
**IMMIGRANT SISTERHOOD:
VISUAL NARRATIVES OF ASYLUM-SEEKING WOMEN IN ITALIAN
RECEPTION CENTERS**

Sabine Tiefenthaler, *Free University of Bolzano*

Gemma Lynch, *HMKW University of Applied Sciences - Independent Photographer*

ABSTRACT

Immigrant Sisterhood is a feminist ethnographic collaborative research project where young female asylum seekers in first reception centers in Sardinia show through pictures and narratives different aspects of their life. The dominant visual representations of female refugees in media depict them as helpless victims or sexualized objects and this disregard women's agency, voice and their resources. The aim of this PhotoVoice project is to focus on the strengths and challenges of female refugees in first reception centers in Italy. The female asylum seekers were included in the whole research process and used academic and non-academic strategies to show their results.

KEYWORDS

PhotoVoice, agency, resilience, participatory research, visual ethnography, refugee women

Bio

Sabine Tiefenthaler, PhD: Born in Austria in 1986, living in Italy since 2015. Researcher in the Faculty of Education at the Free University of Bolzano where she conducts field research on the topics of migration, gender and child protection.

Gemma Lynch: Originally from the United Kingdom but based in Italy since 2007. She works as a photographer and creative producer for the audiovisual industry. She has made several photographic and documentary projects on intercultural issues and expat experiences.

sabine.tiefenthaler@unibz.it

lynchgb@gmail.com

Introduction

Immigrant Sisterhood is the photographic part of a feminist ethnographic collaborative research project about the resilience of young female asylum seekers in Italian first reception centers. During the PhotoVoice project four young female asylum seekers in first reception centers in Sardinia were involved in the whole research process and acted as co-researchers. They developed their own research questions, made pictures about a topic of concern, told stories about their pictures and their lives, and showed them to the public with the hope to create awareness about their specific situation. In the following Photo-Essay some of the pictures of the asylum-seeking women and their narrations will be exposed. The PhotoVoice project was supported by the photographer Gemma Lynch, whose pictures will also be shown in the section 'Reportage pictures' and give some insight in the process of the project.

Female refugees belong to a marginalized group of the population whose perspectives and voices are rarely included in the public discourse. The dominant visual representations of female refugees in media depict them as helpless victims or sexualized objects. These images contribute to harmful gender stereotypes that often trivialize violence against women and disregards women's agency, voice, and their resources as survivors, protectors and providers (Krause 2017).

An important area of impact of these stereotypical images relates to the actions of psychosocial professionals in first reception centers. Through previous research in Italian first reception centers, Pinelli notes that "these organizations represent immigrants as human beings in need, devoid of any autonomy and agency" (2016: 31). In view of these circumstances PhotoVoice was used to disrupt pictures of the helpless, passive victim, in which women with refugee biographies are often cemented, and to develop counter narratives by focusing on the resilience of women asylum seekers but also on the complexity of their experiences of intersectional discrimination.

The research project was conducted in Sardinia, a Mediterranean Italian island with 1.5 million inhabitants. Sardinia as a research location is characterized by its geographical and social nature. The Mediterranean Sea as a natural border as well as the massive economic decline has triggered strong emigration instead of immigration flows in the last decades. Asylum seekers arrive in Sardinia with the hope of creating their own future but are confronted with a lack of access to educational opportunities, few job opportunities or a lack of psychological care. Sardinia thus becomes a typical transit location, which for many stands in contrast to a hoped-for permanent place of residence in Europe. Given the long waiting times of the asylum procedure, asylum seekers often spend years in first reception centers. When women in Europe are accommodated in refugee reception centers, the longstanding view is still that violence and discrimination are limited exclusively to experiences in countries of origin and transit and are therefore a thing of the past. Freedman (2016), on the other hand, notes that women who have fled alone, i.e. without children or partners, like the women in the project, are particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence and discrimination also after their flight. This danger is even greater when there is a lack of adequate accommodation. To better understand the impact of these conditions on the daily life of asylum-seeking women in first reception centers in Italy this aspect will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Gendered perspectives on living in Italian reception centers

In Italy more than 80% of the asylum seekers live in so-called emergency reception centers (CAS-Extraordinary Reception Centers), which were actually only intended to provide temporary accommodation for not more than six months to compensate for a lack of regular reception centers.¹ However, the reality is different and the majority of asylum seekers spend the entire duration of the asylum procedure, often more than three years, in the emergency reception centers. In the course of time and primarily due to legal changes², accommodation in emergency reception centers turned from exception into the rule.

1 https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/report_download_aida_it_2019update.pdf (access:10.09.2021).

