

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Open Access



A female advantage in asylum application decisions? a gendered analysis of decisions on asylum applications in Italy from 2008 to 2022

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Abstract

Women constitute over half of the global refugee population, yet they are underrepresented among asylum-seeker applicants in Europe. In this study, we analyse asylum application decisions in Italy between 2008 and 2022 using Eurostat data and a comprehensive set of indicators to assess political conditions and gender discrimination in the applicants' countries of origin. Our analysis unveils a limited 'female advantage' in asylum applications, revealing a complex relationship between gender, country of origin characteristics, and the asylum decision process. Interestingly, the observed advantage for women is contingent on the applicant's country of origin. In countries marked by war, autocracy, or severe discrimination towards women, the gender of the applicants does not significantly correlate with asylum decisions, as recognition rates are high for both men and women. Conversely, women from countries with moderate political and discrimination issues have higher chances of success than men in their asylum applications. The understanding of how gender intersects with other factors in asylum decisions is imperative for developing more equitable asylum policies and practices.

Keywords: Gender, Asylum seekers, Italy, Refugees

Introduction

As for the literature on migration studies, a gendered framework in asylum and refugee studies is relatively recent: concerns about women in forced migration only gained attention from academics and international organisations in the 1980s and a focus on women was slow to develop until the 1990s (Christou & Kofman, 2022; Indra, 1999). Women represent more than half of the 34.6 million refugees estimated worldwide at the end of 2022, and several reports by international and civil society organisations highlight how women are disproportionately affected in displacement situations (EUAA, 2023; UNHCR, 2023). However, just 29% of asylum applications were lodged by women in EU + countries in 2022 (EUAA, 2023), a persistent gap that indicates that women face higher obstacles than men to reach Europe and claim

asylum (Freedman, 2008). Due to the high cost of long-distance travel, the need to rely on smugglers, the elevated risk of physical and sexual violence throughout the journey, and disproportionately higher mortality rates among females at the borders, women find themselves constituting a minority among those seeking asylum in the Global North (Christou & Kofman, 2022; Freedman, 2016; Pickering & Cochrane, 2012). The composition of those seeking asylum also impacts the nature of protection provided by countries and the services needed. Women tend to form a significant proportion of adults classified as vulnerable, with likely implications for gendered mobilities and trajectories.

While there is a recent, predominantly qualitative, reflection on how gender shapes the experience of women refugees in the Global North (Demarchi & Lenehan, 2019; Kofman, 2019), differences by gender in asylum recognition in the European context have remained little noticed and hardly recently studied (Plümper & Neumayer, 2021). Many scholars have pointed out that international laws and conventions are based on a male model of asylum seeker and refugee, which has ignored typical grounds for women's persecution. Indeed, the available, although not recent, evidence suggests that gender-specific grounds for persecution, such as rape or other forms of sexual violence, or culturally based gender norms, are the basis of a minority of claims (Bhabha, 2004).

The impact of an applicant's gender on asylum decisions remains ambiguous, with mixed evidence overall. Some studies suggest that women are notably underrepresented among successful asylum seekers and that being a woman may contribute to the rejection of asylum claims (Keith & Holmes, 2009; Randall, 2002). Conversely, other research finds no discernible effects (Rodda, 2015). Moreover, research conducted in the early 2000s indicates that, despite their underrepresentation, female asylum seekers may have a relative advantage over males, as they are more likely to be granted asylum (Bhabha, 2004). Recent findings indicate that in Europe, women tend to be somewhat more successful than men in both their initial applications and subsequent appeals (EUAA, 2023). Plümper and Neumayer (2021), analysing data from Germany between 2012 and 2018, demonstrate significant variations in asylum recognition rates based on gender among asylum seekers from different countries of origin.

Despite some reflection on the lack of a gendered approach in procedures for asylum, for example, in terms of no common definition of gender-based persecution throughout the EU (UN Women, 2017), no extended reflection has been carried out on how gender is correlated to asylum seekers' rejection rates and a gendered analysis is usually absent from reports and commentaries.

This paper aims to fill this gap by analysing decisions on asylum applications in Italy between 2008 and 2022. Given its geographical position at the periphery of the European Union, this country has seen a surge in the number of asylum requests in the last decades (Busetta et al., 2021). The growing number of land and sea arrivals to Italy (ISMU, 2023) gave way to the spread of anti-asylum seeker sentiment that was accompanied by the harshening of migration policies and multiple changes in the legislation (Perocco & Della Puppa, 2023). While the effects of these changes regarding higher or lower overall acceptance rates are known, it is unclear if the impact has been different according to gender.

Does being a woman matter in asylum recognition?

Are women more advantaged in the process of asylum recognition compared to men? The question is highly debated, and findings are mixed depending on the ground of analysis and the context analysed. In general, while refugee legislation does not differentiate between male and female asylum seekers, specific historical and sociological factors have, in fact, advantaged men, while other gendered mechanisms related to asylum seekers' stereotyping and demographic characteristics could favour women.

Legislation

No distinct treatments or specific requirements in Italian and European refugee law can account for differences in rejection rates based on gender. However, critics have pointed out that laws related to asylum and refugees, though supposedly neutral, have historically undervalued the extent of persecution faced by women (Christou & Kofman, 2022; Freedman, 2008). The Refugee Convention was drafted at a time when there was "complete blindness to women, gender, and issues of sexual inequality" (Edwards, 2010, p. 22). Whilst women equally share belonging to social groups on which claims of oppression can be based, men are expected to face more political repression and persecution than women due to their higher political participation rate and involvement in public political opposition to regimes that violate human rights and persecutes opponents (Crawley, 2000). Indeed, asylum law typically favours male-dominated 'public' political activities over the activities of women, which mostly take place in the 'private' sphere (Coffé & Dilli, 2015; Crawley, 2000; Plümper & Neumayer, 2021; Rodda, 2015). Many instances of persecution considered to be of particular concern for women or historically viewed as belonging to the 'domestic' sphere are less clearly covered by international legal conventions (Rodda, 2015). Women are extremely more exposed than men to private forms of violence. Threats such as forced marriage, female genital mutilation, violence committed or related to women's behaviour, such as their refusal to adhere to specific dress codes, can be challenging to prove or not recognised as grounds for granting refugee status. Victims of spousal abuse and rape by authority figures often find difficulties in presenting their cases for asylum, even when they can expect no help or protection from the police or state authorities in their country of origin (Freedman, 2008). Within this framework, being a woman puts the individual at a disadvantage, possibly resulting in fewer instances of full asylum protection (Rodda, 2015).

Gendered mechanisms related to asylum seekers' stereotyping

Research has suggested that, at the same time, other gendered mechanisms related to asylum seekers' stereotyping may impact asylum recognition rates. Hyndman and Giles (2017) argue that individuals who stay in the Global South are often perceived positively as genuine, immobile, depoliticised, and feminised. In contrast, those who are on the move, particularly to reach the Global North, are often viewed in a negative light as potential liabilities and/or security threats, with young refugee men being particularly associated with this perception. Despite current legislation being based on a male idea of refugees, the gendered imagery has shifted the representation of refugees from heroic European men to depoliticised mothers and children from the Global South who are

depicted as victims of generalised violence and poverty (Christou & Kofman, 2022; Kofman, 2019). This imaginary might actively bias decision rates in favour of women. In this regard, a general preference for women emerged from recent experimental survey research. Bansak et al. (2016) conducted a conjoint experiment using vignettes of hypothetical asylum-seeker cases to assess European citizens' attitudes. Whilst not the main focus of their analysis, the results of Bansak et al. (2016) demonstrate that survey participants show a preference for female to male asylum-seekers that, if shared by members of asylum commissions, might bias their decisions. In addition, gendered stereotypes in asylum advocacy generate a widespread perception of female applicants as more 'vulnerable and dependent' and 'less adventurous'. They are perceived as more credible or are more likely to be given the benefit of the doubt. While many scholars have pointed out how the focus on women's vulnerability and their cultural stereotyping as pure victims without any agency is highly problematic and disempowering, often pushing them to perform vulnerability to be prioritised for the allocation of resources (Bhabha, 2004; Christou & Kofman, 2022; Zetter, 1991), this might still explain a gender gap in favour of women especially if they migrate with children and are underrepresented among asylum seekers from their country of origin.

