



From displacement to settlement

Selection and stratification patterns in the migration and integration
trajectories of refugees

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Lidwina Gundacker, 2025

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Abstract

Forced migration unfolds as a dynamic, multi-phased process encompassing several stages of decision-making, uncertain and perilous journeys, arrival, and integration. The outcomes at each stage are contingent on individual features and external conditions. This thesis advances the sociology of migration through three interconnected studies that examine how individual resource endowment, legal and geographical conditions, xenophobia, social norms, and integration policies shape the trajectories of forced migrants. My findings demonstrate that border regimes and geographic barriers are more permeable to more educated, male, and solo refugee migrants. I furthermore reveal that the duration and risks associated with refugee journeys have complex but measurable effects on post-arrival integration trajectories. Importantly, long and hazardous journeys can undermine the ability of refugees to draw on their pre-migration human capital. Also, integration outcomes vary by pre-migration resources and gender: while the higher educated refugees are in general more likely to enter education after arrival, subsequent labor market entry is much more common among men than among women. Moreover, this thesis provides evidence that the probability to be legally recognized as refugee varies in response to local political climates. In regions with governments or residents that are more hostile towards immigrants, asylum chances are lower. In addition, male and Muslim asylum-seekers per se have lower recognition chances than others. In the sociological understanding of structural inequalities, I therefore argue that the uneven distribution of resources and unequal access to opportunities stratify migration and integration outcomes of forced migrants along the lines of gender, family context, educational background, social class, and immigrant status. Having shown that disadvantages accumulate throughout all stages of the refugee trajectory, I furthermore conclude that integration patterns are inseparable from migration processes. I argue that, instead, considering migrants' pre-arrival periods in migration and integration research represents an excellent starting point for (1) scholars seeking to advance migration theory-making towards encompassing forced migration and (2) overcoming blind spots in the research on refugees' integration outcomes after arrival.

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Chapter 1. Selection and stratification patterns in forced migration and integration trajectories

1. Introduction

In recent years, the phenomenon of refugee migration has become a major focus of both scholarly discourse and public policy debates, spurred by increased conflict, violence, and war. In contrast to the public impression in Western societies, most refugees do not seek protection in a country in the Global North but rather next by, i.e. within their home country or in neighboring countries. In 2024, out of 123 million forcibly displaced individuals, 74 million were internally displaced, and roughly three out of four refugees were hosted by low and middle-income countries (UNHCR, 2025a). For example, as a result of the war in Syria, the UNHCR (2025b) reported on 7.4 million Syrians displaced within Syria in 2024 and 4.7 million Syrians seeking shelter in countries close by, namely in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt. In European Union countries, 1,7 million Syrians applied for asylum between 2014 and 2024 (Eurostat, 2025a). Within Europe, Germany has emerged as a key host country for individuals seeking humanitarian protection. 3.5 million asylum claims were lodged between 2010 and 2024, with Syrians representing the largest group of asylum seekers (BAMF, 2019, 2025).¹

Nevertheless, fleeing to Europe is a dangerous endeavor: 34,000 men, women, and children were recorded missing and presumably lost their lives on their way to Europe since 2014 (IOM, 2025). Although contexts of violence, war, and persecution affect most groups simultaneously, the resources and abilities to reach safe ground are distributed unequally across groups. Successfully arriving to a desired destination depends on a person's physical fitness, available financial resources, networks, the resources and needs of travel companions, and the external conditions on the route. Unpredictable factors such as weather, coincidences, and (bad) luck furthermore blur the story (Belabbas et al., 2022; Blauth, 2023; Friedman-Kasaba, 2024; Panzaru and Harding, 2025). As a result, refugee populations strongly differ across time and space. For example, more Syrian men than women make it to Germany, and they are on average

¹ In addition, with the Russian war against Ukraine starting in February 2022, 1.4 million Ukrainians were granted residency in Germany through the EU Temporary Protection Directive (Eurostat, 2025b). This recent cohort of forced migration is not subject to this thesis.

more educated than those seeking refuge in Lebanon and Jordan (Spörlein et al., 2020; Guichard, 2020; Aksoy and Poutvaara, 2021). Understanding the mechanisms behind these selective processes is important for policy-makers if equal access to humanitarian protection is a political goal: the current frameworks are more permeable for some groups than for others, contrasting with the universal right to asylum established in the Geneva Refugee Convention.

These selected individual characteristics of refugee migrants, in turn, shape their participation patterns after arrival in a destination country. There is strong evidence that individual resources and characteristics shape the individual trajectories. This prominently refers to the pre-migration educational and socioeconomic profile, health status, including mental health, as well as gender, age, and family structure (FitzGerald and Arar 2018; Kogan and Kalter 2020; Kosyakova and Kogan, 2022). For example, a higher educational attainment is indicative of faster language acquisition (Spörlein and Kristen, 2018) and better labor market performance (de Vroome and van Tubergen, 2010). In addition, institutional factors such as access to legal status, education, labor markets, adequate housing, health care, and child care are important pillars for integration (Kosyakova and Brenzel, 2020; Spörlein and Kristen, 2019; van Tubergen et al., 2004; Kanas and Kosyakova, 2023; Fasani et al., 2022; Gambaro et al., 2021; Kosyakova and Kogan, 2022). The same holds true for local conditions such as the state of the local labor market and the social environment, including the existence or absence of social exclusion and discriminatory practices against certain groups (Aksoy et al., 2023). The composition of refugee populations thus has a large implication for policy making: the human capital backgrounds, health conditions, gender distributions, and family compositions of the arriving refugees require a large set of suitable structures to facilitate the participation of the various groups in the different destination countries.

In sum, manifold factors act as filters for the migration and integration outcomes of refugee migrants. This thesis explores the stratification and selection patterns in the migration and integration trajectories of refugees through three interconnected studies that examine the pathway of refugee migrants from their displacement to their eventual settlement in a major receiving country in the Global North, namely, Germany (see Table 1.1 for an overview). Are external structures and conditions equally permeable to all groups? As I will argue, neither migration processes nor integration processes are neutral or uniform processes. Rather, these are highly selective processes in which individual characteristics and resources interact with external structures and conditions. The analyses of these processes presented in this thesis are deeply rooted in a sociological understanding of inequalities: I argue that the uneven

distribution of and access to resources and opportunities among different groups of refugees results in different migration and integration outcomes. To be precise, I address social stratification across the lines of gender and family context, education, social class, and immigrant status. I furthermore examine the selective effects of external structures and conditions, that is, border regimes, immigration and asylum policies, societal manifestations of prejudices and xenophobia, integration policies, and social norms. I show that these structures are not equally permeable to all groups.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will critically review the current state of the literature on selection and stratification patterns in refugee migration and integration trajectories. The empirical investigations are each briefly described in chapter 2. Chapter 3 summarizes and concludes.

Table 1.1 Article overview

Article	Year	Author(s)	Title	Journal (status)
1	2024	Lidwina Gundacker, Sekou Keita, Simon A. Ruhnke	Unequal access to protection? Selection patterns over arrival cohorts of Syrians seeking refuge in Lebanon, Turkey, and Germany	Frontiers in Human Dynamics, 5(1171885), 2024 (published)
2	2026	Lidwina Gundacker	Refugee journeys and the erosion of pre-migration human capital: a sequence-analysis approach to post-migration trajectories	Advances in Life Course Research, 68 (published)
3	2024	Lidwina Gundacker, Yuliya Kosyakova, Gerald Schneider	How regional attitudes towards immigration shape the chance to obtain asylum: Evidence from Germany	Migration Studies, 13(1), 2024 (published)

2. A note on terminologies

Dealing with the migration and integration processes of recent refugee cohorts in the European context, this thesis necessarily operates in highly politicized realms. The steering of immigration and integration is subject to a large scientific debate while it is also discussed on the policy level. Although used concepts and defined goals differ between research and

policymaking, they are constantly conflated (Penninx, 2019). Framing research around policy concerns to live up to the expectations of policy relevance, political notions, categories, and research questions inevitably filter into the research process (Bakewell, 2008). Terminologies and analytical concepts therefore inadvertently bare normative components. Categories such as ‘migrants’ and ‘refugees’ that are used analytically by social scientists at the same time hold symbolic power and carry attributes defined by the societal, political, and media discourse. They furthermore coincide with bureaucratic labels and legal categories, used by administrations to distinguish individuals with different legal status, for example (Dahinden et al., 2020). By using such terms, no matter how well defined, they will reproduce and legitimize certain concepts and ascriptions: by researching categories of concern such as ethnicity and gender, the problematic ‘nature’ of these categories is reinforced (Bakewell, 2006, 2008). For example, by researching the heterogeneous effects of different types of networks, contrasting ‘native’ networks with ‘co-ethnic’, ‘co-national’, ‘immigrant’, or ‘non-native’ networks, the network literature undoubtedly delivers important insights on social capital (Kalter and Kogan, 2014; Gericke et al., 2018; van Tubergen et al., 2011; Chiswick and Miller, 2005; Damm, 2009; Aguilera and Massey, 2003). At the same time, stereotyped images and normative assumptions are reproduced. It is therefore important to remain reflexive on the used terms and concepts throughout the research process and to clearly distinguish the used analytical categories from policy categories (Bakewell, 2008).

With ‘refugees’, I refer to individuals who left their home countries to seek humanitarian protection and security abroad (Lee et al., 2020). I use this term without requiring a legal confirmation of the status; in my analyses, this category is thus comprised of individuals in transit, asylum seekers, rejected asylum seekers, and recognized refugees as well as their family members. This broad terminology is necessary given that I analyse the refugee migration process and the refugee status determination process itself. In my understanding, refugees make up a sub-category of migrants, recognizing that the distinction between voluntary vs forced migration is continuous rather than dichotomous (de Haas, 2021; Richmond, 1993), and humanitarian, economic, social, and political factors causing individuals to flee are usually intertwined (Castles, 2003, 2007). As Kogan and Kalter (2022) convincingly argued, the theoretical and analytical approaches towards overall migration are powerful tools that can (or should, as Kogan and Kalter phrase it) also frame research on refugee migration and integration, without negating refugee-specific patterns therein. My arguments presented in the subsequent

sections thus lean on theoretical and empirical contributions from the field of migration in general as well as from refugee-specific research.

The concept and political program of ‘integration’ in today’s terms is largely referred to as the process of settlement of newcomers in a society (Penninx, 2019). Mostly used in functional terms, that process entails education and training, the acquisition of language skills, health, housing, and paid work (Cheung and Phillimore, 2014, 2017). The concept thereby necessarily creates a group expected to ‘integrate’ that is different from the majority society, forming the dominant group. This essentially represents a process of othering. ‘Migrants’ and ‘refugees’, the targeted groups of such endeavors, are those departing from the normal that need to be managed and controlled (Horvath, 2019; Dahinden et al., 2020; also see section 4.5 of Chapter 1). To design and evaluate effective integration policies, problems to be solved must be identified and goals and norms must be defined. This problem-solving approach has a pragmatic and neutral appearance but carries symbolic power that ascribes deficiencies, classifications, hierarchical positioning, and expectations to the targeted individuals and thereby defines them as a homogeneous group in opposition to all others (Bourdieu, 1989; Jöhncke, 2011).

In this thesis, I analyze and explain the functional integration in terms of labor market participation. Although I use integration as an analytical concept to describe and study a biographical process rather than a normative concept to evaluate and rank participation outcomes of migrants (Penninx 2019), this setup bears the risk of reproducing social hierarchies and norms. While with that dilemma, I am in good company among scientists (Ager and Strang, 2008; Harder et al., 2018; Phillimore, 2021, 2024), it is worthwhile to keep in mind the normative implications of the used concepts and the research questions asked when interpreting the results (Bakewell, 2008; Penninx, 2019).

3. Forced migration as a selective process: a critical review of the current debate

The movement of people for a large variety of reasons constitutes a basic feature of modern society (Castles, 2017). Migration is widely understood as a selective process: not all potential migrants actually move, and those who move often differ systematically from those who stay. Scholars across economics, sociology, psychology, demography, human geography, and political science have studied this selectivity, drawing a nuanced picture of how individual, household, and macro-level factors shape who migrates, why, and where to - and who stays.

For the specific case of forced migration, no encompassing theory has yet been developed, such that empirical investigations on forced migration outcomes are informed by the general models and insights on migration that will be discussed in chapters 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3. The application of general migration models on forced migration and its shortcomings are subject to chapters 3.4, 3.5, and 3.6. In particular, I discuss the male gaze in migration studies, the South-North migration bias, and the persisting black box regarding refugee journeys and their role in migration (and post-migration) processes.

