

SOLROUTES

'Ain't I a woman?'

**Iranian and Afghan women's underground solidarity networks and
practices in Lesvos**

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Introduction

A series of events have marked recent history with regard to migration in Greece, as well as in its islands. During the so-called 'migration crisis' in 2015, more than 500.000 people arrived in Lesbos between January and December (UNHCR, 2015); similarly, in 2020, the world witnessed again images of thousands of refugees stranded in Lesbos's streets and public spaces after the fire that engulfed the infamous Moria camp.

“Ah, you're here to work on refugees? I didn't think the problem still existed” (E.Z.'s fieldnotes, 08/11/ 2024).

For many years, Lesbos - dubbed 'the island of solidarity' and nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize in 2015 - has been emblematic of the border spectacle (De Genova 2020), yet it has subsequently descended into a limbo and oblivion that accelerated after the global pandemic of 2020. The period between 2019 and 2022 indeed was characterised by a series of crises, including the rise of the far-right political party (Di Matteo and Daminelli 2024). These events had a profound impact on the lives of refugees and volunteer workers on the island. This has been accompanied by a drastic reduction in funding for NGOs and other organisations engaged in solidarity work, as well as a progressive decline in international attention. Despite this decrease, the island continues to be traversed by a considerable number of volunteers on an annual basis and the amount of social actors engaged in providing assistance to people on the move¹ remains considerable, as do the numbers of academic researchers and journalistic inquiries, leading to an over-saturation of attention and the fetishisation of the migratory issue. However, as the aforementioned quote from the field research illustrates, in recent years the island and the fate of the thousands of people it hosts temporarily have receded from the public consciousness; a combined outcome of a collective removal and the limited capacity for short-term attention, along with the selective nature of solidarity.

Nevertheless, the island remains a pivotal site for the EU's experimentation and implementation of its sovereignty, as it can be regarded as a pivotal pawn in the sub-contracting of European migratory filtration. Even if for most of the people on the move Lesbos is only a temporary stop in the middle of their many games, it would be wrong to overlook the density and complexity of the time they spend on the island. Years ago, thinkers such as Etienne Balibar and Didier Bigo pointed out that borders are constantly being repositioned and reconfigured in new spaces, so we should be talking about 'living at/in borders' rather than merely 'crossing borders' (Schmoll 2023). In light of these premises, my research in Lesbos did not concentrate on the migratory phenomenon in itself, nor on the international solidarity that was observed. Rather, it is situated within the context of other parallel lines of enquiry that I have pursued over the past year. In this regard, it may be considered a node of a caravan in continuation and ideal amplification of other complementary projects, rather than a single isolated field of study.

Firstly, the objective was to build upon existing research concerning the emic physical and digital solidarity

¹ In this report, I have preferred to use the term 'people on the move', but the terms 'refugee' and 'asylum seeker' will also be used, as they identify the main (legal, existential) stages in the process of staying on the island: before and after obtaining documents.

infrastructures utilised by Iranian and Afghan PoMs to enter Europe illicitly. Secondly, I employed a transfeminist and postcolonial approach to enhance a perspective that is frequently marginalised within the field of migratory studies: the experience of self-organisation and solidarity of women on the move. This interest is derived not solely from my position as a feminist scholar and activist, but also from the awareness of a dramatic neglect of women and queer perspectives within the broader field of migration and critical border studies (Schmoll 2023). Conducting sociological and ethnographic research with women as protagonist subjectivities and not as secondary voices is in itself still an original element within migration studies (Pinelli 2019, Schmoll 2020, Rigo 2019). Indeed, while the number of women on the move towards, around and across Europe has constantly been on the rise, there has been a dearth of attention paid to the gendered nature of unauthorized migration (Freedman 2016). When such attention has been paid, it has focused predominantly on the aspects of violence, suffering, and passivity. In contrast to this prevailing trend, I am interested in the practices and networks related to informal cooperative actions that could fall under the terms ‘migration industry from below’ and ‘interested solidarity’ (Bonnin et al., 2024) underpinning women’s unauthorized movements along the Balkan Route and in Greece specifically with a focus on Iranian and Afghan flows. It has often been argued in research that these women are exceptionally difficult to approach, and it has often been noted that they have no information to offer, as decisions throughout the journey are made by a male member of the group (son, husband, distant relative) (Dimitriadi 2017). In contrast, the present research has sought to reach their voices directly, without an intermediate filter, thereby giving visibility and dignity to their own experiences and narratives.

Even if it is widely acknowledged that ethnography is an inherently uncertain terrain where, often, it is the field to lead the researcher and not the contrary, I tried to explore some research themes that can be summarised as follows:

1. My primary line of inquiry concerns the so-called migration industry and infrastructures from below that support Iranians and Afghans crossing these routes to Europe, whether they can be subsumed under the conceptual framework of 'solidarity from below', and how they intertwine, confront or collide with the 'humanitarian machine' present on the island.
2. What is the role of women within this industry from below? Does gender play a role in the resistance and resilience practices enacted? And, if so, what are the strategies and narratives that emerge?

Migrant Afghan and Iranian women migrating to Greece often describe themselves as caught in a condition of multiple marginality; they constitute a vulnerable group within the overall migrant population. The absence of comprehensive immigration policy, the prevalence of undocumented work, and spatial and social isolation, in conjunction with prejudiced perceptions regarding women's capacity for collective action, contribute to the perception that these women are unable to engage in proactive, organisational, entrepreneurial and solidarity activities (Christopoulou and Leontsini 2017). Consequently, these aspects remain mostly understudied.

This report is structured as follows: The last section on creative work is written by the photographer,

Emanuela Zampa; the other sections are written in the first person by the researcher, Rassa Ghaffari.

Epistemological and methodological challenges of navigating the field

The ethnographic material analyzed stems from a combination of preliminary analyses and extensive participant observations conducted during my volunteer and activist experiences from October to December 2024 in Lesvos. In light of the fruitful experience gained from my previous fieldwork in Bulgaria², I decided to join non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that provide assistance to people on the move as a volunteer. Volunteer tourism can be a way for scholars to access fieldwork (Wearing, Young, and Everingham 2017)). In the period preceding my arrival, I have been engaged in pro bono translation work for a number of activist groups that provide assistance to a diverse range of individuals on the move, including a solidarity network for queer refugees. In total, I volunteered with two different NGOs (Europe Cares and Because We Carry), worked as a paid translator for another (Terra Psy) and participated in the initiatives and activities of other NGOs and informal - and, in some cases, underground - networks. I conducted both semi-structured and unstructured interviews with refugees (7), NGO operators and volunteers (3), and one researcher. I also collected valuable ethnographic data through numerous informal conversations, exchanges and interactions during volunteering activities and daily life in all contexts. Details of these interactions are reported in the table at the end of this report. These conversations were meticulously documented and incorporated into the field diary, which forms an integral part of the empirical analysis. Throughout this contribution, I have deliberately avoided making specific references to most of these actors and spaces to safeguard their safety and anonymity, as well as to prevent any potential interference or issues that could arise from the delicate and complex contexts under analysis.

In my previous field research, I employed the methodological framework of militant ethnography while collaborating with No Name Kitchen, an NGO focused on providing humanitarian aid to migrants and refugees. Militant ethnography, as defined by Juris (2007), involves active engagement with activist movements, aiming not only to understand them from an ethnographic perspective but also to contribute to their objectives through participatory involvement. This methodological choice was shaped by my commitment to exploring and addressing the lived realities of displaced individuals navigating border regimes and humanitarian infrastructures.

However, the context of this research presented unique methodological and epistemological challenges. The hosting NGOs operate on foundational humanitarian principles—such as neutrality, impartiality, and the prioritization of immediate relief for vulnerable populations. These principles, while vital for humanitarian operations, often exist in tension with the critical and politicized ethos of militant ethnography, which

² The report is available here: <https://www.solroutes.eu/node/the-land-gateway-to-europe-the-border-of-bulgaria-and-turkey/>.

emphasizes the structural analysis of power relations and a critical stance toward dominant social and political institutions, including those that facilitate humanitarian interventions.

Yes, we work until 'Europe cares' ...but when it is supposed to happen, exactly? The work here seems totally de-politicised to me. How you expect the government to act if you are basically doing their job? You have become indispensable to them (field notes, 22/11/2024).

“On the one hand, I think our presence here is very important: we do things the camp administration does not do. We are small, but I believe our project is the most efficient. But we do not want them to rely on us: for example, the blanket distribution. We stopped, we said that we would not have distributed more than this, because now it is their turn to do something” (S16, 7/12/2024).

Unlike the well-documented cases of reappropriation and occupation of spaces that are central to migrant rights struggles, especially in Greece, most of NGOs and community centres in the island function as places for services and activities without an explicit political agenda (Martini 2024). However, their political significance lies in their mission to create spaces for exchange and sharing where everyone feels safe and accepted, emphasising the engagement of different perspectives and fostering mutual respect and solidarity. Scholars such as Didier Fassin (2012) have critiqued the humanitarian field for its depoliticizing tendencies, noting that its focus on alleviating suffering can obscure the structural violence underpinning displacement and inequality. Similarly, the work of Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995) advocates for an engaged anthropology that does not shy away from taking ethical and political stances, even when these challenge dominant paradigms. As one of my interlocutors eloquently expressed, *“here, volunteering and militant ethnography are at odds”*.

Furthermore, an additional element was identified that served to further complicate the initial plans. This pertained to the 'assault' on the island in recent years by researchers, students and journalists seeking stories and research about migrants. This situation has led to almost all NGOs implementing strict guidelines to ensure the safeguarding of people's privacy and safety – *“Anyone decent on the island has a strict no photographers policy. You are all the same, even those who seem an ally.”* (E.Z.'s fieldnotes, 06/11/2024). None of the NGOs I volunteered with allowed me to use their premises to carry research – conducting interviews was specifically forbidden - and access to the photographer working with me was denied. In a context systematically saturated with academics and journalists, I have been repeatedly told to *“keep the research at home”*.

The following is an extract from Emanuela Zampa, the photographer accompanying me for a month, ethnographic diary:

A project synopsis was sent to this association. I could visit the community centre as a guest 6 days after my arrival. With the researcher occupied with her volunteer duties, I introduced myself to the centre's staff, receiving a firm denial for the creative workshops. When I asked for an explanation, I was told that they do not authorise anything of this kind, with no room for negotiation. I asked for a formal

response, but I never received one. I was asked to sign declarations about the images (obviously, I couldn't even photograph with my phone), but I wasn't given a copy. They even asked me to leave my photographic equipment in their custody, which I refused.

In reflecting on this fieldwork, it became clear that militant ethnography and research in humanitarian settings requires a nuanced approach that balances the immediate priorities of host organizations with the broader analytical goals of critical social science. This entails recognizing the value of humanitarian principles while also pushing for deeper structural critiques that address the root causes of suffering. Such an approach calls for ongoing dialogue and collaboration between researchers and practitioners, fostering mutual understanding and enabling more impactful interventions.

I circumnavigated these denials and barriers by implementing several strategies: NGOs' spaces have been mostly used for networking and connecting, granting me nevertheless enough credibility to meet with people elsewhere. After a few days of volunteering, indeed, several people started to recognize me and greet me in other contexts, crediting my legitimation as a volunteer, ally and member of their community. I started hanging out with people in other, informal settings where our relationships could also be less unbalanced. Two locations, specifically, have become the sites at which I customarily convene with the Persian-speaking community. In this report, as already mentioned, I have opted not to disclose their names or provide any details that would render them identifiable, as they are also – as I gradually became cognizant of – locales for underground forms of networking and activities. This entailed gaining access to private and intimate spaces, sharing our houses, and spending leisure time with volunteers, activists and people on the move in diverse locations both inside and outside the NGO settings, a shift that reframes the power dynamics in field research. Finally, I participated in the activities of anarchist, anti-fascist, no-border, religious groups, solidarity grassroots groups and political collectives. Despite the sensitivity of these environments, which precluded the possibility of conducting open interviews, these groups provided valuable insights into the solidarity networks on the island. These denials also severely affected our ability to conduct a proper Generative Narrative Workshop using photography; and even though we were able to build a second chapter of our 'Illegal Cookbook' project in an informal space, we eventually decided to shift our plans and focus them on the issue of the (in)visibility of migrants, their voices and the monopoly of their images on the island. Further details of this project are to be found in the final section of this report.

'Which smuggler did you come with?': my positionalities in the field

Scheper-Hughes (1995) argues that it is not possible to enter a field without becoming a part of it. This study was conducted in accordance with a feminist epistemology, which acknowledges that both researchers and the subjects of their studies are the subject and object of research (Sprague and Kobrynowicz, 1999). This implies that academics are not the sole, isolated producers of knowledge (Lincoln and Denzin 2003; Harding and Hintikka 1981,

1983). The establishment of a relationship of mutuality between the researcher and the researched, through the processes of self-revelation and emotional support, has been demonstrated to result in the generation of superior data and a more nuanced understanding of the subject matter (Oackley 1981). Volunteering in Lesvos entails integration into a community of - predominantly white, young and female - individuals unified by a common objective: the provision of assistance to refugees and the enhancement of their quality of life. Furthermore, for some, volunteering represents an initial step towards pursuing a professional career in the field of humanitarian organisations. This facilitates the formation of relationships with individuals who espouse similar values, thereby fostering a sense of camaraderie. This can result in the creation of a self-reinforcing social structure, characterised by a high degree of interconnectedness and mutual support. Conversely, in my field notes, I documented numerous instances in which my fellow volunteers congregated outside while I was experiencing a profound sense of exhaustion and a complete depletion of social energy.