The role of demographic characteristics and gender composition of the population seeking asylum

Some demographic characteristics more commonly found among women may affect asylum application success. Research has shown that being married or having children can increase the likelihood of being granted asylum. For example, Holzer et al. (2000) analysed approximately 180,000 asylum decisions in Switzerland and found that being married had a positive impact on recognition chances, with a more significant effect on men than on women. Similarly, Mascini and Van Bochove (2009) found that in the Netherlands, men had a lower success rate due to two demographic factors: they were less likely to be married or accompanied by children and less likely to follow their spouse for family reunification.

It has also been observed that the small proportion of women seeking asylum (minority status) may be a factor that works in their favour. Ecker et al. (2020) studied approximately 41,000 asylum cases in Austria; their research shows that female applicants have a higher chance of success when controlling for the regions of origin. They also found that the gender gap is even wider if the person deciding the case is male and has a large number of cases to attend to.

In her reflection, which was carried out about 20 years ago, Bhabha (2004) suggested that a relative advantage for women could be due to selection and stereotyping. Bhabha pointed out that women are selected in terms of fewer applicants, disproportionate origin from countries with high recognition rates, and greater severity of their claims. Selection may imply that only women with the strongest cases overcome the additional hurdles that women asylum seekers face in accessing asylum systems.

The concept of vulnerability also plays a crucial role in understanding gender-based differences in mobility experiences in Europe. While there are categories of vulnerable individuals that can apply to both men and women, such as people with disabilities, the elderly, and those with serious illnesses, women are more likely to be classified as

Table 1 Asylum application by gender in Italy of the applicant

| Time | Total | Males | Females | Number of males over 100 females |
|-------|---------|---------|---------|----------------------------------|
| 2008 | 30,140 | 25,740 | 4400 | 585 |
| 2009 | 17,725 | 13,225 | 4505 | 294 |
| 2010 | 10,000 | 7460 | 2540 | 294 |
| 2011 | 40,315 | 35,370 | 4945 | 715 |
| 2012 | 17,335 | 14,895 | 2440 | 610 |
| 2013 | 26,620 | 22,965 | 3655 | 628 |
| 2014 | 64,625 | 59,695 | 4930 | 1211 |
| 2015 | 83,540 | 73,880 | 9660 | 765 |
| 2016 | 122,960 | 104,505 | 18,455 | 566 |
| 2017 | 128,850 | 108,215 | 20,635 | 524 |
| 2018 | 59,950 | 45,675 | 14,270 | 320 |
| 2019 | 43,770 | 32,080 | 11,690 | 274 |
| 2020 | 26,940 | 21,215 | 5725 | 371 |
| 2021 | 53,610 | 44,165 | 9445 | 468 |
| 2022 | 84,290 | 67,960 | 16,330 | 416 |
| Total | 810,670 | 677,045 | 133,625 | 507 |

Years 2008–2022. Source: Authors elaborations on Eurostat data migr_asyappctza last updated 27-10-23

vulnerable compared to men due to factors such as pregnancy and single parenthood (Christou & Kofman, 2022).

Italy as a country of asylum

Because of its geographical position and ties with countries situated along the main migration routes towards Europe, Italy received an unprecedented number of 447,600 asylum applications between 2014 and 2018 (Ortensi & Kingston, 2022), and the number of applications has risen again starting from 2021 after the COVID19 pandemic and the onset of the war in Ukraine¹ (Eurostat, 2023).

Despite being considered a relatively ‘new country of asylum’, Italy has received a high number of asylum applications in recent decades. Around 810,000 applicants claimed asylum in Italy between 2008 and 2022, 16.5% of whom were women (Eurostat, 2023: Table 1).

The highest number of female asylum seekers between 2008 and 2022 has been observed among Nigerians (37.3 thousand), Ukrainians (12.3 thousand) and Georgia (6.8 thousand). Among groups with at least 100 applicants, the lowest sex ratios are observed among those from Kyrgyzstan (23 male applicants for every 100 female applicants), Georgia (27) and the Philippines (62).²

¹ However, the effects of the latter are only partially accounted for by this study. In fact, most Ukrainians were granted temporary protection, a type of permit that does not imply an actual decision, but only grants status based on nationality. Moreover, Eurostat (2023) enumerates the permits issued for temporary protection in a different database. Temporary protection is, therefore, not analysed in this study as it does not imply legal reasoning on the inclusion requirements of international protection.

² Authors elaborations on Eurostat data migr_asyappctza last updated 27-10-23.

The Italian legislation on asylum

For a long time, Italy had limited regulation regarding the recognition of refugee status, initially through the constitutional provision (Article 10, which remained inactive for decades) and then following the ratification of the Geneva Convention in 1954. While specific references to women as subjects of the right of asylum compared to men may be absent in these norms, Italy has demonstrated a proactive stance in combating gender discrimination and violence against women in all its manifestations. This commitment is also evident in the application of laws regarding international protection. Italy ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1985. This convention, promoted by the United Nations in 1979, does not explicitly address gender-based violence. However, the CEDAW Committee has broadened the convention's scope through general recommendations. Especially following the introduction of the Optional Protocol in 2000, which established monitoring and reporting mechanisms, efforts to address gender-based violence have been strengthened (Di Pascale, 2024).

Asylum law in Italy was mainly regulated by an administrative national procedure until the 2000s. However, this procedure was rarely applied due to the limited number of cases.³ Between 2007 and 2008, national regulations on the subject were overridden by the mandatory transposition of European regulations. Specifically, Directive 2004/83/EC concerning the qualification of refugees and subsidiary protection, and Directive 2005/85/EC regarding procedures for the recognition and revocation of refugee status were incorporated into Italian law.⁴ With the introduction of these two directives into the Italian legal system, the regulatory framework for asylum law changed radically. The term 'asylum' itself was redefined as the status of refugees and holders of subsidiary protection were united under the common umbrella of 'international protection.'

Subsequently, three primary directives were introduced and incorporated into Italian law: Directive 2011/95/EU on qualification, Directive 2013/33/EU on reception conditions, and Directive 2013/32/EU on asylum procedures. The main objective of these regulations was the European harmonisation of treatment standards. For our purposes, it is essential to emphasise that the law considers so-called "vulnerable" individuals, previously more broadly defined as "individuals with special needs". This category includes minors and unaccompanied minors, disabled individuals, the elderly, pregnant women, single parents with dependent minor children, individuals suffering from serious illnesses or mental disorders, and individuals who have experienced torture, rape, or other severe forms of psychological, physical, or sexual violence, such as victims of female genital mutilation or human trafficking for labour or sexual exploitation. In particular, the latter circumstance, falling within the scope of persecution and gender-based violence, can be the basis for a request for international protection. In the meantime, the gender dimension gained significant importance at the global level.