3.1 The neoclassical idea of selective migration

The notion of selective migration was most prominently put forward by Borjas (1987) and Chiswick (1999) who sought to understand migration patterns to the United States. In a neoclassical understanding of individuals as rational utility maximizers, potential migrants only migrate if the expected return to migration (in terms of wages, access to education, living standards, etc.) outweigh the costs of migration. Borjas (1987) proposed that the decision to migrate largely depends on differences between country of origin and potential destination country with respect to wage structures and expected returns to skills. For destination countries offering higher relative wages in comparison to source countries, the framework expects a positive selection of migrants: higher educated individuals expect higher labor market returns and are thus more likely to decide in favor of migration, resulting in positively selected migration populations in that given country. Negative selection occurs in the opposite case. In that sense, Borjas and Chiswick advanced a human capital approach to migration, treating migration decision-making as a rational and well-informed investment decision. Their framework essentially refined the intuition of Lee's (1966) push-pull model rooted in the fields of demography and human geography, offering an analytical framework to formalize and model the costs and benefits of leaving the origin country (push factors) and of moving to a potential destination country (pull factors).

Despite its focus on the individual costs and benefits, this approach essentially is of structural nature: individuals with limited agency react to external conditions. In a recent publication, Kauppinen and Poutvaara (2025), for example, apply this approach to Finnish migration patterns. Finns deciding to emigrate typically are highly educated and particularly sort themselves into countries with higher earnings potential and better expected career options, such as the United States. In the neoclassical framework of selective migration, these individuals represent agents with limited agency taking migration decisions based on given external conditions to maximize their returns.

3.2 Interdisciplinary perspectives on migrant selection

Although the rational-choice approach still represents one of the most prominent frameworks to model migratory decision-making, various disciplines have criticized and advanced it from various angles. For example, why do not all of the highly-educated Finns in Kauppinen and Poutvaara's (2025) study emigrate? Firstly, not granting agency to individuals has been argued to weaken the model's predictive power (de Haas, 2021). Secondly, scholars have pointed to blind spots on the structural level, that is, external factors other than labor- and income-related structures. This concerns network and community-level factors, political and societal institutions. Assigning agency to (potential) migrants and accounting for less tangible factors on the individual and community level (meso level) makes the conceptualization of migration more complex but also more powerful and encompassing, as de Haas (2021) argues.

Sociologists in particular highlight non-monetary factors that shape migration decision-making, such as cultural context, family ties, collective decision-making, and social capital. It is by now well established that migrant networks and social ties facilitate movement, provide logistical support, transfer information, and facilitate integration upon arrival. These considerations were prominently put forward by Massey and colleagues in their cumulative causation theory (Massey, 1990; Massey et al., 1993) and have since been empirically tested and advanced in numerous studies (e.g., Beine and Salomone, 2012; Bertoli and Rapoport, 2016; Gërxhani and Kosyakova, 2022; Kosyakova and Kogan, 2024). These advancements also broaden the scope of analysis from the individual to the household and community structures in which potential migrants take their migratory decisions (Timmerman et al., 2018). The sociology of migration by now also increasingly incorporates environmental problems as social problems shaping individual lives and structural inequalities, including the role of environmental conditions in migration decision-making (Van Praag and Timmerman et al., 2019). The role of persisting structural inequalities affecting migration decisions and migration outcomes is subject to section 3.3.

From the angle of political science, migration regimes, welfare policies, and institutional setups are important factors in migration decision making (Massey, 1999). Czaika and de Haas (2017) establish in a study of 34 countries between 1973 and 2012 that more restrictive visa policies decrease migrant inflows but also decrease outflows of the affected groups. Restrictive entry policies thus shape the composition of migrants in a country by disincentivizing circular migration and encouraging long-term settlement of those affected by the policy. Similarly,

policies prioritizing particular groups such as skilled individuals shape migrant group compositions, both in terms of observable characteristics (such as education and skills) and unobservable features (e.g., ability or motivation, Bertoli et al., 2016). The effect of welfare regimes, often depicted as a pull-factor for migrants, is ambiguously debated in the literature. While some provide evidence on the so-called welfare magnet hypothesis (Borjas, 1999; Dodson, 2001), a growing body of literature increasingly relying on individual-level rather than aggregate data finds that networks, housing costs, language barriers, family reunification policies, and labor market opportunities outweigh the role of welfare benefits for migrants' decisions (Ferwerda et al., 2024, Jakubiak 2019, Ponce, 2019). Effects are furthermore highly heterogeneous across groups (Dellinger and Huber, 2021; Agersnap et al., 2020).

Psychological literature highlights that migration is highly self-selective in psychological terms, arguing that migrants select based on personality traits such as internal motivation, self-efficacy, forward-orientation, extroversion, risk preferences, and patience (Canache et al., 2013; Goldbach and Schlüter, 2018; Berlinschi and Harutyunyan, 2019; Hernández-Carretero and Carling, 2012). Ayhan et al. (2020) furthermore establish that a sense of adventure and openness to new experiences, which is more prevalent at a younger age, can fuel migration aspirations and their realizations. A growing body of literature furthermore explores the role of emotions in migratory decisions: perceived discrimination, feelings of relative deprivation and exclusion and hope for a better life abroad have been identified to incentivize migration (Hagen-Zanker et al., 2023; Hernández-Carretero, 2017). Disentangling these rather intangible factors from commonly studied tangible factors is, however, challenging (Hagen-Zanker et al., 2023).

3.3 Structural inequalities in migration processes

Sociologists add an important dimension to the discussion: structural inequalities and social hierarchies along class, gender, ethnicity, religion, and belief systems shape the resources and opportunities to migrate, causing selection that can hardly be modelled in simplistic economic models (de Haas, 2021; Eichsteller, 2021). Simply speaking, not everyone has access to the financial means, the necessary information, the networks, the physical health, communication skills, the social standing, the familial support, or the freedom of choice to realize migration intentions (Mazzili et al., 2024). De Haas (2021) and Eichsteller (2021) add yet another layer of complexity: Applying Sen's (2001) capability approach, they argue that these resources alone do not automatically translate into a predictable migration outcome. Rather, an individual with the wish to migrate and a given set of resources in addition requires the opportunity to

make use of them, i.e, the chance to use the money, knowledge, and language skills to actually migrate.

This refers to the institutional, social, legal, and political constraints individuals face given their social class, gender, ethnicity, or legal status. “People’s ability to make independent migration choices is constrained by states and other structures such as family, community, networks and culture, which ultimately determine the social, economic and human resources which people are able and willing to deploy to migrate” (de Haas, 2021, 6). For example, gender norms and care obligations, often justified by cultural beliefs, may prevent women to form and realize migration aspirations despite potentially available resources. Also, irrespective of individual resources, national visa systems favor some groups (e.g., high skilled individuals or selected nationalities) over others and typically do not offer legal entry channels for forced migrants (Eichsteller, 2021). The approach of structural inequalities has therefore much to offer to explain why some do not migrate, even if certain individual and structural conditions would predict migration.

In that vein, de Haas’ (2021) aspiration-capability framework overcomes the dichotomy between social structure and individual agency by defining both as integral elements in the forming and realizing of migratory aspirations. In contrast to the neoclassical understanding of migration representing a mechanism that distributes resources more equally (e.g., across origin and destination countries), Eichsteller (2021) and de Haas (2021) rather highlight how the reproduction of all sorts of inequalities are inherent to migration processes. In section 3.5, I will furthermore argue that migration research itself is subject to structural inequalities.

3.4 Explaining forced migration outcomes

A handful of studies investigated the selective patterns in forced migration, applying the economic model of costs and benefits (or, in a larger sense, the model of push and pull factors). Guichard (2020), Spörlein et al. (2020), and Aksoy and Poutvaara (2021) confirm that forced migration is not random but selective with regard to education, age, and gender. Guichard (2020) finds that Syrian and Iraqi asylum seekers in Germany are on average more educated than their home country populations (i.e., they are positively selected), while Albanians and Serbians are negatively selected. He attributes this to differences in the economic and security conditions in the home countries, migration costs, and expected returns. Comparing Syrian refugees in Germany, Lebanon, and Jordan, Spörlein et al. (2020) show the highest selectivity among those in Germany and similarly point towards structural constraints such as risky routes

and high migratory costs that individuals with a stronger socioeconomic background and with a better fitness are more likely to counter. Comparing refugee and labor migrants in Germany, Spörlein and Kristen (2019) furthermore provide evidence that differences in the educational attainments of labor migrants and refugees in Germany are minor.

These findings in fact contradict the predictions of the economic model of migration: in the reasoning of Chiswick (1999), labor migration is rather motivated by the goal to improve the economic situation, while seeking humanitarian protection is mostly motivated by push factors (such as conflict in the home country), such that self-selection based on human capital is expected to be less pronounced. Aksoy and Poutvaara (2021) offer a solution to this puzzle, theorizing that conflict in the home country decreases expected returns to human capital to the point that particularly the higher-skilled consider outmigration, given the higher returns to their skills in non-war countries. Their empirical investigations on refugees in European destinations confirm this reasoning.

By and large, quantitative studies on the selectivity of forced migrants have remained in the theoretical realm of the economic framework, proposing that higher migration costs (e.g., in terms of geographic distances, border controls, and risks on the route) affect the selection patterns of forced migrants (Spörlein et al., 2020; Guichard, 2020; Aksoy and Poutvaara, 2021). With the exception of the monetary costs of travel included in the robustness analyses of Aksoy and Poutvaara (2021) and Guichard (2020), these channels remain, however, empirically untested. Section 1 in Chapter 2 of this thesis offers a descriptive approach to fill this gap.

3.5 Structural inequalities in migration research itself: Male gaze, colonial gaze

Adding a second layer of observation, it is worthwhile to consider the structural inequalities and social hierarchies in migration research itself: Theory-making and the empirical investigation of migration processes has from the outset occurred through a male lens, that is, through the eyes of mostly male scholars on mostly male migrants representing their major research subjects (Donato et al., 2006, 2017, Timmerman et al., 2018). “In traditional migration research, the starting point was the pioneer male labour migrant, who would be followed by women in processes of family reunification and family formation. The specific experiences of women, both as independent migrants and as ‘followers’, were systematically disregarded”, Timmerman et al. (2018,7) summarize. However, “[d]ecisions to migrate are made within a larger context of gendered interactions and expectations between individuals and within families and institutions. Therefore, gender is critically important to consider before the

development of theory about who migrates (...) and its consequences”, Donato and colleagues (2006, 12) conclude.

An impressive body of research has caught up by integrating gendered perspectives on migration (Carling, 2005; Donato et al., 2006; Beine and Salomone, 2012; Bastia and Piper, 2023, Anastasiadou et al., 2024). Migration literature now features research on gender-specific types and drivers of migration (e.g., Kofman et al., 2000; Carling, 2005; Tittensor and Mansouri, 2017; Piper, 2006; Beine and Salomone, 2013; Greenwood, 2008, Christou and Kofman, Malhotra et al., 2016). Also, the notion that migrant selection happens at the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and class dimensions has reached popularity among migration scholars (Anthias, 2020; Fathi and Laoire, 2024).

Various scholars agree, however, that in migration theory-making, a gender gap still persists. In fact, while gender and gendered perspectives now feature in a large range of empirical contributions in migration-related research, its theoretical underpinnings remain at best fragmented (Bircan and Yilmaz, 2022). In comparison to the average male life, female daily lives and biographies are significantly more complex in terms of activity patterns, time use, and the multitude of duties (Donato et al., 2006; Chidambaram and Scheiner, 2024), challenging the parsimony of existing theoretical models. A gender-sensitive theory of migration would furthermore have to integrate concepts on gender roles, gender identities, and masculinity, as well as intersectional work on social categories and classes, hierarchies, and inequalities, relating to questions of power, oppression, and privilege (Christou and Kofman, 2022, Timmerman et al., 2018). Such a theory would have to overcome the methodological focus on nation states and allow for the emergence of transnational perspectives (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2003; Amelina and Faist, 2012), persevere the concurrence of structural factors and individual agency (de Haas, 2021; Bakewell, 2010), and incorporate insights from South-South migration and domestic migration in which women are overrepresented (Bastia and Piper, 2023). Testing such a theory would require gender-responsive data (Bircan and Yilmaz, 2022). That is, data must not only be collected by gender but also reflect gender-specific issues and categories. Ultimately, such a theoretical framework would have to manage to shake off feminist connotations and grab a foothold in mainstream migration research: “[e]fforts to integrate gender into migration studies are not shared evenly by women and men. Women scholars author almost all of the work that treats gender as integral to understanding migration dynamics and patterns” (Donato et al., 2017, 1081). Unsurprisingly, the lack of such an

encompassing gender-sensitive migration theory also limits the research presented in this thesis and represents an interesting and important line of thought for future work.