Evening. We're having dinner in a tavern to say goodbye to a departing volunteer. We're talking and laughing while drinking wine and commenting on board games and birthdays. I notice some folks commenting sarcastically the red noses of the clowns who came to the centre today. I can't think of anything else but the Afghan grandmother who, today, in the Women's Space, wore a red nose to make her grandchild laugh. She was sitting on the floor with many things in her eyes and memory. I can't drink any more wine. I can't help wondering how all the people here don't feel disgusted (fieldnotes, 30/10/2024).

The majority of this mental fatigue was a direct consequence of the distinctive circumstances surrounding the assumption of multiple positionalities, at the same time, all the time. Ethnography requires those who use it to put into play their body and their subjectivity (Semi, 2010). Douglas Ezzy (2010: 169) likewise argues that 'research is also embodied, emotional, and performed'. I am a woman of Iranian heritage, born in Italy to parents who migrated from Iran. Consequently, I have acquired a comprehensive understanding of the language and culture of Iranian society. In summary, I am undoubtedly at an advantage compared to many of my European and American colleagues who work or volunteer in the same context. It is conclusive that my social and cultural capital facilitated my access to the field and my research to a degree that would have been unattainable for other scholars. However, this advantage also entailed a certain degree of awareness and responsibility that could not and should not be overlooked (Amanolahi 2004).

"Oh but you grew up in Italy, you are not a real Iranian! - But my parents are Iranian...-Oh, that's ok then"
(fieldnotes, 16/10/2024)

"How long have you been here? – Almost two months. -Oh, that long? How is that possible? What is wrong with your case? – Oh well, I am a volunteer. I am an Italian citizen -Wow! Ok, so what does it mean? What are you doing here?"
(fieldnotes, 22/10/2024).

In almost all my encounters with people on the move, regardless of where they were occurring, people initially

assumed automatically I was a refugee too; on more than one occasion, it took me several minutes of conversation to realise that my interlocutor was asking me questions about my (allegedly) unauthorized journey. Being considered a partial member of their community, with which I shared several commonalities, lacking fundamental other ones, posed me in unique positions that shifted and twisted continuously. Although ‘going native’ is an established anthropological maxim encouraging ethnographers to thoroughly immerse themselves in the culture under study, adopting its perspectives and practices, this process has proven particularly challenging in my own case.

Which stories can be told?

During the weeks I spent on the island, I was in the incredibly privileged position of being able to collect stories from the most disparate situations; much of this involves stories of invented identities, false asylum claims and different strategies for navigating unauthorised border crossings and the asylum process. In short, these are stories that, if revealed, could severely jeopardise people's chances, not only at an individual level but also as a collective. Despite the prevalence of knowledge regarding these dynamics in both academic literature and common sense, I have elected to withhold certain elements from my research, my collaborators and subsequent publication.

Within the context of the contemporary academic system, characterised by its competitive, performance-driven and extractive nature, such narratives would constitute substantial material. Indeed, one issue that emerged from the fieldwork encounters concerns the rejection of the academic reproduction of descriptive migrant objecthood, as Khosravi understands it, the rejection of a knowledge that excludes migrant intellectual life (Khosravi 2024) and potentially harms them. This is about the ethical implications of reporting what was observed in the fields: the refusal to belong, to be the property of the dominant narrative, and thus, the accented thinking undermines what is proper (Vahabzadeh 2015, 56). In his 1997 work, the Martinican cultural theorist Édouard Glissant identifies this demand for understanding as being part of the colonial project for transparent universality. He posits that the ideal of transparency is a Western project rooted in modernity, which is to reduce, categorise, and hierarchise in order to understand and comprehend the other. In opposition to the coloniser's demand for knowability, he asserts that opacity is a right to resist. The right to opacity is the right to refuse to be understood on the coloniser's terms and to not stand under them (Khosravi 2024). That is, not everything should be seen, explained, understood and documented.

“You see, in this book about unauthorized migration, the authors tell about an Afghan migrant who lied about his identity to obtain asylum, he declared to have another nationality...No. We do not do that. We do not tell white people about this. There is no need to expose this” (S5, 23/11/2024).

This participant's statements reflect a resistance against subjugation within the field of migration studies. This involves a refusal to be defined by the dominant narrative on migration, which is seen as a subversive act that

liberates individuals from the constraints of power and knowledge; the question of how to use narratives collected about issues such as illegality, lies, subjugation and violence without transforming them into mere academic data, which might result in a tendency to fetishise migrants' identities and experiences - "*we do not tell this to the white people*". For whom are we engaged in the production of knowledge on migration? What is the objective of studying migration? How might I, as a scholar, avoid the potential for complicity with the state? In other words, how might I ascertain that my work does not inadvertently reinforce border control practices? In what manner might I compose a text about migrants in a way that would not be used against them? How might I compose a text that is both academically honest and politically responsible?

My unilateral decision about which information to share and which topic to analyse in the research affected also the creative work of the photographer who accompanied me, leading to contrasting but thought-provoking debates about the relationship between research and art, insider versus outsider in the field, and the freedom to document in sensitive contexts. The decision to omit lines of enquiry that had the potential to yield interesting results for a creative project or to wait extensively for certain contacts to be completed has undoubtedly delayed the research process. However, this judgment is the outcome of extensive reflexivity practices rooted in my positionality and political stances, for which I take full responsibility. Working on almost identical fieldwork, Khamsy reflects:

“Migration is a field where sharing knowledge takes place in a highly politicised arena full of risks, because asylum seekers are often engaged in illegalised practices to reach asylum [...] Scholars and practitioners in the field of asylum are well familiar with the incentive of individuals to lie about their journey. How to store archives, knowing that my research participant and friend may wish to delete them before continuing his migration journey? The way I answer these questions is by keeping in mind the overarching aim of the no-harm principle [...] Working on migration issues in this context means witnessing a high degree of violence that one often feels the urge to publish about outside of academia. However, publications that highlight people on the move’s agency to misleading counter conceptual views of their passivity and vulnerability are confronted with the challenge of not divulging their strategies to counter the violence. There is an urge to go beyond academic papers: but then how to communicate results beyond academia?” (Khamsy 2022, 264-267).

Khosravi, too, writes that:

“Concealment of the time of departure, the path, the means of travel, the destination, and the migration facilitator one works with, is crucial for a successful border crossing. Revealing too much information to others can result in arrest and deportation. In this kind of situation, being accompanied by a researcher who demands transparency and understanding is problematic. There is a palpable violence embedded in this demand” (Khosravi, 2020, 3).

Khosravi and Keshavarz write that opacity is the weapon of marginalized people (2022). I am not sure whether she was cognizant of Khosravi's theories; however, N., a young woman whom I interviewed on my final day in Lesvos, articulated a definitive assertion that was clearly rooted in this premise:

“I am telling this to you because probably you are leaving tomorrow and we won't ever see each other again...but I have lied to you. This is not my name; this is not my age and this is not my nationality. And this is why I asked you how you want to use this interview. For this truth not to be used against me. But now that I have told it to someone...I feel so relieved” (N11, 7/12/2024).

Following the routes: the geographical context and post-Covid Lesvos

The countries of origin

This research focuses on unauthorized migratory movements of Iranian and Afghan populations. The decision to examine these two nationalities is primarily grounded in their significant linguistic commonalities, as Persian and its regional variant Dari serve as shared languages, facilitating communication and cultural connection. Furthermore, Iranian and Afghan irregular migration routes often overlap geographically, reflecting intertwined patterns of displacement and transit that warrant comparative analysis. However, I remain well aware that the two countries exhibit markedly different migration cultures, as well as distinct political and economic hierarchies and dynamics, which shape their respective migratory experiences and trajectories which will be discussed further below. Furthermore, I acknowledge that my accent and dialect are comprehensible to most Afghans due to prolonged cultural, economic and political subjugation under the Islamic Republic of Iran. This has resulted in a significant number of Afghans being compelled to migrate to this country, where they predominantly encounter discrimination and a paucity of legal protection.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a major country of emigration, immigration and transit migration, nestled between regions that have long exchanged labor and forced migration flows (SeeFar 2019). According to ICMPD (2020), it is one of the top ten countries with the highest number of asylum applications in European nations. Iranians also account for a significant proportion of refugees and asylum seekers in Turkey, particularly after the 1979 revolution. From the latter half of the twentieth century, emigration from Iran gained significant momentum. The trend in the number of Iranian asylum seekers after the 1979 revolution highlights three distinct peaks, summarized in the chart below.

Diagram 3. The average annual growth rate of Iranian Emigrants in the world (1980-2013)

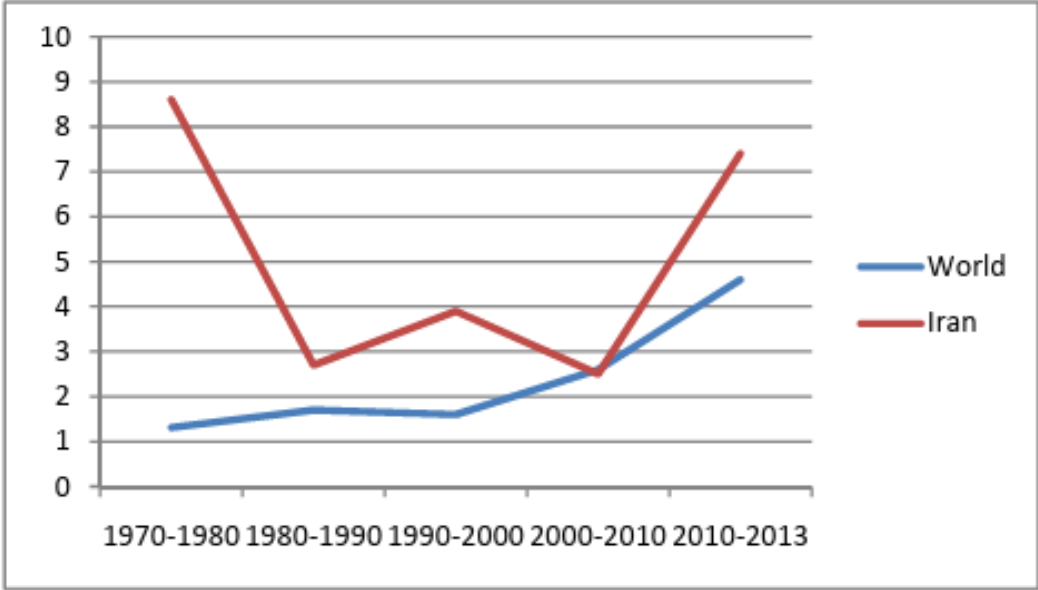
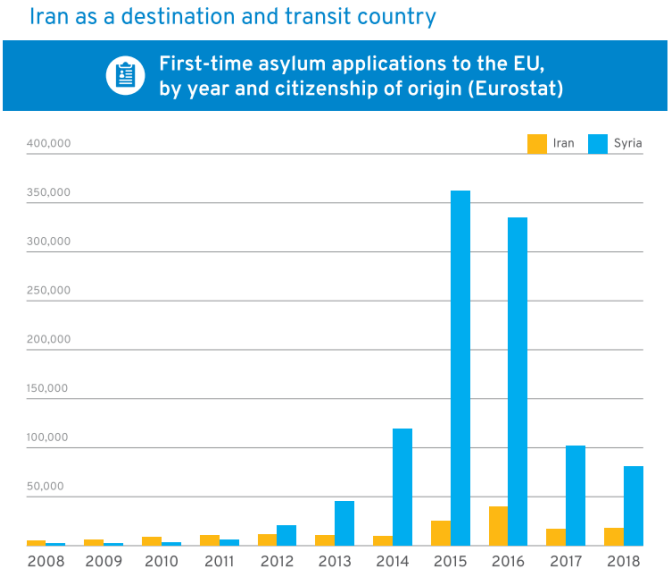


Figure 1. Source: Rostamalizadeh & Ardahae, 2016

In the final quarter of 2015, Iranians were among the top five nationalities applying for asylum in ten EU Member States, and from May to October 2015 the number of Iranians seeking asylum in the European Union more than quadrupled (SeeFar 2016). Indeed, it is safe to say that recent waves of emigration have strengthened an otherwise uncommon 'culture of migration' in Iran. Eventually, official and reliable statistics on the number of individuals who have left the country in response to the recent wave of protests following Jina Mahsa Amini's death in September 2022 remain unavailable. Notwithstanding, NGOs and organizations have already documented a significant emigration flow due to a combination of political, religious, and economic factors.