In 2011, the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, commonly known as the 'Istanbul Convention,' was signed. This convention mandates parties to develop laws, policies, and support

³ Readers can find further information on the Italian legislation in a historical perspective in Petrović (2020).

⁴ Readers can find further information in Hailbronner and Thym (2016).

services aimed at ending violence against women and domestic violence. Italy ratified the Convention in 2013, while the European Union ratified it only in June 2023. In Italy, stakeholders made significant efforts to combat human trafficking for sexual exploitation, particularly affecting women and girls from sub-Saharan Africa, primarily Nigeria and Cote d'Ivoire (Coppola et al., 2020; Malakooti, 2020). Efforts have also been directed towards understanding the legal rationale for granting refugee status to victims of trafficking.⁵ The Italian Ministry of the Interior and UNHCR Italy's Guidelines for Territorial Commissions (first published in 2016 and updated in 2020) play crucial roles in facilitating effective identification and protection measures. In many instances, women are granted asylum, with a subsidiary or complementary protection provided, depending on the specific circumstances.

Another crucial aspect to consider in analysing the Italian legislative context is the presence of a complementary form of protection known as 'humanitarian protection', later renamed 'special protection', which has significantly influenced acceptance rates (Travaglino, 2022). This form of protection constitutes a residual provision under Italian law for individuals who do not qualify for refugee status or subsidiary protection but cannot be returned to their country of origin due to objective and/or complex personal circumstances. Over the years, several legislative changes have occurred regarding this form of protection. From 1998 to 2018, humanitarian protection was in force, providing a broad scope of protection for vulnerable individuals with "serious humanitarian reasons" warranting acceptance. In 2018, with the enactment of the 'security' decree, humanitarian protection was repealed in Italy. It was replaced by shorter-term specific permits addressing particular situations such as medical treatment, instances of labour exploitation, or cases of domestic violence. Additionally, a form of 'special protection' was introduced, aligning with the principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits the repatriation of individuals facing the risk of inhuman or degrading treatment in their country of origin. Subsequently, in 2020, amendments were made to the special protection permit, expanding its scope. This included considering migrants' integration, encompassing aspects such as housing, employment, and family ties in Italy.

In 2023, further changes were implemented, limiting again the scope of the national special protection. Integration requirements on the territory were excluded, with only the principle of non-refoulement retained as a basis for granting protection (see Table 2).

In recent years, the legislature has given great attention to national protection amidst numerous and rapid legislative changes. On the one hand, some policymakers aimed to restrict the scope of national protection; on the other hand, there's a need to uphold subjective and specific humanitarian considerations within the legal framework, particularly focusing on integrating asylum seekers into the territory. In this context, women undeniably represent a group with distinct needs and vulnerabilities. It can indeed be said that women have increasingly received special attention from both national and international legislators as bearers of specific vulnerabilities and needs. Despite legislative restrictions

⁵ UN Refugee Agency Guidelines n. 1 suggest that women fearing persecution or discrimination due to gender may be considered members of a specific social group for status determination (UNHCR, 2002). For this reason, it is crucial to identify female trafficking victims among international protection applicants. In these cases, persecution fears may arise from retaliation for cooperating with authorities or discrimination upon repatriation, especially for a woman with a history of sexual exploitation and the risk of re-trafficking.

Table 2 Main legislative changes on asylum and gender-based violence in Italy 1948–2023

| | |
|-----------|--|
| 1954 | Ratification of the Geneva Convention on Refugees |
| 1985 | Ratification of Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women |
| 1998 | Introduction of 'humanitarian national protection' as a complementary protection providing broad protection for vulnerable individuals with serious humanitarian reasons for acceptance |
| 2002 | UN Refugee Agency Guidelines n. 1 Gender-Related Persecution |
| 2004 | Introduction of the EU 'subsidiary protection' to protect people from serious harm |
| 2007—2008 | Transposition in the Italian legal system of the European Directives on qualifications and procedures |
| 2011—2013 | European harmonisation of treatment standards on qualifications, reception and procedures, with particular attention to vulnerabilities |
| 2013 | Ratification of the Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence |
| 2016 | UNHCR Italy's Guidelines for Territorial Commissions on identification and protection of vulnerable people |
| 2018 | Abrogation of the 'humanitarian protection' as an open residual catalogue replaced by shorter-term specific permits and the introduction of 'special protection' aligned with the principle of non-refoulement |
| 2020 | Enhancement of 'special national protection' through the requirements of integration in the territory and family ties |
| 2023 | Further revision limiting the scope of special national protection, excluding integration requirements and maintaining only the principle of non-refoulement |
| 1948 | Rights of asylum in the Italian constitution |

For more details, Petrović (2020)

in 2018 and 2023, Italian asylum legislation has made concerted efforts to address the gender dimension. By ratifying relevant conventions and adhering to UNHCR guidelines while adopting best practices for identifying individuals in need, Italy has demonstrated a commitment to addressing gender-specific concerns within the asylum process. It is a plausible hypothesis that these conditions have contributed to the increasing recognition rate of international and national protection over the years.

Research hypotheses

Based on the literature discussed, we propose the following research hypotheses:

RH1. Women are less represented among asylum-seeker applicants in Italy but have higher success rates compared to men.

RH2. Women are more likely to be more successful in their application if they are less represented among applicants from their countries of origin (minority status).

RH3. Women do not have an advantage over men if they come from countries where women face higher levels of discrimination.

RH4. Women are more advantaged than men even in the light of recent restrictions in asylum legislation implemented in the Italian legislation.

Data and methods

Since 2008, the gender data gap on asylum applications and decisions in Europe has been filled, allowing for gendered analysis. We used Eurostat data (2023) on first-instance decisions by age, sex, citizenship and year of the decision [migr_asydcfsta] to recreate a database at the micro-level. The frequency of each combination of decision, age class, gender, year, and citizenship indicates individuals sharing these same characteristics.

By weighting each combination for the number of occurrences,⁶ we could re-create the database of all first-instance decisions on asylum seeker applications from non-EU or EFTA citizens in Italy for 2008–2022. The final dataset includes information on 719,090 decisions.

As we focus on the application success rather than the type of permits eventually recognised to each successful applicant, we consider the *decision* a dependent variable with a binary outcome (1 = application accepted; 0 = rejected).

The applicants' characteristics, as provided by Eurostat, are:

- *Gender* (male, female)
- *Age* (0–13, 14–17, 18–34, 35–64, 65 +)
- *Year of the application* (2008–2022).

To acknowledge the gender compositional effect within each applicant's country of origin, we consider the *percentage of decisions on women's applications at the country level by year*.

To test our hypotheses and assess if gender discrimination in the applicant's country of origin is significantly associated with the application's outcome, we added a set of indicators related to the country of origin to the database. Each indicator is included in the models by country and year of the decision. To ensure comparability, we retrieved each indicator from the site Our World in Data (<https://ourworldindata.org/>).

Gender-related indicators included in our analysis are:

- Gender Inequality Index (GII) (continuous)

The Gender Inequality Index (GII), calculated annually by the UNDP, reflects the disparity between female and male achievements in reproductive health, empowerment, and the labour market. The index is calculated using data on the maternal mortality ratio, the adolescent birth rate, the population share with at least some secondary education, and the labour force participation rate (UNDP, 2022). The GII varies between 0 (when women and men fare equally) and 1 (when men or women fare poorly compared to the other in all dimensions).