Secondly, most migration studies originate from the Global North (Crawley and Teye, 2024; Hagen-Zanker et al., 2023, Anastasiadou et al., 2024), introducing a “receiving country bias” (de Haas, 2021). This bias is also true for the research presented in this thesis. For decades, mainstream migration research focused on South-to-North migration, particularly on (male-dominated) labor migration (Anastasiadou et al., 2024), despite other migration movements being similar in volume (Schewel and Debray, 2024). Similarly, all prominent theories draw on South-North migration (Bastia and Piper, 2023; Crawley and Teye, 2024), such that its “colonial gaze” (Hagen-Zanker et al., 2023) persists. What reinforces the skewed knowledge production is the strong policy focus of current research, as Bloch (2020) argues. Policy interests of Global North actors financing the large bulk of migration research, such as the containment or structural control of migration movements, continue to shape the employed categories, research questions, and research designs (Bakewell, 2008), thereby reproducing the hegemonic power of states in the Global North (Bloch, 2020). Some scholars therefore called for a post-colonial approach that overcomes colonial narratives of migration, displacement, and their subjects (Banerjee and Samaddar, 2019). In sum, I argue that migration scholars should keep in mind the structural inequalities within their field: migration research and migration theory-making up until today suffers from a Global North bias as well as from a male gaze.

3.6 The black box of the refugee journey

Relatedly, the overwhelming share of studies targets migration outcomes, that is, finalized migration moves and their determinants. The pre-migration stage as well as the journey itself has received much less attention (Anastasiadou, 2024; Hagen-Zanker et al., 2023, BenEzer and Zetter, 2015). This entails experiences and obstacles along journeys, the permeability of migration systems and border policies, and situations of transit. Data on these characteristics is much less encompassing than data on post-migration states, contributing to the empirical gap (Anastasiadou, 2024).

This observational gap on the migration stages before arrival is particularly momentous for scholars trying to make sense of forced migration outcomes. Available data, empirical investigations and theoretical considerations regarding the refugee migration process (from forming migratory aspirations to completing them and settling in a new destination) are

underrepresented in migration research (BenEzer and Zetter, 2015).² “While transit situations can occur in voluntary migration, they are an important differentiating characteristic of forced migration and have not been investigated sufficiently”, Hugo et al. (2018) state. BenEzer and Zetter (2015) contend that most studies either look at conditions under which individuals fled or at their arrival and settlement in destination countries, ignoring what happens in between. Interestingly, the framework on push and pull factors developed by Lee (1966) offers a feature that has gone largely unnoticed: that of intervening obstacles between origin and destination, such as the mere distance, restrictive border regimes, or legal restrictions.

In qualitative interviews with Syrian refugees in Germany, Blauth (2023) identified such obstacles affecting migrants’ decision-making in the form of hazardous border crossings, the risks of being imprisoned or exploited, as well as weather conditions. Borders and bordering practices represent a significant element of refugee migration “because they encompass not only the physical space of the border but a host of areas that relate to borders including surveillance (external and internal), fences, journeys, death, state sanctioned injury, agency and power at the macro and micro levels” Bloch (2020, 437) resumes. During transit migration, insufficient sleeping and hygiene conditions, policing, hunger, and the depletion of financial resources conditioned the onward journey of Blauth’s (2023) interviewees. His research furthermore revealed the matter of time and chance: securing an appointment in an embassy, encountering a crossable border or finding a trustworthy smuggler are hardly predictable events. Friedman-Kasaba (2024) impressively describes how coincidental personal interactions and experiences with colleagues, train attendants, fellow refugees, and strangers provided Bosnians with the ability to overcome bureaucratic hurdles, checkpoints, and national borders to escape ethnic cleansing in 1992 Yugoslavia.

As a result, the decision to move on and the decision where to were constantly re-evaluated. Panzaru and Harding (2025, 11) agree that decisions on the route are a “fluid, context-sensitive process”. Their study provides a unique mixed-method analysis on the decision-making of forced migrants in transit who for the time being decided to stay in Romania, Hungary, and Bulgaria instead of continuing their journey. The interviewees revised their decisions several

² One prominent attempt to theoretically frame refugee migration was undertaken by Kunz (1973, 1981). His kinetic model of refugee migration emphasized the particular reasons and circumstances that distinguished refugee migration from other forms of migration. Often critiqued for its simplicity, this model did, however, not find empirical application (Bloch, 2020).

times because of experiences of violence, financial hardship, and emotional stress. Perceived safety, legal protection, and positive social experiences in transit countries contributed to the decision to stay. “Migration decisions are not static; rather, they reflect a dynamic interplay of factors encountered along the route, including legal environments, reception conditions, social networks, and access to protection”, Panzaru and Harding (2025, 1) summarize.

Lindholm (2021) describes refugee journeys as arrhythmic processes oscillating between rush and standing still, fragmented by sudden and unpredicted events. Hugo et al. (2018) add that rather than representing steady flows, forced migration can take wavelike forms initiated by particular events and situations in origin, transit, and destination countries. Belabbas et al. (2022) define four key elements that shape refugee journeys and decision-making on the route: capital, networks, information, and chance. Inherent in all the cited studies is the assumption of refugees’ agency in their migratory processes. “Refugee stories of flight cut through pernicious stereotypes of refugees as passive, dependent, and immobilized by trauma and suffering”, Friedman-Kasaba (2024, 107) writes. Their agency intersects with individual resources, external constraints, and structural inequalities. The Bosnian family’s “luck derived in large part from [the father’s] professional status, the knowledge he derived from it and how he deployed it strategically along their journey to safety. In other words, [the father’s] luck was also a function of the agency his gender, family status, age, and class conferred upon him”, Friedman-Kasaba (2024) concludes.

The structural barriers and intersecting structural inequalities discussed in section 3.3 are thus a particularly prominent feature of refugee migration (Belabbas et al., 2022). The presented insights furthermore highlight the (spatial and temporal) nonlinearity that characterizes forced migration processes (Lindholm, 2021). Given the eventful and unpredictable character of refugee journeys, they represent periods in individuals’ lives that constitute a unit of analysis in themselves (BenEzer and Zetter, 2015). I argue that considering this particular period in migrants’ lives in the knowledge production on migration forms the basis for an encompassing theory on forced migration. To fill this gap, the analyses presented in section 1 of Chapter 2 explore the heterogeneous forced migration outcomes of Syrians in Lebanon, Turkey, and Germany, identifying legal and political frameworks as well as the accessibility of routes as major external barriers to forced migration that shape the selective composition of refugee cohorts.

4. Stratified integration trajectories: individual and contextual constraints

Likewise, refugees' societal and economic participation upon arrival is a process with heterogeneous outcomes that is not necessarily linear or uniform. The participation of newcomers in society and the labor market has received large attention across sociology, politics, economics and other fields. Policy-makers have put the largest emphasis on economic self-sufficiency, that is, the labor market participation of migrants and refugees. Employment represents a major aspect of structural integration and, in turn, facilitates the formation of social capital, fosters psychological wellbeing, self-confidence, and life satisfaction, and spurs human capital acquisition (Cheung and Phillimore, 2014; Ager and Strang, 2008). For the receiving countries, the economic self-sufficiency of migrants and their dependency on state subsidies is of financial concern, while demographic aging and the increasing lack of qualified workers in developed economies like the German one challenge German policy makers (Kanas et al., 2011). This section summarizes major findings on integration determinants.

As has been argued in section 2 of Chapter 1, concepts and insights on migrant integration as well as refugee-specific research informs scholars of refugee integration (Kogan and Kalter, 2020). A large body of literature has analysed determinants of the integration outcomes of migrants, a lot of which is also applicable to refugees (Kristen and Seuring, 2021; Kosyakova et al., 2022; Kogan and Kalter, 2020). Given its policy relevance that informs the main focus of this thesis, this review concentrates on economic participation, but also touches upon societal participation and human capital formation which are strongly interlinked processes (Kanas et al., 2011, Phillimore, 2024). For a critical discussion on the term of 'integration' see section 2.

As will be shown, integration outcomes are stratified based on both individual and structural aspects. Individual characteristics such as the human capital endowment, social capital, cultural capital and language skills as well as demographics and the family background are well-established factors in integration outcomes (FitzGerald and Arar 2018; Kogan and Kalter 2020). For refugees, additional obstacles have been identified: their health and resource endowments as well as specific selectivity patterns aggravate their disadvantages vis-à-vis other migrants and the host population (e.g. Kogan and Kalter 2020). A second set of factors relates to the institutional and spatial context. Policies towards newcomers, labor market characteristics, the welfare state setup as well as the societal hospitality towards newcomers affect the extent to which an individual can participate socially and economically (Kogan 2007). Obstacles to

individual agency and unequal access to opportunities and resources thus stratify the integration outcomes of refugees (Phillimore, 2024).

Given the geographical focus of this dissertation on refugee participation in Germany, I will focus on research results from the European context and the German context, in particular. Fortunately, de Vroome's and van Tubergen's (2010, 377) assessment that "[m]ost research [on refugees] has been done in the United States, Australia, and Canada, and little is known about how refugees fare in (...) European countries" is outdated: fifteen years later, the literature on immigrants and refugees in Europe is in fact very rich.

4.1 Human capital and its transferability

On the individual level, it is well established that human capital and socioeconomic backgrounds shape participation patterns of migrants and refugees. Those with a higher pre-migration educational level have been found to perform better on receiving labor markets in various contexts (for example, de Vroome and van Tubergen, 2010, for the Netherlands; Gladwell et al., 2020, for the UK, Foged et al., 2023, for Denmark; Kanas et al., 2012, for Germany). While refugees initially perform substantially worse on the labor market compared to family and labor migrants, this gap typically narrows over time (Bakker et al., 2017; Dustmann et al., 2017, Brell et al., 2020, Fasani et al., 2022). Bakker et al. (2017) term this the 'refugee entry effect' and contribute it to a larger propensity of mental health problems as well as to lengthy legal status determination processes, delaying or denying access to employment, education, and social security.

Human capital relates to integration outcomes for various reasons. For one, human capital carries symbolic value, opening gates to social networks and operating as a social marker (Mirowsky and Ross 2003, 171, Brown and Carasso, 2013). Also, occupational and social prestige facilitates access to job positions, financial resources, and political power (Weber 1978, Becker 1993, Webber and Butler, 2005). A higher educational background furthermore facilitates human capital investment, such as learning the destination-country language (Kosyakova et al., 2022), which in turn spurs economic participation (Phillimore, 2024; Dustmann and Fabbri, 2003; Kanas et al., 2012). Particularly in formalized labor markets such as the German one, formal education and professional credentials are key. Damelang et al. (2020) show that the successful recognition of foreign qualifications lowers initial disadvantages, albeit not completely. The recognition process is particularly important for

individuals with pre-migration education from countries with very different educational systems (Liebig and Huddleston, 2014).

The transferability of foreign qualifications can be a limiter in various aspects. Firstly, the destination labor market may simply not demand a person's qualifications (Gladwell 2020; Creese and Wiebe, 2012). Furthermore, the official recognition of foreign titles is administratively demanding and takes time, particularly if documents have to be retrieved from education countries that are politically unstable (Sommer, 2021). Foreign qualifications may, thirdly, be undervalued and individuals have to go for jobs they are overqualified for (Li, 2001, Damelang et al., 2020; Tibajev and Hellgren, 2019). Fourthly, some skills and knowledge may have been devalued over time, due to job inactivity, health impairments, and psychological discouragement (Cheung and Phillimore, 2014). Finally, some types of human capital may not be transferable at all (Sommer, 2021). Kosyakova et al. (2023) show that this is particularly the case for refugee women who often possess country-specific human capital, such as in the fields of education or health. These fields are not only heavily regulated but also require destination-country specific skills and knowledge. Those with such pre-migration job experience would thus have to heavily invest in Germany-specific knowledge, acquire German job certificates, and reach a very good command of German to pick up on their pre-migration job careers. Given these difficulties with regard to foreign qualification recognition, education acquired in the destination country is crucial to refugees' economic performance, particularly in highly formalized labor markets (Bakker et al., 2017; Kanas and van Tubergen, 2009).

