

Refugee women in contemporary Spain: taking shelter where people once fled

**Mujeres desplazadas en la España contemporánea:
buscar refugio allí donde una vez se huyó**

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Abstract: The case study of a group of refugee women in contemporary Spain sheds light on the present experience of flight and resettlement from a gendered perspective. It is also functional to evaluate the importance of historical memory of forced displacement in fostering the adaptation and inclusion of current involuntary migrants in the host societies. The main thesis of this research is that the female experience of involuntary migration is influenced by distinctive gendered factors, which must be attentively examined to reconstruct a fully comprehensive picture of present refugee flows. Moreover, this paper stresses the crucial role of historical memory in enhancing refugees' adaptation to the new reality in the receiving country.

In this research, Spain constitutes not only the political and social framework but also the historical context in which the narratives of flight and relocation of the aforementioned group of contemporary female refugees are placed. Women taking shelter in this country nowadays after escaping violence and conflicts share the same trauma as millions of Spanish women who were forced to flee during and after the Spanish Civil War. Reflecting on this parallelism places contemporary humanitarian crises, which are mainly analysed from a political science point of view, in the right historical perspective. The data collected showed that sharing past experiences of forced migrations between recent refugees from non-European countries and the host community in Spain, which itself was compelled to migrate in the previous century, is crucial to raise social awareness and fight marginalization. In addressing the above-mentioned objectives, this

research adopts an interdisciplinary approach, which combines historical investigation with anthropological, sociological, and political analysis.

The contribution of this paper is twofold. Firstly, this article emphasises gender dynamics in refugee streams today as in the past, which continue to be overlooked even though women represent half of the over one hundred million forcibly displaced persons around the world. Secondly, it stresses the historical dimension of forced displacements, that the scholarship has substantially neglected, by matching similarities of personal experiences through storytelling between former and current involuntary migrants.

Keywords: refugee women, forced displacement, resettlement, historical memory, Spain.

Resumen: El estudio de un grupo de mujeres refugiadas en la España actual arroja luz sobre la experiencia contemporánea de huida y reasentamiento desde una perspectiva de género. Asimismo, permite evaluar la importancia de la memoria histórica del desplazamiento forzado en el proceso de adaptación e inclusión de las corrientes migratorias involuntarias en las sociedades de acogida. La tesis principal de esta investigación es que la experiencia femenina de la migración involuntaria está influenciada por factores de género que deben ser cuidadosamente considerados para reconstruir una imagen completa de los actuales flujos de refugiados. Además, este artículo pone en evidencia la función clave de la memoria histórica para mejorar la adaptación de los refugiados a la nueva realidad en el país de acogida.

En esta investigación, España constituye no sólo el marco político y social, sino también el contexto histórico en el que se sitúan las narrativas de huida y reasentamiento del mencionado grupo de refugiadas contemporáneas. Las mujeres que se refugian en este país hoy en día después de huir de la violencia y los conflictos comparten el mismo trauma de millones de mujeres españolas que se vieron obligadas a desplazarse durante y después de la guerra civil española. Reflexionar sobre este paralelismo permite situar las crisis humanitarias actuales, que hasta ahora se han analizado principalmente desde el punto de vista de la ciencia política, en la perspectiva histórica adecuada. Los datos recopilados muestran que compartir experiencias pasadas de migraciones forzadas entre refugiados contemporáneos procedentes de países no europeos y la comunidad de acogida en España, que en parte fue a su vez desplazada por la fuerza en el siglo anterior, es crucial para aumentar la conciencia social y luchar contra la marginación. Al abordar los objetivos antes mencionados, esta investigación

adopta un enfoque interdisciplinario, que combina la investigación histórica con el análisis antropológico, sociológico y político.

La contribución de este artículo es doble. En primer lugar, enfatiza las dinámicas de género en los flujos de refugiados hoy como en el pasado, que continúan siendo ignoradas a pesar de que las mujeres representan la mitad de los más de cien millones de desplazados por la fuerza en el mundo. En segundo lugar, enfatiza la dimensión histórica de los desplazamientos forzados, hasta ahora sustancialmente ignorada por el mundo académico, al comparar las experiencias personales a través de la narración entre los migrantes involuntarios del pasado y los actuales.

Palabras clave: mujeres refugiadas, desplazamiento forzado, reasentamiento, memoria histórica, España.

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Refugee women in contemporary Spain: taking shelter where people once fled*

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Introduction

This paper explores the experience of flight and resettlement of a group of refugee women in contemporary Spain and reflects on the impact of historical memory of forced displacement during the Spanish Civil War on their process of inclusion in the host society. The main thesis of this research is that the female experience of involuntary migration is influenced by distinctive gendered factors that must be carefully considered to reconstruct a fully comprehensive picture of present refugee flows. Moreover, this paper asserts the key function of historical memory in enhancing refugees' adaptation to the new reality in the receiving country. The data collected showed that sharing past experiences of involuntary migrations between recent refugees from non-European countries and the host community in Spain –which itself was forced into displacement in the previous century– is crucial to raise social awareness and fight marginalization. In addressing the above-mentioned objectives, this research adopts an interdisciplinary approach, which combines historical investigation with anthropological, sociological, and political analysis.

The contribution of this paper to the advancement of scholarship on forced migrations is twofold. Firstly, it emphasises gender dynamics in refugee streams, which continue to be overlooked even though women represent half of the over one hundred million forcibly displaced persons around the world.¹ In the last ten years, humanitarian emergencies have multiplied in the so-called Global South, with female refugees being affected disproportionately. Forced displacement frequently produces family separation, thus depriving women of the protection the family used to give them. Humanitarian crises also aggravate pre-existing gender inequalities. Episodes of gender-based violence, including early forced marriage and rape, intensify due to deteriorating protection mechanisms, with around one out five female refugees estimated to have

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¹ The numeric data is taken from <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/statistics/> (last accessed on 01-09-2022)

suffered sexual assault during the flight.² In contexts of civil conflict, girls experience more severe difficulties in accessing education than boys, being the first to be withdrawn from school to reduce family expenses. Women face significant obstacles when finding adequate means of subsistence and are often employed in low-paid jobs or forced into prostitution. In several cases, they are also excluded from life-saving services, such as access to healthcare and food distribution, and decision-making processes based on discriminatory social norms.³ Some testimonies, however, also return another, more positive, image of forced migration. Indeed, for some women, the experience of displacement represents an opportunity for empowerment and emancipation from the patriarchal rules in their origin countries. This frees them from the role of victims and inert subjects to make them fully aware of their agency, namely the capacity to make choices actively and independently and to affect change in the political and social spheres. Accordingly, the present research sheds light on the gender-specific challenges and risks that a sample group of refugee women arriving in Spain between 2006 and 2018 faced, as well as on their agency during the transit and in the receiving community. For this investigation, a bottom-up perspective has been adopted. This approach employs the narratives of forcibly displaced women to fully understand their perception of the displacement, in so doing stimulating both academic and political reflections and favouring the realisation of empowerment programmes that authentically meet female refugees' needs. Testimonies have been collected through individual semi-structured interviews carried out at the *Museu Memorial de l'Exili* (MUME) in the Catalan city of Girona from June to October 2020. The interviewees are women between twenty-six and fifty years old coming from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, with various levels of education and religious affiliations, as well as diverse marital and refugee statuses.⁴

Secondly, this paper stresses the historical dimension of forced displacements – substantially neglected by the scholarship – by matching similarities of personal experiences through storytelling between former and current involuntary migrants. In this research, Spain constitutes not only the political and social framework but also the historical context in which the narratives of flight and relocation of the aforementioned group of contemporary female refugees are placed. Crucially, this country, which

² UNHCR gender-based violence report at <https://www.unhcr.org/gender-based-violence.html>. The numeric data is at <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/women-refugees-and-migrants#info> (last accessed on 01-07-2022)

³ See UNHCR refugee women report at <https://www.unhcr.org/women.html> (last accessed on 01-07-2022)

⁴ The sample group examined consists of eleven women who have been recruited partly through the Spanish Commission for Refugee Aid and partly through the academic and personal networks of the interviewers (a man and a woman). The interviews were mainly conducted in Catalan or Castilian. One interview was held in English and another one in Arabic. In this last case, a native speaker interpreter took care of the translation. It is to be noted that, although this paper focuses on the narratives of the women mentioned above, it also considers the testimonies of refugee men on gender dynamics in the experience of flight and resettlement, which have been collected at MUME. A total of thirty-one refugee interviews have been analysed for this research.