While a high Gender Inequality Index (GII) might suggest a scenario of female advantage in theory, empirical evidence indicates that no country has achieved full gender parity, with women consistently facing disadvantages compared to men (World Economic Forum, 2019). As such, the GII is commonly interpreted as an indicator of female disadvantage (UNDP, 2019).

- LGBT+ rights index (continuous)

The LGBT+ rights index is retrieved from the work of Velasco (2020). The index assesses the extent to which lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender and other non-traditional sexual and gender categories are recognised the same rights as heterosexual and cisgender individuals. It combines 18 individual policies, such as the legality of

⁶ The frequency of each combination is rounded at the 5th unit.

same-sex sexual acts, marriage, and gender marker changes. Higher values indicate more rights, and negative values regressive policies.

Finally, to address other political characteristics of the country, we build on the work of the V-Dem Institute of the University of Gothenburg (V-Dem) (Coppedge et al., 2023). We control for:

- Political regimes (closed autocracies, electoral autocracies, electoral democracies, liberal democracies)

The classification of political regimes is based on the criteria by Lührmann et al. (2018) and the assessment by experts of the V-Dem.

- Electoral democracy index (continuous)

This index measures electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian characterisations of democracy. The index relies on evaluations by around 3500 country experts and supplementary work by its V-Dem researchers to assess political institutions and the protection of rights. It captures the extent of voting rights in free and fair elections, and freedoms of association and expression are guaranteed. It ranges from 0 (least democratic) to 1 (most democratic).

- Number of deaths in armed conflicts (continuous)

The count includes deaths of combatants and civilians due to fighting in armed conflicts that were ongoing every year. The data sources is the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (2023). Data were retrieved and processed by Our World in Data.

Table 3 shows the main outcomes for countries of origin of asylum applicants in Italy between 2008 and 2022.

To test our research hypotheses, we developed the following analytic strategy. First, we fit a set of logistic regression models by country (for countries with at least 700 applications in 2008–2022) to understand if, conditional on the age of the applicant and the year of the application, being a woman is associated with application success (RH1).

As a second step, we run a full model (RH1) accounting for the characteristics of the country of origin and the proportion of women (RH2), the level of gender discrimination (RH3), the type of regime and LGBT + discrimination.

As a third step, we will focus on the association between gender and the year of the decision to account for the multiple legislative changes related to the so-called security decrees (RH4). We will fit a model that includes an interaction between gender and the year of the decision. All models fit on the entire sample allow standard errors intragroup (citizenship of birth) correlation, relaxing the requirement that the observations be independent.

The strategy of analysis is detailed in Table 4. Results for models 1.c will be presented in terms of odds ratios. In contrast, results for models 2 to 5 will be presented in terms of predicted probabilities (calculated by leaving all other variables at their means) (Mood, 2010). The coefficients for models 2–5 are reported in the Supplementary materials.

Table 3 Main outcomes by countries of origin of asylum applicants in Italy between 2008 and 2022

| Country | Number of applications 2008–2022 | % Women | % Positive decisions | Average electoral democracy index | Average annual GII | Average annual number of deaths in armed conflicts | LGBT+ rights index | Most restrictive political regime in the period observed |
|------------------------|----------------------------------|---------|----------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------|--|--------------------|--|
| Afghanistan | 30,570 | 10.2 | 92% | 0.303 | 0.701 | 16,160 | – 2.291 | Closed autocracy |
| Albania | 5350 | 32.4 | 31% | 0.496 | 0.166 | 0 | 5.935 | Electoral autocracy |
| Algeria | 1890 | 9.8 | 18% | 0.312 | 0.472 | 202 | – 1.913 | Electoral autocracy |
| Angola | 25 | 20.0 | 40% | 0.304 | 0.540 | 14 | 1.397 | Closed autocracy |
| Argentina | 40 | 50.0 | 13% | 0.691 | 0.315 | 0 | 6.456 | Electoral autocracy |
| Armenia | 775 | 39.4 | 59% | 0.534 | 0.273 | 22 | 2.340 | Electoral autocracy |
| Azerbaijan | 190 | 39.5 | 66% | 0.196 | 0.312 | 1823 | 2.072 | Electoral autocracy |
| Bahrain | 5 | 0.0 | 100% | 0.164 | 0.241 | 0 | 0.072 | Closed autocracy |
| Bangladesh | 54,880 | 0.8 | 23% | 0.277 | 0.544 | 15 | – 0.631 | Electoral autocracy |
| Belarus | 210 | 66.7 | 62% | 0.202 | 0.106 | 0 | 0.035 | Electoral autocracy |
| Benin | 1165 | 3.9 | 33% | 0.628 | 0.616 | 2 | 0.072 | Closed autocracy |
| Bolivia | 30 | 33.3 | 17% | 0.585 | 0.446 | 0 | 6.536 | Closed autocracy |
| Bosnia and Herzegovina | 2730 | 48.4 | 38% | 0.568 | 0.180 | 0 | 4.387 | Electoral democracy |
| Brazil | 1140 | 36.4 | 50% | 0.707 | 0.400 | 1781 | 8.570 | Electoral democracy |
| Burkina Faso | 5790 | 2.6 | 40% | 0.589 | 0.610 | 332 | 1.072 | Closed autocracy |
| Burundi | 5 | 100.0 | 100% | 0.180 | 0.505 | 76 | – 1.376 | Electoral democracy |
| Cameroon | 6095 | 30.2 | 47% | 0.299 | 0.685 | 681 | – 1.386 | Electoral autocracy |
| Central African Rep | 130 | 11.5 | 85% | 0.343 | 0.579 | 1165 | 2.072 | Electoral autocracy |
| Chad | 1185 | 5.9 | 66% | 0.274 | 0.701 | 106 | 0.072 | Closed autocracy |
| Chile | 45 | 44.4 | 44% | 0.828 | 0.198 | 0 | 3.953 | Electoral democracy |
| China | 2800 | 55.2 | 14% | 0.078 | 0.209 | 11 | 1.950 | Closed autocracy |
| Colombia | 3075 | 43.3 | 50% | 0.656 | 0.428 | 138 | 9.614 | Electoral democracy |
| Comoros | 30 | 16.7 | 0% | 0.327 | 0.497 | 0 | – 0.431 | Electoral autocracy |
| Congo | 755 | 35.8 | 70% | 0.250 | 0.592 | 8 | 0.072 | Electoral autocracy |
| Congo, Dem Rep. | 1150 | 45.2 | 74% | 0.337 | 0.631 | 2681 | 1.072 | Electoral autocracy |
| Costa Rica | 10 | 50.0 | 50% | 0.897 | 0.272 | 0 | 3.072 | Liberal democracy |
| Côte d'Ivoire | 29,620 | 12.1 | 35% | 0.512 | 0.637 | 70 | 0.072 | Electoral autocracy |