Overall, the pre-migration human capital background as well as the acquisition of destination-country human capital are major determinants of integration processes and outcomes. Whether refugees can capitalize on these resources after arrival is tested in section 2 of Chapter 2 of this thesis.

4.2 Health constraints

Refugees face marked health disparities, particularly high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression. Systematic reviews by Alemi et al. (2014), Bogic et al. (2015), and Lindert et al. (2009) illustrate that mental health disorders among refugees are several times more prevalent than among native populations and non-refugee migrants, due to experiences of displacement and post-migration stress. The forced character of having to migrate and the inability to return home in many cases causes a sense of displacement and disorientation. Most refugees furthermore experienced war, violence, abuse, persecution imprisonment, and/or

physical and emotional torture. The loss of family members and friends or the uncertainty about their wellbeing can furthermore cause distress and grief. These experiences can result in a variety of unpleasant emotional states and psychological distress such as sleeplessness, anxiety, a lack of optimism for the future, as well as depressive and post-traumatic stress disorders (Fazel et al., 2005; Lindert et al., 2009; Steel et al., 2009; Porter and Haslam, 2005; Phillimore, 2011; Alemi et al., 2014). The refugee journey furthermore bears health risks given experiences of violence, deprivation, malnutrition, poor living conditions and hygiene conditions, and a lack of health care on route and in camps. This results in a higher likelihood of physical impairments, such as chronic illnesses, hypertension, respiratory and gastrointestinal diseases, diabetes, skin diseases, burns, fractures, and head injuries. Pregnant and breastfeeding women face additional risks (Daynes, 2016).

Upon arrival, post-migration conditions and stressors can amplify health impairments. Limited health access after arrival and untreated illnesses can result in severe consequences for a person's health and life situation (Robjant et al., 2009). Having to justify the deservedness of receiving humanitarian protection, asylum seekers have to tell and defend their stories in manifold situations, bearing the risk of re-traumatization. In securitized surroundings such as police stations and detention centers, this can particularly cause stress among those who experienced persecution, torture, or incarceration in their home countries or on the journey (Phillimore, 2011; von Werthern et al., 2018). The uncertainty associated with lengthy asylum procedures is a further source of anxiety (Laban et al., 2008; Kearns et al., 2017, Hainmüller et al., 2016), particularly in societal climates depicting refugees as bogus migrants or potential terrorists (Alemi and Stempel, 2018). Acculturation stress, unemployment, and inadequate housing can further enhance mental health problems (Porter and Haslam, 2005). Interestingly, while the mental health of non-refugee migrants is positively associated with the economic situation in the destination country, this has not been empirically confirmed for refugee migrants (Lindert et al., 2009). This may be due to their pre-migration experiences as well as the different selection mechanisms at play: non-refugee migrants (such as labor migrants) differ from refugee migrants in terms of the migratory reasons as well as in the voluntariness and the available choices within the migration processes (Lindert et al., 2009, also see section 3 of Chapter 1).

Physical and mental health impairments are in turn strongly associated with reduced labor market entry, shorter employment durations, lower earnings, and educational setbacks. Longitudinal studies in the Netherlands (de Vroome and van Tubergen, 2010), UK (Ruiz and

Vargas-Silva, 2018), and Sweden (Lindencrona et al., 2008) provide robust evidence of these effects on employment outcomes. Will and Homuth (2020) further show that PTSD impedes refugee children's educational attainment and classroom progress.

The health impacts of displacement are thus well-documented, suggesting that the higher prevalence of mental health impairments resulting from adverse experiences before or during the refugee journey impede refugees' post-migration activities (Byrow et al., 2022; Walther et al., 2021). Through the channel of health, integration scholars have recognized and integrated the role of the refugee journey in studies on the post-migration participation of refugees (Brell et al., 2020; Ruiz and Vargas-Silva, 2018; de Vroome and Tubergen, 2010, among others). A second link between migration and integration experiences is the depreciation of human capital associated with long refugee journeys (Brell et al., 2020). Long journeys may at the same time equip migrants with additional resources, such as important social contacts or being able to communicate in a language learned during transit (Belabbas et al., 2022; Panzaru and Harding, 2025). With the outstanding exception of Freitas-Monteiro and Ludolph (2025), who confirm that victimization on the route to Germany affects refugees' post-migration integration trajectories, the direct relationship of refugees' migration experiences and integration outcomes has, however, not yet extensively been studied. To address this gap, the first contribution of this thesis explores the potential effects of straining and dangerous journeys on the post-migration biographies of refugee men and women in Germany (Chapter 2, section 1).

4.3 Social norms and gender stereotyping

A less tangible element in migrants' and refugees' post-migration activities is their socialization prior to migration. Social norms, belief systems, and cultural values leave a permanent imprint on individuals, both through society as a whole and through family structures (Bandura and Walters, 1977). For instance, observing and internalizing conservative gender norms shapes individual preferences and actions (Alesina and Giuliano, 2010, Blau et al., 2020). Blau and Kahn (2015) provide evidence that the level of female labor supply in the home country has a strong explanatory power for the likelihood of female migrants' economic participation after migration. This is after controlling for the individual's pre-migration labor market activity. Krieger (2020) finds that female migrants from families or communities in which mothers were employed are more likely to pursue education and work in the host country, demonstrating the powerful role of familial socialization and intergenerational transmission of work norms. Hence, while women from more egalitarian societies or families tend to more actively engage

in education and employment in host countries, conservative social norms can inhibit labor market participation by reinforcing caregiving and domestic roles. Over generations, Fleischmann and Höhne (2013) observe that gendered labor market patterns of migrants converge with the destination country gender gaps.

A growing body of literature evidences the effect of lived gender norms on individuals' post-migration activities. Family structure and the division of tasks has profound implications for integration outcomes, with distinctive effects by gender. Until today, in shared households, women provide the majority of unpaid household work (Fendel and Kosyakova; 2023) and typically carry the mental work load (Dean et al., 2021). This refers to cognitive tasks related to the planning and organizing of families as well as the emotional load associated with being responsible for others without interruption. The transition of moving and accommodating the family in a new environment comes with a variety of tasks in these realms, such as interacting with public authorities, attending emotionally troubled children, or furnishing. As a consequence, migratory moves have been identified as a particular stressor for female household members (Magdol, 2002).

Menke's (2024) encompassing biographical study confirms that women in refugee households in Germany were predominantly in charge of re-arranging the multiple aspects of family life in the arrival phase, while husbands were mainly occupied with the single task of labor market entry. Menke (2024) documents that in comparison with their husbands, refugee mothers with young children experience delays or interruptions in their language acquisition and labor market integration. In addition to care obligations, Menke attributes these gender differences to institutional barriers, such as difficulties to access childcare as well as insufficient labor market services (see 4.6 for details).

In sum, the caregiving burden on women substantially limits their ability to participate in language learning, upskilling, and the labor market. This effect is particularly pronounced for refugees in Germany given that the recent refugee cohort predominantly arrived in the phase of early family formation. Lived social norms, gender stereotyping, as well as the (potentially unintended) institutionalization of such norms in legal and policy systems thereby frames the economic integration of refugee women and men, favoring fathers in paid work and mothers in unpaid care work and thus resulting in highly selective integration outcomes. In section 2 of Chapter 2, I therefore analyse how the family composition at arrival shapes refugee integration trajectories and whether men and women are differently affected.

4.4 Local conditions

Empirical studies on the integration processes of migrants and refugees furthermore increasingly take into account residential environments and local economic conditions affecting education and employment outcomes (Atkinson and Kintrea, 2001; Kahn, 2010; Cockx and Ghirelli, 2016; von Schwandt and Wachter, 2019). Wimark et al. (2019) found that migrants in Sweden starting off in deprived neighborhoods showed adverse labor market outcomes in the short and in the long run. In Norwegian regions with high immigrant employment rates, refugees realized higher average wages than in other regions (Aslund and Rooth, 2007), even when controlling for local business cycles, peer effects, or welfare policy differences (Godøy, 2017). For refugees in Germany, Aksoy et al. (2023) show that a higher local unemployment rate decreased their likelihood to enter the labor market or education. The effect was particularly pronounced for males. Kristiansen et al. (2021) provide evidence that the employment share among native neighbors, but not among co-ethnic neighbors was positively associated with male refugees' labor market entry in the Netherlands. Damm's (2014) analyses suggest that a higher average skill level of non-Western neighbors increased a male migrant's employment chances in Denmark, and a high employment rate among co-national neighbors increases his annual average earnings, while the size of the co-national community was irrelevant. Stips and Kis-Katos (2020) confirm these findings for refugees in Germany. At the same time, Kristiansen et al. (2021) find no effect of the employment rate of co-ethnics on refugees' employment chances in the Netherlands, while the employment rate of natives has a positive effect. Vogiazides and Mondani (2020) show worse employment outcomes for refugees in Sweden in areas that are characterized by rising unemployment and de-industrialization, driven by increased competition for low-skilled work drive these patterns.

A decentral or peripheral location can additionally complicate access to local labor markets (Wimark et al., 2019; Vogiazides and Mondani, 2020; Andersson et al., 2018; Bevelander and Lundh, 2007). Kosyakova et al. (2022) provide evidence that exposure to the destination-country language is key for successful language acquisition, which in turn shapes labor market patterns (see 4.1). Based on their results for Glasgow, UK, Kearns and Whitley (2015) conclude that the allocation in deprived areas negatively affects the social integration of refugees, referring to feelings of safety, trust, and reliance as well as neighborly exchange. Overall, a large body of empirical evidence suggests the importance of residential characteristics for the socioeconomic outcomes of migrant populations and refugees. The study on integration

trajectories of refugees in Germany presented in section 2 of Chapter 2 therefore accounts for potential regional effects.

4.5 Othering and discrimination

Another local determinant of refugee integration is the stance that the society takes towards newcomers. The ‘othering’ of groups represents a prominent historical feature of humankind, that is, the construction, stigmatization, and exclusion of a group perceived as fundamentally different through a dominant group (Whitehead, 2018; Kastoryano, 2010). Typical markers to construct such in-groups and out-groups are ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender, or skin color, creating social hierarchies (Fiske, 1998).

Migrants are thus a typical target of othering and discrimination through the dominant destination society, albeit not homogeneously. A ranking in the public attitudes towards different nationalities and ethnicities was for example confirmed for the UK, with a distinct preference for white migrants and those perceived culturally more proximate (Ford, 2011). Among Western Europeans, Bansak et al. (2016) reveal a preference for asylum seekers who are Christian rather than Muslim, for those who are assigned a higher employability and/or a higher vulnerability. In a similar vein, Paré (2022) convincingly argues that migration politics and attitudes in Europe are characterized by a racial bias, depicting refugees from African and Middle Eastern countries as a group of non-European, non-white, ‘Oriental’, non-Christian others, while Ukrainian refugees, perceived as predominantly Western, white and Christian, were received with solidarity and generosity particularly in the first months after the Russian invasion in 2022. See Esses (2021) for a broader overview on heterogeneous forms of stereotyping along the lines of immigration category, legality, origin, religion, and skill level.

Such social hierarchies and categorizations result in stereotyping and differential treatment based on the created boundaries, referred to as discrimination, thereby generating structural inequalities (Fiske, 1998; Paré, 2022). Discriminatory behavior refers to treating individuals differently due to group memberships (Allport, 1954; Arrow, 1973) and can occur at the individual, societal, and institutional level (Pettigrew, 1998; Mendola and Busetta, 2025). Fretheim et al. (2024) show that migrants who experienced discrimination during childhood show significantly lower levels of social and institutional trust during adulthood. “Individuals who have experienced discrimination must always be on their guard, and cannot therefore, afford to trust”, Wilkes and Wu (2019, 3) comment. A hostile surrounding and discriminatory experiences can negatively affect the health and wellbeing of refugees, decrease their likelihood

to make use of health and public services, and weaken their willingness to participate in societal and political processes (da Silva Rebelo et al., 2018; Brydsten et al., 2019; Secen and Öztürk, 2024; Mendola and Busetta, 2025).