Figure 2. Source: Seefar (2019)



In the latter half of the 1990s, there was a slight shift in the social makeup of Iranian refugees. Existing literature characterizes migration from Iran as an elitist phenomenon. It is believed that Iranian asylum seekers who fled following the 1979 revolution hail from the economic, political, and cultural elite. As Bohmer and Shuman contend, the quintessential claim of asylum pertains to the male political activist who is targeted on account of his public activities and subsequently experiences persecution in a public space (Koçak 2020). Nevertheless, my fieldwork corroborates the need to nuance this notion of the Iranian exodus as a phenomenon exclusively pertaining to the elite. Indeed, the primary factors driving migration from Iran are rooted in the country's distinctive socio-political landscape, as well as the recent economic downturn. The literature indicates that Iranian migrants include a diverse group of individuals, including political dissidents, social activists, artists, ethnic and religious minorities, and members of the LGBTQ3 community. In recent years, this population has significantly diversified with a rapid increase in students, workers, and non-politicized (*siasi*) citizens. Iranians entering the European Union illegally mostly entered Turkey - where the clandestine Iranian smuggling network in the 2010s was recognised as one of the five largest - with the help of human smugglers; leaving the country by boat and heading for the Greek island is one of the options offered by smugglers, the others being to walk to Athens, on to Bulgaria (less and less common) and to fly to another European country.

The second highest nationality in irregular arrivals in Greece in the last ten years, Afghans were termed 'transit migrants' from early on (Dimitriadi 2017). The history of emigration from Afghanistan has been shaped by decades of socio-political upheaval, armed conflict, and economic instability, with significant waves of displacement occurring during the Soviet-Afghan War (1979–1989), the Taliban regime (1996–2001), and the protracted insecurity following the U.S.-led intervention in 2001, resulting in a considerable number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees seeking asylum in neighbouring countries, predominantly Iran and Pakistan. Within this broader context, Afghan women have faced unique challenges, as patriarchal structures, restrictions on education and employment—particularly under Taliban rule—and gender-based violence have compelled many to seek refuge abroad, often navigating additional barriers to migration and resettlement due to their gendered vulnerabilities.

A substantial divergence is observed in the legal trajectories of Iranians and Afghans in their pursuit of asylum. In October 2024, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) handed down a ruling that Afghan women can be granted asylum in EU countries based solely on their gender and nationality, without the need to prove a specific risk of persecution. This landmark decision serves to acknowledge the severe restrictions imposed on women's rights by the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, including limitations on education and employment, which are grounds for asylum.

In the middle of the morning there is a small commotion: a woman, whom I vaguely recognise as coming from the horn of Africa, enters shrieking and embraces her friends amidst shouts of joy: we immediately realise, without the need for translation, that she has been granted asylum. "Il this fuss about a passport? But you know we all get it," comments M. haughtily, a jaunty Afghan girl who has already established herself as the leader of our group. Above the potatoes we are peeling, I point out to her that refugee status is not so obvious for all nationalities, and that while for

Afghan women obtaining it seems almost automatic, for many others it still seems a mirage to be celebrated. She nods, confirming that even for Iranians it has become quite difficult (fieldnotes, 27/11/2024).

For other nationalities, in the context of asylum interviews, the performance of asylum seekers constitutes the primary evidence upon which decisions are made. However, the onus of substantiating claims rests exclusively on the individuals, who are expected to present a narrative that is both coherent and credible, detailing ‘well- founded fear of persecution’ due to factors such as their sexual orientation, political beliefs, gender, or religion.

“I have been waiting here for over three months, while I see Afghans coming and going to Europe continuously...I don’t understand why for us [Iranians] it’s so difficult, I’m scared of being deported. I’d kill myself in this case. I don’t know how to prove that I’m really gay. Do you know if there’s a test to prove it? I’m scared they won’t believe me” (M14, 14/10/2024).

The routes

The term 'Balkan route' varies in meaning depending on the user and context (Hamersak et al. 2020). While it has long been commonly seen as a unidirectional migration route from Turkey and Greece through the former Yugoslav countries to Austria or Italy, the reality is more complex (Martini 2024). Since the closure of the formal migration corridor in 2016, movement patterns have become fragmented, non-linear and sometimes circular. As a result, some scholars now refer to them as the 'Balkan Circuit', reflecting both securitisation practices and resistance to them (Hameršak et al. 2020). Within this frame, unauthorized migration to Greece belongs to a broader set of contemporary migration phenomena in Southern Europe in the last twenty years (Papadopoulou 2004). The country, and particularly the islands, has for some time been one of the main entry points for PoMs from Syria, Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq, with the country receiving over 857,363 individuals in 2015 alone. The majority of these people entered Greece from Turkey, while 853,650 arrived by sea. Greece and Turkey have both served as significant countries of destination and transit for migrants over the past decade. However, within the context of migration to Europe, these countries play markedly different roles: Turkey serves as the final point of departure for the European Union, while together with Bulgaria, Greece represents the primary point of entry into the EU and plays a crucial part in its politics of internal externalization.

In this research, I have focused on a very specific segment of the route, looking at the flows coming from Afghanistan and Iran, crossing Turkey and arriving in Greece by sea. Landing on an island is one of the options available: the other is to cross the borders of Greece on foot, via the Meric river, Thessaloniki and then Athens. The decision to arrive in Lesbos is not invariably a calculated one. While a significant number of individuals elected to arrive here (*"We did not want to walk in the forest", "We heard the life and conditions here are not that bad"*), for other people interviewed, it was a matter of fortuity (*"Our ship was bound for Athens, but a woman started bleeding, so we stopped here", "I didn't know where we were going. The smugglers decided on the destination"*).

I would like to further reflect on the criticisms inherent in labelling Turkey as a mere 'transit country'. Turkey continues to adhere to the geographical limitations set out in the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees, thereby rejecting non-European asylum seekers seeking to settle on Turkish territory. A notable aspect of this policy is the fact that the majority of asylum applications in the country are submitted by individuals from the Middle East, particularly from Iran. A significant proportion of those interviewed had resided in Turkey for extended periods, ranging from months to years. During their stay, many of them engaged in economic activities, formed families, and had children who, in the majority of cases, do not possess any knowledge of Persian or Dari.

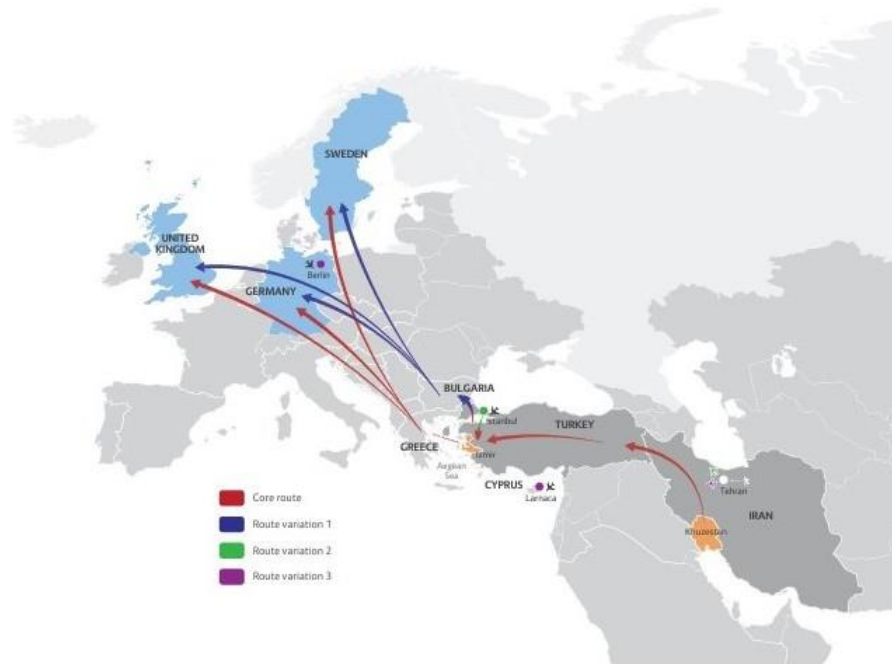


Figure 3. The main routes analysed during the ethnographic caravans. Source: Seefar (2019)

Lesvos

Within this picture, Lesvos can be considered as a “de facto border” (Nabi 2024, 138), one of the ‘hot spots’ where the tensions and contradictions of the EU migration regime coalesce and find emblematic expression (Rigo, 2019). Although the island became emblematic of the so-called 'refugee crisis' following 2015, it had already served as a conduit for individuals seeking asylum in Europe for several years prior (Di Matteo and Daminelli 2024). Simultaneously, for a proportion of individuals transiting through the territory, it functions as a filtration mechanism between the status of unauthorised migrant in motion and the legally recognised status of asylum seeker, even though it should be emphasised that this status is frequently transient and unstable, as the majority of individuals opt to depart the island after receiving the travel documents.

In 2012, a new increase in landings led local activists from the village of All Together to open an independent camp

for vulnerable refugees called Pikpa. Then, in September 2013, the Moria camp began operating under the management of the Greek police and Frontex, with the support of the UNHCR. During the first phase of arrivals in 2015, people were provided with basic documentation and encouraged to continue towards northern Europe after a few days. In the same year, another reception centre, run by the municipality of Mytilene, was opened in Kara Tepe and the European Union's 'hotspot approach' was launched; in September, the Moria centre was declared an EU hotspot. The deteriorating conditions in the centre reached a climax on 8 September when a fire devastated the Moria camp. The entire camp population then lived on the streets for about 10 days, after which people were moved to the mainland and the new Mavrovouni camp was set up in a former military zone on the outskirts of Mytilene. This supposedly temporary camp of tents and containers soon became the only reception centre on the island (Di Matteo and Daminelli, 2024).

At the time of writing, a new closed facility was due to open in the north of the island, far from any inhabited areas, but its opening has been repeatedly postponed thanks to the efforts of a heterogeneous range of actors, including human rights activists, ecologists and, interestingly, far-right groups.

Despite the decline in arrivals numbers and a concomitant waning of international interest, there are a number of reasons why the island should not be forgotten and still merits academic attention. The number of comings by sea to the Greek islands of the Aegean increased by 100% between 1 July and 29 September 2024 compared to the previous quarter, with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reporting a total of 17,034 migrants arriving in Greece by sea and Lesbos continues to serve as the primary point of arrival for migrants along the Eastern Mediterranean route. The Lesbos Closed Controlled Access Centre (CCAC) is currently housing nearly 1,300 migrants in inhumane living conditions, many of whom lack access to food and clean water. This situation persists due to a persistent policy of discrimination based on legal status within the CCAC. This deprivation of the most fundamental rights has persisted throughout the 2024 summer months (Lesvos Legal Centre 2024).

One of the primary steps in the governance of migrants on the island is the process of fingerprinting and registration in the EURODAC database, which contains data on undocumented migrants across the European Union. This procedure is designed to ensure that, upon claiming asylum in any other EU country, authorities can swiftly identify the first country of entry. This is in accordance with the EU regulation, known as Dublin II, which stipulates that the burden of return for undocumented migrants lies with the first country of entry. Despite documented evidence of expulsions, inhumane detention conditions, and instances of police and coast guard brutality against detainees in both Greece and Turkey, the majority of EU countries continue to return migrants to Greece as the first country of immigration. Consequently, under the provisions of the Dublin II agreement, migrants who have undergone fingerprinting in Greece face significant challenges in pursuing asylum in their desired destinations, which typically include the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Germany. International NGOs specialising in refugee rights have underscored the implications of the 'immobilisation' effected

by the Dublin II regime, which hinders migrants' ability to move forward while simultaneously preventing them from returning due to the risk of war and persecution in their countries of origin.

Contrary to the portrayal of migrants as being 'stuck in a revolving door', as suggested by human rights organisations, the findings from this research reveal a more complex situation. The data collected during fieldwork indicates that patterns of circularity, periods of both mobility and immobility, and spaces for negotiation and escape complicate and blur the contours of the EU borders. As demonstrated by Papadopoulos et al. (2008), the practices of migrant detention in the Aegean islands reveal a system that functions over time rather than in a static state. These 'transit points' on the European periphery evolve into 'centres for the control of the speed' of migratory movements, thereby playing a pivotal role in the regulation and de-regulation of the labour that migrants embody (Rigo 2019).

Moreover, according to the Lesvos Legal Centre (2024), in recent months, individuals attempting to cross the Aegean Sea border have encountered heightened levels of violence as a result of Greece's continued implementation of a restrictive policy aimed at preventing the arrival of migrants. I recall my perplexity in commenting on the news of a group of individuals who arrived on the island and concealed themselves for several days to evade the authorities. *"I understand that they all want to be found to go to the camp, right?"*, I asked one activist. *"Yes, the point is to be found by the right people"*. During the summer, which is Greece's peak tourist season for the Greek islands, there was an increasing number of incidents involving migrant boats capsizing after being pursued by Hellenic Coast Guard (HCG) vessels. Additionally, migrants were subjected to the use and threatened use of firearms, as well as severe beatings. These tactics have resulted in numerous fatalities, the precise number of which is uncertain due to the clandestine nature of pushback operations. As a consequence of alterations to the asylum policy and the reduction in the number of arrivals, at the conclusion of September 2024, for the first time since 2016, the largest population within the camp was that of Syrians (30%), followed by nationals of Afghanistan (30%) and Yemen (10%). Men make up 55% of the camp's population, women 19% and families 26%.