Table 3 (continued)

| Country | Number of applications 2008–2022 | % Women | % Positive decisions | Average electoral democracy index | Average annual GII | Average annual number of deaths in armed conflicts | LGBT+ rights index | Most restrictive political regime in the period observed |
|----------------|----------------------------------|---------|----------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------|--|--------------------|--|
| Cuba | 950 | 40.5 | 38% | 0.172 | 0.311 | 0 | 2.718 | Closed autocracy |
| Dominican Rep. | 115 | 65.2 | 26% | 0.591 | 0.442 | 0 | 1.072 | Electoral democracy |
| Ecuador | 140 | 42.9 | 36% | 0.613 | 0.375 | 83 | 8.575 | Electoral democracy |
| Egypt | 10,405 | 7.4 | 30% | 0.178 | 0.478 | 347 | 0.449 | Closed autocracy |
| El Salvador | 9200 | 51.2 | 65% | 0.567 | 0.372 | 10 | 3.053 | Electoral autocracy |
| Equat. Guinea | 25 | 0.0 | 40% | 0.179 | 0.583 | 0 | 2.072 | Electoral autocracy |
| Eritrea | 10,440 | 24.1 | 85% | 0.068 | 0.607 | 10 | − 0.390 | Closed autocracy |
| Eswatini | 5 | 100.0 | 100% | 0.131 | 0.559 | 0 | 0.564 | Closed autocracy |
| Ethiopia | 2285 | 35.0 | 76% | 0.246 | 0.562 | 3859 | − 0.390 | Electoral autocracy |
| Gabon | 75 | 6.7 | 33% | 0.379 | 0.556 | 0 | 0.072 | Electoral autocracy |
| Gambia | 44,490 | 1.4 | 32% | 0.383 | 0.618 | 0 | − 0.518 | Electoral autocracy |
| Georgia | 5535 | 79.7 | 33% | 0.640 | 0.296 | 3 | 3.918 | Electoral autocracy |
| Ghana | 28,770 | 4.9 | 33% | 0.738 | 0.551 | 2 | − 0.240 | Electoral democracy |
| Guatemala | 75 | 40.0 | 67% | 0.505 | 0.484 | 1 | 2.072 | Electoral autocracy |
| Guinea | 19,470 | 2.6 | 30% | 0.345 | 0.619 | 5 | − 0.412 | Closed autocracy |
| Guinea-Bissau | 3810 | 0.5 | 29% | 0.490 | 0.632 | 0 | 2.072 | Closed autocracy |
| Haiti | 60 | 83.3 | 100% | 0.439 | 0.625 | 0 | 2.072 | Electoral autocracy |
| Honduras | 985 | 55.8 | 64% | 0.400 | 0.440 | 13 | 3.041 | Electoral autocracy |
| India | 3835 | 12.6 | 14% | 0.474 | 0.505 | 790 | 1.659 | Electoral autocracy |
| Iran | 3210 | 26.8 | 76% | 0.194 | 0.494 | 103 | − 2.271 | Electoral autocracy |
| Iraq | 10,525 | 12.6 | 85% | 0.391 | 0.566 | 5504 | 0.072 | Electoral autocracy |
| Jordan | 60 | 25.0 | 33% | 0.259 | 0.462 | 0 | 2.072 | Electoral autocracy |
| Kazakhstan | 55 | 63.6 | 36% | 0.243 | 0.168 | 0 | 2.072 | Electoral autocracy |
| Kenya | 390 | 62.8 | 44% | 0.444 | 0.562 | 212 | − 0.133 | Electoral autocracy |
| Kosovo | 2830 | 22.1 | 34% | 0.563 | 0.269 | 0 | 4.786 | Electoral autocracy |
| Kuwait | 10 | 0.0 | 50% | 0.325 | 0.221 | 0 | − 1.260 | Electoral autocracy |
| Kyrgyz Rep | 420 | 81.0 | 25% | 0.429 | 0.380 | 11 | 1.971 | Electoral autocracy |
| Lebanon | 740 | 20.9 | 59% | 0.469 | 0.447 | 85 | − 2.337 | Electoral autocracy |

Table 3 (continued)

| Country | Number of applications 2008–2022 | % Women | % Positive decisions | Average electoral democracy index | Average annual GII | Average annual number of deaths in armed conflicts | LGBT+ rights index | Most restrictive political regime in the period observed |
|-----------------|----------------------------------|---------|----------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------|--|--------------------|--|
| Liberia | 1810 | 11.0 | 38% | 0.639 | 0.655 | 0 | − 0.336 | Electoral democracy |
| Libya | 2475 | 22.4 | 80% | 0.280 | 0.262 | 1209 | − 1.392 | Closed autocracy |
| Madagascar | 15 | 66.7 | 0% | 0.407 | 0.571 | 0 | 0.072 | Closed autocracy |
| Malaysia | 5 | 100.0 | 0% | 0.472 | 0.225 | 0 | − 2.460 | Electoral autocracy |
| Mali | 43,920 | 1.3 | 44% | 0.505 | 0.663 | 685 | 2.072 | Closed autocracy |
| Mauritania | 800 | 5.6 | 53% | 0.754 | 0.642 | 0 | − 1.617 | Closed autocracy |
| Mauritius | 35 | 57.1 | 43% | 0.631 | 0.358 | 0 | 0.715 | Electoral democracy |
| Mexico | 40 | 37.5 | 13% | 0.667 | 0.314 | 14,465 | 6.134 | Electoral democracy |
| Moldova | 510 | 56.9 | 43% | 0.635 | 0.230 | 0 | 2.852 | Electoral autocracy |
| Mongolia | 5 | 0.0 | 0% | 0.501 | 0.421 | 0 | 2.072 | Electoral autocracy |
| Montenegro | 330 | 54.5 | 23% | 0.263 | 0.184 | 0 | 3.525 | Closed autocracy |
| Morocco | 10,130 | 16.3 | 21% | 0.347 | 0.442 | 0 | − 1.360 | Closed autocracy |
| Myanmar | 70 | 21.4 | 71% | 0.675 | 0.516 | 712 | − 0.439 | Electoral democracy |
| Namibia | 5 | 0.0 | 100% | 0.638 | 0.456 | 0 | 0.582 | Electoral democracy |
| Nepal | 480 | 8.3 | 27% | 0.253 | 0.467 | 0 | 4.725 | Electoral autocracy |
| Nicaragua | 150 | 50.0 | 53% | 0.547 | 0.431 | 0 | 3.105 | Electoral autocracy |
| Niger | 2460 | 4.1 | 49% | 0.524 | 0.653 | 211 | − 0.928 | Closed autocracy |
| Nigeria | 131,325 | 28.7 | 28% | 0.526 | 0.675 | 3630 | − 3.395 | Electoral autocracy |
| North Macedonia | 430 | 41.9 | 36% | 0.429 | 0.153 | 0 | 2.072 | Electoral autocracy |
| Pakistan | 84,045 | 2.0 | 32% | 0.130 | 0.544 | 1344 | − 0.321 | Electoral autocracy |
| Palestine | 1755 | 19.9 | 71% | 0.603 | 0.113 | 17 | 6.834 | Closed autocracy |
| Paraguay | 30 | 50.0 | 17% | 0.794 | 0.446 | 0 | − 1.903 | Electoral democracy |
| Peru | 4450 | 46.4 | 27% | 0.440 | 0.395 | 2 | 6.875 | Electoral democracy |
| Philippines | 525 | 64.8 | 23% | 0.262 | 0.422 | 493 | 3.053 | Electoral democracy |
| Russia | 1000 | 57.0 | 52% | 0.232 | 0.224 | 99 | 3.115 | Electoral autocracy |
| Rwanda | 5 | 0.0 | 100% | 0.016 | 0.388 | 7 | − 0.928 | Electoral autocracy |
| Saudi Arabia | 25 | 20.0 | 80% | 0.721 | 0.274 | 43 | − 3.490 | Closed autocracy |
| Senegal | 38,085 | 2.8 | 25% | 0.402 | 0.534 | 0 | − 0.458 | Electoral democracy |