nowadays makes its contribution in welcoming those seeking international protection, suffered itself the trauma of a civil conflict in 1936–39 that generated a human avalanche of refugees. The Spanish Civil War was the first internal conflict in Europe in which the international community became aware of the humanitarian implications of forced displacement, as well as of the difficulties that refugees had to face, the fears that their arrival engendered in the host countries and the challenges that managing this problem implied. Around three million were the Spaniards who were obliged to flee throughout the three years of fighting.⁵ Among them are many women, whose testimonies are pivotal to reflect on gender dynamics in forced migrations in the past. The impact of the historical memory of forced displacement in Spain on the resettlement experience of the female refugees analysed will be assessed as follows. First, the considerations on the topic by the contemporary refugee women interviewed will be reported. Secondly, the accounts of some women who experienced displacement and exile as a consequence of the Spanish Civil War will be considered. These memoirs will make it possible to highlight analogies, as well as points of differentiation, compared to today's experience of refuge. Additionally, interviews with Spanish policymakers, cultural institutions and NGOs involved in refugee assistance, as well as with academics engaged in research on past and present forced migrations, will be examined. These interviews were carried out at MUME between May and November 2020.⁶

The article is divided into four sections. The first section offers an overview of the broad interdisciplinary academic debate on refugee women, in which this paper is rooted, from its origins to the present day. The second section is dedicated to the analysis of the stories of displacement and resettlement emerging from the interviews with the sample group of female refugees who found shelter in Spain in the last sixteen years. The third section reflects on the historical dimension of the refugee phenomenon, with a focus on Spanish refugee women during and after the 1936-39 Civil War. It also ponders on the role of historical memory in the process of adaptation of the contemporary refugee women, as well as of refugees in general, in today's Spain. Finally, the fourth section draws the conclusions.

Studying refugee women: a growing field of research

Interest in gender dynamics in refugee flows dates back to the mid-1970s, when women's rights, their role in development processes and the issue of female refugees

⁵ Julio CLAVIJO LEDESMA: *La política sobre la població refugiada durant la Guerra Civil 1936–1939*, Girona, Universitat de Girona, 2003, p. 90.

⁶ Six interviews with policymakers, three interviews with cultural institutions, seven interviews with NGOs and three interviews with academics have been analysed for this research.

began to enter the international political debate. Not by chance, in 1975 the UN launched the program «Decade for Women» during the first United Nations (UN) World Conference on Women held in Mexico City, whose progress was reviewed five years later during a homonymous event in Copenhagen. In 1985, a third UN World Conference on Women took place in Nairobi to celebrate the objectives achieved up to that point. On that occasion, an agenda for future initiatives to promote worldwide equality for women and foster their participation in peace and development efforts was also established. In 1990, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) published the *Policy on Refugee Women*, which was followed by the *Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women* in 1991.⁷ In particular, the latter identified the specific risks faced by female involuntary migrants and outlined various measures to protect them. In 1995, the fourth UN World Conference on Women in Beijing led to the signing of the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action by 189 countries, which agreed on an agenda for women's empowerment that is so far considered the key global policy document on gender equality. In all these circumstances, the lived experience of refugee women was recognised as a field of particular concern, and targeted interventions in support of the world's forcibly displaced female population were encouraged both nationally and internationally.

Political attention to refugee women acted as a stimulus for academic debate. Critical examination of the gender dimension of the refugee phenomenon started to appear in the late 1980s and early 1990s.⁸ Sociologists and psychologists, as well as political scientists, legal theorists and international relations scholars, began to question the traditional discourse on refugees.⁹ Analyses of specific case studies emerged, often with

⁷ UNHCR Policy on Refugee Women, 1990, <https://www.unhcr.org/protection/women/3ba6186810/unhcr-policy-on-refugee-women-1990.html> UNHCR Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women, July 1991, <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/legal/3d4f915e4/guidelines-protection-refugee-women.html> (last accessed on 01-05-2022)

⁸ This new research on refugee women was inspired by pioneering work on female migration, which appeared during the 1970s and in the early 1980s and had its most glaring example in Mirjana Morokvasic's investigations. See, among others, Mirjana MOROKVASIC: "Les femmes immigrées au travail", Communication au *Colloque Européen sur les problèmes de la migration*, Louvain-la Neuve, 31 January-2 February 1974; Id.: "L'immigration féminine en France: état de la question", *L'année sociologique*, 26 (1976), pp. 563-75; Id.: "The Invisible Ones: A Double Role of Women in the Current European Migrations", in L. EITINGER and Schwarz D. BERN (eds.), *Strangers in the World*, Vienna, Hans Huber Publishers, 1981, pp. 161-85; Id.: "Émigration féminine et femmes immigrées: discussion de quelques tendances dans la recherche", *Pluriel*, 36 (1983), pp. 20-51.

⁹ Audrey MACKLIN: "Refugee Women and the Imperative of Categories", *Human Rights Quarterly*, 17 (1995), pp. 213-77; Eileen PITTAWAY and Linda BARTOLOMEI: "Refugees, Race, and Gender: The Multiple Discrimination against Refugee Women", *Refugee*, 6 (1991), pp. 21-32; Jacqueline GREATBATCH: "The Gendered Difference: Feminist Critiques of Refugee Discourse", *International Journal of Refugee Law*, 4 (1989), pp. 518-27; Geneviève CAMUS-JACQUES: "Refugee Women: The Forgotten Majority", in Gil LOESCHER and Laila MONAHAM (eds.), *Refugees and International Relations*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989, pp. 141-47; Doreen INDRA: "Gender: a key dimension of the refugee experience", *Refugee*, 6 (1987), pp. 3-4.

a focus on the countries of the Horn of Africa and Southeast Asia.¹⁰ However, these early investigations had evident limitations. They principally concentrated on sexual violence against women during forced displacement, overlooking other forms of gender-based persecution and the reasons behind them. Additionally, these initial studies tended to describe female refugees exclusively as inert victims and vulnerable individuals, thus denying them their autonomous capacity for action.

With the beginning of the twenty-first century, the number of feminist and gendered research on forced migration has grown progressively, especially after the publication of the 2008 UNHCR Handbook for the Protection of Women and Girls and the outbreak of new civil conflicts in the world that engendered new flows of refugees.¹¹ The latest studies have fully recognised the uniqueness and the significance of women's experience of flight. They have given a voice to female refugees who, long treated as almost invisible subjects, have begun to be analysed in consideration of their specificity and agency.¹² Currently, there is greater awareness of the ways in which expectations and possibilities in the asylum application process, as well as in resettlement or repatriation, vary based on gender.¹³ Accordingly, recent research is particularly attentive to how gender identities and relations influence the experience of forced displacement.

¹⁰ Rosemary SALES and Jeanne GREGORY: "Refugee Women in London: The Experience of Somali Women", *Refuge*, 1 (1998), pp. 16–20; Kabahenda NYAKABWA and Caroline LAVOIE: "Sexual Violence against Women Refugees in the Horn of Africa", *African Women*, 10 (1995), pp. 26–31; Judith C. KULIG: "A review of the health status of Southeast Asian refugee women", *Health Care for Women International*, 1 (1990), pp. 49–63; Patricia D. ROZÉE and Gretchen VAN BOEMEL: "The Psychological Effects of War Trauma and Abuse on Older Cambodian Refugee Women", *Women & Therapy*, 4 (1990), pp. 23–50; Roberta AITCHISON: "Reluctant Witnesses: Sexual Abuse of Refugee Women in Djibouti", *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, 2 (1984), pp. 26–7.

¹¹ UNHCR Handbook for the Protection of Women and Girls, January 2008, <https://www.unhcr.org/protection/women/47cfa9fe2/unhcr-handbook-protection-women-girls-first-edition-complete-publication.html> (last accessed on 01-05-2022)

¹² See, for instance, Angela GISSI: "What Does the Term Refugee Mean to You?: Perspectives from Syrian Refugee Women in Lebanon", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 4 (2018), pp. 539–61; Habtom M. GHEBREZGHIABHER and Pnina MOTZAFI-HALLER: "Eritrean Women Asylum Seekers in Israel: From a Politics of Rescue to Feminist Accountability", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 4 (2015), pp. 570–94; Bruna IRENE SEU: "The Woman with the Baby: Exploring Narratives of Female Refugees", *Feminist Review*, 73 (2003), pp. 158–65; Agnès CALLAMARD: "Refugee Women: a gendered and political analysis of the refugee experience", in Daniël JOLY (ed.), *Global Changes in Asylum Regimes. Migration, Minorities and Citizenship*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, pp. 137–53.