As with other critical points of transit and 'border zones' (for example, Lampedusa in the Mediterranean), detention centres such as Lesvos are not simply a cause for concern from a humanitarian standpoint. Rather, they are fundamental players in the ongoing process of stratifying migrants' rights in the European space, differentiating their access to labour and citizenship (Rigo 2019).

Figure 4. Screenshot of UNHCR Operation Data Portal, showing arrivals to Greece from Turkey in 2024 as of 7 November 2024



Gender and solidarity in migration studies

This research is informed by a feminist standpoint epistemology, which has its roots in the insights and struggles of authors such as Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir. These authors articulated their profound sense of exclusion from the prevailing avenues of knowledge production, perceiving that their experiences, concerns, and contributions were marginalised and dismissed by the dominant forces of their society (Danaj 2022). Therefore, I begin with the assumption that migration patterns and processes, migrants' experiences and the social, political, economic and cultural impacts of migration are gendered and that migration influences gender relations in various social institutions (Erel et al. 2003). I concur with the proposition that migrant women evince and deploy their agency in diverse forms throughout the various stages of the migration process, in comparison to men; that their needs, experiences and navigation strategies – even when the migratory journey occurs concurrently with those of men – diverge (Danaj 2022). It is not fortuitous that agency is constrained by the 'gendered structures of constraint'. These are the limits imposed by the structural distribution of rules, norms, resources and responsibilities that serve to position different groups of women and men within the broader social hierarchies of their societies (Kabeer 2013, 3).

Given the increasing importance of the international aspect of migration today, there is an emerging need to specifically examine issues such as how women are articulated in the phenomenon of migration, the role of women in migration, and the nature and extent of their exposure to migration (Avcil 2021). Nevertheless, the broader field of migration studies has not yet fully embraced feminist migration analysis and theory as the salience of gender for understanding migration phenomena has come to the forefront over the last decade (Cavounidis 2003). Historically, the role of women in migratory movements has often been overlooked, and this tendency persists in contemporary research. When their role was mentioned, it was often in relation to their roles as wives and mothers. The prevailing assumption was that women's migration was contingent on that of men; women were assumed to migrate in accompaniment with male migrants (Cavounidis 2003).

In approximately three decades, gender and migration scholarship has evolved from a few studies that included women immigrants or included gender as a dichotomous variable to a substantial body of literature that has made significant contributions to understanding numerous aspects of the emigration experience. Gender, however, should not be limited to statistics broken down by sex, but raise our awareness about broader social factors that influence women's and men's roles, and access to resources, facilities and services. More recent scholarship has advanced to what Hondagneu-Sotelo (2003, 9) called "gender as a constitutive element of immigration". This examination of gender in the context of immigration encompasses a variety of practices, identities, and institutions. Therefore, it is crucial to emphasise the necessity of producing situated analyses on female migrations that go beyond any form of generalisation. The works of Manalansan (2006), Luibhe'íd (2002) and Phizacklea (2003) provide excellent examples of this type of scholarship as they endeavour to extend the dismantling of the gender binary that is evident in much North American sociological work, with their focus not merely on the reconstruction of gender through the experience of migration but rather on a comprehensive

dissolution of gender norms. Camille Schmoll (2024) proposes the adoption of a feminized perspective to re-politicize gender within migration studies, centring women's autonomy and agency in analysis, moving away from portraying them merely as victims or invaders and recognizing them as independent actors. My perspective aligns with Scholl's line of reasoning, which acknowledges that while many women who migrate experience various forms of violence, the existing literature often fails to recognize the strategies these women employ to navigate and resist such violence. Silvia Di Meo (2024), besides, stresses that the experiences of women living in and across border areas can be understood as a story of the violent removal of their social and political presence. This presence is constantly neutralized by the normative and institutional power of the states that govern borders and is crystallized within a securitarian-humanitarian, colonial, and patriarchal discourse that renders women absent, vulnerabilizes them, and mortifies them into stigmatizing roles. Academic research, furthermore, which is predominantly conducted by men and is based on a Eurocentric perspective, contributes to the dissemination of a hegemonic discourse on migration that is centred exclusively on the male protagonist within mobilities and mobilizations at the borders.

The journey to Europe can present particular challenges for women, who appear to be affected in specific ways by the dangers of the journey and the lack of facilities in countries of reception such as Greece. However, these women also demonstrate resilience and, in many cases, adopt their own strategies for coping with the insecurities of migration. Much of the new research emphasized the independent agency of women in migration flows, contrary to the passivity implicit in previous portrayals of female migrants as moving in response to the migration of their menfolk. However, there is a paucity of rigorous analysis of the gendered experiences of migrants, which has led to the perpetuation of stereotypes of the 'dangerous' male migrant or the 'vulnerable' female migrant in both media and political discourse. Borders mirror the imperialistic genesis of the world order (Walia 2013) and confirm its current postcolonial condition (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, Rigo 2005). Borders do not function as linear boundaries that keep unwanted people outside. Rather, by assigning migrants to different legal, political and symbolic spaces (Rigo 2007, 2011), they also hierarchize people's movement according to gender-constructed roles. Nevertheless, since the adoption of the Geneva Convention, the figure of the 'genuine refugee' – as the 'ambassador' of the Western World who fights against, or takes flight from, the threat to Western values – has always remained male.

To move beyond such stereotypes, a more nuanced examination of the experiences and needs of female and male migrants and refugees is required, including an analysis of how gendered relations may evolve during the migratory process. As has been noted (Cavounidis 2003), the problem is not simply to 'add' women to the picture or to ask the same questions of immigrant women that were asked of immigrant men but rather to begin with an examination of how gender relations facilitate or constrain both women's and men's immigration and settlement.

Moreover, it is evident that the discourse surrounding female victimhood, characterised by a lack of subjectivity and a perceived need for rescue (Mai 2011), permeates legal discourses, numerous acts of solidarity, and our research endeavours. However, as Rigo contends, it would be equally fallacious to merely substitute this rhetoric with

an emphasis on autonomy and the freedom of choice (Andrijasevic 2014). The notion of ‘performing the border’ (Wonders, 2006) is a complex concept that can be used to deconstruct, problematise and confirm gender roles and hierarchies, both from an institutional perspective and from the perspective of those who cross borders. Indeed, the women who cross the Aegean Sea in search of asylum force us to rethink unauthorised migration and asylum as a terrain of political struggle. This is because their acts do not only contest the role assigned to them as gendered illicit migrants but also challenge vulnerability as a condition that diminishes their agency. In other words, their acts re-signify the political function of refugee law beyond the scope institutionally assigned to it.

Self-organization and solidarity from below

Prior to 2015, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) on the island



Figure 5. American students visiting a community centre as part of their 'international experience'. "Welcome to the zoo" was the most common sarcastic comment among volunteers on this occasion

were limited to just a few of the major international organisations, such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). However, following this period, the arrival of national and international NGOs, grassroots organisations, activists, and volunteers on Lesvos grew exponentially (Tsilimpounidi and Carastathis 2017). At the outset, a comprehensive and official public record of organisations and volunteers was not available, as a considerable number of groups were not registering their presence with the relevant local authorities. In their 2016 study, Kitching and colleagues estimated that between 2,060 and 4,240 volunteers arrived between November 2014 and February 2016. Subsequently, in May 2018, the Secretariat General for the Aegean and Island Policy asserted that up to 114 NGOs and 7,356 volunteers had been operating on Lesvos from 2016 onwards (Refugee Observatory 2018). Recently, the University of the Aegean, in collaboration with the Hellenic Foundation for Research and Innovation (HFRI), initiated the HUMANcITY project, which aims to map the diverse elements of the humanitarian landscape in Lesvos from 2019 to 2022. In 2022, the project reported the existence of 60 organisations and/or initiatives (Di Matteo and Daminelli 2024).

The beneficial impact and utility of the NGOs and volunteers on the island is undeniable and, maybe, also banal to state here. As the focal point of this research, the endeavours of self-organisation from below by people on the move have been a primary area of interest. Consequently, this decision has been made to direct greater attention to the criticisms intrinsic to what has been termed ‘the humanitarian apparatus’, along with its repercussions and interrelationships with migrants' networks. It is not the intention to denigrate the activities and values of NGOs and volunteers; rather, it is to illuminate some dynamics that have persisted on the island, yet have received insufficient attention and recognition.

“The problem inherent in this volunteerism... we receive many requests from international volunteers thinking they are coming to cuddle kids and they ask when we are having a ‘tour’ in the camp. Which tour? It is not a fucking zoo” (S16, 6/12/2024).

As Di Matteo and Daminelli (2024) have demonstrated, volunteer tourism has also been the subject of study as a form of expansion of neoliberal moral economies, promoting an individualistic approach to politics, as well as being a neo-colonial practice. Moreover, some scholars have highlighted the dearth of attention devoted to aspects such as the intercultural encounters occurring in the everyday spaces of volunteer tourism. They have urged future researchers to transcend the oversimplification of volunteer tourism as an orientalist phenomenon and apply it to ‘local communities’ that are portrayed as ‘poor’ yet ‘happy’ and ‘exotic’. Multiple conversations with individuals involved in solidarity practices have revealed that both volunteers and activists often attribute a deeply political significance to their actions, consciously distancing themselves from the conventional ‘humanitarian’ discourse typically associated with such practices and heavily criticizing the ‘humanitarian’ apparatus and its functioning:

“This NGOisation in the island, to me, is another form of inherently European colonialism...I heard a volunteer, once, saying that refugees too should eat vegan. Can you believe it?” (S5, 12/11/2024).

“There was a woman working here...she was taking pride in fucking men from the camp. She said she was ‘saving them from Islam’, showing them how ‘real civilization’ is. You can’t imagine how many of these stories I know here. European volunteers who come to fuck Arab men” (Y9, 22/11/2024).

“You see, this is the problem with spaces like those [mentioning a community centre]...white people standing in front of migrant and managing the place” (L7, 8/11/2024).

“I do not consider what we do as ‘solidarity’. I do not think many of the volunteers recognize their privileges. So much white saviourism...empowerment can come only collectively [...] People from the camp know very well these dynamics. When we refuse them an extra spoon of sugar, they feel we are not treating them as humans. They understand it very well” (Y9, 22/11/2024).

Through various fieldwork experiences, I observed how diverse communities and groups have confronted

exclusionary environments by establishing communal spaces designed to be more inclusive and accessible. These spaces aim to counteract prevailing inequalities in border regions, illustrating the potential for spaces to be reinterpreted, reappropriated, and transformed to embody new social realities and possibilities (Lefebvre 1991). In many of the situations analyzed, grassroots organisations focus on self-managed community spaces, where everyone contributes to both their maintenance and functioning.

The Moria White Helmets (MWH) constituted a deviation from the customary non-governmental organisation (NGO) paradigm, emphasising refugee self-organisation as a fundamental tenet of their operations. Despite the absence of current data regarding its condition, it still represents a notable example. According to their website, the organisation was established in 2021, and it operated on the principle that the residents of refugee camps are not passive or helpless individuals but rather skilled professionals and educated individuals whose autonomy and abilities are often undermined by their living conditions. In contrast to conventional NGOs, which depend on external volunteers, potentially leading to dependency within camp communities, MWH adopted a model that prioritises the empowerment of camp residents. MWH facilitated the provision of platforms through which these residents can offer their skills and services, thereby enabling them to contribute meaningfully to their community and engage in purposeful activities.

“We at Moria White Helmets believe in a concept which breaks with the standard NGO-model: We believe in refugee self-organization, which is why 3 years ago, we founded the Moria White Helmets. Residents of refugee camps are not helpless people, they are trained professionals, people with education, whose ability to operate themselves is undermined due to their living conditions. Typical NGO’s, with their foreign volunteers further undermine the autonomy of the residents inside the camp”³.

A notable initiative is the Women's Workshop, which offered a dedicated beauty salon for women within the camp. This space facilitated self-care practices, including hairstyling, nail care, and make-up, as well as providing a safe, women-only environment where participants could find respite from their surroundings and engage in meaningful social interactions. For a significant number of women, such routines represented an integral component of their daily lives, and the Women's Workshop enables them to maintain a sense of normalcy and dignity. This initiative is emblematic of MWH's commitment to restoring autonomy and fostering resilience among camp residents, while also offering a politically significant critique of humanitarian practices that perpetuate paternalistic and dependency-driven dynamics.

³ Source: <https://moriawhitehelmets.wordpress.com/home/>.

The Persian-speaking emic networks

As the focus of the present study is the Persian-speaking community, I identified some physical and digital spaces in the island I regard as sites of informal self-organisation and resistance from below.