Table 3 (continued)

| Country | Number of applications 2008–2022 | % Women | % Positive decisions | Average electoral democracy index | Average annual GII | Average annual number of deaths in armed conflicts | LGBT+ rights index | Most restrictive political regime in the period observed |
|--------------|----------------------------------|---------|----------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------|--|--------------------|--|
| Serbia | 2260 | 44.5 | 44% | 0.522 | 0.168 | 0 | 4.842 | Electoral autocracy |
| Sierra Leone | 2790 | 13.1 | 33% | 0.172 | 0.641 | 0 | − 0.394 | Electoral democracy |
| Somalia | 21,305 | 20.0 | 95% | 0.181 | 0.601 | 1973 | − 0.357 | Closed autocracy |
| South Sudan | 45 | 22.2 | 89% | 0.578 | 0.593 | 795 | − 0.431 | Closed autocracy |
| Sri Lanka | 2430 | 21.8 | 35% | 0.221 | 0.390 | 1275 | − 0.390 | Electoral autocracy |
| Sudan | 3575 | 8.7 | 70% | 0.142 | 0.583 | 1166 | − 2.431 | Closed autocracy |
| Syria | 5910 | 36.2 | 80% | 0.434 | 0.474 | 44,082 | − 1.338 | Closed autocracy |
| Tanzania | 35 | 14.3 | 14% | 0.447 | 0.565 | 5 | − 1.516 | Electoral autocracy |
| Togo | 3965 | 7.8 | 38% | 0.572 | 0.599 | 1 | − 0.273 | Electoral autocracy |
| Tunisia | 13,715 | 9.9 | 14% | 0.391 | 0.275 | 8 | − 1.280 | Electoral autocracy |
| Turkey | 7115 | 9.6 | 57% | 0.317 | 0.349 | 638 | 1.072 | Electoral autocracy |
| Uganda | 105 | 61.9 | 57% | 0.472 | 0.545 | 28 | − 2.487 | Electoral autocracy |
| Ukraine | 17,460 | 58.0 | 51% | 0.879 | 0.241 | 8336 | 2.047 | Electoral autocracy |
| Uruguay | 20 | 25.0 | 0% | 0.214 | 0.239 | 0 | 10.881 | Liberal democracy |
| Uzbekistan | 20 | 50.0 | 50% | 0.214 | 0.261 | 0 | − 1.250 | Closed autocracy |
| Venezuela | 4600 | 57.2 | 92% | 0.152 | 0.491 | 40 | 2.072 | Electoral autocracy |
| Vietnam | 5 | 0.0 | 0% | 0.297 | 0.315 | 0 | 2.072 | Closed autocracy |
| Yemen | 165 | 21.2 | 97% | 0.293 | 0.807 | 4166 | − 2.588 | Closed autocracy |
| Zimbabwe | 55 | 63.6 | 18% | 0.400 | 0.586 | 115 | − 1.532 | Closed autocracy |
| Total | 719,090 | 15.3 | 39.9 | 0.400 | 0.562 | 2321 | − 0.452 | |

Results

We first show results for the set of country-level logistic models controlling for the year and the age structure of the population (Tab. 4). Separate models for countries with at least 700 applications and at least 10 applications by year, show that for most countries women are significantly most likely to being recognised a form of protection compared to men. Only for Afghanistan, men are significantly more likely than women to have a positive decision to their application. At the same time, for Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, China, Colombia, Eritrea, Liberia, Libya, Moldova, Niger, Palestine, Iran, Iraq, Russia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Venezuela, significant differences are not observed between man and women.

Table 4 Strategy of analysis

| Model | Hp tested | Level of analysis | Dependent variable | Independent variables | Control variables | Presentation of results |
|---|-------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------|---|---|--|
| Models 1.c (1 model for each country c) | Hp1 | Country level and all countries | Asylum application outcome | Gender | Age, year of the decision | Coefficients (Table 5) |
| Model 2 | Hp1 Hp2 Hp3 | All countries | Asylum application outcome | Gender, Gil, percentage of women at the country level, LGBT+ rights index, political regime (each variable has an interaction with gender) | Age, year of the decision | Coefficients (Table A1 Supplementary materials) Predicted probabilities (Figs. 1, 2, 3) |
| Model 3 (robustness check) | Hp1 Hp2 Hp3 | All countries | Asylum application outcome | Gender, Gil, percentage of women at the country level, LGBT+ rights index, electoral democracy index (each variable has an interaction with gender) | Age, year of the decision | Coefficients (Table A2 Supplementary materials) Predicted probabilities (Fig. 2) |
| Model 4 (robustness check) | Hp1 Hp2 Hp3 | All countries | Asylum application outcome | Gender, Gil, percentage of women at the country level, LGBT+ rights index, number of deaths in armed conflicts (each variable has an interaction with gender) | Age, year of the decision | Coefficients (Table A3 Supplementary materials) Predicted probabilities (Figure A1 Supplementary materials) |
| Model 5 | Hp4 | All countries | Asylum application outcome | Gender, year of the decision and their interaction | Age, Gil, percentage of women at the country level, LGBT+ Policy Index, political regime (each variable has an interaction with gender) | Coefficients (Table A4 Supplementary materials) Predicted probabilities (Fig. 3) |

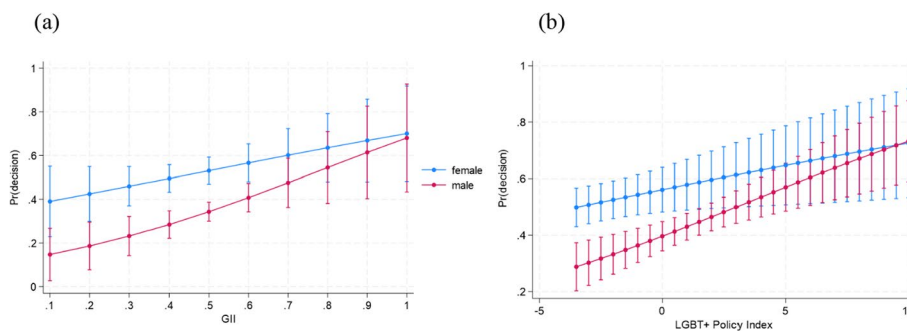


Fig. 1 Predicted probabilities of being recognised a form of protection by gender and Gender Inequality Index (a) and LGBT+ Right Index (b). Note: See Table 4 for details on variables included in Model 2

In general, no advantage for women is observed for applications from countries with ongoing conflicts or crises or countries where the proportion of women among the applicants is higher than the average. Therefore, if the model on all observations (last row of the right side of Table 5) shows a positive relationship (RH1) between being a woman and a positive asylum decision at the country of origin level, the female advantage is not observed for some countries.

To better assess results from Table 5, we aim to determine if the relative advantage of women holds once we control for variables related to gender discrimination and other country characteristics.

Model 2, adding to the applicants’ characteristics information on the country of origin, shows that the odds ratio for women compared to men is no longer significant (OR = 4.292; $p = 0.076$).⁷

Hence, the predicted probabilities for the model including the interaction of gender and, respectively, the gender inequality index, the LGBT+ rights index, the electoral democracy index and the proportion of women by citizenship and years, suggest that women per se do not have a systematic advantage over men (RH1).

