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### Awareness of refugee men of human rights

End of August 2020, we conducted a focus group discussion with **eight male beneficiaries of international protection** who live in Slovenia for at least four years or more. Due to covid-19 measures, we organized two separate discussions in small groups, one group consisting of five younger single men and the other group consisting of three married men with families. We planned to organize separate focus groups with female beneficiaries of international protection, however, due to covid-19 situation, we have not yet managed to conduct them.

The topic of our focus group discussion was refugee experience with integration in Slovenia and the obstacles they are dealing with. Within this broad frame, we focused on more specific topics: **the awareness of refugees of their rights and obligations, of women's and children's rights, civil and political rights, social norms in Slovenia, and also, of their changed lifestyle in a new European country** (especially regarding the “ghetto” influence – a large migrant community – or “ghetto” absence in Slovenia, where, except for migrants from former Yugoslav republics, other migrants do not have large communities).

We wanted to know how much **information about civil and political rights, gender equality, women's rights, family rights and obligations, children's rights, legislation on marriage etc.** refugees obtained from their counselors from The Government Office for the Support and Integration of Migrants, when they were granted international protection. And how much information they got not only from their legal advisors, but also from other state institutions (such as Center for Social Work, where they had been arranging social welfare and child's benefits, or their children's schools), NGOs (like Slovene Philanthropy or Association Odnos, which are assisting refugees with integration) or other people, like their friends.

The group of younger single men said, they did not get any information of that kind, when their refugee status had been granted, except information about their limited political rights in Slovenia (they can vote in the local elections but not in the national ones). They assumed that any other information had not been given to them due to the fact that they are young single men and that the refugee counselors at the Government Office for the Support and Integration of Migrants considered they do not need to inform them about human rights,



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women's rights, gender equality, acceptable social norms, etc. However, they all agreed, their knowledge of these topics is insufficient and would like to know more. They would also prefer, if someone would explain it to them, and not to search for answers on their own. The group of married men said, they had received some information about civil and political rights in Slovenia and also of their (family) obligations from the state's refugee counselors, as well as from NGOs and their friends. However, this group was very reserved, when asked specific questions.

We continued our discussion by tackling **equality** in general and **gender equality**. The group of younger single men said, they do understand what equality means, however, they think they did not have the opportunity to "practice it" in their countries of origin. They said that the societies they were a part of before coming to Slovenia, were very patriarchal, theocratic and controlling and that in order to fully understand gender equality, they first need to know human rights and limits – in the sense of where one person's human rights end and when he/she might interfere with another person's human rights. They also said, they first have to get used to their new lives, especially to the freedom they now have. This – freedom – is what surprised them the most, after coming to Slovenia and obtaining the refugee status. Some of the younger single men even said, it came as a shock to them, a positive shock, which had a positive impact on their personalities.

The group of married men said that gender equality is a new concept for them, since they all grew up in societies, where the relationships between men and women are based on traditional gender roles and obligations. They said that after coming to Slovenia, they "lost the balance" in their families, regarding their relationships with their wives and children. They also pointed out that gender equality is still "a big question" for them, that they have to think about it and find their own answers. They agreed that it is a long and difficult process to adopt the new way of living in Europe, but also expressed this might be easier for them without the pressure of the migrant community (the "ghetto"). The married men pointed out that the biggest issue for them is accepting the change, especially concerning their children and wives, or better said, the change in their behavior, since they live in Slovenia.

The discussion continued around the "**European way of living**". We asked the participants, what they liked or did not like, what they agreed or did not agree with, to which extent they adopted the European way of life (in sense of culture, food, drinks, clothes, social life, going



out, studying, etc.). Single men said, they mainly like their “unlimited freedom” in Slovenia and the absence of a migrant “ghetto”. One of the participants, who had also been living in Austria, where the migrant community from his country of origin was much larger, said, he believes that his life in Slovenia would be much more difficult, if the migrant “ghetto” existed here. Younger single men said, they easily adopted the European way of life in all senses. Most of them are University students and are trying to fit in their study groups; however, one of the challenges they have, is the Slovene language, and the other is that they are older than the majority of their classmates. They said, it was not easy at first. In the beginning, they all struggled to adopt the new students’ life, since they had been influenced by their religion, culture and traditional beliefs. But the situation has changed. They think, the reason they managed to adapt quite quickly was that they do not live in a migrant “ghetto”, but are surrounded by their (mostly Slovenian) friends and fellow students. This group of men said that their lives in general are much better now and establishing relationships is easier for them since they live in Slovenia, especially because “the law guarantees equality and human rights”.

The group of married men also said, they mostly like everything about living in Slovenia and they feel independent and free from their society’s restrictions. They said, their wives and children feel the same way. They noticed that their beliefs are not so strong anymore and that now they are more open-minded (“what we do not agree with today, we might agree with tomorrow”). They said, the most important thing for them is for their children to see the world differently. But to achieve that, they said, they need help from different institutions/organizations which work with children. All three married men said that since their wives and children are now better informed about their rights, they cannot impose restrictions on them anymore. When being asked, how was that issue in their country of origin, they were very reluctant to talk about it. However, towards the end of discussion, this group said that despite living free from the state’s oppression and the society’s control, their relationships with their wives are getting “more difficult” now. This was a sensitive topic and they were reluctant to openly discuss it, however, they mentioned women’s emancipation, different behavior and “sexual freedom”. In the last four years, there have been some cases of refugee women demanding divorce, and men seemed a bit worried about their wives “getting such ideas”.

The group of younger single men said, they still need to learn about human rights, women’s and children’s rights, family code, the acceptable social norms etc. But they also raised a question about the awareness of other migrants of their rights and obligations (this group



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considered themselves as being more open-minded, progressive, liberal etc. in comparison to many other migrants). Married men said, they got enough information so far, however, when discussing it, they were questioning, if their wives also got all the information. It seemed, they have never discussed these topics at home with their wives or children. Since all participants live in Slovenia for four years or more, and most of them visited some other EU countries (or they have relatives living in other EU countries), they can compare living in Slovenia and elsewhere. They all agreed that the influence of large migrant communities (“ghetto”) in other countries is huge and perhaps the main influence on people’s lifestyle (not the country’s laws or general social norms). They mentioned stereotypes and prejudices, societal control, traditional oppression, (un)acceptance of diverse ethnic groups, invasive behavior, lack of respect of individual freedoms, patriarchal women’s oppression, influence of religion or even religious extremism. On the other side, so it seems, people might find employment easier/faster in countries with large migrant communities. They consider the fact that in Slovenia there are no large migrant communities from their countries of origin as a positive thing, in the sense that the migrant community is not judging them or influencing them directly (their behavior, dressing, going out, drinking, etc.).

When conducting this focus group discussion, it was obvious, there is a need for a wider research or an in-depth analysis on awareness of refugees of their rights and obligations, social norms, and of their challenges with changed lifestyle in a new European country. Integration is a two-sided process and the role of the society is crucial for a successful integration. In countries, where there are only very small migrant communities (especially from the same country or region), like in Slovenia, migrants presumably interact more with the host society – which certainly influences their lives and life-styles – both, in positive and negative ways. In order to live fully and exercise their rights, refugees first need all relevant information. We see a need to thoroughly explain the rights and obligations and (acceptable) social norms to all refugees, which (hopefully) would help to avoid several issues and exploitations they are facing now, often due to unawareness of their rights. Conducting such research would also help us understand different lifestyles people have, social norms they accept/do not accept, understand/do not understand, and challenges they are facing during the integration process.



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