The first space was introduced to me by two Iranian individuals residing in the camp who served as my gatekeepers. This area is designated as a secure environment for all Persian-speaking individuals from the camp and is structured as a recreational space offering a variety of activities and services. On a daily basis, tea and biscuits are provided to all visitors in the afternoon, followed by a communal dinner. The absence of formal management or supervision allows for unstructured socialising and shared experiences, and the presence of two dedicated children's areas ensures the safety and enjoyment of families. Fridays are exclusively reserved for women, with a diverse range of activities, including film screenings, cooking, and decoupage. This space was constructed collectively several years ago by a team of German volunteers in collaboration with Afghan residents of the camp. Following the emergence of the Covid pandemic, its operation was assumed by a small group of international individuals, comprising Iranians and Afghans from the camp, who, during their sojourn on the island, are at liberty to engage in all management activities, becoming part of the 'organizers'. The international volunteers share a connection with Iran and Afghanistan, with most speaking Persian and having visited the countries, some of them being former migrants now settled elsewhere. As one of them explained to me, the venue operates in a state of semi-secrecy due to the expired rent contract and the subsequent lack of rent and tax payments. Furthermore, its capacity to accommodate people is limited; at present, it is exclusively intended to serve as a refuge for Persian-speaking people on the move. Consequently, the 'organisers' have expressed a desire for the venue to remain undisclosed and have requested that its name and location not be revealed.

Interestingly, they come from a Christian international diasporic network, and the space has a religious blueprint that influences some of its features. I observed several instances of soft and indirect religious proselytism enacted through diverse means, including documentary screenings, meetings, and private conversations. Yet, the environment appeared to be inclusive of individuals from all religious backgrounds, with the majority of women wearing *hijabs* and displaying no discomfort in the presence of Christian elements. When compared to other examples on the island - such as the Jeowa witnesses waiting in the middle of the road for migrants to approach, or the defendants transferred to the Christian NGO EuroRelief - the importance of this place as a safe oasis seems undeniable.



Figure 6. Wifi signal in one informal place for gathering

The significance of this space and the dynamic processes occurring therein are predicated on the role of religion during migration, a factor which scholars have hitherto overlooked despite the long history of the relationship between religion and migration. Religion is generally considered an integrating agent, yet for some Iranian asylum seekers, religion, and especially religious conversion, is employed as a tool for migration (Akcapar 2006). The utilisation of religion, conversion, and ‘spiritual capital’ (i.e. the acquisition of support from religious institutions and the attainment of peace of mind and hope for a better future through communal prayers) can be of considerable importance in the lives of migrants, particularly when considering the adverse psychological impact and challenges they face. Also, this space functions as a site for networking between different actors and their own needs: while sipping a cup of tea, people compare smugglers’ prices, provide mutual psychological help and recount personal experiences.

The second location was introduced to me by a Persian-speaker colleague. Notwithstanding the fact that this facility caters to a different commercial entity, it functions as a regular meeting point for a small community of Persian-speakers from diverse backgrounds, linked by a migratory story that led them to stay for a more or less prolonged time on the island. This has resulted in the formation of an informal information hub for individuals who are on the move. According to my informant,

“Here there is anything people need, in different layers: advices, services, sociality... a lot of movements is organized by people on the move themselves, split according to their communities. There are self-initiatives they started to help, to gain something. Where else would people get help and what they need?” (S5, 22/11/2024).

The underlying motivations for these activities are diverse, encompassing a range of factors from financial gain to altruistic gestures of assistance to acquaintances in need. This phenomenon can be conceptualised as a manifestation of ‘community-based solidarity’, as posited by the informant, contrasting with the external solidarity that characterises the island. The question of whether the individuals providing these services can be categorised as ‘smugglers’ is open to debate. My interlocutor proposed an interpretation which I concur with:

“I’d not say ‘ghachaghbar’ [smuggler, trafficker]. They are on the move themselves. They are trying to make some money, help some friends...I’d use the term ‘navigators’, ‘facilitators’, sort of middle-men...they are part of a rhizomatic movement, they are conductors of the underground Europe...and this place can be somehow considered an underground station in it” [S5, 22/11/2024].

I am beginning to understand the role of the place in the informal economy of the place, an underground station, as S. says, in underground Europe, or rather: ‘zir abi’, underwater, as we say here, now that the term Game has been cleared through customs and given the crossing that each of them experiences on the boats. What they all have in common is an irregular migratory past that has led them - some in 2017, some in 2018 and some in 2019 - to go through the asylum application process and then to stay on the island, stuck or waiting: some because they do not have enough money to leave, some because they have already started a family, some because they are overwhelmed by life and can no longer go on (fieldnote, 27/11/2024).

Entering the camp also gave me a fleeting opportunity to observe the development of emic ties, practices and networks of self-organisation. Refugee camps may be regarded as the closest observable approximation of the



Figure 7. Writings on a container in the camp advertising selling bread

process by which individuals with heterogeneous endowments of human capital and other resources are placed upon a hilltop or plain and permitted to interact with each other and the economy of the host country, if the rules permit, given the often severe constraints they face. In other words, the genesis of an economy (Alloush et al. 2017). Contrary to the narrative of an arid and empty space, the camp appeared to be populated by a myriad of small, informal, yet well-structured relationships that structure its everyday economic life. Handmade writings on containers and tents advertise - mostly in Persian - the businesses that have been or are still operating, such as ‘hairdresser’, ‘market’ or ‘bakery’. The food provided in the camp is unanimously recognised as *“inedible, to be thrown away”*⁴ and so a thriving business has sprung up selling homemade Iranian

⁴ Interestingly, I found out that the food in the camp is prepared by a European NGO, with volunteers doing the cooking. I spoke to a refugee who works with them, and we joked together about the terrible quality of the food that the solidarity people prepare for them.

and Afghan dishes: cooked mainly by women, the dishes are then advertised on WhatsApp groups and sold by the men, creating a family business that often expands to include neighbouring families in the same container or in neighbouring tents. These acts are not understood as ‘solidal’ by the people who carry them out; yet, I believe they can be interpreted as a fragment of an informal migration infrastructure from below that goes beyond the mere concept of economic profit.

Indeed, the phenomenon of solidarity and everyday organisation from below is not confined to physical spaces; as my previous research has demonstrated, digital infrastructures constitute crucial spaces upon which people on the move rely at all stages of their journeys.

Following the establishment of contact prior to arrival, I was able to join several WhatsApp and Telegram groups of Persian-speakers people inside the camp. These digital spaces pursue a range of diverse objectives; one of them operates as a virtual market in which a real circular, internal market in the camp also functions. In this particular group, individuals in transit engage in the exchange of services, including homemade food, SIM cards, beauty services, and cigarettes. Another group functions as a repository for information, offering insights into the range of services available on the island, but also the latest Game, the arrival of individuals from Turkey, and the process of transferring funds from their respective countries of origin. Indeed, a number of these channels operate as a system of real-time monitoring of unauthorised departures and arrivals of compatriots from the Turkish cities of Izmir and Ayvalik, providing more or less reliable updates on the routes, the conditions on the various Aegean islands, and the camps.

During the course of my stay, I encountered an Iranian individual who operates a Telegram channel through which he facilitates the purchase of airline tickets for refugees, ensuring optimal combinations at highly competitive prices. In addition to ticket procurement, he provides invaluable guidance on visa requirements and essential documentation, a service that is particularly beneficial given the pervasive misinformation I have encountered. I subsequently managed to meet him in person; his appearance, characterised by leather footwear, a warm wool jumper, and a long ponytail, resembled that of a dandy and well-dressed businessman. Utilising Bluetooth headphones, he engaged in a transaction with a customer in a cordial and professional manner, a stark contrast to the often impersonal demeanour exhibited by airline personnel.

“They never understand,” he tells me with a sigh at the end of a call. “They don’t trust the price I tell them, and they do it themselves: now this one took an Aegean flight from here to Thessaloniki, with an 8 kg piece of luggage, and then from Thessaloniki to Germany with Ryanair just a hand luggage! They don’t understand how it works, they think they have saved money” (fieldnotes, 27/11/2024).

Following a thorough examination of Skyscanner, I concluded that the prices he offers are indeed transparent. It is evident that he derives a modest profit from these transactions – another Iranian defined his enterprise as a ‘Western Union’- but the general consensus about his services appears to be favourable, as another Iranian commented to me that he received the plane tickets he had reserved even before the full payment had been made.

The majority of networks and groups at the center of this research distinguish themselves by adopting an approach that is not overtly political, often avoiding direct confrontation with the border regime and reception systems. Their initiatives align with what scholars describe as ‘direct social actions’ (Zamponi 2017), ‘subversive humanitarianism’ (Vandervoordt and Verschraegen 2019), and ‘de-bordering solidarities’ (Ambrosini 2022), as they primarily provide direct and practical support to those in need.

As Cantat et al. (2019) emphasize, solidarity means different things to different actors, taking on various forms in different contexts. An important focus is put on the ongoing debate on humanitarianism and solidarity, which has grown particularly over the past two decades (Fassin 2012; Malkki 1996; Agier 2011; Pallister-Wilkins 2022), and to the multifaceted nature of the solidarity concept, that shows its resistance to a singular definition (Agustín and Jørgensen 2018; Gaztambide-Fernández 2012). Recent literature has framed solidarity as a bottom-up assemblage of practices, encounters, and cooperative efforts from below that promote transformative processes (Queirolo Palmas and Rahola 2020). Other scholars view it as shaped by contested social imaginaries, embodying ideals for a better society and fostering transformative relationships (Fleischmann 2020).

I decided to interpret what I saw as an alternative notion of solidarity that is both situated and embodied. In developing this, I am inspired by Fotaki's reworking of Butler's (2004, 2009a, 2009b, 2015) idea of shared vulnerability as a source of empowerment and her reading of Levinas's (1987) work on ethical obligation to the unknown other. The proposed notion of solidarity is not based on abstract ideas of love, charity, shared cultural values or the pursuit of 'an identitarian assimilation' (Butler 1998: 37), but emerges from the shared predicament of human life as a precarious condition, while recognising that precarity is unequally distributed between groups of people within/across different societies. Building on this theorisation, I rely on a feminist conception of solidarity that rejects the ideal of homogeneity and the notion of common interests as its foundation.

In the cases analysed, I understand solidarity as informal cooperative actions that can be framed in terms of moral economy, understood here as “the production, distribution, circulation, and use of moral sentiments, emotions and values, and norms and obligations in social space” (Fassin 2009, 49). I also share Fotaki's (2022) reading of solidarity as a primarily economic-technical concept, with weak normative commitment to the abstract and idealistic promises of equality for all that can easily be separated from its social and ethical dimensions. While framing the extraction of money in exchange for help, as these actors often do, as a moral act may seem counterintuitive at first, for many such a request does not necessarily indicate some form of immorality. The entangled relationship between smugglers and people on the move, as instance, calls for a critique of abstract models of solidarity and liberal moral ideals (Meagher 2005) and demands an examination of how the moral economies of smuggling emerge. Rather than a mere ‘business approach’, the logic and practices analyzed can be better understood by framing them within the concept of a ‘interested solidarity’ (Bonnin et al. 2024) within the ‘migration industry from below’, implying our gaze to shift to the operose dimension enacted by illegalized travellers (Khosravi 2007), rather than interpreting all of these human flows and practices in terms of the rationality, predictability, and linearity of a ‘business enterprise’ supplying goods and services. It also means focusing on the

practices, representations and forms of self-organization of those who travel or contribute to the material production of travel, rather than looking for the apex and subordinate figures of an integrated organization - in a popular and moralized narrative, the traffickers and smugglers.

In the context of offering care and assistance, these spaces have been shown to provide immediate material support, while also acting as a form of resistance, challenging established norms that perpetuate inequality and exclusion. They propose an alternative paradigm that places a premium on compassion, solidarity, and the establishment of meaningful relationships, in contrast with the status quo (Fleischmann and Steinhilper 2017; Ataç et al. 2021). The practices of care in these spaces extend beyond mere reaction; they embody a visionary approach that imagines and articulates new modes of recognition and inclusion. In the context of exclusionary border regimes and the devaluing impact of racialised criminalisation, these acts of hospitality (Hamington 2010), care (Tronto 1996), and aid create spaces and moments where people, irrespective of their background, can find acknowledgement, dignity, and shared humanity. In opposition to the tendency to reduce economic phenomena to a mere pursuit of profit, it is posited that there are more complex factors at play. The intricate network of financial transactions, the exchange of goods, information and social interactions is characterised by a rationality that is not solely driven by the pursuit of profit. Instead, it is imbued with a sense of care for others and a complicity in the shared objectives of these exchanges (Bonnin, Fravega, and Palmas 2024).

Women's spaces, resistances and strategies

"I flee Iran to find my place. Where is a woman's place? It doesn't exist in Iran. In Greece and Europe, it doesn't exist either! I've been stuck here for six years. Why? Ain't I a woman? I ask for asylum! Where is my place? So far, Europe hasn't given me anything. Why? Ain't I a woman?" (G10, 7/12/2024).