¹³ Jane FREEDMAN: "Taking Gender Seriously in Asylum and Refugee Policies", in Kavita R. KHORY (ed.), *Global Migration*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 45–64; Melinda MCPHERSON et al.: "Marginal Women, Marginal Rights: Impediments to Gender-Based Persecution Claims by Asylum-seeking Women in Australia", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 2 (2011), pp. 323–47; Jane FREEDMAN: "Women Seeking Asylum: The Politics of Gender in the Asylum Determination Process in France", *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 2 (2007), pp. 154–72; Alice SZCZEPANIKOVA: "Gender Relations in a Refugee Camp: A Case of Chechens Seeking Asylum in the Czech Republic", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 3 (2005), pp. 281–98; Refugee Women's Resource Project (Asylum Aid), *Women Asylum Seekers in the UK: A Gender Perspective*, London, Refugee Women's Resource Project, 2003; Jos VAN WETTEN et al.: "Female Asylum-Seekers in the Netherlands: An Empirical Study", *International Migration*, 3 (2001), pp. 85–98; Alice BLOCH, Treasa GALVIN, and Barbara HARRELL-BOND: "Refugee Women in Europe: Some Aspects of the Legal and Policy Dimensions", *International Migration*, 2 (2000), pp. 169–90.

Thus, for instance, some works have highlighted the plurality of patriarchal systems with which refugee women frequently clash in departure and receiving countries, as well as during their stay in refugee camps.¹⁴ Other studies have emphasised the opportunities in terms of gender empowerment that can result from forced displacement, following the breakdown of the old social order and the creation of a new one with a more gender-balanced distribution of social tasks.¹⁵ Gendered barriers to integration and practices of marginalisation in host, resettlement and origin countries have also been investigated, as have cases of sexual assault and other types of gender-based violence including domestic violence, child marriages and prostitution for survival.¹⁶

Contemporary literature, however, retains limitations in some respects. Firstly, in many cases, the flight experiences of women are still analysed as “exceptional” compared to what is usually considered the “normal” experience, namely that of men. Conceptually, women continued to be pre-identified as a vulnerable group. This can produce biased studies on their experience of displacement and perpetuate the imbalance of

¹⁴ Elena FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH: *The Ideal Refugees: Gender, Islam and the Sahrawi Politics of Survival*, Syracuse, NY, Syracuse University Press, 2014; Id.: “‘Ideal’ Refugee Women and Gender Equality Mainstreaming: ‘Good Practice’ for Whom?”, *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 2 (2010), pp. 64–84; Sharon CARLSON: “Contesting and Reinforcing Patriarchy: An Analysis of Domestic Violence in the Dzaleka Refugee Camp”, *RSC Working Paper No. 23* (2005), pp. 1–59; Agnès CALLAMARD: “Refugee Women: A Gendered and Political Analysis of the Refugee Experience”, in Alastair AGER (ed.), *Refugees: Perspectives on the Experience of Forced Migration*, London, Continuum, 1999, pp. 194–214. Cf. Jane FREEDMAN: *Gendering the International Asylum and Refugee Debate*, Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

¹⁵ Sahar ALMAKHAMREH, Hana Zuhair ASFOUR, and Aisha HUTCHINSON: “Negotiating patriarchal relationships to become economically active: an insight into the agency of Syrian refugee women in Jordan using frameworks of womanism and intersectionality”, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 2020, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13530194.2020.1836609?journalCode=cbjm20> (last accessed 01-05-2022); Yumna ASAF: “Syrian Women and the Refugee Crisis: Surviving the Conflict, Building Peace, and Taking New Gender Roles”, *Social Sciences*, 6 (2017), pp. 1–18; Ulrike KRAUSE: “Analysis of empowerment of refugee women in camps and settlements”, *Journal of internal displacement*, 1 (2014), pp. 28–52; Lisa HUNT: “Women Asylum Seekers and Refugees: Opportunities, Constraints and the Role of Agency”, *Social Policy and Society*, 3 (2008), pp. 281–92; Linda KREITZER: “Liberian Refugee Women: A Qualitative Study of Their Participation in Planning Camp Programmes”, *International Social Work*, 1 (2002), pp. 45–58. Pioneering works on this topic are Deborah LIGHT: “Healing Their Wounds: Guatemalan Refugee Women as Political Activists”, *Women and Therapy*, 13 (1992), pp. 297–308; and Helene MOUSSA: “Women Refugees: Empowerment and Vulnerability”, *Refuge*, 4 (1991), pp. 12–4.

¹⁶ Marianne C. KASTRUP and Klement DYMI: “Gender-Specific Aspects of Intercultural Psychotherapy for Traumatized Female Refugees”, in Meryam SCHOULER-OCAK and Marianne C. KASTRUP (eds.), *Intercultural Psychotherapy*, Cham: Springer, 2020; Jane FREEDMAN: “Sexual and gender-based violence against refugee women: a hidden aspect of the refugee ‘crisis’”, *Reproductive Health Matters*, 47 (2016), pp. 18–26; Yanyi K. DJAMBA and Sitawa R. KIMUNA: *Gender-Based Violence: Perspectives from Africa, the Middle East and India*, Cham, Springer, 2015; Jinan USTA and Amelia R. MASTERTON: *Assessment of Reproductive Health and Gender-based Violence among Displaced Syrian Women in Lebanon*, Geneva, UNHCR, 2013; David NORRIS: “Gender, Flight and Neglect: An Examination of the Sexual and Gender-Based Violence against Congolese Refugee Women”, *Proceedings of the 35th Annual AFSAAP Conference*, Australia, 2012; Jane FREEDMAN and Bahija JAMAL: “Violence Against Migrant and Refugee Women in the EuroMed Region: Case Studies of France, Italy, Egypt, and Morocco”, Copenhagen, Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network, 2008.

power that often occurs in national and international aid programmes.¹⁷ Moreover, studies on refugee women are conducted almost exclusively using political and social sciences approaches, with a substantial lack of historical depth. In part, this can be explained by a long-standing, notable absence of history from refugee studies due to a supposed methodological discrepancy between these two. The broad analytical approach of the former might seem at odds with the practical focus of the latter and its close connection with the policy-making process. The importance of looking back in time to better understand the phenomenon of contemporary refugees has long been denied and, for decades, history has been considered irrelevant when examining forced displacements.¹⁸ A problem linked to the scarcity of historical sources also emerges when analysing refugees and, even more, in the case of refugee women, whose voices have long been unheard.¹⁹ Notwithstanding, in the last years, the academic debate is becoming increasingly aware of the extent to which contemporary refugee movements are related to those of the past.²⁰ The circumstances in which forced displacements occur, the challenges that refugees face during flight and resettlement, the sense of uprooting and loss they feel, and the problems related to the management of humanitarian crises are among the elements that unite forced migrants of yesterday and today in any part of the world. In this context, the memory of the past constitutes a central element. In-depth knowledge of the historical and cultural legacy of violence, displacement and

¹⁷ Elena FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH: “Gender and forced migration”, in Id., Gil LOESCHER, Katy LONG and Nando SIGONA (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 406.

¹⁸ Philip MARFLEET: “Refugees and History: Why We Must Address the Past”, *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 3 (2007), pp. 136–48; Tony KUSHNER: *Remembering Refugees: Then and Now*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2006.

¹⁹ Among the few studies on refugee women from a historical perspective, are Magdalini FYTILI: “Violence, Civil War, and Female Forced Displacement: The Return to Chios”, in Javier RODRIGO and Miguel ALONSO (eds.), *Forced displacements: a European history*, Collection Horizon 2020 SO-CLOSE Project, Cracow, Villa Decius Association, 2021, pp. 57–69; Elizabeth ZANONI: “Global Women. Migrants and Refugees, 1850s–2000”, in Nancy A. HEWITT and Anne M. VALK (eds.), *A Companion to American Women’s History*, Hoboken, NJ, Wiley, 2020, pp. 319–336; Fiona REID and Katherine HOLDEN (eds.): *Women on the Move: Refugees, Migration and Exile*, Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010. An interesting reflection on the relationship between gender studies, refugee studies and historiography, with a focus on recent studies on the Spanish Republican exile, is in Alba MARTÍNEZ: “Refugiados, mujeres y género en la encrucijada historiográfica. De Europa a España, un estado de la cuestión desde abajo”, *Historia Actual Online*, 57 (2022), pp. 191–208.