Aksoy et al. (2023) furthermore show that negative sentiments towards immigrants measured on the county-level negatively impacts the economic and social participation of refugees in Germany, and of female refugees in particular. A prominent approach towards discriminatory practices on labor markets is the distinction between taste-based and statistical discrimination (Becker, 1957; Phelps, 1972; Arrow, 1973), largely focusing on hiring decisions by employers. In that reasoning, discriminatory behavior in recruitment processes can either be based on actual preferences in favor or against members of certain groups, such as men, women, refugees, or migrants from certain regions (taste-based discrimination), or it is a rational strategy to overcome uncertainty by inferring from group characteristics on individual features (statistical discrimination, see Lang and Lehmann, 2012, for an overview). In an extensive meta study, Zschirnt and Ruedin (2016) reviewed experimental studies on ethnic discrimination in hiring decisions and confirmed vast evidence for taste-based discrimination. There are also records of statistical discrimination, but evidence was inconclusive whether additional information would actually narrow decision biases. Lippens et al. (2022) confirm in a subsequent meta analysis that taste-based discrimination outperformed statistical discrimination in explaining ethnic discrimination on the labor market.

In an illuminating article, Bohren et al. (2025) make an important contribution to this debate: they argue that beliefs on group characteristics that inform the statistical discrimination of employers are often incorrect (Fiske, 1998), but the majority of the respective studies implicitly assume correct beliefs. They furthermore elaborate on the option that incorrect beliefs solely mask underlying preferences, such that new information will not lead to an update of beliefs. Such imprecision results in biased estimates with regard to statistical vs taste-based discrimination. “Additionally, when discrimination stems from inaccurate beliefs or preferences, it can lead to further discrimination by other people (or algorithms) who learn from the decisions of the discriminators but are unaware of their bias” (Bohren et al., 2025, 605, also see Bohren et al., 2024). Lippens et al. (2022, 4269) add that the measurement of statistical discrimination is less straight-forward and uniform than the operationalization of taste-based discrimination, and the distinction of the two often leaves “room for interpretations” (Lippens et al., 2022, 4269). Section 3 of Chapter 2 adds to this discussion and examines whether such differential treatment based on taste-based preferences or statistical discrimination is prevalent

in the asylum-decision making in Germany, resulting in unequal chances to receive humanitarian protection. Section 4.6 in Chapter 1 further discusses the importance of such legal and institutional aspects in refugee integration trajectories.

4.6 Legal and institutional aspects

Finally, the legal and institutional setup is foundational for integration processes. Access to educational programs such as language classes, the recognition of qualifications (see 4.1), access to the labor market and to labor market measures, and mobility policies shape the integration experiences of refugees (Kosyakova and Kogan, 2022, Lee et al., 2020). Kanas and Kosyakova (2023) find that a greater local supply of language classes to refugees in Germany increases their German skills as well as their employment chances. Participation in language classes can furthermore alter social networks and provide institutional knowledge (Hoehne and Michalowski, 2016; Jacobsen, 2019). Spatial residence obligations and regional allocation schemes can in turn create labor market disadvantages and isolate refugees from networks or services (Cardozo Silva et al., 2023; Vogiazides and Mondani, 2020).

Spatial residence obligations and regional allocations targeted at asylum seekers and recognized refugees can, in turn, create labor market disadvantages and isolate refugees from networks or services (Cardozo Silva et al., 2023; Vogiazides and Mondani, 2020; Rashid, 2009; Rooth and Åslund, 2006). Similarly, employment bans have detrimental effects on the labor market outcomes of refugees, particularly for the less educated (Fasani et al., 2021). Some argue that they are also detrimental for receiving societies: for Germany, Marbach et al. (2018) calculated a yearly cost of 40 million euros in terms of welfare expenses and unrealized tax revenues from unemployed refugees from the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia who arrived in Germany between 1999 and 2000.

Kanas and Steinmetz (2021) showed that labor market policies can alleviate refugee-related disadvantages. The result held for both general support policies as well as those targeted at refugees and their families in particular. There is an ongoing debate, however, whether these programs are able to support high-skilled refugees in returning to their pre-migration occupational status (Liechti et al., 2017; Mozetič, 2022). Spehar (2021) identified that particularly refugee women received insufficient institutional support in realizing their labor market plans in Sweden. It has been argued in organizational sociology that labor market institutions are not gender-neutral (Acker, 1990, 2006; Williams, 1989, 2001): constructed from a default male biography, these institutions optimize employment opportunity structures for

men (Spehar, 2021; Menke, 2024; Wingens, 2011). Consequently, women more often deviate from this ‘ideal worker’ and are treated as the deficient individuals who must be fixed to maximize their returns (Ryan and Morgenroth, 2024). This male-default lens materializes in a number of labor market attributes: importantly, full-time employment is the default expectation towards potential employees (Salikutluk and Menke, 2021; also see 4.3). Furthermore, the reconciliation of unpaid care work with paid work, language acquisition, or the participation in job measures is not accounted for (Sansonetti, 2016; Spehar, 2021). Applying traditional gender-stereotyped norms, labor market officers furthermore tend to assume that women do not want to pursue a career, resulting in low-level educational and work offers (Spehar, 2021). Such labor market structures optimized to male rather than female biographies represent major gender-specific barriers that also apply to refugee women.

Finally, a particularly important component of refugees’ early post-migration trajectories typically is the process of gaining a legal residence title (Kosyakova and Kogan, 2022). In states offering asylum, recognized asylum seekers usually obtain access to basic civil services and systems such as labor markets, education, and health care. It is well established in the literature that these circumstances are crucial for building a new life in the destination country in terms of social, educational, and economic participation (Phillimore, 2021; Kosyakova and Brenzel, 2020; Lai et al., 2024, among others). Yet, empirical evidence suggests that access to legal protection is marked by structural inequalities. Kosyakova and Brücker (2020) showed that the outcome and duration of the asylum procedure varied with applicants’ socioeconomic background. More educated individuals and those with stronger social networks were more likely to secure a protection status and on average went through shorter asylum determination processes.

Previous research has furthermore found large variation in asylum approval rates in the United States and European Union member states due to increased public or political attention to asylum issues (Salehyan and Rosenblum 2008; Spirig, 2021; Emeriau, 2024), the political predispositions of judges (Keith et al., 2013, Ramji-Nogales et al., 2007), regional political preferences (Holzer et al., 2000, Riedel and Schneider, 2017; Schneider et al., 2020), or the occurrence of terrorist attacks (Emeriau, 2024; Rottman et al, 2009). These findings are in contradiction with the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees granting asylum to everyone who has a well-founded fear of persecution, which has since been translated into international and national law (Joppke, 1997). Such discriminatory behavior is possible as asylum agents have considerable discretion in executing asylum law, representing a typical principal-agent situation

(Pressman and Wildavsky, 1984). The access to legal recognition therefore varies with contextual factors and individual resource endowment.

Kosyakova and Brenzel (2020) find that protracted asylum processing creates uncertainty, depression, and restricts refugees' access to work, healthcare, and education. Uncertain legal status can thus revoke the positive effect of education on socioeconomic outcomes and wellbeing (Gladwell, 2020). It can further hamper investment decisions, while an approved legal status represents an incentive to invest in human capital, such as language skills (Kosyakova et al., 2022; Brell et al., 2020). Legal security thus represents a major element in integration processes. 3 of this thesis explores how discriminatory setups described in section 4.5 interfere with the process of refugees to gain legal security, namely the asylum procedure. The analysis establishes that immigration-averse climates in German regions lower the chances to be granted asylum status. Structural conditions in the county or region of residence thus serve as external filters, contributing to spatially stratified integration outcomes.

5. Conclusion

In sum, the migration and integration literature identifies manifold individual and contextual factors that can act as filters throughout several stages of refugee migration and integration. Migration and integration outcomes are thus strongly shaped by individual background and the context in which an individual is embedded. In other words, the uneven distribution of and access to resources and opportunities among different refugee groups can result in a variety of migration and integration outcomes. The sociological perspective of structural inequalities thus provides a valuable approach to understand such heterogeneous patterns in the migration and integration trajectories of refugees. Guided by this approach, Chapter 2 explores such heterogeneities in refugees' migration processes (section 1), integration processes (section 2), and legal recognition processes (section 3).

To be precise, I firstly conclude from the critical discussion of the migration literature in section 3 of Chapter 1 that the refugee journey remains an understudied phenomenon in migration research and represents a valuable starting point for scholars seeking to advance migration theory-making towards encompassing forced migration. Section 1 of Chapter 2 therefore analyses the selection processes of Syrian refugees across receiving countries in the Global South and Global North and establishes that legal and political frameworks as well as the accessibility of routes represent major external barriers to forced migration. These are more

permeable to some and less permeable to others at different points in time, resulting in heterogeneous forced migration outcomes.

Relatedly, integration studies (discussed in section 4 of Chapter 1) tend to focus on post-migration developments, while forced migration processes as a potential determinant of integration outcomes remain understudied. Also, pre-migration features such as educational and employment careers, social contexts and social norms, as well as family care obligation structures in which an individual was embedded in prior to migration do not simply vanish with the settlement in a new country. Rather, it can be expected that pre-arrival factors shape biographies after arrival in a new country (Kosyakova et al., 2025; Elder et al., 2015; Ruis, 2019). I therefore argue that a life-course perspective integrating the pre-migration phase as well as the refugee journey into the analysis of post-migration integration outcomes is a promising approach (Wingens et al., 2011). Section 2 of Chapter 2 offers a biographical approach to the integration trajectories of refugees and proposes that pre-migration and migration phases are important elements in shaping their biographies after arrival.

Finally, obtaining a legal protection status represents an important stepping stone into educational, economic, and social participation. While access to humanitarian protection should be granted to everyone with a well-founded fear of persecution according to the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees, asylum status determination processes in receiving countries of the Global North have been found to vary with national political contexts (see section 4.6, Chapter 1). Section 3 in Chapter 2 therefore investigates the role of political climates and political preferences for asylum-decision making in Germany and finds that positive asylum decisions are less likely in regions with more hostile governments and ore residents.

In sum, this thesis provides evidence for selection patterns and structural inequalities in refugee migration and integration and argues that external structures and conditions are not equally permeable to all groups. Rather, individual characteristics interact with contextual factors, that is, border regimes, immigration and asylum policies, societal manifestations of prejudices and xenophobia, integration policies, and social norms, stratifying migration and integration outcomes of forced migrants along the lines of gender and family context, education, social class, and immigrant status.

Chapter 2. Empirical investigations

1. Unequal access to protection? Selection patterns over arrival cohorts of Syrians seeking refuge in Lebanon, Turkey, and Germany (Article 1)

An ample scholarly literature on voluntary migration has shown that migration is a highly selective process, resulting in migrant populations that often differ significantly from their respective population of origin in terms of their socio-demographic characteristics. The literature attributes these differences to either migrants' active choice and agency in the migration decision (i.e., self-selection), or to selectively applied external constraints. Although the socio-demographic make-up of forced migrant populations has received significant attention in public discourses in receiving countries such as Germany and Turkey, the literature on migrant selection largely focuses on voluntary migration and self-selection mechanisms. As a result, the selection mechanisms of forcibly displaced persons are less well understood. In this study we contribute to that literature by investigating differences in forced migrant selection outcomes in countries of first refuge neighboring the origin country, relative to a reception country in the global north. Based on novel household survey data, we compare age, gender, socio-economic background and family context of the Syrian populations in Lebanon, Turkey, and Germany by arrival cohort (2013-2017). We furthermore explore two potential selection mechanisms of forced migrant populations. Particularly in the context of forced migration, the conditions for migration fluctuate heavily within a relatively short time span, e.g. regarding immigration policies and border controls. We explore the changing conditions under which Syrians sought international humanitarian protection and link them to the selection outcomes in the three destination countries. In a narrative approach, we establish legal and political frameworks as well as the accessibility of routes as external barriers to forced migration. We combine the cohort analysis of Syrians in Lebanon, Turkey, and Germany with contextual analyses of the (changing) frameworks governing refugee migration in transit and destination countries and descriptive analyses of changing risk levels along routes. Our analyses reveal that higher external barriers coincide with a stronger selection in migrants' socio-demographic make-up. In particular, riskier routes and higher entry barriers are associated with a lower share of female migrants, a lower share traveling with family members, and a higher socio-economic background. For details of the study, refer to Appendix 1.

The first study was published in *Frontiers in Human Dynamics*:

Gundacker, L., Keita, S., Ruhnke, S. (2024): Unequal access to protection? Selection patterns over arrival cohorts of Syrians seeking refuge in Lebanon, Turkey, and Germany. *Frontiers in Human Dynamics*, 5(1171885), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fhumd.2023.1171885>.