Nearly illiterate, in her fifties, with a warm smile and a kind word for everyone, I am pretty sure this Iranian woman has never read Sojourner Truth or bell hooks. Yet it does not take a PhD in sociology to articulate powerful feminist statements about the EU's migration management of bodies and temporalities.

The island of Lesbos is host to a plurality of NGOs offering specific services to women; indeed, Parèa is among the very few spaces where single men can access services too. Among these, I had the opportunity to talk with personnel of When We Band Together (WWBT) and Bashira, two northern European NGOs dedicated to women, and I volunteered for a Dutch NGO called Because We Carry (BWC) who offers specific support to mothers and families, entering inside the camp too. It is interesting to note that all these organisations employ women from the camp, albeit with different rules. While WWB provides a small salary to her only community employer, BWC states openly that:

"We don't pay our volunteers because we want them to work for us because they like it, not because they expect something in return" (S16, 5/12/2024).

In the course of my collaboration with BWC, I became cognisant of the fact that volunteering, even when not remunerated, proffers certain advantages to female volunteers. For Afghan female volunteers, as instance, the act of adorning themselves with a badge and marching through the camp distributing items engendered a sense of empowerment and acclaim among their peers that they were seldom in a position to attain. Nevertheless, in the following section, the focus is predominantly on cases of self-organisation from below, around or outside NGOs and civil society's solidarity frame.

In exploring the migratory experiences of women in this study, my findings resonate with Avcil's (2021) work. While 'dependent migration'⁵ is typically identified as the predominant factor influencing migration decisions among women, the reasons for migration, as indicated by Afghan and Iranian women in my research, demonstrate that the concept of 'dependent migration' does not always apply perfectly to them. The reasons that motivated them to leave are numerous and call for a radical rethinking of the dichotomous oppositions between forced and voluntary migrations (Schmoll 2023).

This research aims to illuminate the creative and numerous strategies women on the move have developed in order to navigate the various social, economic and racialised spaces that have been created within their migration experiences. The findings show how a powerful will to navigate through various legal systems leads to the emergence of political subjectivities along the way (Khosravi, 2020). *“Women here have shown much more resilience than men”*, an interviewee commented; *“when Moria burnt down, many men fell into desperation, depression and even addiction; women did roll up their sleeves and moved on”* (S5, 27/11/2024).

The 'feminisation of migration' is a concept that facilitates understanding and visibility of the problems encountered by women in the migration process. As actors primarily positioned at the centre of migration, women play a significant role in enabling themselves and other individuals migrating with them to sustain themselves, shouldering considerable responsibilities from the initial to the final stages of the process (Avcil 2021).

Contrary to the notion of being passive actors, women from Afghanistan and Iran have been shown to take an active role in their own migration, often acting autonomously in decision-making processes. This includes their choice to leave their country of origin, as well as those of transit, and the routes to undertake.

“I see you live in another country and you have a lot of experience. Please tell me what you think. Where should we go next? Everyone else is going to Germany, but I'm not sure. I'm asking everyone because I want to get as much information as possible to make an informed decision for my children and their future” (G2, 5/12/2024).

“I'm finding out about each country so I can decide where to go when we get the passport. I'm travelling with my two kids. My husband left me in Iran, so we moved here on our own. So now I'm asking everyone about the best place to

⁵ Dependant migration is a phenomenon that defines the movement of a woman following male members of a family that have already migrated for any reason (finding a job or reassignment, etc.) (Ilkcaracan and Ilkcaracan 1998: 3).

move” (T17, 22/11/2024).

In the majority of cases, the empowerment⁶ and agency of the women I encountered were evident not only in the destination but also in the country of origin, as the very act of engaging in migratory projects demonstrates the agency of women (Erel, 2009; Lévy, 2015; Moujoud, 2008).

“My family kept telling me, ‘You’re going to end up in trouble’, because I never watch what I say or how I act. I always take part in protests and events. I can’t help but act as I please. So I decided to leave Iran, alone, because I would have ended up in a bad situation. I want a better future for my studies: I went to university in Iran, but it was awful” (N4, 2/11/2024).

The following are three cases that I found particularly fascinating, albeit quite different from each other.

B3. represents one of the testimonies of Afghan women’s diverse resilience and survival strategies even in the absence of supportive networks. Completely illiterate, she migrated from Iran, where she grew up, to Turkey with her husband. In this context, she gave birth to a child and, despite her lack of education, found work as a porter, earning sufficient funds to attempt the journey to Greece. At the time of our encounter, she was alone with her one-year-old child, as her husband was unsuccessful in joining them. She subsequently demonstrated remarkable resourcefulness in securing legal representation, obtaining a private residence through a solidarity association outside the camp, securing financial support for her son, and planning her next steps towards Germany without waiting for her husband to join them. In instances where she lacked the requisite linguistic, educational or economic capital to obtain something, she resorted to her relational skills, soliciting assistance from a variety of actors with whom she surrounded herself. Upon acquiring her travel documentation, she on more than one occasion requested that I purchase her flight tickets. I declined, and she was ultimately successful in contacting a middleman who arranged flights for refugees and secured the ticket before receiving the funds from a relative.

In contrast, N4. is another young Afghan girl who was raised in Iran but hails from a privileged background. Her family ensured that she received a quality education, which she pursued independently. Her sisters, her sole remaining relatives, provided her with encouragement and financial support to leave Iran alone due to her rebellious nature and her aspiration for enhanced educational opportunities. On several occasions, she demonstrated the capacity to take the initiative and provide guidance to the group she was part of, even in the context of diverse challenges:

“Once, our smuggler had to send us a taxi, but I felt like he was trying to cheat us. I told my friends to go to the beach and act like tourists. I took off my socks and lied on the sand while frenetically texting the taxi driver, trying to understand where he was [...] The night after, I told my friends to hide between some warehouses in the streets. We snuck between one

⁶ I utilise Kabeer's (1999) conceptualisation of empowerment as an ongoing process through which individuals who have been denied the capacity to make strategic life decisions are able to gain that capacity.


and the other. In the dark, I told them what to do" (N4, 31/10/2024).

I met T17 in one of the areas dedicated to women within an NGO; in the space of a few minutes, she decided to tell me the whole story of her life as a single mother in her thirties. The decision to leave Iran, where she used to work in a catering service, was taken by the family together. Still, after she left for Turkey with her two teenage children, her husband never moved, and after a few months, he abruptly cut off all communication. "*Maybe he has another woman,*" she hypothesised. Nevertheless, she managed to find a job in Turkey to earn enough money to try to get to Greece; after the first attempt failed, they managed a second thanks to the help of another woman who supported her financially and morally. The sense of female solidarity and cooperation in T19 is strengthened after a Turkish policeman sexually abused her daughter in a detention camp: "*When I have my third interview here,*" she said, "*I want to denounce everything. My daughter is afraid, she told me to give up so as not to cause trouble, but I can't: what if it happens to another girl? As a woman, I feel responsible. I must stop it*".

These women have demonstrated a commitment to being involved in the decision-making process throughout their journey, often working to fund their travels and support their families. This commitment is evident even in the context of asylum processes, where they have been known to devise innovative strategies for financial sustainability.

Accumulation of various forms of capital, such as cultural ones (language proficiency, education), legal ones (residence permit, passport), and economic ones (a job, a salary), is only possible when one stays in one place for a longer period of time. In her study of waiting and uncertainty experienced by refugees in transit, Massa (2020) correctly states that immobility and prolonged waiting between one border crossing and the next do not imply passivity. Immobilized and waiting migrants are actively trying to turn obstacles into opportunities and to mobilize their resources to improve their situation. Mobility and immobility, thus, do not need to be in binary opposition to one another.

P27. is another salient case study. A young woman travelling from Afghanistan with her husband and two children, she initiated her own beauty business for Iranian and Afghan women while awaiting the asylum process. She identified a need among the Persian-speaking women in the camp for their own beautician, as they did not trust the Arab ones already in the camp. She purchased new accessories and created a WhatsApp channel where she promotes her services and lists prices in both Persian and English. The reputation she had built led to requests from some local NGOs for her services.



- * Eyelash transplant..... 🇸🇩7
- *Epilation 🇸🇩(prices are given per person)
- * Color and highlight..... 🇸🇩35 above
- *Short hair..... 🇸🇩6
- * Correction and contouring of eyebrows 🇸🇩
- *Face wax... 🇸🇩6
- * Types of African fabric. ... 🇸🇩4
- * Cleansing the 🇸🇩
- *Hair curler... 🇸🇩4
- * Face make-up..... 🇸🇩4
- *Eyeliner... 🇸🇩1
- * Hair strand..... 🇸🇩5

Afrer



Befor



- Eyelash transplant..... 🇸🇩7
- *Epilation... 🇸🇩 (prices are given per person)
- Color and highlight... 🇸🇩35 b above
- *Short hair..... 🇸🇩6
- Correction and contouring of eyebrows 🇸🇩5
- *Face wax.... 🇸🇩6
- Types of African fabric... 🇸🇩4

Figure 8. Promotional messages in P.'s WhatsApp channel



Figure 9. WhatsApp message promoting P.'s catering service

Following this initiative, she established a catering service named 'The Meal is Ready', which specialises in the delivery of Persian homemade dishes to individuals' doors within the camp. Whilst the bulk of buying and selling activities in the camp are generally overseen and promoted by men, P. established her own activities led only by herself, the aim being collecting enough money to continue their journey to another European country. The care that is invested in the creation of a visually pleasing outcome is evident: in contrast to the numerous other individuals engaged in the sale of food within the camp, P. published an aesthetically pleasing photograph obtained from the internet to symbolically disassociate her commercial activities from the broader context of the camp. Furthermore, she meticulously selected a particular vocabulary to promote her food.

I posit that P.'s aesthetic and personal care practices have exerted a pivotal influence on her branding endeavours, too. By embodying traits that are particularly esteemed within Iranian beauty standards, such as slender physique, light hair and eye colour, and freckles, P. has effectively marketed herself as a desirable and marketable model. The aforementioned matter is not merely an additional concern; it has been demonstrated that self-care is an indispensable component of the daily lives of these women in the context of migration.

"I'm really inspired by how determined and strong these women are. They look after themselves, even when they're on the move. These are women escaping wars, and most of them have lost someone. Even in the jungle, they take care of their appearance. And spaces like this [Parèa women space] are crucial because here they can stop, have a break, think only about themselves. It's important. It's an act of resistance, of power" (N22, 26/10/2024).

Certainly, the collective attendance at spaces exclusively populated by women, where the opportunity to engage in self-grooming, the application of beauty and cosmetic products, and the access to a range of health and

beauty-related services are all possible, constitutes a significant component of these women's routine. Not surprisingly, these gatherings also represented significant opportunities for informal interaction, during which I could establish a relationship of trust and intimacy with them and conduct interviews.

Scholars and activists have noted that in recent decades, the feminist movement has reappropriated and redefined the notion of care, moving it from a 'privatized, feminized, and therefore devalued domain' (Glenn, 2000) into the public sphere. As a practice, care involves creating relationships of interdependence and can be transformed into a public or communal responsibility. This perspective has led to the idea of politicizing the concept of care (Tronto 1996), where care is defined as 'a specific activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible' (Tronto 2013). It is evident that a proportion of these activities, such as the beauty treatments provided by P., are subject to a fee, thereby becoming an integral component of an informal industry from below. However, I observed that these activities also underpin practices of mutual care and assistance. For the entire two weeks preceding her departure to Germany, for instance, a young woman I became friend with was preoccupied with grooming her eyebrows and removing facial hair to become 'presentable' for her relatives:

"This whole time I couldn't take care of myself, you know, with this little kid, it's impossible...but now I'm leaving, and it's not nice, you know? It's not nice to be like this, I have to take care of myself now, do my eyebrows, possibly a botox to my lips, I also shaved my legs, look how smooth they are now..." (B3, 1/12/2024).

Utilising the WhatsApp groups operational within the camp, she initiated communication with P. to request her services as she specifically wanted an Iranian woman to take care of her. On the final day of her island sojourn, a gathering was convened in a space designated for Persian speakers, where she underwent a hair removal procedure while other women looked after her kid. While I proffered to pay the service as a 'farewell gift', she independently negotiated the price successfully securing a modest discount because, she privately commented with me, "*P. had compassion for me*".

Notwithstanding my conviction that there does not exist an organic and structured network of solidarity amongst the Persian-speaker women in the camp, which I attribute chiefly to the temporary and short nature of their stay, I did observe multiple volatile yet significant instances of collaboration and mutual aid that were distinctly female-led. In the spaces exclusively frequented by women I attended regularly, it was customary to engage in the exchange of information such as the most reliable smugglers to facilitate the continuation of their journey⁷, the arrival of the different Game from Turkey, the location of basic services on the island, and the organisation of activities just for women, like a day of fishing reserved for women only.

