

**Dr. Andrew Azzopardi**  
Lecturer, Youth & Community Studies  
University of Malta  
Msida, Malta  
andrew.azzopardi@um.edu.mt

**Maria Pisani, MA**  
Youth and Community Studies  
University of Malta  
Msida, Malta  
maria.pisani@gmail.com

# The Odyssey of the Young Female Asylum Seeker: Engaging Critically on Gendered Forced Migration<sup>1</sup>

There is an increasing awareness of the different forms of human mobility and the variety of push and pull factors resulting in regular and irregular, voluntary and forced migration. The latter, forced migration, understood as the movement of asylum seekers, will be the focus of this paper. More specifically, we will be looking at the intersection between youth, gender and forced migration, and the implications for education.

The paper is based on findings of research conducted in Malta towards the end of 2007. In depth interviews were conducted with thirteen young women aged between 20 and 29 hailing from sub-Saharan Africa, who arrived in Malta on a boat that departed from Libya. Each of the young women applied for asylum upon arrival. Our concern in this paper will be what Borg and Mayo (2006) describe as the 'dominant hegemonic discourse that education and social well-being... are the responsibility not of the state but of the individual.' In a nutshell, this paper will focus on the social and structural obstacles young female asylum seekers face in continuing their education.

The past few years have witnessed a considerable increase in irregular migration flows, mainly originating from sub-Saharan Africa and heading towards Europe. Traditionally a country of emigration, Malta, as a result of its geographic position at the centre of the Mediterranean, is experiencing a steady influx of asylum seekers arriving on its shores (NSO, No. 133/2005), resulting in what Frendo (2006) describes as one of the most challenging issues to face a traditionally homogenous Maltese Society. Castles and Miller (2003) define Asylum Seekers as 'those people who move across international border in search of protection, but whose claim for refugee status have not yet been decided.'

(Castles & Miller, 2003; 103). Of course, not all asylum seekers have a valid claim for refugee status, and not all of them will be granted some form of legal protection. The defining line between what constitutes flight as a result of persecution (grounded in the 1951 Geneva Convention) and that brought about by the breakdown of economic and social infrastructure so necessary for any quality of life is particularly blurred.

Often the asylum process can be long and difficult (in Malta asylum seekers are placed in detention for up to 12 months, failed asylum seekers are detained for 18 months), and even in the case of rejection many asylum seekers can not be deported (this for a number of reasons that fall outside of the remit of this paper) and hence will remain in the host country. The increase in asylum claims has brought about the construction of 'fortress Europe' (UNHCR, 2000), paradoxically, it has been suggested that the tightening of restrictive immigration measures provides greater demand for smuggling networks (Castles & Miller).

To summarize, our point of departure asserts that:

1. Irregular migration, made up of mixed flows from the South to the North, will not abate.
2. Regardless of the final asylum decision, and regardless of their wish to continue to mainland Europe, asylum seekers will remain in Malta (measures such as the Dublin Convention reinforce this).

## Young female asylum seekers: A voiceless population

Migration discourse traditionally constructed women as passive appendages to men in the

migration process, ignoring the intricacies of women's motives and their active role in the decision making process (De Souza, 2004; Carling, 2005). In addition, research on female migration lacks age-disaggregated data (ESCAP, 2004). The vast majority of asylum seekers arriving in Malta fall between the 20 – 30 year age bracket. The stages of the life cycle – in this case youth – is a significant determinant of economic and social position, culture and consciousness. In the context of forced migration, humanitarian agencies and scholars often give priority to 'children' as a particularly vulnerable group; this, in general, is in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which defines this life phase in terms of chronological age, 18 years being the official limit (de Berry, 2005).

In Malta, asylum seekers travelling alone, and under the age of 18<sup>1</sup> are considered as minors and hence, in recognition of their vulnerability, are awarded certain rights that are subsequently removed once the individual attains 'adult' status (MJHA & MFSS, 2005:21). Young people who fall beyond this limit of 18 are apt to be ignored as a specific group and are consequently absorbed within the category of adult, resulting in policies that fail to address the age related social and welfare needs and experiences of young women. This, despite the fact that the National Youth Policy of Malta recognizes young people as falling between 13 and 30 years of age.