2. Refugee journeys and the erosion of pre-migration human capital: a sequence-analysis approach to post-migration trajectories (Article 2)

More than a decade ago, refugee immigration prominently returned to Europe's political agendas, sparking interest in the factors shaping refugees' economic and societal participation. Adopting a life course perspective, this study addresses the conflicting views in sociology of migration on the importance of pre-migration capital for refugees' post-migration trajectories. While some argue that human capital is accumulated over the life course and retains its value after migration, others describe forced migration as a disruptive event that may severely diminish these resources. Drawing on rich survey and administrative employment data, this article employs sequence analysis combined with cluster analysis to identify typical integration trajectories of refugee women and men in Germany. In multivariate analyses, I demonstrate that pre-migration human capital is associated with a higher likelihood to enter education and employment, underscoring the enduring relevance of resources acquired prior to migration. Straining journeys can, however, reduce available resources after arrival: for individuals reporting long and traumatizing journeys, human capital effects partly disappear. The results highlight the important role of refugee migration experiences that are often neglected in both scholarly and political discourses on integration outcomes as well as migration and integration policies. For details of the study, refer to Appendix 2.

The second study was published in *Advances in Life Course Research*:

Gundacker, L. (2026): Refugee journeys and the erosion of pre-migration human capital: a sequence-analysis approach to post-migration trajectories. *Advances in life course research*, 68. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alcr.2026.100741>.

3. How regional attitudes towards immigration shape the chance to obtain asylum: Evidence from Germany (Article 3)

Asylum recognition rates in advanced democracies differ not only across states but also vary within them, translating into fluctuating individual chances to obtain protection. Existing studies on the determinants of these regional inequities typically rely on aggregate data. Utilizing a German refugee survey and leveraging a quasi-natural experiment arising from state-based allocation rules tied to national dispersal policies, we test two explanations for the perplexing regional differences. Drawing on principal-agent models of administrative decision-

making, we test whether asylum decision-makers consciously or unconsciously comply with regional political preferences between 2015 and 2017 in Germany, one of the major European destination countries for refugee migration. We furthermore explore whether such biased decision-making amplifies in times of organizational stress as suggested by the statistical discrimination theory. Using mixed-effects logistic regressions, our analyses confirm a lower approval probability in regions with more immigration-averse residents or governments. We cannot confirm, however, that this association is mediated by high workloads or large knowledge gaps. Our results thus suggest that regional political biases affect the individual chance of asylum-seekers to obtain protection irrespective of temporal administrative conditions. For details of the study, refer to Appendix 3.

The third study was published in Migration Studies:

Gundacker, L., Kosyakova, Y., Schneider, G. (2024): How regional attitudes towards immigration shape the chance to obtain asylum: Evidence from Germany. *Migration Studies*, 13(1). <https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnae002>.

Chapter 3. Conclusion

Forced migration is not a singular event but a dynamic, multi-phased trajectory encompassing pre-migration decision-making, uncertain journeys, arrival, and integration. From a sociological perspective, migration and integration processes are characterized by structural inequalities and selection processes that stratify outcomes along the lines of gender and family context, education, social class, and immigrant status, contingent on structural contexts, institutions, and policies. In this thesis, I contributed to this field in three interconnected studies exploring how individual resource endowment, border regimes, immigration policies, xenophobia, integration policies, and social norms shape the trajectories of forced migrants.

In particular, I established that restrictive border regimes and immigration policies are more permeable to male, single, and the more educated refugees. With the seminal works of Chiswick (1999) and Borjas (1987), the most prominent stream of migration theory is rooted in an economic understanding of migration decision-making as a utility-maximizing strategy of rational individuals. This approach mostly targeted labor migration, establishing that individuals select into migration and destination countries based on expected (mostly monetary) returns. More recently, scholars have tested this framework on forced migration and confirmed that refugees also represent selected groups: they are typically younger and more educated than their origin country population and display gender disparity towards men (Guichard, 2020; Spörlein et al., 2020; Aksoy and Poutvaara, 2021). In their theoretical reasoning, these studies consider refugee-specific costs and risks (such as health risks, gender-specific risks, geographic distances, and dangerous and costly routes) but do not empirically investigate them. Their analyses furthermore do not account for the (sometimes rapidly) changing border and immigration policies under which refugees typically operate.

In a descriptive approach, I filled this gap by showing for Syrian refugee migration that a shift towards less risky, less costly and shorter travel options increased the number of women, family migrants, and the less educated reaching Germany (Section 1 in Chapter 2). To that end, I combined survey data with macro-level data in descriptive analyses and contextualized the results in a narrative approach (see Romer and Romer, 2023). My results implied that the legal and geographical accessibility of countries had a large impact on the composition of refugee populations. While migrant selection along the lines of gender, education, social class, and immigrant status have been addressed extensively in the literature, the specific contexts in which forced migration takes place (or remains unsuccessful) has been understudied. Based on

my analyses, I suggest an expansion of the existing framework to external barriers, namely legal and political conditions such as border policies, asylum policies, and route characteristics. These external structures are permeable to some but impermeable to others at different points in time, such that the uneven composition of migrant populations should be studied in the context of these selective external structures governing forced migration.

Likewise, refugees' societal and economic participation upon arrival is not a linear and uniform process. Again, both individual resource endowments and the structural and social context in which refugees are embedded affect their participation patterns after arrival. In my second empirical contribution, I assessed these stratified post-migration trajectories of refugees in Germany in a biographical approach (Section 2 in Chapter 3). Using sequence analysis techniques on survey data combined with administrative data, I identified typical integration trajectories of male and female refugees in Germany. Given its policy relevance, I largely focused on economic participation and human capital investments. I could show that participation trajectories after arrival differed widely with pre-migration resources and gender: women with higher levels of education were more likely to enter the labor market rapidly, while men rather capitalized on previous work experience. Additionally, highly educated individuals were overrepresented in education-intensive trajectories.

Based on the findings of my first contribution, I furthermore considered the potential effects of straining and dangerous journeys. Indeed, a longer journey duration and the experience of adverse events were associated with a higher inactivity of men after arrival. In line with Freitas-Monteiro and Ludolph (2025), this particularly concerned the educational activity of men. Results for women were inconclusive. In addition to health impairments (Walther et al., 2021), victimization can reduce optimism and future orientation, lowering incentives to pick up education or work (Bindler and Ketel, 2022; Beiser, 1987). While this analysis did not exhaustively explore the causal link between refugee journeys and post-journey outcomes, it does provide important evidence for a gendered relationship between the migration and integration experiences of refugees that deserves further empirical and theoretical exploration.

A key element in refugees post-migration trajectories is gaining legal residence which grants access to labor markets, education, and health care systems, facilitating social and economic participation (Kosyakova and Kogan, 2022; Phillimore, 2021). Yet, asylum outcomes vary with applicants' socioeconomic resources and local factors such as the political, societal and judicial contexts and conditions (see section 4.6, Chapter 1). The asylum decision-making process can

be described as a typical principal-agent situation (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1984) which gives room for political preferences of the regional public or regional governing bodies to filter into asylum decisions (Law, 2005; Baum, 2010). Most of the studies investigating the backgrounds of imbalanced asylum decision-making rely on macro analyses of aggregate protection numbers, such that individual factors cannot be accounted for.

In this thesis, I addressed this gap by examining the political determinants of protection chances for asylum seekers in Germany employing individual-level data in mixed-effects logistic regressions. Given the high political salience of immigration and integration in the German discourse in the period under study, asylum decision-makers may have been affected by political climates and preferences. I furthermore tested whether biased decision-making grew in times of organizational stress and high workload. My analysis allowed me to assess whether access to a legal title is distributed equally across groups and time. I found that in regions with a more hostile environment towards immigrants, referring to both government and residents, chances of a positive asylum decision were lower. Furthermore, male and Muslim asylum seekers had per se lower recognition chances. Hence, access to protection was not distributed equally across groups: both individual factors and structural conditions in the county of residence affected refugees' access to legal status.

The presented studies focused on selected refugee cohorts since 2013 in a selected set of destination countries such that the applicability to other contexts such as the displacement from Ukraine in response to the Russian invasion in 2022 is subject to discussion. Also, the causality of the proposed mechanisms has not exhaustively been explored in the presented studies and needs verification in future studies. Furthermore, with a focus on structural integration patterns, this thesis does not provide insights into aspects of refugees' societal participation.

From a scholarly perspective, I nevertheless conclude on three major takeaways. Firstly, approaches that reconcile structural constraints and individual agency are fundamental for advancing the empirical and theoretical understanding processes and outcomes of forced migration (de Haas, 2021). Studies that neglect either individual conditions, structural conditions, or their interplay, will miss large parts of the picture and leave the heterogeneities of migration and integration processes uncovered.

Secondly, migration processes and integration processes should not be understood as unrelated periods but as interlinked elements in continuous refugee biographies (Timmerman et al., 2018). Integration research often focuses on developments after arrival, ignoring how pre-

migration factors - such as family structures, lived social norms, educational and job careers - affect post-migration trajectories. Also, the refugee journey itself remains empirically understudied and insufficiently conceptualized. This results in theoretical and empirical gaps in understanding (1) migration decisions, migration processes, and migration outcomes of forced migrants and (2) how these migration patterns affect experiences of refugees after arrival in a destination country. I conclude that incorporating pre-arrival periods in the examination of post-migration outcomes bares strong analytical potential to overcome knowledge gaps and blind spots in the understanding of refugee integration. A life-course approach represents a valuable frame for that endeavor.

For the same reason, I, thirdly, advocate for interdisciplinary and multi-methodological research (Bloch, 2020; Boswell, 2008). Migration and integration outcomes are shaped by the dynamic intersections of migrant aspirations, resource endowments, family ties, health, norms and beliefs, societal structures and institutional conditions. They thus touch upon the fields of psychology, politics, sociology, health research, economics, demography, and human geography. Up until today, migration theory is dominated by rational choice approaches that fall short in grasping the complexity of forced migration. Integrating insights and methods from various disciplines and accepting their respective strengths and weaknesses can expand the empirical foundations from which forced migration can be explained and theorized. In sum, bridging the gap between migration and integration analyses will advance our theoretical understanding of forced migration, providing the foundation for more effective, inclusive, and equitable policies for refugees across all stages of their journeys.

In policy terms, the findings suggest that integration policy-making is intimately connected to policies governing migration, border regimes, and legal recognition. Multi-level governance—which spans national, regional, and local levels—can either mitigate or exacerbate structural inequalities. Firstly, if equal access to humanitarian protection is a political goal, then asylum and immigration laws should be reconsidered in terms of their fairness and practicability. Broadly accessible legal pathways into humanitarian protection could decrease harm and deadly risks and could ensure that access to security is not a matter of physical fitness, gender, or family status. Such policy reforms would be most effective if enacted on an international level. Given the current risks of victimization during refugee journeys and the impeding impact on post-migration activity, policy-makers are furthermore advised to revise support schemes for refugees in destination countries. Secondly, given the persistent risks of victimization during

refugee journeys and their impeding impacts on post-migration trajectories, support systems in receiving countries are of crucial importance. Culturally sensitive and gender-sensitive health programs to alleviate mental stress and physical impairments early after arrival could ease the long-term negative consequences of straining refugee journeys. Such an approach would benefit both fleeing individuals and receiving societies. Given the strongly stratified outcomes identified in my research, policies should be attuned to the varying needs with respect to gender, age, family contexts, and health status. Finally, regular training and systematic supervision sessions for asylum decision-makers to address potential biases in their decision-making could enhance fairness and accountability in asylum processes. Asylum decisions should furthermore systematically be reviewed, ideally by external agents, and respective data should be released for scientific and public use. In sum, these measures could help mitigate the inequalities that accumulate throughout the biography of a refugee migrant.

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Appendix

Appendix 1

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Unequal access to protection? Selection patterns over arrival cohorts of Syrians seeking refuge in Lebanon, Turkey, and Germany

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Introduction: An ample scholarly literature on voluntary migration has shown that migration is a highly selective process, resulting in migrant populations that often differ significantly from their respective population of origin in terms of their socio-demographic characteristics. The literature attributes these differences to either migrants' active choice and agency in the migration decision (i.e., self-selection), or to selectively applied external constraints. Although the socio-demographic make-up of forced migrant populations has received significant attention in public discourses in receiving countries such as Germany and Turkey, the literature on migrant selection largely focuses on voluntary migration and self-selection mechanisms. As a result, the selection mechanisms of forcibly displaced persons are less well-understood. Particularly in the context of forced migration, the conditions for migration fluctuate heavily within a relatively short time span, e.g., regarding immigration policies and border controls. In this study we contribute to that literature by exploring the changing conditions under which Syrians sought international humanitarian protection between 2013 and 2017 and linking them to the selection outcomes in three major receiving countries: Lebanon, Turkey, and Germany.