²⁰ See, for instance, Delphine DIAZ: *En exil. Les réfugiés en Europe, de la fin du XVIII siècle à nos jours*, Paris, Gallimard, 2021; Philipp THER: *The Outsiders. Refugees in Europe since 1492*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2019; Peter GATRELL and Liubov ZHVANKO: *Europe on the Move: The Great War and its Refugees*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2017; Matthew FRANK and Jessica REINISCH: *Refugees in Twentieth-Century Europe: The Forty Years’ Crisis*, London, Bloomsbury, 2016; Panikos PANAYI and Pippa VIRDEE (eds.): *Refugees and the End of Empire. Imperial Collapse and Forced Migration in the Twentieth Century*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011; Olivier FORCADE and Philippe NIVET (eds.): *Les Réfugiés en Europe du XVIe au XXe siècle*, Paris, Éditions Nouveau Monde, 2008; Peter GATRELL: “Population Displacement in the Baltic Region in the Twentieth Century: From ‘Refugee Studies’ to Refugee History”, *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 1 (2007), pp. 43–60; Tony KUSHNER: op. cit.

solidary refuge is important to better comprehend the experience of current refugees, as well as to contrast discrimination and implement effective humanitarian aid. This paper fits in the new academic literature on refugees that assumes such a perspective.

Female voices of forced displacement in today's Spain

This section contributes to the general understanding of forced displacement by illustrating the stories of flight and resettlement of some female protagonists of recent refugee flows. The interviews conducted mirror the complexity of the female experience of displacement. They speak of pain and abuse, but also of resilience, hope and new chances. This section is structured following three main themes that emerged during the interviews. First, the interviewees' considerations on the situation in their origin countries and the reasons behind their flight will be analysed. The stories of their migratory journey will follow, with a focus on the impact that gender mechanisms had on it. Finally, the challenges that these women had to face when resettling in Spain will be illustrated, as well as the opportunities they seized once they arrived in the receiving society.

Crucially, all the women who offered their testimonies for this research escaped the brutality of the civil war, whose images continue to reappear in their minds. Rasha, a forty-nine-year-old purchasing expert from Damascus, clearly recalled what made her decide to abandon her home place.²¹ «I remember I was watching what you see on TV of bombing and bombed buildings from the window of my office», she said. She described this event as «not only scaring» but «terrifying». «You know that people are dying, and you cannot do anything», she added, «you cannot even cry or show any emotion because your colleagues in the office might take it against you».²² Censorship and political repression were the reasons that pushed Leena, a thirty-seven-year-old journalist, to leave Syria in 2016. She explained that she could not stay there because of her job. «I knew I was at risk», she declared. «I saw that my name was on the list of wanted people in my country. I was expected to go to prison; I did not come back».²³

Beyond the violence of civil conflicts and authoritarian regimes, many of the refugee women interviewed decided to escape the harsh rules of a strongly patriarchal society in which they could not access education, were subjected to family and social pressures, and lacked options. It is indicative that some of them described being a woman as being part of a «minority group» who «did not have a voice» in their home countries.²⁴ With the war, as some female refugees stressed, women have become a

²¹ All female names mentioned in the following pages are fictional. Real names have been omitted for privacy and security reasons.

²² H2020 Project SO-CLOSE. MUME-Refugee Interview no. 27.

²³ MUME-Refugee Interview no. 30.

²⁴ Ibidem.

household item that any male member of the family can sell, trade, or throw away. «Women belong, first, to their father, then to their brother, then to their husband, then to their son. They have no life, they are a property of their men», one of the interviewees stated.²⁵ Another said:

I could not live anymore as a submitted person. In the Middle East, people ask women to be calm, controlled and pure, but, at the same time, they need to be beautiful, super skinny and sexy [...]. There is the pressure of makeup and surgical operations. You must be always attractive, but you cannot show your beauty, which is just for your husband. You cannot do anything, you cannot go out, you cannot have a boyfriend, you cannot decide your clothes, as you must protect the honour of your family [...] Gender issues influenced my decision to leave, they are the main reason.²⁶

The stratagem that Nawar, a female social educator of thirty-six-year-old from Kabul, devised to enjoy greater freedom in Afghanistan is certainly extreme and paradigmatic in this sense. She recounted she dressed like a man for ten years to circumvent the limitations to which women are subjected in her city, as they are substantially segregated within the domestic walls and their existences relegated to a private dimension.²⁷

For the interviewees, escaping their origin countries was, often, an anything but easy path. Some reached Europe with the help of NGOs, relatives and friends already residing there or thanks to university scholarships. However, many refugee women could not count on any external support and had to embark on long and dangerous journeys on their own. One of them recounted her odyssey to leave Iraq and reach Jordan, where she would later take a plane to Spain. She remembered the panic she felt when the Jordanian police forces denied her, her mother, and her sister permission to enter the country, even though they had valid passports and visas. They were forced to sleep one night at the border. After waiting for hours and paying a bribe to complacent policemen, they finally managed to cross the frontier taking advantage of the darkness, in a bus full of persons, with the lights off so as not to be noticed.²⁸ The fear and desperation of Sihaam, a forty-five-year-old unemployed Afghan woman, led her and her mother to contact a smuggler to abandon their country and seek temporary refuge in Pakistan. They were obliged to sell their house and properties to pay for the journey, which lasted an entire week on an overcrowded truck. «Sometimes I lost my mum»,

²⁵ MUME-Refugee Interview no. 23.

²⁶ MUME-Refugee Interview no. 28.

²⁷ MUME-Refugee Interview no. 1. See Suad JOSEPH: "Patriarchy and Development in the Arab World", *Gender and Development*, 2 (1996), pp. 14–9.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

Sihaam said, «we all had burqa and it was hard to recognize her between the other people. [...] There was no food and water [...] I was young and, for me, it was pretty hard».²⁹ Once she reached Pakistan, the situation did not improve. During her stay in a refugee camp, she went through the tragedy of the kidnapping of one of her children, before being able to reach Madrid with her family thanks to the support of the UNHCR.

Specific gendered dynamics affecting the experience of flight emerge when listening to the story of Ameera, a Syrian forcibly displaced woman now living in Catalonia, who worked in a refugee camp of the Red Cross in Athens, Greece. She described the situation as «very difficult at the gender level». She reported that the context was promiscuous. People lived in caravans divided into two very tiny rooms, each occupied by a family of seven, in conditions of total misery and poor hygiene. «There were some mattresses on the floor and they all lived there, they all slept in that room, they shared the bathroom among them and also [...] with another family», she recounted. «It was not a safe space for women», she stated, adding that «many women had problems because at night people attacked their caravans and, in order to stay, they had to pay money, [there were] some mafias». Sexual harassment was also the order of the day, as well as human and drug trafficking.³⁰ Iman, a female refugee who volunteered in a camp for internally displaced people in the Syrian city of Atma before taking shelter in Spain, depicted a similar situation. She reported that, in that camp, there were no sanitary conditions and no privacy for women who could not even find a place to have a shower when they had their menstrual period. Prostitution was also a frequent practice, as well as gender-based violence. It was sufficient for a woman sleeping outdoors in the absence of a tent to accidentally uncover a part of her body, to be beaten by her husband or father.³¹

Adapting to the new reality in the host country was another critical and challenging moment in the lives of the interviewees. When asked to describe their arrival in Spain, they all recounted they felt a strong sense of bewilderment. Religion plays a significant role in this respect. Contemporary Muslim refugees in Europe find themselves to be part of a minority religion and one that faces significant discrimination and marginalisation. Language barriers significantly aggravate this already difficult situation. The impossibility of communicating their needs and understanding the bureaucratic requirements to be fulfilled are among the biggest obstacles they had to face. Even seemingly simple operations such as going grocery shopping, booking an appointment, or answering a questionnaire represented real challenges, especially for those refugee women with a low level of education. In these situations, the guidance of friends and other forcibly displaced people residing in Spain for some time, who had already

²⁹ MUME-Refugee Interview no. 23.

