

Irregular migration from France to Great Britain in small boats: highlighting female experiences and perspectives : Summary points on women and girls.

A dissertation by David Sunderland, November 2022. www.david-s.site

The dissertation collates observations relating to the experiences of women and girls when undertaking irregular migration, particularly around small boat crossings of the English Channel but also from longer Mediterranean crossings. There are terrible conditions in northern France where thousands of migrants hoping to cross the Channel live without proper shelter; having inadequate, or indeed non-existent, state protection, with conditions worse than in many refugee camps in the developing world. Reference is also made to the 'Calais Jungle' which was considered the 'worst refugee camp in the world' before its destruction in 2016. However in many respects it was better than the current more anarchic and 'necropolitical' situation.

The existence of these populations bespeaks of a growing body of clandestine migrants who exist in many parts of the world. The unregulated conditions in which they live mean they may be subject to various abuses and largely unprotected by human rights frameworks.

In France, given the fear of being sanctioned or punished by the authorities, many irregular migrants prefer to remain inconspicuous and only seek help from governments as a last resort; when the EU Dublin Regulation is applied, they may be returned to the first country in which they entered the EU.

After setting out the normative and theoretical frameworks that govern migration, and presenting a gender lens and stereotypes, Chapter 6 of the dissertation focuses on the experiences and perspectives of women and girls. The harsh realities and vulnerabilities they face undertaking journeys in irregular small boat crossings is clearly demonstrated by the fact that they represent 10% of the total migrants (compare this to 90% of the first wave of Ukrainian refugees).

Sexual violence and transactional sex are widespread in these conditions. Women also face grave difficulties obtaining adequate healthcare, especially for sexual and reproductive health issues, as well as basic sanitation – for example being able to use the bathroom without risk or to manage menstruation with dignity. Finnerty¹ noted the Calais Jungle was criticized for not meeting the minimum standard (MISP) for sexual and reproductive health. Finnerty also considered the potential for crisis pregnancy, acquisition and transmission of sexually transmitted infections including HIV 'was high'. Women migrants in France wishing/needing an abortion have to typically go to Belgium; another study² found that 60% of women did not

¹ Finnerty, F. (2016, January 29). Sexual and reproductive health in the new migrant "jungle" camp in Calais, France– A perfect storm? Blog/Sexually Transmitted Infections. <https://blogs.bmj.com/sti/2016/01/29/sexual-and-reproductive-health-in-the-new-migrant-jungle-camp-in-calais-france-a-perfect-storm/>

² Refugee Rights Europe. (2016, February). Unsafe borderlands: Filling gaps relating to women in the Calais camp. https://www.refugee-rights.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/RRE_UnsafeBorderlands.pdf

know where to go for healthcare and advice if pregnant. The UK Kent Public Health Observatory found asylum seekers were three times more likely to die in childbirth than the general population of the UK.

Finnerty also found it ‘strange that a camp in Europe (despite its illegality) does not meet basic standards that are insisted upon in the developing world. This is an important human rights issue. The end destination for many of the people living there is the United Kingdom and clearly we may be seeing significant sexual health morbidity associated with this crisis here in the UK in the future.’

UNODC³ identified a number of issues affecting women in small boat trips, for example increased risks to women who are pregnant or breastfeeding. Often women are ‘placed in the middle of the rubber boat, where they are thought to be more protected as they are as far as possible from the water. However, it is in the middle of the boat that seawater and fuel mix up, creating a toxic substance that burns people’s skin and often causes them severe injuries. There they are also more at risk of being stepped on and suffocated when the boat is in distress.’ In parallel a report from the Chief Inspector of UK Borders and Immigration⁴ found that ‘fuel burns ... were the most common injury of migrants arriving in small boats.’

UNODC also notes ‘First-hand accounts report that in the middle of situations of panic on board, more than once women emerged as the best point of contact, as they managed to stay calm, listen carefully to understand how to find the GPS coordinates on the phone and speak clearly to provide precious information.’

UNODC adds ‘women do often not receive relevant information that could help them to locate loved ones due to gender stereotypes that portray women as overly emotional. They are excluded from decision-making processes in an attempt to “reduce their suffering” which often leads to women’s perspectives being dismissed. They are often denied access to social spaces that would help them in their rescue mission and are often disproportionately impacted by financial costs linked to search and repatriation operations.’

The population trends are stark: between the present day and 2100, the population of Europe is due to fall 16% from 748 million to 630 million. In Africa, it is due to grow more than threefold from 1,340 million to 4,280 million. In conclusion, one way or another irregular migration is likely to increase in the world, with the only (better but imperfect) solution through improved regulation and coordination – including across borders – in order to reduce risk and ensure that conditions for people are more humane.

³ UNODC, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2021, June 21). Abused and neglected – A gender perspective on aggravated migrant smuggling and response. https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/2021/Aggravated_SOM_and_Gender.pdf

⁴ Neal, D. (2022, July 21). An inspection of the initial processing of migrants arriving via small boats at Tug Haven and Western Jet Foil, December 2021 – January 2022. Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1092487/E02726679_ICIBI_Tug_Haven_and_Western_Jet_Foil_Web_Accessible.pdf