

Including refugees and migrants in decision making on their futures

Anila Noor / March 2019



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When refugees — I am among their number — are included in events and conferences in Brussels, or in Geneva or New York, it is usually so we can tell our miserable stories. Policy makers like to hear accounts of a hard journey on a refugee boat. They are less interested in listening to our ideas. At some gatherings, migrants are invited to cook authentic refugee food; we're meant to be charmed by this display of inclusivity but this is as far as promises we hear about inclusion are allowed to go. Tokenism like this needs to stop. Migrant and refugee organizations represent lived experience which is at least as valuable as a policy makers' technical qualifications.

This is a critical moment for EU policy, and Brussels can do more to give recently relocated migrants, especially migrant women, some agency in their lives and draw from the well of expertise and experience among migrants that is currently being ignored.

The European Migrant Advisory Board (EMAB) was established in 2018 to represent and defend the interests of migrants and refugees in Europe by providing input on key policy areas affecting their lives. For our report — “Ask the People” — we talked to more than 500 newcomers to seven EU countries — Germany, Finland, the Netherlands, Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal, half online and half in focus groups. The respondents came from more than fifty countries, with Somalia, Syria and Afghanistan the most represented.

The refugees surveyed made meaningful suggestions on housing provision, on improving integration and participation, helping find employment, and on providing more adequate support for unaccompanied minors. On integration, for example, the report recommends prioritizing assistance to the most vulnerable individuals, such as those living on the streets in Greece and Italy, and prompting the EU, national and local governments to establish clear benchmarks for integration that recognize the need for basic human dignity. The EU should also close detention centers and redirect funds to integration and towards greater efforts to reduce conflicts in the countries of origin.

The report showed how far reality falls short of expressed goals. Discrimination is a daily experience, and integration is difficult when language courses are unavailable or a newcomer's skills are not being adequately assessed. (Of the online respondents, 40 percent had a bachelor's degree or higher, and there were frequent reports that qualifications were not recognized.) Many expressed difficulty in finding adequate housing and job opportunities, or in accessing services from homes located in distant suburbs.

Another problem voiced by many was the threat of deportation, which looms large over people even as they try to integrate their families. Most governments in the EU set a high bar for integration, measured by ever increasing language skills, in return for our continued refugee or residency status. Most readers will have tried to learn a language - imagine trying to reach advanced levels when you're still not allowed to work, and while you're sleepless about the prospect of a possible deportation. The report shows significantly, a majority of respondents had never heard of the [EU Action Plan on Return](#) – which details 36 concrete actions to improve the efficiency of the European Union's return system. Of the online survey participants, 55 percent said they would not consider returning to their country of origin, and 60 percent that they would not consider voluntarily moving to a third country. The EMAB report demonstrates a significant disconnect between official policy and the wishes of the people it affects. Women migrants are the most marginalized and neglected group. The persistence of cultural stereotypes leads officials to assume women from Middle Eastern backgrounds, particularly women with children, don't want to work or participate in politics, ensuring they will continue to live invisibly and without choice.

The EU is at a critical crossroads for its refugee policy. National migration and asylum laws have been reopened for debate, and negotiations of the 2021-2027 budget will set policy priorities for a decade. Representatives of migrant and refugee communities must be given input into discussions on EU-wide policy that affects all their constituents including the Action Plan on the Integration of Third-Country Nationals (2016), and the Urban Agenda for the EU (2016).

In the same way that gender mainstreaming commits the EU to adopting a gender perspective in all its programs to achieve equality, refugee mainstreaming would ensure meaningful participation and ownership for refugees in governmental policies. Refugees should be able to assist in designing, monitoring and evaluating specific programs in partnership with civil society both in member states and at EU level including the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) and the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) which covers 2021-2027.

Systematically including refugees and migrants in the decision-making process will allow us to shift the focus from statistics and optics to positive outcomes. Displaced people live with the results of bad policy every day, and we must treat them as people who have the skills and experience to help guide the course of their own futures.



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