

INTERVIEWER

How do you think women and men have experienced this recent refugee crisis of 2015 differently?

DR HEAVEN CRAWLEY, Coventry University

Well, if we're talking about the refugee crisis specifically in the European context, they were talking about large number of people who were travelling into Europe through the southern border, mostly through Greece from Turkey but also through Italy from Libya, then I think it really depends on who you're looking at and who you're talking to. There's huge variations in people's experiences not only as a result of gender but also as a result of class, from which country they're coming and the opportunities that are available to them. So we know that the people who are passing through are the ones that have had to rely upon smugglers and traffickers of one kind or another in order to be able to access protection, because it's not possible to get protection without arriving in the country that you're claiming asylum in. So they're in a vulnerable position and they have to do what they can to navigate access, and they do that by essentially paying to travel on the journey across either the Mediterranean or the Aegean seas.

Now, how vulnerable they are in that context will depend partly on their own status, women especially single women tend to be more vulnerable than men, but also family groups are also quite vulnerable because they're responsible for children. If you're from a place like Syria, which has a long conflict but not such a long conflict as a place like Afghanistan, you might have more resources, more cash and be able to pay for a better quality of boat. Than for example a young Ghanaian or Malayan man who's travelling from West Africa who's been on the road for some time and has been earning bits of cash on the journey to pay for that final crossing. So there's lots of different factors that intersect to do with gender, age, nationality and class amongst others that really shake the refugee journey and shake the levels of vulnerability on that final passage into Europe.

INTERVIEWER

OK thank you. So how important is it to include gender-based persecution into refugee law and practice, and what do you think has been achieved so far, what issues have not been addressed?

DR HEAVEN CRAWLEY, Coventry University

Well, it's a very big question, and a lot of people have been working on issues of gender related persecution for a very long time, really since the mid-1980s. What we know is that gender very much shapes the experience of persecution. It does that in lots of different ways. It may be that women are politically active but that activism is not recognised or acknowledged because they are

taking on particular roles that might be less public perhaps than men in those communities. We know that in many communities gender has become politicised in a way that means that aspects of women's identity, what they wear, who they sleep with, who they have family relations with, takes on a political significance which may lead them to be persecuted if they don't conform to norms and expectations about their behaviours. We also know that women in some contexts are subject to certain kinds of gender-based violence. So that might be FGM, it might be forced marriage or sterilisation. So gender can manifest itself in different ways.

The problem that we see in terms of the asylum process is that those gender specific forms of harm and those forms of harm that are associated with being a woman, in the context of gendered power relations in certain contexts, are simply not taken into account. So there is an assumption that you're only a political refugee if you behave very publically in a political sphere as a political activist or an MP for example, whereas I say in reality gender and politics are much more complex in those different areas. And in fact women may not even be asked about their experiences if they travel in a family unit. It might be assumed that the man is the primary applicant, when of course the man in that relationship might be the problem for the woman in terms of domestic violence or issues of violence within the community.

I think the other thing to say is that increasingly of late there's been recognition that gender is not just about women, it's about the power relations between women and men, and of course those can impact on men's experiences too. So when men don't conform to gendered expectations about their behaviour or perceived as not conforming then they might be persecuted similarly. So again men who don't conform to ideas about their role in war for example who refuse to be forcibly conscripted, who don't comply with certain ideas about dress in some contexts so not having facial hair or having facial hair, wearing certain types of clothes. And in particular we see men being persecuted because they don't conform to gendered stereotypes about masculinity and sexuality. So men who are gay may be particularly subject to persecution because they challenge those norms around masculine sexual identity. Or they've been perceived to be gay and therefore challenging those norms because of things to do with their behaviour or the way that they act with others.

So I think gender clearly does shape what happens to refugees. The extent to which it's taken into account into the asylum process though I think is largely recognised as being very problematic. Not just because of the absence of understanding of gender, but because of the tightening of the asylum processes more generally.

INTERVIEWER

OK thank you. So, finally, what role do you think do media and other public representations of men, women and sexuality play in the asylum process?

DR HEAVEN CRAWLEY, Coventry University

Well, there is no clearer example of that than the current time. That the images we see of people travelling across the Mediterranean tend to fall into two very clearly gendered stereotypes. One is the image of the young black African man in a boat, usually en masse in a very anonymised form, where you can't see the face, you don't hear the stories, you don't understand anything of the background. It's very much the image of threat, and that's a threat that's masculine and black, predominantly and young. The other image that we see in the crisis is of course the image of the woman. The vulnerable often headscarved woman who is desperate for protection, who's trying to support herself and her children. Or indeed images of dead or dying children. So that's very much an image around vulnerability and victimhood, and again that's associated with the female rather than the male.

So we see this very strong imagery that feeds through in the media in ways that, on the one hand they reinforce gender stereotypes, because of course the experience is much more complex and messy as I've been explaining, but they also I think in the public perception lead to either a concern that refugees are a threat in the case of the masculine image, or in the case of the female image a concern that they are a liability in terms of the cost to social provision and to welfare because they have needs and are very vulnerable. There is not space in that debate or that representation for either the kind of politically active, very autonomous individual who's trying to get access to rights to which they're entitled, nor is there space for an individual who's capable of working, supporting themselves and their family because that doesn't sit with either of these two stereotypes.

So we've always known that the refugee discourse and the imagery of it is gendered, but I think this particular crisis shows it to be gendered in very specific and very clearly differentiated ways.

INTERVIEWER

Thank you very much.

DR HEAVEN CRAWLEY, Coventry University

That's OK.