³⁰ MUME-Refugee Interview no. 28.

³¹ MUME-Refugee Interview no. 25.

experienced these difficulties, turned out to be essential. However, it is interesting that the interviewees generally noticed a more benevolent attitude of the Spanish people towards women than men since the initial phase of their resettlement, which facilitates female refugees' inclusion in the host community to a certain extent. Some admitted they experienced positive discrimination, which they also linked to the existence of a widespread stereotype that associates the somatic traits of the Middle Eastern man with the prototype of the Islamic fundamentalist. «Women are more welcome than men probably because people think that women are not terrorists», one said.³² «People are afraid of the Arab man, with dark hair [...] They can be racist with women too, but they are less violent with them», another affirmed.³³ «If you are a woman, it is easier to be included in a reception centre or to find a family that hosts you. If you were a man, it would be almost impossible», one acknowledged. «Being a woman implies receiving more confidence, as people know that female refugees [from the Middle East] are suffering a lot, there is a deep respect for them in Spain».³⁴

This does not imply denying that episodes of micro-racism do exist also against forcibly displaced women. As emerged from the stories of some interviewees, these episodes are mainly linked to prejudice against the traditional use of the Islamic veil, which can represent an obstacle when searching for a job, and to a paternalistic behaviour that labels all refugees as poor and ignorant. In such circumstances, the help of social workers and psychologists proved crucial for the women examined, who identified emotional and mental support as a key element in their experience of resettlement. On the other hand, post-traumatic stress and depression are very common among female refugees. They are primarily connected to the processing of the experience of war and displacement, the feeling of isolation, the sense of guilt, as well as to the difficulties of adapting to the new cultural context and the new gender role in the host country.

Throughout the interviews, these women also reported that they perceived a feeling of loss once resettled in the new reality, which continues to accompany them over time. Memories of life before the war are vivid in those women who, in almost all cases, recalled with suffering and nostalgia the families and friends they left behind, the smells of their land, the scent of their food and drink, and the beauty of the nature of their territory. They described an almost physical and visceral connection with their fatherland, of which, however, they perceive all the incongruities. Widad, a refugee of Afghan origins, associated her home place with the freedom to be herself, to dress as she wants, and to speak her language. She fully recognised Afghanistan as a country of war and violence at present. Nonetheless, she remains deeply attached to it.³⁵ Talking about

³² MUME-Refugee Interview no. 29.

³³ MUME-Refugee Interview no. 30.

³⁴ MUME-Refugee Interview no. 1.

³⁵ MUME-Refugee Interview no. 24.

Syria, another refugee woman described it as a «place full of contradictions», a «nice country, interesting, full of history and diversity», but now a «sick country» which has a «sort of cancer» and finds itself «in a constant crisis». ³⁶ Frequently, the youngest among the interviewees could not even cling to the memory of a peaceful and serene past, as armed conflicts have been a constant in their lives and the only reality they experienced. Thus, for instance, Haala from Iraq asserted:

My country does not exist anymore. [...] I was born in 1985, in the middle of the Iraq-Iran War. In 1990, when I began to go to school, the Gulf War started. [...] The Iraq I know is made of war, suffering, hunger and frustration. ³⁷

The management of the relationship with their families, who frequently remain in the origin countries, represents another destabilising factor for the interviewees. For some of them, escaping war meant breaking the bond with their relatives. «When the war started, families separated», said one of the Syrian refugee women, who further explained:

I am the only one who is against the regime and in favour of the revolution. My whole family is with the regime, they support it. There is no military in my family, neither my father nor my brother nor my sister is in the army, but they are afraid of the revolution. In the first years after I left my country, we did not talk to each other. ³⁸

Other interviewees confessed that, despite maintaining contact with relatives via telephone and social networks, they limit themselves to asking about the health conditions of their loved ones and do not share feelings with them. Several female refugees admitted they perceive not only a physical distance but also an emotional and cultural detachment from their family, which makes these women feel divided between the bond with their past existence in the origin country and their new life in the host society. «I speak to my relatives but not too much», one of them stated, confiding that it is hard for her to balance between the differences she notices with her relatives and the understanding of the difficult situation her family lives in the home country. ³⁹ Likewise, another interviewee admitted:

³⁶ MUME-Refugee Interview no. 28.

³⁷ MUME-Refugee Interview no. 29.

³⁸ MUME-Refugee Interview no. 25.

³⁹ MUME-Refugee Interview no. 24.

I have a sort of conflict with my origin country. When relatives visit me, I still feel a sort of pressure. They comment on how I dress, how my body is, and my sentimental life. [...] My relationship with them works well when we are distant.⁴⁰

These testimonies offer insights into the importance of forced displacement also as an opportunity for empowerment for refugee women, who begin to perceive themselves as holders of rights – not just duties – once they moved away from the social context of origin. Some of them embarked on a complex path, which led them to redefine their identity and leave their traditional domestic role. This is particularly true for those female refugees who lived the experience of flight and resettlement alone, without the presence of male relatives. This helps them discover their individual dimension and become aware of their autonomous capacity for action. An interviewee admitted:

Women in Afghanistan suffer a lot; they suffer the social pressure of men and their families. They do not know that they have different options to follow in their lives. I am lucky because I was strong enough to come [to Spain] alone.⁴¹

The freedom to choose for themselves and make decisions for their life independently is a central theme in the stories of displacement of these refugees. In many cases, resettling in the host country meant for them improving their conditions. Some found stability and security in academia thanks to scholarships. Some committed themselves to obtain a job that would make them economically self-sufficient. Others made their experience of displacement available to others by becoming social educators, volunteers in refugee assistance centres, human rights activists, and peacebuilders. Once in Spain, the interviewees started to create spaces of sociality without the presence of men, for instance, by joining training courses, dance classes, reading and hiking groups. In this respect, the data emerging from the testimonies collected suggest that arriving in Spain alone was a factor that favoured socialization for most of them. In such cases, the resettlement coincided with the breakdown of the patriarchal rules to which these refugee women must comply in their origin countries, where social relations are managed by men.

The situation is different for those female refugees who arrived with their husbands, as Najat, a thirty-year-old single chef from Iraq, denounced. «There are many men who do not let you do anything», she claimed. «When you were in your country, you were locked in your world. Now you are in a new country that is open to everything. You also must open up». «It is not about the man learning the language, going on a trip

⁴⁰ MUME-Refugee Interview no. 28.

⁴¹ MUME-Refugee Interview no. 1.

and seeing the world, working and meeting friends, while women are forbidden to do anything», Najat added. «Few women say what they want», she stressed, as «most of them remain silent as they do not exist». ⁴² «There should be ways to reach women who live with their partners at home», another female refugee stated, «they are isolated, they cannot go out and may need help». ⁴³

This is what happened to Sihaam, whose experience of displacement and resettlement meant abandoning a past of suffering and escaping from a toxic relationship with her abusive husband, who beat her and their children. «Thanks to the help I received [in Spain], I could end up the relationship with my ex», she recounted. Seven years after her arrival in Catalonia, Sihaam found support thanks to an association that assists women suffering from domestic violence. «I lived in a centre for women for one year and three months. [...] I do not know how but I made a change, maybe because I am the mother of three girls and I wanted a different life for them», she said. «This was the reason why I worked a lot on myself», she admitted. She confessed that she did not miss any appointment with the psychologist or the social worker, who helped her accept the change from her «old life» to her «new reality» as a free and emancipated individual. ⁴⁴

Fostering empathy: the role of historical memory in the Spanish context of refuge

When talking about their resettlement in Spain, all the refugee women interviewed highlighted a crucial element. They pinpointed that it was in the civil society they found the most support, which suggests a certain sympathy of the Spaniards, who experienced the tragedy of displacement not long ago, towards contemporary refugees. According to some interviewees, the fact that people in the host community remember how much they suffered from the war in the past facilitates mutual understanding. «All the integration that I missed from the [Spanish] government, I got it from the locals», one of the interviewees stated. Thus, she reported her personal experience:

When I met [Spanish] people, elderly people, they asked me where I came from. When I said I was from Syria, they started crying. They told me: “We are so sorry about what is happening in Syria, we lived through the war, and we know how it is”. [...] Spanish people who lived the civil conflict understand the meaning of leaving your country, your house, your family, going to another country, starting a new life and learning a new language. I think that, even if they do not

⁴² MUME-Refugee Interview no. 16.