Methods: Based on novel household survey data, we compare age, gender, socio-economic background, and family context of the Syrian populations in Lebanon, Turkey, and Germany by arrival cohort (2013–2017). In a narrative approach, we combine the cohort analysis of Syrians in Lebanon, Turkey, and Germany with contextual analyses of the (changing) frameworks governing refugee migration in transit and destination countries and descriptive analyses of changing risk levels along migration routes into Europe.

Results: Our analyses reveal that higher external barriers coincide with a stronger selection in migrants' socio-demographic make-up. In particular, riskier routes and higher entry barriers are associated with a lower share of female migrants, a lower share traveling with family members, and a higher socio-economic background.

Discussion: In this study, we describe differences in forced migrants' selection outcomes in countries of first refuge neighboring the origin country, relative to a reception country in the global north. By establishing legal and political frameworks as well as the accessibility of routes as external barriers to forced migration we expand on the existing theoretical approaches to selection effects and identify a need for policy intervention to ensure equitable access to humanitarian protection.

KEYWORDS

refugees, forced migration, selection, migration processes, mobility, individual-level data, fatality data

1 Introduction

According to the UNHCR, the number of forcibly displaced persons reached the landmark of 100 million for the first time in May 2022, including 53.2 million people displaced inside their borders. In other words, more than one percent of the global population was forced to flee war, violence, human rights violations, or persecution on political, ethnic, or religious grounds [United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR), 2022a]. With 149 signatory states to the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees or the related Protocol from 1967, most countries currently recognize access to peace and security as a fundamental right inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, gender, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status. However, only a few of the 193 UN Member States bear the largest share of responsibility for refugees—either by hosting large refugee populations or by contributing financially to humanitarian efforts. Three in four refugees are hosted by low and middle-income countries such as Lebanon (UNHCR, 2022c), i.e., by countries that only have limited resources and often face internal political or economic challenges of their own. Hence, with the demand for humanitarian protection rising globally, the imbalance between the required and the available resources to provide humanitarian protection increases.

Although contexts of civil war, violence, terror, and persecution affect most societal groups simultaneously, people in vulnerable situations are equipped unequally with the resources and abilities to reach safe ground (Buber-Enns et al., 2016; Guichard, 2020). In other words, access to peace, security, and fundamental rights depend on people's individual resource endowments to move and undertake journeys with uncertain outcomes. This concerns financial means as well as social capital (e.g., family networks abroad) and physical resources (e.g., health and fitness) required to embark on long and risky escape routes that are particularly penalizing for women, children, elderly, and disabled persons. Given the commitment of many countries to provide protection to those in need and the rising number of individuals seeking international protection (United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR), 2022a), it is crucial to examine the unequal selection into humanitarian protection by socio-demographic groups and its determinants. In our study, we focus on refugee migration out of Syria into neighboring countries and Europe, with the Syrian civil war representing one of the largest displacement events of the past decade (UNHCR, 2022c).

The literature on migrant selection outcomes is typically based on utility maximization frameworks in which the cost and benefit considerations of potential migrants predict their migration decisions (Roy, 1951; Borjas, 1987). This literature typically refers to voluntary migration and considers individual resources (such as human capital) and contextual factors (e.g., labor market or economic conditions in destination countries) in shaping migrant selection. While these mechanisms may apply to forced migrants as well (Guichard, 2020; Aksoy and Poutvaara, 2021; Brückner et al., 2021), the mobility of forced migrants needs further exploration for at least two reasons. Firstly, additional contextual factors apply to the mobility choices of forced migrants: border and immigration policies as well as risks and threats at home and

on the route represent external constraints to the mobility of individuals seeking humanitarian refuge (Guichard, 2020; Spörlein et al., 2020). This reactive character of refugee migration derives from a lack preparation and limited legal pathways (Richmond, 1993). Secondly, these external conditions can be highly time-sensitive given the fluidity of wars and conflicts as well as the policy responses of receiving countries, particularly in times of vast international displacement. In the context of the recent refugee migration from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq into Europe, transit and destination countries have adapted their immigration policies and border practices various times, changing the accessibility of countries and the permeability of borders within relatively short time spans. Like most refugee populations, a large share of displaced Syrians initially moved across borders without valid travel documentation such as visas. Hence, the available options to claim asylum were strongly influenced by the ability to overcome barriers to mobility.

In this paper, we investigate how the selection outcomes among Syrians seeking refuge in Lebanon, Turkey, and Germany relate to the changing conditions governing their migration during the peak of Syrian migration between 2013 and 2017. We argue that national entry regulations and policy decisions governing migration and asylum as well as the level of endangerment on travel routes substantially shape the group compositions of refugees in different destinations and at different points in time. More restrictive immigration policies and higher risk en route represent external barriers that are more permeable to men, those of higher fitness (usually younger of age), those with a higher socioeconomic background and solo travelers (in contrast to those traveling with family members). To evaluate these assumptions, we analyze historical fatality data on the main migration routes as well as contextual information on relevant policy regulations and policy changes in host and transit countries and relate the findings to the selective mobility of Syrians in the three destination countries under study.

From a quantitative perspective, studying the intertwined role of external barriers and individual factors is challenging: it requires comparable information on the characteristics of several migration cohorts displaced by the same conflict but residing in different locations. In this study, we take advantage of novel survey data on Syrian refugees collected in Lebanon, Turkey, and Germany to conduct a comparative analysis of different arrival cohorts between 2013 and 2017 in the three host countries. To assess the socio-demographic make-up of Syrians in Lebanon and Turkey, we rely on ongoing longitudinal surveys of Syrian nationals in both countries, jointly collected by the Berlin Institute for Empirical Integration and Migration Research (BIM, Humboldt University Berlin, Germany) and the Institute for Employment Research (IAB, Nuremberg, Germany). Information on Syrians in Germany stem from the longitudinal IAB-BAMF-SOEP survey of refugees. Employing a narrative approach, we furthermore describe the changing external conditions governing migration based on qualitative sources and descriptively explore changing levels of risk over time on major migration routes in the period under study (2013–2017). Our analyses show highly selective Syrian migrant cohorts in Germany compared to Turkey and Lebanon. The results suggest that immigration policy frameworks and endangerment

levels on routes represent external barriers that are more exclusive to women, family migrants and those with a lower socioeconomic status. Our analysis of cohort differences both between destination countries and over time not only contributes to the academic literature on mechanisms of forced migrant selection but also bears important policy implications.

2 Literature review: selection under constrained agency

The contemporary empirical literature on migrant selectivity, i.e., on the question whether and how migrants systematically differ from non-migrants, dates back to the seminal work of Borjas (1987). His theoretical framework is in turn based on the Roy-Model (Roy, 1951). This discourse is firmly situated in what de Haas (2021) has described as the functionalized paradigm of migration theory. Within this paradigm, the migration decision is typically modeled as a utility-maximization process such that a potential migrant only engages in migration if the expected gains from migration (e.g., higher returns on education, better living standards) outweigh the pecuniary and non-pecuniary costs of migration (travel costs, loss of social networks) (Sjaastad, 1962). While this distinctly neoclassical theory with its focus on labor market outcomes has been gradually refined to incorporate more nuanced aspects of the migration decision such as household and family decision-making (e.g., Stark, 1991), social networks (e.g., Munshi, 2020), health status (e.g., Riosmena et al., 2017), or cultural preferences (e.g., Docquier et al., 2020), the assumption that migrants represent a selective sub-sample of the population of origin has been consistently confirmed across a variety of geographic contexts. Despite this breadth in theoretical and empirical advancements on the causes and nature of migrant selection, refugees and displaced populations remained long absent from this literature.

This absence can in part be attributed to the dichotomization of forced and voluntary migration and the fact that the migration decision of refugees was long assumed to be void of agency and thus rarely conceptualized at all (Kunz, 1973). Gradually though, it was recognized that, while highly constrained by external factors (exposure to conflict, asylum and border regimes, physical accessibility and danger of flight routes), refugees do retain some level of proactive planning and decision-making capacity (Richmond, 1993; McAuliffe and Jayasuriya, 2016). Rather than aligning with a forced-voluntary dichotomy, refugees, like all migrants, find themselves somewhere along a continuum between forced and voluntary migration. Refugees often react to strong push factors that leave little choice in the timing of outmigration. Nevertheless, refugees retain agency in the choice of destination when several options are available. Consequently, the same mechanisms that have been identified as influencing the migration decision of voluntary and labor migrants may also apply to refugee populations. Within this constrained agency, the expected gains from migration may feature in the migration decision-making of refugees, including in their destination choice. Highly educated refugees may, for instance, prefer to seek asylum in a country with relatively higher returns to education, resulting in self-selection outcomes of refugee cohorts. Refugees, however,

face additional constraints, such that not all individuals are able to act on their preferences. For the majority seeking refuge, no legal pathways into sheltering countries exist. Irregular migration is costly, both in monetary and physical terms, constraining refugees' agency. It is thus plausible to expect some self-selection effects among refugees in economically relevant characteristics (such as education and age) albeit less pronounced than for other forms of migration - depending on the degree to which their agency is constrained (Chiswick, 1999; Chin and Cortes, 2015).

But external constraints may not only dampen selection effects among refugees. Since constraints and enabling factors affect different sub-groups of a heterogeneous refugee population to a different degree (McAuliffe, 2017), they may also amplify selection outcomes. The often-substantial financial cost of (irregular) migration may for instance be more manageable for highly educated members of elevated social strata (Buber-Ennser et al., 2016; Guichard, 2020). Moreover, female refugees, the elderly and those traveling with families are more exposed to physical dangers during transit. They may thus have to abstain from migration or their migration attempts remain unsuccessful (Spörlein et al., 2020; Aksoy and Poutvaara, 2021). As access to asylum is considered a basic human right that is not to be applied selectively, selective refugee migration resulting from external constraints (such as deliberate policy decisions) have important normative implications. Distinguishing between selection outcomes that result from self-selection based on utility maximization motives and those resulting from external constraints is thus of importance both on theoretical as well as humanitarian grounds.

We argue that framing the migration decision of refugees as either void of agency or a result of unconstrained utility maximization bears the risk of overlooking essential political, legal, and economic conditions associated with displacement that limit access to asylum for selected sub-groups of refugees. We understand the concepts of migrant self-selection and selective external constraints as complementary rather than competing in explaining forced migrant selection patterns. Specifically, previous research mostly focused on structural factors of benefits and costs of migration that evolve slowly over time, such as income differences, cultural aspects, distance, ethnic networks, etc. In contrast, external constraints (such as border policies) can change quickly over a short time period in reaction to political or environmental factors. They determine the number of possible choices as well as the conditions and costs to reach a destination. Therefore, alongside the established expectations on costs and benefits, we investigate the role of (1) legal and political frameworks in transit and destination countries at the time of migration and (2) risk levels on main migration routes in shaping refugee migration outcomes.

In line with the theoretical literature described above, the otherwise broad empirical literature on selection rarely features refugees. The relatively scarce existing empirical evidence on selection outcomes among forced migrants aligns with the theoretical assumption of positive selection of refugees along economically relevant factors. Studies consistently show refugees to have higher educational attainment than the average member of their population of origin (Chin and Cortes, 2015; Buber-Ennser et al., 2016; Birgier et al., 2018; Blum and Rei, 2018; Lange and Pfeiffer, 2019; Guichard, 2020; Spörlein et al., 2020; Aksoy and

Poutvaara, 2021; Welker, 2022). Some studies suggest that this selection effect is less pronounced than among labor migrants in the same arrival context (Chin and Cortes, 2015; Blum and Rei, 2018), while others find mixed results (Spörlein et al., 2020). Spörlein et al. (2020) further provide evidence on selection on gender, with the refugee population under study (Afghans, Eritreans, Iraqis, and Syrians) being disproportionately male.

These post-migration comparisons of the composition of refugee populations relative to their respective populations of origin can provide evidence on the existence of selection effects among refugees. They are, however, limited in their ability to shed light on the underlying mechanisms at play. The selection outcomes reported in the literature are compatible with both self-selection on the basis of utility maximization and selection based on external constraints. One option to overcome this limitation is to add further variation to the analysis by comparing selection outcomes between refugees in different destination countries. Multiple studies have shown that asylum seekers in Germany are younger on average, are more likely to be male and have a higher average educational attainment than their compatriots seeking asylum in countries neighboring their country of origin (Guichard, 2020; Spörlein et al., 2020; Welker, 2022). Yet, once more the authors discuss but do not test that the more pronounced selection may be attributable not only to higher returns on education in Germany, but also to higher costs, risks and barriers associated with the long journey to Germany (Guichard, 2020; Spörlein et al., 2020; Welker, 2022).