When considering the level of gender discrimination in the country of origin as measured by the GII index (Fig. 1a), we see that women and men have a similar (low) probability of being recognised protection if they come from countries with a GII below 0.2 (low gender discrimination). Similarly, both men and women have a high probability of their application being recognised if they originate from countries with a GII above 0.6 (very high gender discrimination). However, women do have an advantage if they come from countries with medium–high gender discrimination. A similar pattern is observed if we consider LGBT+ rights index (Fig. 1b): women have an advantage only when they originate from countries with a high or intermediate level of discrimination (LGBT+ rights index < 1.5). RH3 is, therefore, only partially confirmed.

When focusing on the political regime of the country of origin, it emerges that men have a lower predicted probability of being accepted as asylum seekers compared to women only if they originate from electoral democracies (Fig. 2a).

⁷ The full model is shown in the Supplementary materials.

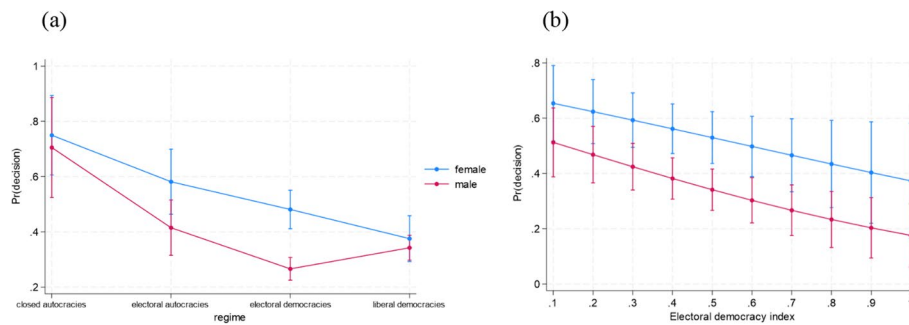


Fig. 2 Predicted probabilities of being recognised a form of protection by gender and political regime (Model 2) (a) and electoral democracy index (Model 3) (b). Note: See Table 4 for details on variables included in Models 2 and 3

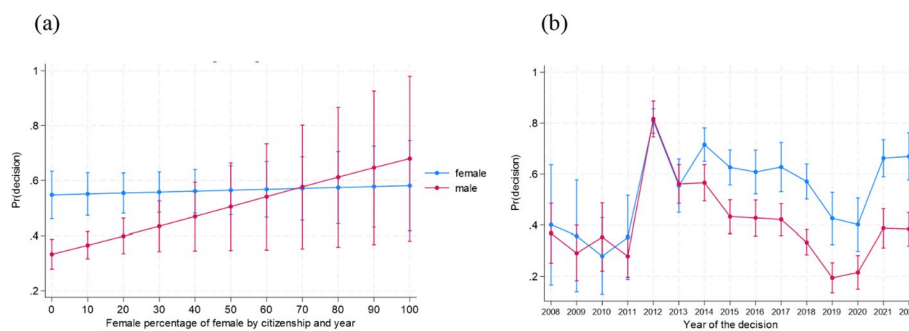


Fig. 3 Predicted probabilities of being recognised a form of protection by gender and percentage of female applicants at the country level (Model 2) (a) and year of the decision (Model 5) (b). Note: See Table 4 for details on variables included in Models 2 and 5

As a robustness check (Model 3, Fig. 2b), we assess the same dimension using the electoral democracy index. We observe that, similarly to previous results for the GII, women tend to have an advantage in asylum recognition when they originate from countries with intermediate situations (measured as an electoral democracy index between 0.4 and 0.6). A further robustness check, by using the number of deaths in armed conflicts as an indicator, (Model 4) shows that women have a higher predicted probability of being recognised as asylum seekers compared to men if they originate from countries with less than 2500 annual deaths. Results are reported in the Supplementary materials to avoid redundancy.

Considering the compositional effect (Fig. 3a), we observe that women’s applications tend to be more recognised when women are less represented among applicants at the citizenship level (RH2).

The female advantage disappears for applicants from countries where women make up more than 20% of the total. We also see some tendencies in the opposite direction: men tend to have an advantage over women when men are ‘rare’. However, the higher predicted probability observed for men is not significant due to the small number of applicants among those originating from countries where most applicants are women.

Finally, given the repeated changes in Italian asylum legislation, we want to assess if an eventual female advantage has been constant or changed over the years, especially

Table 5 Odds ratios (OR) from logistic regression models assessing associations between the gender of the applicant (Female, Ref. Male) and positive asylum application outcome

| Citizenship | Freq | OR | Sig | % Female | Citizenship | Freq | OR | Sig | % Female |
|------------------------|--------|-------|-----|----------|--------------|---------|-------|-----|----------|
| Afghanistan | 30,570 | 0.757 | ** | 10.2 | Kosovo | 2830 | 2.786 | *** | 22.1 |
| Albania | 5350 | 2.732 | *** | 32.4 | Lebanon | 740 | 5.376 | *** | 20.9 |
| Algeria | 1890 | 4.630 | *** | 9.8 | Liberia | 1810 | 1.215 | | 11.0 |
| Armenia | 775 | 1.010 | | 39.4 | Libya | 2475 | 1.344 | | 22.4 |
| Bangladesh | 54,880 | 2.786 | *** | 0.8 | Mali | 43,920 | 2.331 | *** | 1.3 |
| Benin | 1165 | 2.604 | * | 3.9 | Moldova | 510 | 1.009 | | 56.9 |
| Bosnia and Herzegovina | 2730 | 1.020 | | 48.4 | Morocco | 10,130 | 4.587 | *** | 16.3 |
| Brazil | 1140 | 0.451 | *** | 36.4 | Niger | 2460 | 1.044 | | 4.1 |
| Burkina Faso | 5790 | 3.012 | *** | 2.6 | Nigeria | 131,325 | 2.950 | *** | 28.7 |
| Cameroon | 6095 | 2.564 | *** | 30.2 | Pakistan | 84,045 | 3.175 | *** | 2.0 |
| Chad | 1185 | 4.219 | ** | 5.9 | Palestine | 1755 | 0.873 | | 19.9 |
| China | 2800 | 0.838 | | 55.2 | Peru | 4450 | 1.418 | *** | 46.4 |
| Colombia | 3075 | 1.073 | | 43.3 | Russia | 1000 | 1.289 | | 57.0 |
| Congo, Dem. Rep | 1150 | 2.141 | *** | 45.2 | Senegal | 38,085 | 3.509 | *** | 2.8 |
| Côte d'Ivoire | 29,620 | 3.215 | *** | 12.1 | Serbia | 2260 | 1.678 | *** | 44.5 |
| Egypt | 10,405 | 2.976 | *** | 7.4 | Sierra Leone | 2790 | 2.625 | *** | 13.1 |
| El Salvador | 9200 | 1.326 | *** | 51.2 | Somalia | 21,305 | 0.991 | | 20.0 |
| Eritrea | 10,440 | 1.026 | | 24.1 | Sri Lanka | 2430 | 1.433 | ** | 21.8 |
| Ethiopia | 2285 | 1.422 | ** | 35.0 | Sudan | 3575 | 0.847 | | 8.7 |
| Gambia, | 44,490 | 4.049 | *** | 1.4 | Syria | 5910 | 1.081 | | 36.2 |
| Georgia | 5535 | 1.618 | *** | 79.7 | Togo | 3965 | 3.509 | *** | 7.8 |
| Ghana | 28,770 | 2.309 | *** | 4.9 | Tunisia | 13,715 | 3.745 | *** | 9.9 |
| Guinea | 19,470 | 4.695 | *** | 2.6 | Turkey | 7115 | 1.558 | *** | 9.6 |
| India | 3835 | 5.405 | *** | 12.6 | Ukraine | 17,460 | 1.350 | *** | 58.0 |
| Iran | 3210 | 1.068 | | 26.8 | Venezuela | 4600 | 1.079 | | 57.2 |
| Iraq | 10,525 | 1.139 | | 12.6 | Total | 719,090 | 2.141 | *** | 15.3 |

Each model controls the age of the applicant and the year of the decision

P value: * $p < 0.005$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

when the security decrees were implemented (2018–2022). Figure 3b suggests that no systematic female advantage existed before the onset of the so-called refugee crisis in 2014. After the pressure on the reception system increased, we observed a significant and persistent female advantage over men despite normative changes confirming RH4.