⁴³ MUME-Refugee Interview no. 28.

⁴⁴ MUME-Refugee Interview no. 23.

know the history of Syria, they know their history, and this is something very similar. Human history is very similar.⁴⁵

Indeed, not even a century has passed since Spain was also a land to escape from. Starting from the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in July 1936, the continuous shifting of the borders that divided the area under the control of the legitimate Republican government from the area occupied by the troops of General Francisco Franco corresponded to an uninterrupted displacement of population. At the beginning of the military operations, this involved hundreds of thousands of Spaniards who, whereas endorsing the Francoist *Alzamiento* or the republican-socialist cause of the *Frente Popular*, found themselves in territory under enemy control and, therefore, were forced to flee. Most of those who supported Franco's coup d'état decided to go into exile, finding refuge in Portugal, Italy, and Latin America, among others. However, in many cases, it was a temporary condition since these individuals could return to Spain as the tide of the war turned in favour of the nationalist rebels led by the *Generalísimo*. Conversely, as the Francoist army gained ground on the internal front, the situation for those who stood by the Second Republic, both combatants and non-combatants, became increasingly dramatic.⁴⁶

The issue of the Spanish republican refugees is not new to historiography. However, scholars have only recently begun to analyse this topic from a gendered perspective, which has led to the publication of significant studies on Spanish refugee women after the outbreak of the Civil War.⁴⁷ Many of these investigations analyse the stories of women who launched themselves in a long and dangerous exodus to seek shelter in the republican rear-guard. In several aspects, their experience of refuge mirrors the experience of the contemporary forcibly displaced women interviewed. They were compelled to abandon their cities to escape war, violence, and political persecution. Without economic means, they undertook long and risky journeys in search of a haven. As it happened for the female protagonists of this paper, the flight was exhausting for those Spanish women who were obliged to move repeatedly from one place to another because

⁴⁵ MUME-Refugee Interview no. 27.

⁴⁶ Javier RUBIO: *La emigración de la Guerra Civil de 1936-1939*, Madrid, Editorial San Martín, 1977.

⁴⁷ Critical historical works on this topic are, among others, Ángeles EGIDO et al. (eds.): *Mujeres en el exilio republicano de 1939*, Madrid, Ministerio de la Presidencia, 2021; Rocío NEGRETE: "Mira, ¿ves mis manos? Militancia y trabajo de las mujeres exiliadas", *Imposibilia*, 20 (2020), pp. 55-77; Maëlle MAUGENDRE: *Femmes en exil. Les réfugiées espagnoles en France, 1939-1942*, Tours, Presses universitaires François-Rabelais, 2019; Alba MARTÍNEZ: "Las mujeres recuerdan. Género y memoria sobre exilio republicano en Francia, 1939-1978", *Arenal. Revista de historia de las mujeres*, 2 (2019), pp. 367-98; Mercedes YUSTA: "Género e identidad política femenina en el exilio: Mujeres Antifascistas Españolas (1946-1950)", *Pasado y memoria. Revista de historia contemporánea*, 7 (2008), pp. 143-63; Alicia ALTED: "El exilio republicano español de 1939 desde la perspectiva de las mujeres", *Arenal. Revista de historia de las mujeres*, 2 (1997), pp. 223-38; Pilar DOMÍNGUEZ PRATS: *Voces del exilio: mujeres españolas en México (1939-1950)*, Madrid, Dirección General de la Mujer, 1994.

of the continual retreat of the Republican defensive lines. During the journey, they frequently found shelter in overcrowded accommodations, whether the latter were seized private houses and hotels or public buildings and spaces. They lived in poor hygienic conditions that favoured the spread of epidemics and dealt with food shortage, lack of basic medical aid and clothing to cover up with.

Many are also the testimonies of refugee women who tried to find protection outside the Spanish boundaries since the early stages of the conflict, mainly heading to other Christian countries. France, Great Britain and Russia were among the main destinations of refuge, as well as Cuba, Chile, the Dominican Republic and the United States, to name a few. Undoubtedly, the religious and cultural affinity between the Spanish refugees and host societies is a distinguishing factor from the experience of current refugees from Islamic countries arriving in Europe. Additional distinctive factors that must be kept in mind are the presence of a strong political and social mobilization linked to international anti-fascism during the 1930s-40s, and the existence of employment policies for Spanish refugees, who were considered a potential driver of economic development in several host states.⁴⁸ However, what has not changed over time are the narratives concerning the experience of escape and refuge. Thus, for instance, life in refugee camps outside Spain, where hundreds of thousands of republicans were herded into inhumane conditions since the last months of the Civil War, does not differ much from that of many current involuntary migrants around the world living the same dramatic circumstances. In this regard, the story of the Spanish writer Teresa Gracia, who became a refugee when she was just a child, is tragically similar to the testimonies of some of the contemporary refugee women described above. She recounted her stay in the concentration camp of Argelès-sur-Mer, in southern France, starting from 1939 as follows:

[The French] shoved us into a barrack where there was black and wet sand [...] The barbed wire entered the sea to prevent leaks [...] There was no one sunbathing or bathing. The toilets were small huts and the excrements flowed into the sea through a tube. Then we drank that water and diarrhoea came, especially in children. There was no medical care [...]. The women with their menstrual period tried to wash their clothes in a trickle of water, they had very few clothes [...]. They stayed away from the rest of the people because they considered it a shameful disease. As a child, I did not realise it, but they must have had a very bad time.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Dolores Pla BRUGAT: “El Exilio Republicano en Hispanoamérica. Su Historia e Historiografía.” *Historia Social*, 42 (2002), pp. 99–121.

⁴⁹ The testimony of Teresa Gracia is in Alicia ALTED: op. cit., pp. 223–38. On the topic, see also Paula SIMÓN: “Los campos de concentración franceses contados por las mujeres: aportes para la reflexión sobre la narrativa testimonial femenina”, *Laberintos*, 14 (2012), pp. 151-165.

As frequently happens nowadays, even for Spanish refugee women the experience of flight and exile was characterised by recurrent episodes of humiliation, often perpetrated by the authorities of the receiving countries, as the Spanish journalist and political activist Teresa Pàmies recounted:

I will never forget the sound of a group of old ladies crying because they were forced to show themselves naked in front of gendarmes, doctors, practitioners, and bureaucrats, who were in charge of ensuring the *santé publique* of the dear France. Spanish women who had never shown themselves naked neither in conjugal intimacy. Women with bodies withered and deformed by the years, childbirth, excessive physical labour and a thirty-two-month war that left many of them skin and bone. Among these women was one with a child in her womb; a womb profaned by obscene or disgusted looks.⁵⁰

The intimate trauma of separated families and the personal tragedy of those who were uprooted from their land and had to recreate a new existence elsewhere represents another common thread that linked Spanish refugee women in the past and present female refugees worldwide. The testimony of the intellectual Áurea Matilde Fernández, who left Spain in 1937 with her family to escape the Francoist repression that caused her father's death, is proof of this. In her book of memories she recounted that she felt a «sensation difficult to describe» upon arrival in Cuba, where she spent forty-five years in exile. «The rupture with everything that had been my life up to that point, the uprooting from my distant homeland [...] suddenly took over my mind», she asserted.⁵¹ From a similar perspective, the lawyer and radical socialist politician, Victoria Kent, described her exile in Paris as «an inexhaustible source of suffering», analogous to the feeling of loss and nostalgia that emerged from the interviews of the contemporary refugee women examined in this paper. She also highlighted the distinctive character that women impressed on the experience of exile. «It has been said that exile is a deeper pain for men than for women because for the woman the homeland is her home, and her home goes with her. It goes without saying», she added, that this was a «men's opinion» [...]. For the exiled woman, the homeland is her abandoned house». ⁵²

These testimonies report deprivation and despair. However, the stories of the Spanish refugees are not only stories of broken lives. Like forced migrants nowadays, during the displacement, many Spaniards transformed themselves from war victims in

⁵⁰ Teresa PÀMIES: *Quan érem refugiats*, Carcaixent, Sembra, 2016, p. 18.

⁵¹ The words of Áurea Matilde Fernández are collected in Carlos FERNÁNDEZ RODRÍGUEZ: *La lucha es tu vida. Relato de nueve mujeres combatientes republicanas*, Madrid, Fundación Domingo Malagón, 2008, p. 109.