⁷ Individuals who obtain valid travel documents are permitted to remain in other EU countries for a period of up to 90 days. However, some opt to employ the services of a smuggler in order to facilitate their continued journey, either because they are unable to do so independently or because they wish to obtain additional services such as flight tickets or falsified documentation.

M.: *"Have you heard of L.? She managed to obtain the passport, and she left. We will do the same. This guy asked us 5.000€ to go to Spain..."*

P.: *"But it's a lot, don't you think so?"*

M.: *"Yes but he is trustworthy. I will give you his number, contact him"* (informal conversation, 22/11/2024).

The denunciation of gender-based violence by their male comrades and the desire to fight against it together was another common topic of conversation between these women and me:

"On Wednesday this place was full of new men... I was so ashamed you can't imagine. Men who didn't even know how to sit at a table, how to eat properly. I'm so tired of these men, it's so difficult for me here in the camp and I'm beginning to think I'll never get rid of them, not even in Europe" (N4, 20/11/2024).

"There is this man who beats his pregnant wife... he beat her even when we were on the boat in the sea. I tried to talk to her, but she didn't want to talk to me. We think she is afraid. But we really want to stop him" (N11, 12/11/2024).

"Afghan men in the camp insult me because I don't wear the veil, they say I'm a slur, I've sold myself... I answer them, why did you come here if you behave like Taliban?" (T17, 4/12/2024).

Access to information is the recurring motif in all attempts at networking and gathering among migrant women; it seems to regulate the deployment of agency and the ability to model the mobility narrative. The following is an extract from my ethnographic diary about an evening spent in an informal place run jointly by Persian-speaking volunteers and asylum seekers:

Fridays are dedicated exclusively to women. Today there was a workshop to bake biscuits together and, at the same time, an informative session held by an Afghan woman who emigrated with her family to Canada: the aim is to provide women with information on migration in general and, specifically, to Canada. The woman who leads the meeting speaks mainly in Dari. She addresses concrete issues, especially regarding female migration. She urges women not to shut themselves away at home and to learn the local language, stressing the importance of taking English courses to avoid isolation, to visit spaces such as schools and libraries, not to isolate themselves. 'Your husbands will be working outside and the children at school, don't lock yourselves up at home doing nothing'. Another issue is childcare: it is crucial to avoid children looking neglected (with scratches or obvious marks), as they might ask questions at school about their family situation. Some women, many of whom have lived in Turkey, are concerned about the risk that social services might take the children away. One mother recounts a case where the father, suffering from psychiatric problems, lost custody of his children, and they were never returned to the family. Another much-discussed issue is 'cultural shock'. She encourages women to maintain modesty in dress, but also to educate their children to respect the rules and to integrate into society. 'Be careful because we come from a culture that is relatively closed, but don't be fooled by this.' He tells of young people who, sent abroad at great financial sacrifice by their families, end up behaving disrespectfully. 'The families have paid so much money and they do sins, get drunk, commit crimes. It breaks my heart'. She also gives

practical advice on health and nutrition, recommending avoiding junk food and limiting the use of electronic devices for children (fieldnotes, 18/10/2024).

The guidance is imparted by women to women, rather than being disseminated by a volunteer or activist and, most significantly, by an Afghan woman who, like the women to whom it is addressed, has already crossed a border and achieved a positive outcome. The tips are simple, concrete and specifically designed for a female audience that is not mythologised and which in this case is not particularly educated. Rhetorical buzzwords such as 'empowerment' and 'agency' are absent, but the advice is imbued with all its concrete meaning. The meeting was a space characterised by solidarity and the sharing of experiences, where women with similar migratory backgrounds can confront and provide mutual support.

In contrast to utilitarian and economic approaches, or idealistic but abstract invocations of solidarity, feminist thinking focuses on situated practices and embodied experiences (Covi 2016; Fotaki and Daskalaki 2020; Kenny and Fotaki 2015). Furthermore, feminist theorisation of solidarity across different geographical locales accounts for the experiences of those excluded from defined social groups, including refugees, migrant workers, ethnic minorities, and various categories of dispossessed (Cheah 2006; Federici 2012; Fotaki 2019; Mohanty 1998). Far from being subordinated to their husbands, fathers or brothers, there are many B., P., and N. throughout Asia and Europe that are invisible because of racialized discourses, but whose lives are real examples of the multifaced strategies of determination and agency women on the move are able of.

The patterns of gendered circular and cyclical migration observed in Afghanistan towards economic opportunity and in flight from conflict illustrate disparate experiences of difficulty, opportunity, challenge, and change (van Houte et al. 2015). Spatial disruptions can have a cascading impact on gender roles and relations, resulting in shifts in gendered divisions of labour and changes in authority and influence based on gender. Conversely, migration can serve to further entrench existing unequal gender roles, thereby making it more challenging for women to articulate their gender-based rights when struggling with other identity-based issues, such as race, nationality, and religious affiliation (Bagheri and Fluri 2019). This research considers the intersection of gender and migration to be a phenomenon that extends beyond the traditional evolutionary perspective, which associates tradition and modernity with the place of origin and the place of destination, respectively. This intersection is not straightforward, as migration does not necessarily result in women being liberated from subordination (Dahinden et al. 2007; Parreñas 2009; Vianello 2009). The act of crossing borders can be perceived as an empowering experience, which may in turn challenge the established gender norms of a given society. However, it can also result in the formation of new dependencies and the reinforcement of existing gender boundaries and hierarchies (Morokvasic 2008).

"I'd love to contribute to something, to help people...In Iran, I had managed to convince my parents to give food to the poor, even to addicted people, because my family was wealthy, and they used to keep everything to show off to richer families...I tried to challenge this [...] here, I'd love to do the same, once I helped an organization in the city to

distribute items to people, I made my friends come and help, they were all tired but I stayed...in the camp, these exchange activities are mostly run by men, but I want to contribute” (N4, 30/10/2024).

“I don’t trust men, I have always been hurt by men. I only trust women, immediately, from my heart. And I will always help other women, I don’t care where they come from. If I see another woman in need, I’ll help her. This is why I joined it [an NGO dedicated to women on the move only]. I sit there and invite women to come, have a tea, chat together. Women never hurt each other” (G10, 7/12/2024).

WISH and LLRS

During my stay in Lesbos, I had the privilege of encountering two other political entities on the island. The first was WISH—Women in Solidarity House, a feminist self-organised collective of former and current women on the move. The second was Lesbos LGBTQI+ Refugee Solidarity.

WISH is defined by the words of one of its members as a collective to *“resist and struggle together to build networks of trust, support and care: we are women who do not need NGOs and men”* (L7, 12/11/2024). Solidarity represents a pivotal instrument utilised by the collective to assist members in their resistance, education, and enhancement of their circumstances. The collective functions on a horizontal basis and is comprised of women who have experienced unauthorised migration to the island, are still on the move or, for a variety of reasons, live there permanently. The women have various geographical backgrounds, including those from Afghanistan, Iran, Congo, and European nations. The collective arranges a variety of events, including fundraisers, solidarity parties, film screenings, women's assemblies, and daily trips, with the objective of advocating for and supporting individuals subjected to detention under migration policies. Most importantly, it provides a safe space for its members to seek help and support for anything related to their experiences as former or current women on the move. The political basis of the collective work is evident: in a context characterised by the hegemony of *“NGOs managed almost exclusively by white people”* (interview, 12/11/2024), WISH considers solidarity and self-organisation to be *“the best tools to change the system in which we are trapped”*. The following is an extract from one of WISH's manifestos:

“Because we know that only the solidarity among ourselves will make things change. Because the system, states, governments, politicians...they impose their rules without considering us and for their own benefit. Because we don’t trust those who have forgotten us, that is why we take control of our lives. Because we, better than anyone, know what we need, what we want, how we are and what we want to be. That is why we fight and work to achieve it. Because no one is going to give us anything if we don’t fight for it. Because life changes through effort and solidarity. Side by side with those who suffer and share our daily struggle”⁸.

⁸ Source: a flyer distributed by the collective in Lesbos.

I started collaborating over a year ago by providing free phone translation from Persian for Lesbos LGBTQI+ Refugees Solidarity, a grassroots collective that was set up in 2017. When I got to the island, I was lucky enough to be invited to take part in some of the collective's meetings and initiatives, getting to know better its functioning and political actions. The collective's aim is to create trusted points and provide temporary and long-term safer spaces for LGBTQI+ people on the move inside and outside the camp structure. The activists and members connect queer people with each other, work on individual cases and campaign for change for queer migrants. Some examples include assisting with individual interviews by writing documents and letters that may help the asylum case and finding appropriate accommodation for particularly sensitive cases. As well as this, they create social moments outside of the everyday routine of the camp and migration apparatus, which were some of the very few times when I felt the power hierarchies among people on the move, volunteers and activists genuinely faded away.

A few LGBTQI+ European activists who have moved to the island specifically to initiate the group are in charge of its day-to-day running (i.e. managing the shared mobile phone or setting the agenda for meetings), a strategy that is also based on the unequal availability of time, power and privilege, but nevertheless the group is organised horizontally. Decisions are made collectively, with all members having the chance to get involved according to their wishes and availability because, *“after all, we are all grown up, and we want the members of our group to feel independent and responsible”* (R15, 03/02/2025). Membership is based on an initial contact, usually initiated by the people in the camp, and a subsequent meeting with the activists, who then discuss the new member's admission with the others. The following is a short extract from one of the collective statements available online; apart from being a powerful document of self-empowerment, it is relevant in its denunciation of the discriminatory and shaming practices that queer people experience within the migration management apparatus, not by other compatriots but also at the hands of some humanitarian actors who are vividly present inside the Lesbos camp.

Because we love anyway

“There’s really no such thing as the ‘voiceless’. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.” - Arundhati Roy

With homosexuality still illegal in 72 countries, it is obvious why many LGBTQI+ people become refugees. Many of us fled from home because of persecution, violence, threats and because we had to hide our gender identities. When we arrive on Lesbos, expecting safety, we are shocked to find the same issues continue for us here. Homophobic harassment and violent attacks are frequent and severe: by fellow residents in Moria camp as well as by the police and camp guards. According to UNHCR’s website, our specific needs and safety requirements should be addressed: ‘At UNHCR we work to protect LGBTI refugees and asylum seekers everywhere’, right below it a ‘Donate Now’ button. But while UNHCR and other large organizations have comfortably used us for funding and marketing purposes they have structurally lacked to provide genuine specialized support to queer migrants on Lesbos.

Moria camp is largely run by EuroRelief, a hard-line evangelical organization that deliberately ignores queer voices. Members of our group have been called sinners by EuroRelief staff. Demands for our basic rights and specialized support

go systematically unheard. Intrusive interview questions and institutionalized queerphobia at the asylum office have wrongfully left many queer people without asylum, to be deported back to the dangerous situations they fled. Homophobic violence is systematically screened from view, because it needs to be reported to the same police officers who are the instigators of such attacks. A lack of specialized queer refugee support structures is seriously life-threatening. This book was made by us, members of Lesbos LGBTQI+ Refugee Solidarity, as part of an attempt to break that enforced, systematic and deadly silence that surrounds us. It contains fragments of discussions, workshops, interviews and statements that we have made over the years. It contains our love and rage. Our love for life, each other and for our resistance. Our rage because of the xenophobic, queerphobic, profiteering world we face. Rage because they try to stop us from loving. Love because we love anyway. We did not flee our homes only to continue to hide and live in fear. We won't let ourselves be silenced. We won't be ignored. We will shout it from the rooftops: we are gay, we are lesbian, we are women, we are men. We are here. We are all migrants. We want our freedom and we won't wait until it's given to us. We ask those who are able to hear us to fight alongside us, wherever you are. Queer solidarity smashes borders!

Love and rage,

Lesbos LGBTQI+ Refugee Solidarity⁹

In this particular context, these two groups are relevant as they are significant expressions of the need that subaltern actors, such as LGBTQI+ and women on the move, feel to self-organise and manage their experiences collectively, but outside the humanitarian machine that permeates the island and monopolises all practices pertaining to solidarity towards migrants.

The creative work: looking at the invisible

In the context described so far, finding a way to make direct contact with the refugees and build trust was fundamental. One of the first ideas, inspired by 'The Illegal Cook'¹⁰, involved a 'fake' tourist guide to Lesbos. Tourist images of the island would be hidden and, on mouseover, photos of the consequences of migration would be revealed: the remains of Moria, the cemetery of life jackets, abandoned boats, the refugee cemetery, and images taken in the camp by the residents themselves, guided by me. However, the idea clashed with the winter light, the non-tourist nature of the scenario and the inability to obtain aesthetically suitable images for the project.

To gain access to the context and build trust, I accepted an invitation from Dr. Thera Mjaaland, art photographer, social anthropologist and filmmaker who was there as a voluntary photography teacher,

⁹ Source: https://marciona.noblogs.org/files/2020/06/love_and_rage_eng.pdf

¹⁰ The creative work that was produced during the previous fieldwork in Bulgaria is available here: <https://solroutesexhibition.eu/the-illegal-cook/>.

to assist her during her course at the NGO Refocus Media Lab. The classes took place twice a week and revealed a surprising dynamic. M., an Afghan boy, attended almost all the classes and completed the assignments, showing interest and aspirations to become a professional photographer. The first exercise was to photograph a significant place at three different times of the day. M., the only one who understood the exercise about light, chose the hill overlooking the camp and explained: "*The camp represents the place of the refugees and our life there, which will be a wonderful memory and a turning point in our lives for the better*" (field notes, 05/11/2024).

