents acknowledge self-critically that they should have studied the language while they had enough free time which they did not know how to use.

“In (a town; authors’ note), when we [had] lived [there] for seven months, we did nothing, we should [have] attended Czech [courses]. (...) Because no one, not even one woman attended. The teacher went to work every day and no one came to see [her]. She [was] Czech. Because all [of us] sat and thought: How will I go away from [the] Czech [Republic], how will I go away from [the] Czech [Republic]? (...) [We] should [have attended] and we didn’t. No one went [there]. (...) Er, er, well. I didn’t want [to go] anywhere. And [I] didn’t go and learn Czech, because [I] thought: if I get an asylum, so I will learn. And everyone [did so] too: if I get [an asylum], so I will learn. If I [had known], how [much] I would need it, I [would have gone] and learned that grammar.” (a female refugee from Chechnya)

Courses offered to refugees do not take into account their individual needs; this is mainly the case in courses provided elsewhere than in Prague and other major cities. An individual approach should be encouraged in situations when a course participant has specific requirements related to his/her professional training and/or to accommodating his/her qualification and education from the country of origin to the Czech labour market.

It is often possible to attend courses free of charge that are provided within the SIP framework. The choice of courses, as respondents’ opinions show, do not take into account refugees’ professional commitments and family obligations. This problem bears both on women and men. The distribution of labour and gender roles within a family is mirrored in men’s and women’s opportunities to attend classes and pursue further education. Childcare represents an obstacle – especially for women – in acquiring sufficient Czech competence. Moreover, women often lack information; for example, they are not informed well about the possibilities of one-on-one courses or about child day-care services. Their economic activity that routinely asks for the deployment of one’s physical and mental strengths and time flexibility also works to reduce opportunities for further education. It is the man who faces this kind of disadvantage in families with traditional distribution of roles, where the man is employed while the woman takes care of the household and children.

Economic integration – professional lives of refugees

As in all domains of life, refugees’ status within the working sphere is identical to that of Czech citizens (except for passive and active voting right and the right to be employed in institutions of state administration where Czech citizenship is required). Finding an occupation is an important part of refugees’ integration into the majority society since it is a means for achieving economic self-sufficiency and independence from state aid and/or support from NGOs. Moreover, it helps refugees significantly in their return to everyday life and in their self-realization as well as in gaining back their dignity.

Our interviewees encountered unequal treatment both on their entering the labour market and in their jobs. Employers’ discriminatory behaviour was a recurrent topic in the interviews. Our respondents sense stereotypical thinking towards foreigners within the Czech majority as well as apprehension that results from prejudices and ignorance; (employers often fear the complexity of paperwork that comes with employing foreigners as they are not informed about the fact that asylum holders’ status in relation to labour law is identical with the Czech citizens’ status).

“Or even when you get an offer from the Labour Office...I got one, I came there and she kept asking me for two hours, who I was – a Gypsy, a Czech or a Ukrainian. Then she said: ‘It doesn’t matter,’ and then: ‘[The position] has been taken.’” (a female refugee from Armenia/Russia)

The issues of discrimination based on sex and unequal opportunities for men and women at the labour market were reflected on by a female respondent. According to her, it is gender rather than ethnicity or nationality that puts one in an unequal position within the society.

“...I think that it is reflected totally in the financial remuneration and I think, that it is, well, but it is already a secondary question, because this, like, this basic question will simply be – do they take you, or do they not take you [onto a position]. And when they take you, then simply from the very beginning, they will offer you a different pay than they would [offer] a man. (...) but there are certain kinds of jobs where, in most cases, they respect foreigners [and] working positions, well may be not foreigners, [there is] no difference, we are refugees, but for example Czechs. [These] are, it is a question of gender and they are pretty traditional.” (a female refugee from Belarus)

Discrimination based on sex comprises also unequal treatment resulting from one’s parenthood or, respectively, one’s parenting obligations connected with child care and upbringing. It manifests itself when one enters the labour market or in conditions at work and in one’s access to education. Stereotypical attribution of the parental role to mothers frequently leads to women being refused an employment.

“Well, when [they] learned, I had four kids and [that they] are kind of small, they said no, they simply don’t want [me]. So the situation is, like, that they don’t want me at work, because I’ve got kids. (...) Well, that’s discrimination, yeah, that’s a kind of a European style. That’s clear that it concerns me. (...) As a woman, see. I encounter this because it’s clear, you can see, that they don’t want to have a problem, they don’t want [to], because, clearly, when we have kids and each falls sick. And at home we have such a chaos, [the] first [one], second [one], third [one], fourth [one], all month long I must stay at home. And if I don’t go to work, who will work? That’s clear. [The] employer doesn’t want [this]. But it also concerns (respondent’s husband’s name; authors’ note). Because of that he simply must have a worthy pay [since] he has four kids, [he] must have a worthy pay. And no one counts with that. (a female refugee from Kazakhstan)

Asylum seekers’ limited possibilities for achieving work-life balance are, among other things, the result of the absent social and family background. This sets barriers for parents in their access to employment.

“Well, may be [I] just [want to say], that it is hardly in [the fact], that, like, in Czech families, well, for example a young family, see, Czechs have parents next door, [who] can help, they can baby-sit. And we don’t have this. Like, for example, if I found a job now, well, I wouldn’t have anyone [who would] stay with my kid, it’s a problem that we’re, like, we don’t have a family [here], a relative near here.” (a female refugee from Moldova)

Help from Labour Offices represents a basic point of departure for the integration of refugees into the labour market. It is a task of Labour Offices which form a part of the state integration support to facilitate refugees’ employment. It consists of offering refugees an individual action plan, i.e. an intensified care in finding them a job. Labour Office officials’ expertise shows, however, that refugees turn down this form of help due to their lacking language competence. The fundamental problems, frequently emphasized by our respondents, nevertheless are refusals from employers who advertise vacant positions at Labour Offices and unsatisfactory cooperation between Labour Offices and employers.

Based on the findings yielded by the interviews with male and female refugees and Labour Offices officials, we have been able to identify spheres and situations which inhibit equal integration of this group of foreigners into the Czech society and which hinder refugees’ possibilities for adequately starting their new life. Our research has drawn attention to the fact that the Czech majority shows a lack of (often basic) knowledge and awareness as well as understanding of the situation of refugees. Raising awareness in the Czech majority can prevent discriminatory behaviour. Supporting refugees especially in the beginning of their life in the Czech Republic by assisting them in their orientation within the Czech environment and by providing them with information necessary for future integration into the majority society represents a vital form of contribution.

Our research demonstrates that it is essential to take into account gender specificities of integration in the legislation and practice pertaining to the asylum issue. Further, it is vital that the specific needs of women and men from ethnic and national minorities as well as those of foreigners with the refugee status be acknowledged both in politics and in the practice of promoting equal opportunities for men and women in the Czech society.

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European Contact Group in the Czech Republic is a non-governmental, non-profit organization that promotes equal opportunities of men and women and fights against racism and discrimination and changes entrenched stereotypes and prejudices in the Czech Republic and Europe.



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