⁵² Victoria KENT: *Cuatro años en París*, Buenos Aires, Sur, 1947, pp. 74, 80–81.

need of assistance into individuals aware of their capacity for action.⁵³ In some circumstances, the drama of the civil conflict and the flight represented an empowering opportunity for women, which makes the experience of Spanish female refugees akin to that of the contemporary refugee women analysed. To a certain extent, the Civil War helped question traditional gender patterns and relationships in the Spanish society of the 1930s, which was characterised by marked gender asymmetries.⁵⁴ In the majority of cases, these wartime transformations of gender norms did not turn into a long-term improvement in the position of women in society, with the male dimension of the battlefield always holding a priority position, following the metaphor of the “double helix” by Margaret and Patrice Higonnet.⁵⁵ Yet, despite the gender hierarchy remained in place, gender relations did change due to the war experience relevantly.

Crucially, thousands of refugee women replaced men in traditionally male jobs, in addition to performing typically female social care tasks such as first aid nursing and childcare. While men were at the front, these women ensured the family livelihood by working in factories, in the service sector and in the agricultural sector, in so doing playing also a fundamental role for the country’s economy. The testimonies of “ordinary” refugee women, who have recently aroused the curiosity of various scholars, are emblematic in this regard.⁵⁶ Francisca Muñoz, who left Spain in 1939 at the age of 13, talked with admiration about a group of women that took charge of collecting wood to provide heating in the refugee camp of Pont La Dame despite the fatigue and difficulties along the mountain paths.⁵⁷ Similarly, Pilar Valles emphasized the key role of her mother, who effectively replaced her father as head of the family:

My mother began to sew [...] she did it very well (...) In the end, we started a business related to the sale of shirts and it did not go so bad. Little by little, we

⁵³ Mónica MORENO: “Las exiliadas, de acompañantes a protagonistas”, *Ayer*, 81 (2011), pp. 265–281.

⁵⁴ Ana AGUADO: “Memoria de la Guerra Civil e identidades femeninas antifranquistas”, *Annis. Revue d’études des sociétés et cultures contemporaines Europe-Amérique*, 2 (2011), <http://journals.openedition.org/annis/1508>

⁵⁵ Margaret R. HIGONNET and Patrice L.R. HIGONNET: “The double helix”, in Margaret R. HIGONNET et al., *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1987, pp. 31-48.

⁵⁶ On the importance of approaching the personal stories of ordinary refugee women as a pivotal «exercise in micro-history» that helps to better understand the general phenomenon of refuge, see Alba MARTÍNEZ: “Dialogar con la complejidad cotidiana. Una refugiada española bajo la ocupación de Francia”, *Hispania Nova*, 19 (2021), p. 697. See also Id.: “Motherhood, Labor, and Anti-Fascism: The Construction of Refugee Identity by Spanish Women Exiled in France, 1939–1976”, *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies*, 1 (2021), pp. 7-26. Direct testimonies of ordinary refugee women, which are added to those indicated in the following notes, are contained in Luisa CARNÉS: *De Barcelona a la Bretaña francesa*, Renacimiento, Barcelona, 2014; Conchita RAMÍREZ: *Diario de una niña exiliada, 1939-1947*, Sevilla, Diputación de Sevilla, 2006; Antonina RODRIGO: *Mujer y exilio 1939*, Madrid, Compañía Literaria, 1999; Blanca BRAVO, Milagros LATORRE PIQUER, and Carmen ROMERO: *Nuevas raíces: testimonios de mujeres españolas en el exilio*, México, D.F., Mortiz, 1993.

⁵⁷ Francisca MUÑOZ: *Memorias del exilio*, Barcelona, Viena Ediciones, 2006, p. 90.

began to buy sewing machines and several Spaniards worked there [...] But then, my father, as always, joined the Resistance.⁵⁸

Part of the Spanish refugee women was also engaged in political anti-Francoist militancy starting from the very first months of the Civil War. Among the most famous names are those of Isabel de Palencia, the already mentioned Victoria Kent, Federica Montseny, Constanca de la Mora and Dolores Ibárruri, whose memoirs of resistance and fight against the *Alzamiento* and the Franco regime have had a great resonance over time.⁵⁹ Significantly, also ordinary female refugees wrote diaries and biographies, which make it possible to highlight their agency and reconstruct their political activity during their flight, in the republican rear-guard, as well as throughout their exile. Rosalía Sender, for example, recounted she started to participate in social and trade union struggles during her resettlement in France. At the age of 18, she joined the ranks of the Spanish Communist Party, carrying out special assignments under the code name of “Olga”. She said she lived as a «clandestine within clandestines» until 1967, when she returned to Spain as an active communist militant.⁶⁰ For her part, Ana Delso retraced the years of her youth as a libertarian activist and an anarcho-syndicalist. She assumed the role of secretary of the organization *Mujeres Libres*, with the aim of changing «the eternal uniform of women, as a good mother, good wife, faithful and obedient».⁶¹ She was also secretary of the International Anti-Fascist Solidarity; a position she held while in exile. She participated in the Resistance against the Nazis and lived hidden among the 539th Company of Foreign Workers for almost a year, during which she followed the Company in its itinerary through Vichy France.

Based on the considerations made so far, it is possible to reflect on forced migration as a historical phenomenon that assumes peculiar aspects depending on the temporal, political, social, and geographical contexts in which it occurs, but retains

⁵⁸ The testimony of Pilar Valls is in Pilar DOMÍNGUEZ PRATS: *De ciudadanas a exiliadas: un estudio sobre las republicanas españolas en México*, Madrid, Cinca, 2009, p. 92. Further testimonies on the topic are Remedios OLIVA: *Éxodo. Del campo de Argelès a la maternidad de Elna, Barcelona*, Viena Ediciones, 2006, pp. 49-51; Francisca MUÑOZ: op. cit., pp. 118-124. On this issue, see also Rocío NEGRETE: “Una mano de obra barata y eficiente. Mujeres trabajadoras en el exilio francés”, in Rocío Negrete and Cristina Somolinos (eds.), *Las mujeres que cosían y los hombres que fumaban. Voces de mujeres trabajadoras en la España de los siglos XIX y XXI*, Málaga, Unaeditorial, 2021, pp. 151-83.

⁵⁹ Isabel PALENCIA: *Smouldering Freedom: The Story of The Spanish Republicans in Exile (1945)*, London, Gollancz, 1946; Victoria KENT: op. cit.; Federica MONTSENY: “Cien días de la vida de una mujer”, *El Mundo al Día. Cahiers Mensuels de Culture*, 21 (1949); Id.: “Pasión y muerte de los españoles en Francia”, *El mundo al día. Cahiers Mensuels de Culture*, 29 (1950); Constanca DE LA MORA: *Doble esplendor*, Barcelona, Crítica, 1978 [I edition 1939]; Dolores IBÁRRURI, *Memorias de Pasionaria, 1939-1977: Me faltaba España*, Barcelona, Planeta, 1984. In the topic, see also Susanna TAVERA: “La memoria de las vencidas: política, género y exilio en la experiencia republicana”, *Ayer*, 4 (2005), pp. 197–224.

⁶⁰ Rosalía SENDER: *Nos quitaron la miel. Memorias de una luchadora antifranquista*, Valencia, Universidad de Valencia, 2004, p. 78.