The European Women's Lobby articulates this concern:

While non-accompanied minors form a special category and are named as such in European asylum policies, the girl child/young woman is not named as such and this is a matter of grave concern...the non-accompanied girl child/young woman is highly vulnerable. (European Women's Lobby, March 2007).

This said and done, the resilience and strength

demonstrated by the young women who participated in our research defies the homogenized and often skewed image of African women as victims, passive and oppressed. Such images have been prevalent in the media, public discourse and Western literature. The latter, in particular Western feminists, have been criticized for false universalism and ethnocentrism, and the way it portrays the social practices of 'other' races as somehow savage and primitive, from which black women need liberating by their western sisters (McLeod, 2000). Certainly, outside of their common experiences as asylum seekers in Malta, their age and gender, any attempt to collectively define this group of young women would be a futile one, and any generalization would run the risk of subjugating the various voices and experiences of these young women.

## From Heterogeneity to Homogeneity

And yet, the pattern that emerged from the findings of this research was the shift from heterogeneity to homogeneity. Despite the striking differences amongst the young women interviewed, including disparities based on social class in the country of origin, education, religion, ethnicity or legal status in Malta, the young women all seemed to be experiencing the same reality. This reality can be described as one of social, economic and political subjugation. Castles and Miller (2003) describe ethnic minorities as the 'creation of the very people who fear them' (Castles and Miller, 2003:33), in the case of the women who participated in this research, this creation is observed as one of relegation to a subordinate position in Maltese society based on socially-constructed stereotypes and gendered racism. This, we will argue, is largely an outcome of the homogenisation of the asylum seeker population in popular and political discourse, policy and practice.

Castles and Miller (2003) contend that the marginalization of migrant populations is not based on the characteristics of the migrant population per se, but rather on the history, ideology and structure of the host society. The

history of Malta is of importance here, and far too complex a subject to delve into given the space constraints. However, as Borg & Mayo (2006) describe, the experience of European colonization of Malta lasted long enough to leave an influential Eurocentric impression on Malta and the Maltese that is evident in the often racist and Islamophobic representation of the 'Other' in Maltese culture.

In his theoretical elaborations on discourse, Foucault (1977) demonstrates how a social and political context affects language and that language shapes and constructs realities. The Government of Malta has adopted a policy of administrative detention<sup>2</sup> of all asylum seekers who apply for protection after apprehension by the immigration authorities:

Although by landing in Malta without the necessary documentation and authorization irregular immigrants are not considered to have committed a criminal offence, in the interest of national security and public order they are still kept in detention until their claim to their country of origin and other submissions are examined and verified. (MJHA & MFSS, 2005a: p.11)

The passage quoted above sets the tone for the prevalent discourse on asylum seekers in Malta. The terms 'national security and public order' establish a link between asylum seekers and some kind of perceived threat to the Maltese territory, and as a consequence the Maltese people. This in turn reinforces the perceived need for hard line measures, provides a justification for the prolonged detention period and the degrading conditions therein, reinforces the label of 'criminal' and 'dangerous', fuelling far-right rhetoric, and finally serves to further marginalise the asylum seeker population, amongst them – but rarely visible barring public debate on the 'hijab' or prostitution – young women.

Discrimination affects the possibility of employment which then leads to a vicious cycle of poverty, ill health and social isolation.

Whilst their male counterparts seem to be able to provide for the demands of the Maltese labour force, in particular in the construction industry and manual labour, these young women seem to be relegated to the side lines, resulting in unequal gendered power relations and, for some, increased dependency on men.

Farah (2006) demonstrates how the problems encountered by young female asylum seekers are intensified and how these dynamics converge to put young women in a position of powerlessness and

... value loaded disempowerment resulting from structural and institutional imbalances in both social organization and governance systems and structures ... female adolescents are structurally denied the exercise of their roles and their existence as full actors. (Farah, 2006: 23).

As a newly emerging country of immigration, in Malta chain migration either does not exist, or is in embryonic forms. Putnam (2005) defines social capital as 'features of social life – networks, norms and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives'. It would appear from the findings of the research that such social networks, which played a major role in their countries of origin, were not so readily available to these young women in Malta. Such social networks would normally serve as an affective mechanism for providing support and access to the necessary services and institutions that enable integration and social mobility (Castles & Miller, 2003). This lack of social capital would appear to be having a negative outcome on young female asylum seekers since they lack the leverage necessary to gain access to the labour market and basic public goods.