A second, more complex assignment required them to document their accommodation with ten images showing different perspectives. While some students joked about photographing cockroaches and rats, Thera encouraged freedom of choice: "You choose what to photograph, what to show". This freedom highlighted a personal bias of mine, but probably common among photographers and aid workers in general: the idea that refugees would use photography to denounce conditions in the camp or tell their migration stories. Instead, many of the students wanted to learn how to take attractive photos, eager to present themselves as 'normal' people, a legitimate and often therapeutic desire.

This observation fed into the NGO's reaction to the ban on photographers. Photography is often criticised as a violent and extractive act, inherently colonial. Yet it is important to recognize the right of those living with injustice to tell their story, if they wish, to professionals who can organise and transmit it. Refugees' reclaiming of their image is not necessarily useful for a social or political purpose but can be an act of integration and normalisation.

Later, I searched for a female context in which to replicate the experience autonomously, but in line with the research, and found it in a women's refuge, whose anonymity I have to maintain. Here, however, new difficulties arose. Despite the presence of an interpreter, communication was fragmented and complex, even to explain a simple concept like orienting the phone horizontally rather than vertically. The constant presence of children and the inability to give these women a moment of freedom for a short photographic walk hindered any attempt at a more articulated project. Every interaction was supervised, and questions were answered by a translator or an assistant.

Despite these limitations, one episode highlighted an important aspect of the relationship between refugees, photographers and NGOs. On the last day, an Iranian woman in her thirties waited for me with a specific request: to photograph her macramé earrings and necklaces, which she wanted to start selling. I took the opportunity to offer something different: I explained how she could take effective photos herself using a smartphone and common items. Her response was enthusiastic. She spoke English and had a good level of literacy, so she quickly understood how to use the light, aided by a simple sheet of parchment paper and the phone's flashlight. "Oh yes! This is science; I studied it!" she exclaimed, connecting what she had been shown to the principles of light physics she had learned in the past.

The satisfaction she felt in seeing her creations transformed caught the attention of an NGO volunteer

who asked me to promote the centre's activities. I agreed, but not without a certain awareness. After having forbidden me to take photographs in any way, imposing strict rules and limitations, they not only accepted the educational moment - extracting knowledge from me - but also arbitrarily decided that, at that moment, it was suddenly possible to take photographs. The scene thus became an opportunity to extract value from both the refugee and me, fully aware of the return it would generate for them.

199 UNKNOWNNS: The Cemetery and the Remains – Working by Subtraction

While exploring the island, I travelled to the north, where most of the landings take place, and managed to document the new detention centre under construction. I then went to Kato Tritos, where the refugee cemetery is located, which has recently been renovated. The initial idea was to juxtapose a wide shot of the site with an image of the military parade for 'Ohi Day' on 28 October as a visual reaction to the distance between remembrance and celebration. The cemetery is hidden among olive groves, isolated from everything else. It consists of a small structure dedicated to ritually washing bodies and a series of concrete rectangles with simple plaques. Many only display the word “Unknown,” while others show an age: 30 years, 3 years, 3 months. In some cases, there’s a name, but often only numbers. After taking a general photo, I stop to read the plaques. The door of the ghusl chapel slams with the rhythm of the wind, and the atmosphere compels me to leave the place.

However, just a few steps outside, I stopped again. These people had a story, too. I went back and photographed all the graves: 199 in ten years. But the official figures for the dead and missing are much higher, and the remains of sunken boats, life jackets and clothes on the beaches make this gap tangible. At home, looking through the collected material—images from the north, the cemetery, and the surrounding areas—I find myself reflecting on the meaning of restitution. It's not just about it. It's an attempt to restore the dignity of those who have been erased, reduced to numbers, or ignored. In the end, I decided to focus on a narrative that makes these absent faces visible and silent—representatives of a human owl that seems infinite.

If we can't face this reality directly and try to avoid it with justifications or distractions, perhaps we can at least try to remember. These places remind us not only of the suffering of others but also of our own fragility and transience. The final restitution will be a multimedia video in order to give space to the collected material: over 400 images of gravestones, remains and context. The aim will not be didactic, but emotional: to convey the facts and evoke a connection with these shattered lives.

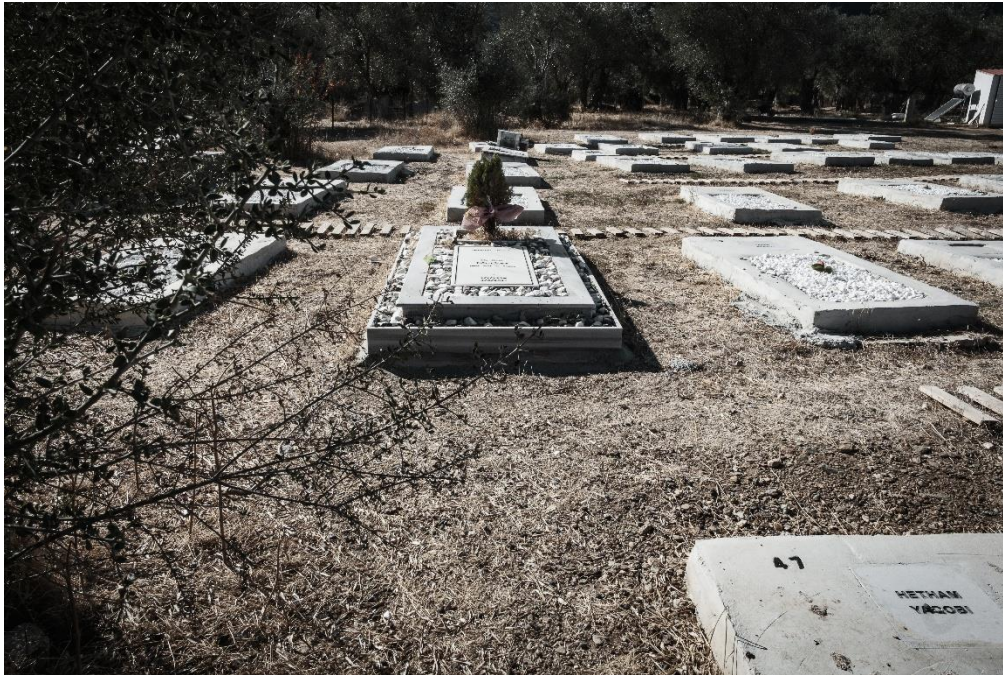


Figure 10. The cemetery

Conclusive remarks

In *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, bell hooks critically explores the intersecting forms of oppression faced by Black women, primarily in relation to race, gender, and class. Through a historical lens, she examines how the legacy of slavery has shaped the lives of Black women, emphasizing how they have been systematically dehumanized, both as women and as African Americans. She underscores the ways in which White feminist movements have often marginalized the unique experiences of Black women, while also critiquing the patriarchal structures that perpetuate the subjugation of all women. hooks' central argument is that the feminist struggle must recognize the multiplicity of women's experiences and adopt an intersectional approach that considers race, class, and gender as inextricably linked. Her analysis underscores the erasure of Black womanhood from mainstream feminist discourse, and calls for a reimagining of feminism that is inclusive and acknowledges the specificities of Black women's realities. At its core, *Ain't I a Woman* advocates for a revolutionary vision of feminism that seeks justice and liberation for all women, with particular attention to those who have historically been silenced and oppressed.

Despite being distant from the specific struggles faced by Black women, the experiences shared by the women in this research resonate with several of the claims hooks makes in her work. Remarkably, it is an extraordinary coincidence that one of my Iranian informants, without prior awareness of hooks' writings, traces her precise words to powerfully denounce the multiple forms of oppression she has encountered—as a woman in Iran, a female migrant, and a refugee in Greece within the European

migration management. The existential period of limbo she has endured, spanning over six years, while awaiting recognition from the European Union, serves as a poignant illustration of the utilisation of time as a biopolitical instrument in the European management of mobility. Through the frontline narration led by these voices, it is possible to see how the structural system of oppression affects women more than men precisely because they are subalterns in subalternity. At the same time, however, the depiction of the woman emancipated through migration fails to acknowledge the ambivalence and intricacies inherent in migratory processes, which, on occasion, result in the rediscovery of identities that are, at times, contradictory in nature.

These narratives, which are deeply rooted in the structural suffering triggered by the necropolitics of the border, provide a clear elucidation of how the European frontier, which has gradually shifted in an eastward direction, has for some time now been fully and effectively realised at the border with Turkey, as research in Bulgaria had previously highlighted. Silvia Di Meo writes:

“The border is undoubtedly a space of exception (Agamben 1995), yet, akin to all liminal spaces, it does not constitute an inert space in which power relations can be simplified. The border liminal is frequently characterised by expressions such as loss of identity, estrangement, existential, social and historical crisis (Miodini 2015). Furthermore, the subjects living it are reduced to bare life, victims, vulnerable. However, a more thorough examination reveals that reducing the dynamic force field to an isolated, ahistorical and inactive space is a highly simplistic and analytical error. The concept of the frontier is frequently linked to that of a “non-place” (Augé, 1992), a term denoting a space experienced and animated by individuals without documentation, regularised by the system, and thus rendered “non-persons”. These individuals are continuously defined as lacking something: without documents, without identity, without history, without money (Dal Lago 2004). However, a more thorough examination reveals that this characterisation understates the significance of the border as a site of profound complexity and activity, rather than merely a transient state of non-existence” (Di Meo 2023, my translation).

Although the testimonies of these women are rarely articulated in political instances of rebellion against the bordering regime, they are expressed in female alliances of Iranian women, Afghan women, and, on occasion, European women. These alliances nevertheless hold political value in their ability to establish networks and cultivate practices of mutual aid and solidarity of various kinds. In another work, bell hooks again teaches us that the margin is not only a place of oppression but also of transformation, where women can live their subalternity as a kind of struggle, developing innovative forms of resilience and creative imagination.

The bodies of women have been identified as the sites where the indications of ‘traumatic memory’ (Beneduce, 2008) persist and where forms of resistance, negotiation, and struggle against repeated

violence are established. Furthermore, women's bodies in marginalized locations, frequently emergent and thus exhibited as evidence of vulnerability or weakness, serve as a means to map the border from which to interpret its articulations and effects.

Alongside more structured realities such as WISH, LLS and some other informal spaces, we find everyday informal (micro-)solidarity practices, defined as “*those manifestations of mutual or unilateral help or support that do not happen in formal contexts and mostly remain hidden from public view because they take place at smaller scales and involve a limited number of people*” (Cuttitta, forthcoming). As has been demonstrated, informal solidarity is typically characterized by its voluntary nature; nevertheless, it may encompass economic transactions or the exchange of interests. While formal solidarity is best exemplified by the various forms of support provided by IOs or humanitarian NGOs, mostly within the formal framework of specific projects supported by various funding sources, informal solidarity is more likely to emerge as mutual assistance within migrant groups in the process of making their way towards Europe.

List of interviews and informal conversations gathered

N.	Name	Gender	Nationality	Status
1	D.	F	Greece	Lesvos resident
2	G.	F	Afghanistan	Asylum seeker
3	B.	F	Afghanistan	Asylum seeker
4	N.	F	Afghanistan	Asylum seeker
5	S.	M	Afghanistan	Researcher
6	O.	M	Turkey	NGO staff
7	L.	F	Afghanistan	NGO staff/activist
8	A.	F	Greece	NGO staff
9	Y.	F	Lebanon	NGO volunteer
10	G.	F	Iran	Refugee/NGO volunteer
11	N.	F	Iran	Asylum Seeker
12	S.	M	Iran	Refugee/NGO volunteer
13	G.	F	USA	Volunteer
14	M.	M	Iran	Refugee
15	R.	F	Germany	Activist
16	S.	F	Netherlands	NGO staff
17	T.	F	Afghanistan	Asylum seeker
18	A.	F	Greece	Researcher
19	A.	M	Iran	Asylum seeker
20	A.	M	Iran	NGO staff
21	H.	M	Iran	Asylum seeker
22	N.	F	Egypt	NGO staff
22	J.	M	Afghanistan	Asylum seeker
23	H.A.	M	Afghanistan	Asylum seeker
24	A.	M	Iraq	NGO staff
25	T.	F	UK	Volunteer
26	B.	F	UK	Volunteer
27	P.	F	Afghanistan	Asylum seeker

Keywords

Humanitarianism; humanitarian apparatus; volunteerism; (in)visibility; NGOisation
 Community based solidarity; solidarity from below; emic networks; religion
 Solidarity; circular economy; interested solidarity; emic businesses
 Navigators, facilitators, middlemen, underground station, underwater.
 Women; queer; care; self-organization; vulnerability

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