⁶¹ Ana DELSO: *Trescientos hombres y yo. Estampas de una revolución*, Madrid, Fundación de Estudios Libertarios Anselmo Lorezo, 1998, p. 47.

constant features over space and time. The parallelism developed above between the experience of refuge in Spain since the 1930s and that of the contemporary forcibly displaced women examined in this essay is functional to stress the importance of historical memory when managing present refugee crises. In fact, historical memory constitutes a critical tool to foster mutual understanding between today's involuntary migrants and the receiving communities. It is no coincidence that several of the refugee women interviewed declared to be interested in studying the Spanish Civil War to find similarities with their own experience of the civil conflict. Among them is Nawar, whose words are emblematic:

Most of my friends in Spain are in their seventies, sixty-five or eighties. They told me everything that happened here. [...] The Spanish people gave me hope. Despite three years of civil war, they managed to create a solid state. My country, Afghanistan, is going through a very complicated situation but I hope that, if I work and the next generation works, maybe one day the Afghan young people will have the life the Spanish people have now, which their grandparents and great-grandparents fought hard for.⁶²

Nawar's reconstruction of Spanish history after the civil war is over simplistic. However, from her testimony it emerges that sharing information about past and present experiences of the flight with the local community in Spain had the effect of comforting her, while reducing the cultural and emotional distance between her and her Spanish friends. As proof of the Spanish solidarity towards refugees, Nawar recounted that she found shelter in a Catalan family a few days after her arrival in Barcelona. «The family that decided to host me helped me with everything», she asserted.⁶³ «I felt secure. I was not listening to bombs anymore», she confessed.⁶⁴

In recent years, Spanish politics has re-evaluated the centrality of historical memory as a useful tool when addressing present problems. The *Ley de Memoria Democrática*, which the Spanish Parliament has approved on 19 October 2022, represents a significant output of this reflection. Indeed, the law asserts that knowledge of the past helps to establish present social coexistence «on a firmer basis, protecting people from repeating past mistakes» (preamble I, paragraph 5).⁶⁵ It identifies historical memory as crucial to prevent the recurrence of all forms of political violence and to promote a more democratic and solidarity-based society. In particular, the law intends to preserve the memory of the victims of the Spanish Civil War and the Franco

⁶² MUME-Refugee Interview no. 1.

⁶³ Ibidem.

⁶⁴ Ibidem.

⁶⁵ «Ley de Memoria Democrática», no. 20, 19 October 2022, in *Boletín Oficial del Estado*, no. 252, 20 October 2022.

dictatorship, and foment reparation for their suffering. Among these victims, it expressly indicates those who were forced into exile (art. 3) and officially recognizes the experience and agency of women, considered not as weak and passive subjects but as resilient protagonists in the fight against the Caudillo regime (art. 11).⁶⁶

Given the importance of implementing an effective «policy of memory» and fostering a deeper understanding of refugees' needs both at the state and local levels, some Spanish policymakers have been also interviewed for this research. Most of them stressed that the main goal of contemporary politics in managing refugee flows is to fight prejudice and racism. In this respect, one of the interviewees declared that is necessary to «find spaces of representation without segregation [...] in the public area for different cultures», while building «a dialogue between a shared common culture».⁶⁷ «We need to realise integration policies», another highlighted, «especially now that hate speeches are spreading around and political parties that support these ideas are growing».⁶⁸ As they stressed, this is where historical memory comes into play. According to the policymakers interviewed, reviving the memory of forced displacement and migrations in the European past would represent a good movement of awareness, debate, and inclusion. Most of the interviewees believed that a nation that does not remember its past cannot create a real policy of memory. However, this cannot happen spontaneously. Crucially, one of the policymakers interviewed pointed out that historical memory needs to be activated.⁶⁹ «What is missed is a place where people can meet and exchange experiences. We should promote encounters between refugees and locals [...]. We should stop fear-based behaviours and encourage interactions», another admitted.⁷⁰

Interesting reflections on the value of historical memory of forced migration in the Spanish context of refuge also come from academic experts, cultural institutions and NGOs assisting involuntary migrants, whose testimonies have been collected for this research along with those of refugee women and policymakers. They all agreed on the need to urgently implement memory policies to facilitate the social integration of refugees. The Spanish academics interviewed, for instance, stated that using the memory of forced displacement and conflict in European history is an indispensable step to raise awareness and build cooperation nowadays. For them, historical heritage is a testimony of similar dynamics that happened in the past; remembering and updating it can help to decode the present. «The key to fostering integration is to build bridges instead of symbolic and real walls», one of the scholars interviewed said. For this purpose, it is fundamental to facilitate encounters, social cohesion, exchange of histories and non-material patrimony. «When Valencia was the capital of the Second Republic during the

⁶⁶ Ibidem.

⁶⁷ H2020 Project SO-CLOSE. MUME-Policymakers Interview no. 1.

⁶⁸ MUME-Policymakers Interview no. 2.

⁶⁹ Ibidem.

⁷⁰ MUME-Policymakers Interview no. 3.

Civil War, we used to host and welcome refugees. [...] Hospitality is a value already shared in the past in Spain», the interviewee added. «We welcomed refugees, and we were refugees», he also declared, «we should remember this through public talks, social networks, and public memory. In so doing, refugees can feel that their experience is shared and understood». ⁷¹ For academics, spaces for social cohesion must be created by moving from a common past. This can make the Spaniards more sensitive toward the difficulties that refugees coming from abroad are experiencing. At the same time, it helps forced migrants to see affinities and points of contact with the receiving country. ⁷²

When asked to answer some questions on the importance of historical memory, the general director of one of the cultural institutions examined, “Memòria Democràtica”, shared a similar perspective. She highlighted the urgency to «discuss memory to have a population in peace with its past and able to live in a democracy». ⁷³ In her opinion, it is fundamental «to know the past better, without rejecting it». ⁷⁴ «We do not need to be ashamed of it, we just need to be more empathetic», she said, so as to achieve a deeper understanding of refugees’ lives. ⁷⁵ The director of another cultural institution, “Memorial Democràtic”, echoed these words. For him, the main goal is to dignify and disseminate the knowledge of the period that includes the Second Republic, the Civil War, the post-war and the Franco dictatorship, thus promoting dialogue on the democratic battles that happened during that time. «We try to focus on the connections between the democratic values we have now and the fights that have been done in the past to obtain them», he stated. «We want to show the fights that people, women and men, had done in the past for us, for our freedom». ⁷⁶ Crucially, the director of the “Museum of the History of Immigration in Catalonia” also underlined the necessity to «give visibility to the heritage generated by all human movements». ⁷⁷ She pointed out that it is essential to gather common testimonies and create comparisons with the past. «Somehow we do not learn from history», she declared, stressing the importance of encouraging the general public to reflect on the common heritage of past and present forced displacements to prevent discriminatory behaviours from recurring over time. ⁷⁸ The action of the NGOs interviewed go exactly in this direction. As the representative of “Abrazo Cultural” pointed out, Europeans tend to forget that they were refugees. He also considered it misleading to judge migration as an exceptional and limited phenomenon in time, being «something normal and natural» instead, a constant element in the

⁷¹ H2020 Project SO-CLOSE. MUME-Academics Interview no. 1.

⁷² MUME-Academics Interview no. 3.

⁷³ H2020 Project SO-CLOSE. MUME-Cultural Institution Interview no. 1.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁶ MUME- Cultural Institution Interview no. 2.

⁷⁷ MUME- Cultural Institution Interview no. 3.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*.

human history.⁷⁹ «Remembering the past can help us reconstruct our history, to cure internal wounds», the coordinator of the NGO “Fundació Autònoma Solidària” affirmed, for her part.⁸⁰ «The connection with the past is evident», she added, pointing to empathy as the key element on which structuring the Spanish political agenda relating to the reception of refugees.⁸¹

Conclusions

By focusing on the gender dynamics of forced migrations through the stories of some female protagonists of past and present refugee flows, this paper has highlighted multiple forms of gender oppression that refugee women suffer in several parts of the earth during the flight and in the host countries. However, these testimonies not only return episodes of violence and submission, but also examples of great strength and altruism. Indeed, for many refugee women, the conquest of emancipation passed through the tortuous path of forced displacement, which in some cases led them to appropriate a new gender role and discover a new, more independent, personal dimension.

This paper has also stressed that the experience of forced displacement today is not just a problem of faraway countries. Similar circumstances also occurred in the heart of Europe not so long ago. The example of Spain is paradigmatic. People taking shelter in this country nowadays after fleeing violence and conflicts – as in the case of the Syrian, Afghan and Iraqi refugee women examined – share the same tragical experience of millions of Spaniards, who were forced to leave their houses and seek refuge far from persecution during and after the Spanish Civil War. Focusing on the parallelism between refugee women in the past and in the present is crucial, as it places contemporary humanitarian crises in the right historical perspective. Usually, refugees tend to be analysed as a rigid political category and forced migrations as purely political and social events. On the contrary, forced displacements must be considered a historical phenomenon that adapts to the different contexts in which it takes place, while maintaining some characteristics unaltered. This helps identify similar problems in diverse spatial and temporal frameworks and propose more conscious solutions to the contemporary refugee issue.

⁷⁹ H2020 Project SO-CLOSE. MUME-NGO Interview no. 6.

⁸⁰ MUME-NGO Interview no. 3.

⁸¹ *Ibidem*.