## Double Liminality

All of the young women who participated in this research had some form of long term plan that was formulated when they first made the decision to leave their home in the country of origin. For

most of these women their plans included improving their education: for some this meant improving their English and learning how to write, for others it meant furthering their studies at university at a post graduate level. However, whilst education was a key concern, none of the women had taken any concrete steps to access training or further education institutions: in the absence of a regular income and some semblance of stability, education takes a back seat to food and adequate shelter. Even when education is provided free of charge, the costs that are incurred – for example transport, photocopies etc. – are prohibitive.

Turner (1977) originally conceptualized 'liminality' as a state where an individual moves from one fixed, known status or circumstance to a new one, "this term literally, "being on a threshold", means a state or process which is betwixt-and-between the normal, day-to-day cultural and social states and processes of getting and spending, preserving law and order and registering structural status" (Turner, 1977:465). Camino (2004) has adopted this concept to describe young asylum seekers as being in a 'double liminal status' (Camino, 2004:30). The period of 'youth' has been defined as a period of transition, the link between childhood and adulthood, likewise liminality could be used to describe the asylum seekers transitional phase, no longer a part of their previous society, and not yet a part of the new: a point of limbo.

The participants in the research could be understood as experiencing 'double liminality', still negotiating and re-evaluating their life trajectory, and with increasingly restricted legal rights, and little hope of stepping out of the margins, they find themselves effectively 'betwixt and between'. Structural challenges add a dynamic that is beyond the control of the young women interviewed. These challenges relate not only to poverty in terms of income, but also to poverty in prospects, in education and decision making opportunities.

Finding one's place and making long term plans is a process that necessitates time and resources.

However, when this process is hijacked as a result of structural and social barriers, the results are particularly frustrating and damaging. Ongoing obstacles and repeated disappointment, in particular brought about by the failure to secure regular employment and financial security seems to erode the sense of self worth and determination, leading to a vicious cycle of increased poverty and disappointment, the abandonment of dreams of a better future, and as this paper posits, increased marginalization.

The young women in general seemed to be facing obstacles that hindered meeting their 'practical needs', which I conceptualize as financial independence, adequate housing and access to healthcare. As a consequence of this situation, the respondents' day to day activities seemed to be carried out as a means of survival rather than grounded in some form of long term strategy. On the other hand, building on Urdang (2007) what we are conceptualizing as their 'strategic needs', relate to the transformation of their situation which would provide for a shift in relations of subjugation. Whilst harder to conceptualize, based on the findings in this research, these needs could include planning for a future, furthering their education and the consideration of career choices. Whilst practical needs may improve the condition of these young women, long term interests will improve their status and provide for personal, social, economic and political empowerment. However, it is clear that strategic needs cannot even be considered until the immediate practical needs are being met. Issues of social, political and civil rights – and citizenship (Castles & Miller, 2003) – are beyond the scope of this research, but do however, go right to the heart of this debate.

## Conclusion

Persons, who have fled their country in an irregular manner, de facto live beyond the protection of a state and are therefore amongst the most powerless people in the world (Williamson, 2004). Racialized and gendered exclusionary mechanisms further interact to

produce an experience tarnished by poverty, poor health, social isolation and differentiation that, combined, create the formation of ethnic minorities (Castles & Miller, 2003).

A secure legal basis provides the necessary foundations with which to plan for the future and build on hopes and dreams. But this is not enough. Submerged in the far-right rhetoric that spews racial intolerance, the neo-liberal agenda is bestowed the space to condemn those who apparently do not want to 'help themselves'. Rights must be accessible in a tangible way that places responsibility on policy makers and service providers to deliver. Long term employment and financial security is a crucial element in enabling these young women to achieve economic independence and autonomy. Furthermore, long term economic security may enable these young women to address their strategic needs and make long term plans that include investing in their education.

## Notes

- \* This article is a summary of the paper titled "The Odyssey of the Young Female Asylum Seeker: Engaging Critically on Gendered Forced Migration" presented at the 3rd Conference of the Mediterranean Society of Comparative Education "Intercultural Dialogue through Education" from 11 to 13 May 2008 in Qawra, Malta. The full paper can be requested from the author: (maria.pisani@gmail.com)
- 1 As laid down in Chapter 285 Children and Young Persons (Care Orders) Act
- 2 For a more precise overview of national law, policy and practice relating to administrative detention in Malta refer to the "Civil Society Report on Administrative Detention of Asylum Seekers and Illegally staying Third Country Nationals in the 10 New Member States of the European Union" (JRS, 2007).