Discussion and conclusions

The adoption of a gender-based approach within refugee studies represents a crucial step towards recognising and addressing the diverse needs, vulnerabilities, and experiences of individuals within asylum systems. At the core of a gender-based approach lies the commitment to ensuring equal treatment and non-discrimination for all asylum seekers and refugees, regardless of their gender identity or expression. Gender-based asylum policies necessitate the provision of specialised support services tailored to the unique needs of individuals, including access to healthcare, psychosocial support, legal assistance, and safe accommodation. These services are vital for addressing the trauma, vulnerabilities, and challenges experienced by survivors of gender-based violence and

persecution (Council of Europe, 2019). Integrating a gender-based perspective into asylum decision-making processes requires training asylum officers and decision-makers to recognise and understand gender-specific forms of persecution. This involves sensitising them to the nuances of gender dynamics, cultural norms, and the impact of discrimination on individuals' experiences.

Within this framework, the extent to which asylum decisions in European countries may be associated with the applicant's gender is currently a poorly understood mechanism. Some scholars have observed that legislation related to asylum and refugees in the Global North has historically been based on a male model of definition, which undervalues typical persecutions faced by women. However, despite legislation potentially favouring men, other gendered mechanisms, including stereotyping, marriage status, and aspects related to vulnerability, such as pregnancy status and the presence of children, might favour women. Additionally, being less represented among applicants may result in higher chances of being recognised for protection.

In this study, we analyse decisions on asylum applications in Italy between 2008 and 2022 using Eurostat data and a set of indicators to assess political conditions and gender discrimination in the country of origin, including LGBT+ discrimination.

Building on the existing literature, we developed a set of research hypotheses. We first wanted to assess if women have a systematic advantage over men in their asylum application outcomes in Italy (H1). Our data show that the answer to this question is complex. Women from most countries are more likely to receive a positive decision on their asylum claim than men, with one notable exception being Afghanistan, where men are observed to have an advantage.

However, if we assess how gender interacts with the characteristics of the country of origin, we get a more nuanced picture. We hypothesised that women might be favoured in their application trial when they are less represented among applicants at the country level (RH2) and, therefore, more selected (minority status). Data for Italy confirm this hypothesis and suggest that women hold an advantage if they represent less than 30% of the applicants from a country. Data indicate that a similar mechanism might work for men when they are a minority, but the number of observations is insufficient to support the claim solidly. However, this finding implies that strong gender selection might contribute to the female advantage.

As an additional point, building on literature that shows a possible disadvantage for women in terms of the limited possibility of gender discrimination being recognised as grounds for asylum, we hypothesised that women might not be advantaged compared to men if they come from countries where women are more discriminated (RH3). Our data support this hypothesis, showing that women coming from countries with very high levels of gender discrimination are not advantaged compared to men, therefore challenging the assumption that higher levels of gender discrimination universally translate to an increased likelihood of asylum recognition for women. However, our findings go further by showing that an advantage for women exists if they come from contexts with medium gender discrimination. Moreover, we tested the association with the political regime in the country of origin, and the presence of armed conflicts. We observe that women tend to have an advantage when originating from less critical contexts (low or no victims in armed conflicts, electoral democracies, and countries with intermediate scores in the

electoral democracy index). When the country of origin tends to show a very critical political situation or high discrimination, acceptance rates are high also for men. This pattern suggests that women's asylum claims are more favourably received compared to men's when they originate from contexts perceived as less extreme in terms of human rights violations. Only LGBT+ discrimination shows a different trend: women are advantaged compared to men when they come from countries with high discrimination.

Finally, we hypothesised that changes in the Italian legislation between 2018 and 2022 did not affect the female advantage. Our data support this hypothesis (RH4). However, our data show that no female advantage existed in Italy before the onset of the refugee crisis in 2014. A persistent gender advantage in the asylum process is observed since 2014, despite legislative evolutions.

Our data provide a first glimpse at what appears to be a complex reality. Analysing the legislation, we noticed that the structure of international and national legislation tends to emphasise the gender perspective only in specific claims (such as victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation, gender-based violence, pregnant women, etc.). The recent changes in Italian legislation, which have limited the possibility of accessing national complementary protection, have not provided a disadvantage for women seeking asylum, whose vulnerability, if present, is still acknowledged. Due to data limitations, we cannot assess if other applicants' characteristics highlighted by the literature may play a role (e.g. marriage status, presence of children of ongoing pregnancy, presence of signs of victimisation, level of education, sexual orientation, etc.). Despite improvement in data availability, there is still the need for socially disaggregated data (including information, for example, on marital status or the presence of children) that help us to better understand the changing flows and trajectories and the implications for policies concerning transit, reception and relocation (Kofman, 2019).

We can conclude that, for Italy, we do not see a systematic female advantage in asylum application decisions. When applicants originate from countries characterised by war, autocracy, or high discrimination towards women, no significant differences between decisions on applications by gender are observed. However, we observe a nuanced advantage that emerges among women from countries with limited—but existent—issues regarding political rights and gender inequality or high LGBT+ discrimination. Unobserved reasons for this advantage can be found in compositional aspects, vulnerability and stereotyping, as the literature suggests.

In conclusion, our research contributes to a more advanced understanding of the role of gender in asylum decisions in the EU. While it is evident that female applicants have higher overall acceptance rates in Italy, this is not a universal trend and is highly dependent on the interplay of gender with other factors like the country of origin's social and political context. Future research could expand on these findings, exploring differences in the types of protection granted and comparing these dynamics across different European countries.

Abbreviations

| | |
|----------------|---|
| EU + Countries | EU + refers to the 27 European Union Member States, plus Norway and Switzerland |
| GII | Gender inequality index |
| LGBT+ | Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning, asexual and many other terms (such as non-binary and pansexual) |
| UNHCR | United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) |

Supplementary Information

The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41118-024-00218-z>.

Supplementary Material 1.

Acknowledgements

Not applicable.

Author contributions

LEO conceived the study, produced the dataset, made the elaboration and drafted the theoretical framework, results and conclusion of the paper. GP produced the dataset and drafted the results and conclusion of the paper. SM drafted the paragraph on legislation, provided background for legislation issues and drafted the conclusion.

Funding

Funded by the European Union - NextGenerationEU under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) - Mission 4 Education and research - Component 2 From research to business - Investment 1.1 Notice Prin 2022 - DD N. 104 del 2/2/2022, from title [AVRAI - Assessing the Vulnerability of Refugees and Asylum seekers in Italy], proposal code [2022XSM5SX] - CUP [J53D23009520006].

Availability of data and materials

The data that support the findings of this study are available from available to researchers at the site <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database> migr_asycdfsta dataset.

Declarations

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Received: 27 December 2023 Accepted: 23 May 2024

Published online: 23 August 2024

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