2 Introduction of the "Security Decree" 132/2018, which has had a significant impact on the living conditions in the emergency centers.

It appears that sexual and gender-based violence and discrimination play a significant role for women in the context of flight. The reasons for flight, the flight itself and also in reception centers different forms of violence and discrimination are represented. While much research has been done on the different phases during the migration process, little attention has been paid to connecting and analyzing these phases and forms of violence. Elizabeth Ferris (1990) pioneers a discussion of what forms of violence occur in the different stages, how women refugees cope with them, and makes connections. She argues for considering sexual and gender-based violence in the migration process as a continuum in which certain variables may change, but violence is a persistent constant. Violence is thus not tied to a geographic and temporal conflict situation but occurs along a continuum that even extends to reception centers in peaceful areas (Cockburn 2004). Krause defines a continuum of violence as ‘the linearity of the prevalence and continuity of sexual and gender violence in the phases of conflict, flight and displacement (...). The continuum is distinguished by transformative character due to changing structures, forms, spaces and conditions, and reveals a diachronic increase of complexity’ (2017: 189).

An insight of the complexity of experiences of discrimination and violence while living in emergency centers and impressions about the living conditions are expressed through the exposed images and narratives of the asylum-seeking women. In order to better grasp how these images and narratives were created, we will discuss the method in more detail below.

Due to the report of In Migrazione (2018)³ the conditions in the emergency reception centers lack of quality in nearly every area: legal assistance with the application for international protection, language teaching, intercultural mediation, psychological and social support, labor market integration measures and leisure activities. According to the report of Pasquero and Palladino (2017) these centers affect especially asylum-seeking women as staff do not meet the qualifications and skills to assess and respond to the needs of people in need of protection (according to 2013/32/EU vulnerable people)⁴. The missing psychological support, but also the insufficient qualifications of intercultural mediators, harbors the danger that people who are actually in need of protection will isolate themselves more and more, thus further reducing the possibility of recognizing vulnerabilities. This danger is particularly great in larger centers. The SWIM (Safe Women in Migration) study (Lombardi 2019) explores the situation of women in reception centers in Europe and concludes that women travelling alone, without partners or children, are particularly at risk: physical and psychological abuse is reported by most women, sexual abuse and rape by more than 50%.

Methodology

Through a feminist-ethnographic-participatory approach, the asylum-seeking women are not only considered as informants, but as co-researchers and is based on an intersectional understanding. This manifests in paying constant attention to the status and privileges of all persons in the field and it is always reflected who exercises power over whom and in which way (Reid & Frisby 2008). The ethnographic fieldwork began in September 2018 and it ended in March 2020, with the outbreak of the pandemic. The project started with a seven-month intensive fieldwork period in one of the facilities, during which participant observations and numerous informal interviews were conducted, and later continued in two other facilities due to the women's relocation. For the participatory part of the research, the PhotoVoice method was used. The PhotoVoice project consisted of three group discussions, eight individual photo interviews and three so-called ‘walking interviews’.

PhotoVoice combines photography, focus groups and social action and aims to highlight the strengths and challenges of a marginalized community through discussion and reflection from the images taken by the protagonists. Socially disadvantaged groups such as migrant women can be integrated throughout the research process and their perspectives can be captured through the photographs and narratives developed. The method has proven useful in generating local knowledge and identifying a community's problems and strengths. It is also acknowledged that PhotoVoice has the power to elicit personal experiences and is beneficial in addressing and coping with gender-based

³ https://www.inmigrazione.it/userfiles/file/oxfam_invece%20si%20pu%C3%B2_paper%20accoglienza_web.pdf (access: 10.09.21).

⁴ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32013L0033&from=EN> (access: 10.09.2021).

violence and experiences of intersectional discrimination (Wang and Burris 1997, Padfield 2021, Köppen, Schmidt, Tiefenthaler 2020). The use of PhotoVoice can also be a way to reduce language barriers, which is particularly important in working with a group of women with different immigrational backgrounds. Images can additionally contribute to making verbally difficult to describe aspects of everyday life tangible and ease the presentation of concerns of a community, start a critical dialogue and thus reach decision-makers as it would not be possible with text-only material (Lenette 2019). Before the start of the PhotoVoice project a primary consideration was to evaluate which tools should be used and how the material aspect of the work could be optimized. Analogue photography seemed to be good fit for a number of reasons; firstly, the young artists in our group already used their cellular phones and were avid selfie takers and users of social media platforms, therefore, for the purpose of this research it was important to distinguish the images they would produce from the aesthetic conventions of social media and their impetus on performative photography. Arguably, analogue photography is also better at creating dialogue from a reflexive perspective as there is a significant time delay between shooting and seeing the developed image. It encourages a process of remembering and as Kuhn (2002) states “(...) Memory work offers a route to a critical consciousness that embraces the heart as well as the intellect, one that resonates, in feeling and thinking ways, across the individual and the collective, the personal and the political” (p. 9). Remembering within the process memory work in a PhotoVoice project can lead to dialogue about how the image was created in the first place.