## **L'odyssée des jeunes demandeuses d'asile : réflexion critique sur la migration forcée liée au genre**

Maria Pisani, titulaire d'une maîtrise de lettres  
Etudes sur la jeunesse et les communautés  
Université de Malte  
Msida, Malte  
maria.pisani@gmail.com

Dr Andrew Azzopardi  
Conférencier, Etudes sur la jeunesse et les communautés  
Université de Malte  
Msida, Malte  
andrew.azzopardi@um.edu.mt

Cet article s'appuie sur les résultats d'une étude conduite à Malte vers la fin 2007. Des entretiens approfondis ont été conduits avec treize femmes âgées de 20 à 29 ans en provenance de l'Afrique subsaharienne, arrivées à Malte sur un bateau parti de Libye. A leur arrivée, toutes ces jeunes femmes ont demandé l'asile. Cet article s'intéresse à ce que Borg et Mayo (2006) décrivent comme « le discours hégémonique dominant », selon lequel l'éducation et le bien-être social sont de la responsabilité non pas de l'Etat mais de l'individu. En résumé, cet article s'intéresse aux obstacles sociaux et structurels que rencontrent les jeunes demandeuses d'asile dans la poursuite de leur parcours éducatif.

Souvent, le processus de demande d'asile peut être long et difficile ; à Malte, les demandeurs d'asile sont placés en détention jusqu'à douze mois, et ceux qui sont déboutés sont détenus pendant dix-huit mois. Même lorsque leur demande est rejetée, beaucoup ne sont pas expulsés (pour plusieurs raisons qui dépassent la portée de cet article) et restent à Malte. La hausse des demandes d'asile a conduit à la construction de ce qu'on appelle la « forteresse Europe » (HCR, 2000) ; paradoxalement, il semblerait que le durcissement des mesures de restriction de l'immigration génère une demande accrue pour des réseaux de passage clandestins.

## Die Odyssee von jungen Asylbewerberinnen: kritische Diskussion der Gender-Aspekte von Zwangsmigration

Maria Pisani, MA  
Jugend- und Gemeinschaftswissenschaften  
Universität Malta  
Msida, Malta  
maria.pisani@gmail.com

Dr. Andrew Azzopardi  
Dozent, Jugend- und Gemeinschaftswissenschaften  
Universität Malta  
Msida, Malta  
andrew.azzopardi@um.edu.mt

Der Aufsatz baut auf den Ergebnissen einer Ende 2007 in Malta durchgeführten Studie auf. Es wurden mit 13, aus Afrika, südlich der Sahara stammenden jungen Frauen zwischen 20 und 29, die auf einem aus Libyen kommenden Boot in Malta eingetroffen waren, detaillierte Interviews geführt. Alle jungen Frauen hatten bei ihrer Ankunft Asyl beantragt. Das Anliegen dieses Aufsatzes wurde von Borg und Mayo (2006) als ‚dominanter Hegemonie-Diskurs‘ beschrieben, wonach ‚Bildung und soziales Wohlergehen ... nicht in der Verantwortung des Staates sondern des Individuums liegen‘. Kurz gesagt: dieser Aufsatz konzentriert sich auf die gesellschaftlichen und strukturellen Hindernisse, mit denen junge Asylbewerberinnen in ihrer weiteren Bildung konfrontiert werden.

Das Asylverfahren kann häufig lang und schwierig sein (in Malta werden Asylbewerber bis zu 12 Monate in Gewahrsam genommen, abgelehnte Asylbewerber werden 18 Monate inhaftiert), und selbst im Falle einer Ablehnung können viele Asylbewerber (aus einer Reihe von Gründen, die außerhalb des Themas dieses Aufsatzes zu suchen sind) nicht ausgewiesen werden und bleiben daher im Aufnahmeland.

Die Zunahme der Asylanträge hat zum Aufbau der ‚Festung Europa‘ (UNHCR, 2000) geführt, und paradoxerweise wurde gesagt, dass die Verschärfung der restriktiven Einwanderungsvorschriften die Nachfrage bei den Schmugglernetzen noch erhöht hat.