



***The Experiences of Female Asylum
Seekers and Refugees in
Accessing Higher Education in the
Region Île-de-France***

***Research Report for
The Margaret Gada Slosberg
Charitable Foundation***

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The Solsberg Travel grant has provided me with the opportunity to conduct research on the experiences of female asylum seekers and refugees in accessing higher education in the region Île-de-France with the NGO, UniR—Universités et Réfugié.e.s. Over the past six months, I have worked with the UniR team to develop a research-action project, that is directly in line with my graduate thesis research. As an association that supports refugees and asylum seekers in their academic integration in France, my work with UniR allowed me to contribute to their third pillar of action: the production and dissemination of knowledge.

The research focuses on the specific experiences of female asylum seekers and refugees in accessing higher educations – particularly, the obstacles that are keeping them from entering into the higher education system or from continuing until completion. Since 2015, France has received an influx of asylum seekers as a result of current global conflicts. As one of the leading members of the European Union, France is highly regarded in terms of the development of sustainable systems for managing migration flows and upholding human and refugee rights. The French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons (OFPRA) has reported that over 250,000 asylum demands have been made during this time.¹ This places the nation in a critical position to address the rights and needs of asylum seekers and refugees that extend beyond immediate humanitarian assistance and focus on long-term integration.²

Questions about the integration and education of asylum seekers and refugees have moved to the forefront of political and social discourse.³ By leaving their country of origin, asylum seekers and refugees are systematically degraded through marginalization, lack of access to information and professional networks, and they often struggle to have their skills and qualifications recognized or valued. Educational institutions, therefore, are at a critical time of reevaluating and strengthening educational systems in order to adapt to the sharp increase in university age youth. In strengthening educational institution systems, the recognition of potential academic and cultural barriers in terms of access to higher education and the development of appropriate infrastructure can directly respond to the needs and challenges faced by female asylum seekers and refugees in the region Île-de-France.

¹ *Rapport d'Activité 2017*. Office Français De Protection Des Réfugiés Et Apatrides, 2017.

² Moskal, Marta, and Amy North. "Equity in Education for/with Refugees and Migrants—Toward a Solidarity Promoting Interculturalism." *European Education*, vol. 49, no. 2-3, 2017, pp. 109.

³ *Rapport d'Activité 2017*.

My position at UniR was fundamental in positioning me within the NGO ecosystem. As a result, the research includes excerpts from 12 research participants, who participated in qualitative interviews regarding their migratory journeys, their academic experiences, and their challenges with integration. Through looking into the lives of the research participants, the research provides an in-depth analysis beginning with an examination of the processes in which each of the women have found value in their education, which is often rooted in childhood experiences. It then moves on to a discovery of the obstacles faced with integration into their new environment. This includes challenges with administrative formalities, or consequences thereof, issues with learning the French language, notions of psychological instability, and discrimination. The final section of the research looks at the opportunities that have been presented to the research participants since arriving in France. This includes the ways in which access to higher education has opened up new pathways for the participants, whereas in their countries of origin restrictive gender roles have often limited educational opportunities. In exploring these key themes that are represented in each of the interviews, the analysis provides a holistic understanding of the experiences of the research participants from a gendered perspective.

Thanks to UniR and the Slosberg Foundation, this research succeeded in creating a space of voice and agency for the participants, as well as forming a space of mutual respect and trust between myself and the participants. In having this opportunity to work closely with UniR through the development of this thesis research, I have gained both professional and academic experiences that have guided my transition from a student to a professional researcher. Specifically, in working with such a small NGO, I have gained indispensable knowledge regarding the internal functions of a non-profit organization, as well as gaining valuable life skills through the data collection process.

My engagement with the research will continue past the completion of the thesis. In fact, I will be continuing the research with UniR in the coming months. Together, we are furthering the research-action project which will transform the research into a longitudinal study, as well as include quantitative data which will be gathered from associations and organizations working with refugees in the field. As such, this research-action project aims to mobilize the research results in a meaningful way that can be shared with other organizations, universities, researchers, the local government, and policy makers. This will include the development of materials that provide the research results in an accessible form. In this way, this experience as a whole has contributed greatly to the application of the theoretical knowledge that I have gained through the past six years of my higher education studies.