None of the group had ever used an analogue camera and as most photographers study photography beginning with analogue and then progressing to digital, it seemed an important rite of passage for the group. Analogue photography also requires patience and encourages you to be more selective with what you shoot. After printing, you have a tangible and material proof of the image and the memory bound up in the creation of the image itself. As Barthes states in *Camera Lucida* (1980) “A photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see”. We also had access to a darkroom and so we were able to bring the co-researchers in to show them how to process and print their pictures, giving them more agency over each stage of the process.

Many of the women had no possibility of formal educational experiences and therefore had neither writing nor reading skills. During the participant observations it became apparent that within their own community photography was used as a primary means of communication. Using this form of communication within a research project was hence positively received by the group. After the first group discussion the photographer conducted some informal introductory lessons about composition, frame and subject but tried to avoid imposing image conventions onto them so they could freely photograph how they wanted to. A batch of black and white and color disposable Kodak cameras were given to the young asylum seeking women. Since the exposures for these cameras are automatic, there was less chance of eventual disappointment from the group from images returning blank from the printers. The results too are often obscure, blurry or over or underexposed which can often lead to much more interesting results that are more removed from reality and therefore leave the photographer feeling a little bit less exposed. This was certainly the case in the images created by the group as the now displayed photos demonstrate.



PHOTO 1: *When I am walking on the street, old italian men think that all black girls are just prostitutes. They always say ‘Andiamo, andiamo!’ or ‘Quanta costa?’ They should stop to see all black girls like this, because not all black girls are like this. We have our own story, our own experiences. I want to say that we are all human beings and we don’t want to be seen only as sex objects.*



PHOTO 2: *Just because I am black and wear shorts it doesn't mean that I am a prostitute. Prostitutes come to you, you don't have to come to the girls. If the girl is not coming to you it means she is not a prostitute.*



PHOTO 3: *When I walk on the street I feel angry, because they often stop me and ask me stupid questions. Like 'Would you like to come with me?'. Just because I am walking on the street it doesn't mean that my body is for sell. I just want to beg them to stop this nonsense.*



PHOTO 4: *My experience in this reception center is better than where I was before. But I had to leave the reception center. I could not stay there and do nothing. I have the need to do something. I want to make a contribution to society.*



PHOTO 5: *Living in the reception center is not easy. You are forced to live with strangers. Different behavior, different characters. I have never experienced anything like this before in my life. It was very difficult to deal with this situation.*



PHOTO 6: *The only thing you can do in the reception center is wait for time to pass. You just wait for your papers. It just didn't make sense to stay there. I just wanted to keep going and have something to do.*



PHOTO 7: *I am no longer in a center. I am in another Italian city. I am working there. At least for some time I have something to do.*



PHOTO 8: *This is the holy virgin Mary. She is the mother of us all. I ask the Mother Mary for help to speak with her Son. She helps me to put my life on the right path. She speaks for us. Every morning in the reception center I pray. This is my happiness.*



PHOTO 9: *I had a plan for me and I thought I will work. I wanted to send money to my family.*



PHOTO 10: *I know there is a great future ahead for me. When there is hope, there is life.*



PHOTO 11: *Before I came to Italy they told me it is the land of milk of honey, but I can't find the milk, I can't find the honey. In my future I want to become an artist. I want to help people. I want to live a normal life, like the rest of the people.*



PHOTO 12: *I am suffering. Tell them I need my documents. I want to work. I am tired of waiting, just sitting in my room. I am not a lazy person. I want to work.*



PHOTO 13: *How do I feel when I look at this picture? It's love, happiness, joy it's like that. He's like a Dad to me, a best friend.*



PHOTO 14: *The mother in the picture says: It feels good to be a mother, you feel beautiful and you feel loved, it's kind of a little bit difficult when the baby is in your stomach, then the baby comes out and you feel joy. At the CAS they made me feel important and special with my baby.*



PHOTO 15: *I feel good but I feel sad also because everything is quite difficult but we got to look ok, just to be ok.*

Reportage Pictures (by Gemma Lynch)



PHOTO 16



PHOTO 17



PHOTO 16

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