



Manifesto

Older Refugees: a vulnerable and powerful group

Invisible group

Older refugees seem to be a forgotten and invisible group. Once they have completed their asylum application process, most of them are lost out of sight.

In their daily life, they are confronted with a triple task of aging:

1. They have to deal with the loss of physical functions and the loss of relatives that ageing involves. Like everybody else, they also have to fit their past into their present life;
2. They have to find their way in a culturally unfamiliar environment that ascribes different meanings to the concept of old and in which the elderly are treated differently than they are used to;
3. They have to find a way to come to terms with the often traumatic experiences they have endured before and during the flight, and sometimes during the asylum application process as well - traumas which will often only be revealed later in life.

Not all older refugees are the same. In fact there is no group of older people which is so diverse as the group of older refugees. Apart from differences which are related to the country of origin, the level of education and the experiences during the flight, the group of older refugees can be divided into three categories:

1. Refugees who came to Europe at a relatively young age and are now ageing in their country of reception . This number will increase rapidly over the next years;
2. Refugees who had to flee at an older age and have been living in a European country for just a short period of time, or might even still be waiting for a decision from the immigration services;
3. Elderly relatives, mostly mothers and/or fathers of refugees living in Europe, who are brought over by their children who would not be able to look after them properly otherwise.

Despite the many differences, older refugees in Europe have to cope with similar life circumstances including:

1. Social isolation because of loss of work, language problems and small and scattered communities;
2. Spreading of relatives over, in some cases, all continents;
3. Relatively severe health problems because of the harsh circumstances they have lived in;
4. A poor income situation due to incomplete pension built-up;
5. The complexity of rules and procedures linked with legal residency, family reunion, etc.;
6. Feeling homesick for their own country;
7. Little social recognition.

Capacities should be recognised

This does however not imply that older refugees must be seen as pitiful people.

The participants of the European Conference The Power of Older Refugees, come to the conclusion that it is a wrong approach to regard older refugees merely as victims and people who need help. They might need support, but they are also powerful people who have a lot of life experience and knowledge they want to apply in society.

To make sure the capacities of older refugees are being recognised, and that they can take responsibility for their own life, it is important that they get the opportunity to tell their life stories, (re)discover their talents and are being heard.

This means that strong emphasis should be laid on:

1. The development and implementation of empowerment programmes that give older refugees the opportunity to express their feelings and stories in different ways and for different audiences;
2. The involvement of (older) refugees in the design of care, housing and health services and social activities provided to them.

Actions to be taken

The Conference The Power Of Older Refugees has formulated the following points of action for the next decade:

1. Refugee community organisations and organisation supporting refugees should work together to organise empowerment programmes for older refugees from various communities, with assistance of professional art teachers.
2. Refugees should get opportunities to work or prepare for work by having access to education, training as soon as they enter the country. The EU should create more flexible regulations improving access to the labour market, e.g. by drawing attention to the special skills of (older) refugees.
3. The EU should develop common European regulations for the recognition of qualifications of refugees in general and older refugees in particular.
4. Special language courses should be developed and tailored to the needs of older people from different ethnic communities.
5. Service providers should seek active collaboration with local organisations for and of refugees to develop special care, housing and participation programmes for older refugees, according to their needs.
6. Service providers should really make strong effort to make their services and structures more accessible to people from all cultural backgrounds and to develop special training programmes for their staff and facilitate the involvement of employees with different cultural backgrounds.
7. Provisions of truly accessible (non written) information should be part of this intercultural opening.
8. Refugee community organisations should be supported to organise inter-generational programmes in which older and younger refugees can learn from each other, support each other and reach out to other communities.
9. Refugees and their families should be included in the EU integration policy, amongst others by extending the scope of The Long Term Residence Directive to refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary forms of protection, and including refugees organisations in the European Integration Forum.

10. To enlarge the possibilities of older refugees to build a new life:

- The scope of the Family Reunification Act should be extended to beneficiaries of subsidiary forms of protection;
- The concept of the family unit should be extended to adult children, elderly parents and other relatives that may depend on the refugee;
- No restrictions should be imposed relating to the length of residence, employment status, access to housing or earning capacity, or on the right to family reunification of refugees.

Participants of the European Conference The Power of Older Refugees
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