We seek to add to this strain of literature by adding another dimension to the comparison of selection outcomes: In addition to studying three key asylum countries of the Syrian diaspora, we also compare selection outcomes over time, studying different arrival cohorts in Lebanon, Turkey, and Germany. This approach allows us to focus on the impact of short-term changes in context factors. Many of the factors that have been proposed as influencing individual migration decisions and thus potentially self-selection outcomes, such as expected return to education, social networks, welfare systems or gender and religious norms are unlikely to change significantly in relative magnitude during our relatively short observation period we study (2013 to 2017). Meanwhile, changes in the border and asylum policy framework governing the migration of Syrians changed substantially over this same time span in response to the unfolding displacement crisis. Studies have shown that such short-term policy changes can have a significant impact on the overall size of refugee arrival cohorts in a country (Hatton, 2017; Bertoli et al., 2022). Given that external constraints tend to affect members of a heterogeneous refugee population differently (McAuliffe, 2017), it is plausible that such short-term shifts could also be reflected in the selection of the different arrival cohorts we study. To our knowledge, no study has investigated these external selection mechanisms empirically. By comparing selection outcomes across both country of residence and arrival cohort we address this important gap in the migrant selection literature.

Based on the framework of constrained refugee agency and the existing empirical literature we assume that less accessible escape routes induce more severe selection patterns in terms of physical and financial resources. Specifically, on routes that require

higher levels of physical fitness and involve more risks, we expect to observe higher shares of young and male migrants traveling without their families. We further assume that Lebanon was the most accessible destination for Syrian refugees: entry barriers at the border were relatively low during the first 4 years of the Syrian civil war. Also, with Arabic as a common language, Syrians face no language barriers in Lebanon. Among the three destinations under study, all routes to Germany were by far the longest in distance, most expensive, and most risky, as will be discussed in more detail in section Syrian refugee migration: paths into Lebanon, Turkey and Germany.

Based on these assumptions, we thus expect

1) Syrians in Germany to be on average younger, to display a higher socioeconomic background, more likely to be males, and more likely to have arrived without their families than Syrians in Lebanon and Turkey.

With regard to the variation over arrival cohorts, we expect a more pronounced selection in terms of age, gender, socio-economic background and family context at arrival.

2) for arrival cohorts who arrived in either of the countries at times of more restrictive legal and policy frameworks, and

3) for arrival cohorts in Germany (vis-à-vis Lebanon and Turkey) whose routes into Europe were characterized by a higher risk of death.

3 Data and method

3.1 TRANSMIT Turkey and Lebanon surveys

In order to identify correlations between selectivity patterns among the displaced Syrian population and macro-structural changes in border and immigration policy as well as risk levels on migration routes, we firstly employ a descriptive analysis of individual-level demographic data by arrival cohort combined with secondary aggregated data on border crossings and migrant fatality data. Secondly, in a narrative approach, we offer a contextual analysis of the (changing) frameworks governing humanitarian migration to Lebanon, Turkey, and Germany. We focus on elusive factors that are usually overlooked in quantitative approaches due to measurement challenges, namely geographical access, border permeability, immigration regimes and policy enforcement. The strength of a narrative approach lies in its ability to consider qualitative sources (such as government statements and news articles) in an empirical framework when comprehensive quantitative indicators are not available (see Romer and Romer, 2023; for an exemplary overview on the narrative approach applied in macroeconomics). We furthermore provide a descriptive analysis of the changing levels of risk for life and health on major routes into Europe based on fatality data and data on border crossing activities. Finally, we interpret the selective mobility of Syrians in the three countries under study in the context of the (varying) legal and political frameworks as well as changing risk levels. This descriptive approach, which does not establish causality in an econometric sense, enables us to shed light on factors that are often overlooked but can induce substantial changes in selection patterns within short time frames.

For the cohort analysis of Syrians in Lebanon, Turkey, and Germany, we rely on an ongoing longitudinal survey of Syrian nationals in Turkey and Lebanon, collected by the BIM and the IAB in a joint research project on Transnational Migration and Integration (TRANSMIT). The survey targets a stratified sample of Syrian nationals and non-Syrian nationals in both Turkey and Lebanon. For our analysis, we use a subsample of Syrians in the first wave of data collection in Turkey and in the second wave of data collection in Lebanon, carried out simultaneously between September 2020 and February 2021. The computer-assisted face-to-face interviews (CAPI) were carried out in Arabic and cover a large battery of items on the respondents' migration biography, employment and education, living conditions, wellbeing and health, as well as family context and household composition. Wherever possible, the items were designed to match those in the IAB-BAMF-SOEP survey of refugees in Germany. Aiming to achieve nationally representative samples of Syrians in the absence of registry data, the surveys rely on stratified area sampling and random walk techniques. In Lebanon, the sampling frame consists of a list of regions on three levels: the 16 administrative regional units (states), divided into several Primary Sampling Units (PSUs), each again divided into several blocks. On the highest level, all administrative units were selected. From there, multi-stage proportional stratified sampling was applied. From all available PSUs, only those with an assumed Syrian presence as indicated by UNHCR data (including informal settlements) were selected.¹ Within the PSUs, the blocks were selected randomly.

Since Turkey is 75 times larger than Lebanon, the sampling frame in Turkey entails four regional levels: the administrative NUTS1 regions, the cities therein, districts within cities and neighborhoods within districts. All NUTS1 regions as well as the two biggest cities within each region are selected, because the relative regional presence of Syrians is highest in the largest cities in all regions [Directory General of Migration Management (DGMM), 2019]. Districts and neighborhoods are chosen by random draw. The number of interviews per federal state is determined by the regional share of Syrians to the overall Syrian population size in Turkey as recorded by Directory General of Migration Management (DGMM) (2019). The number of interviews per city is assigned according to the city's estimated Syrian population size. In the selected units, interviewers in both country surveys perform random walks to recruit respondents. While the representativity of samples with random walk design is discussed ambiguously in the literature (e.g., Himelein et al., 2016), random route procedures combined with area sampling still represent the second-best procedure when sampling hard-to-reach populations in the absence of accessible population registries (see e.g., Gallup, 2022; Pew Research Center, 2022; Alrababa'h et al., 2023).

To account for the higher non-response of females, we apply sampling weights. The TRANSMIT surveys collected basic demographics of all household members, which are less likely to be skewed than respondent data. From the household data, we estimate the overall gender share of Syrians in Lebanon and Turkey,

respectively, and apply them as probability weights to the individual survey interviews. In sum, TRANSMIT survey data of Syrians in Lebanon and Turkey targets representativity for Syrians living in areas for which Syrian residence is known.

3.2 IAB-BAMF-SOEP survey of refugees in Germany

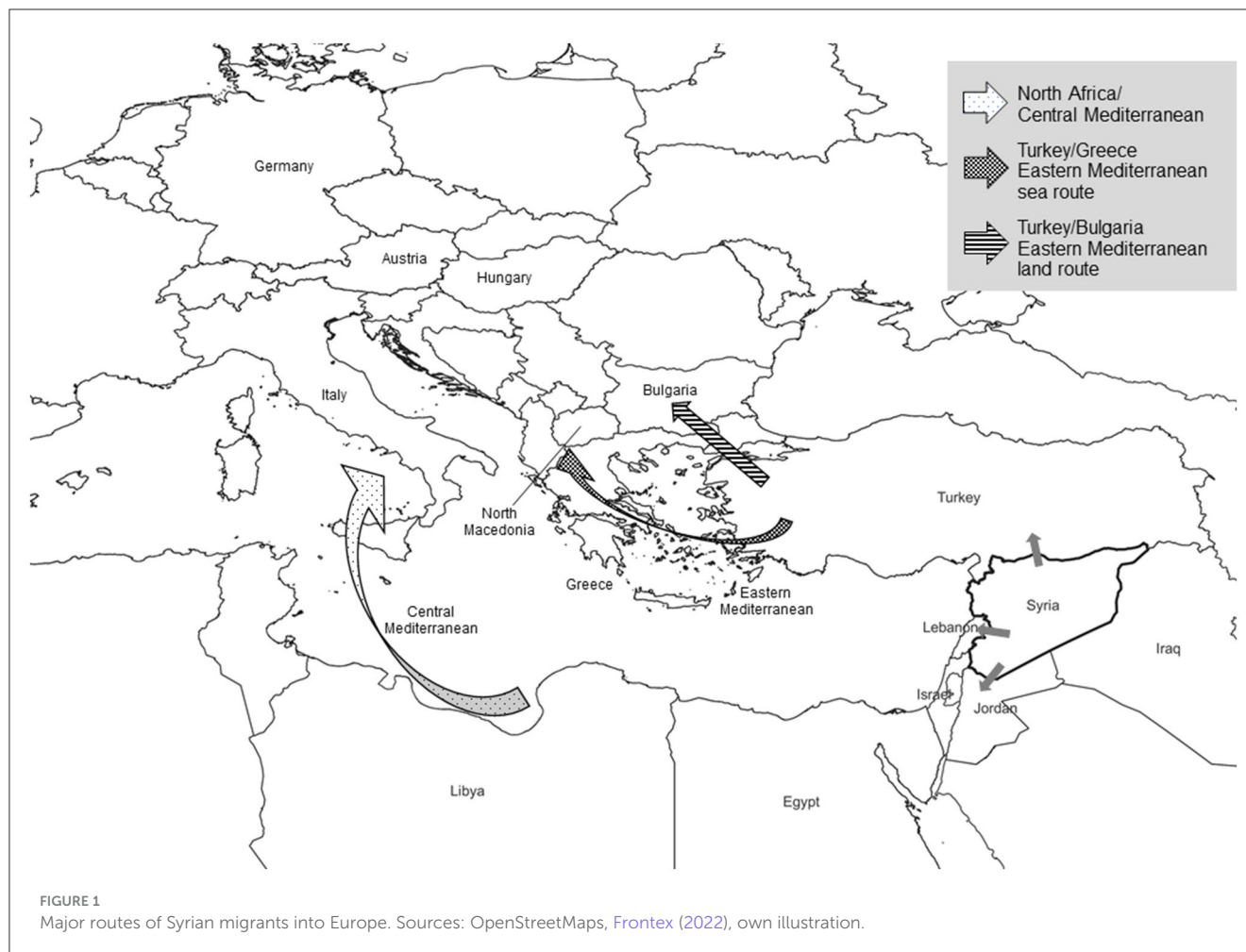
The IAB-BAMF-SOEP survey of refugees is a longitudinal survey of refugees and asylum seekers who have recently migrated to Germany (Brücker et al., 2016). The sample was drawn from the Central Register of Foreigners (AZR) of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF). The target group corresponds to asylum seekers who (i) arrived in Germany between January 1, 2013, and January 31, 2016, and (ii) were registered in the AZR by June 30, 2016. Individuals coming from countries with a high prospect of staying in Germany at the time of sampling (i.e., Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria), women, and persons aged over 30 were over-sampled. The 2017 survey included a refresher sample to account for asylum seekers who were listed in the AZR by January 1, 2017. Sampling weights provided with the survey data allow to produce statistics that are representative for asylum seekers arriving in Germany between January 1, 2013, and January 1, 2017. We use the survey wave 2019, version 37 of the SOEP dataset that includes the IAB-BAMF-SOEP survey. Given that all our outcome variables are measured at arrival and therefore do not change over time, the specific survey year we use does not have a substantial influence on results of our data analysis by arrival cohort.² Respondents were asked a large set of questions related to their lives in Germany, their socio-economic characteristics before migration as well as on their migration biographies. We make use of detailed survey questions on the used migration routes. Applying the definition of Frontex, the survey distinguishes between five main routes, three of which are relevant in the Syrian context: the Eastern Mediterranean sea route, the Eastern Mediterranean land route, and the Central Mediterranean route (see Figure 1).

3.3 Survey data harmonization

All survey data is restricted to arrival cohorts between 2013 and 2017, determined by the maximum time span available in the Germany survey, and to respondents at the age of 15 or older. The absence of registry data in Turkey and Lebanon renders it possible that (a) the surveys cover non-refugees and (b) that area sampling combined with random walk as an alternative sampling strategy did not produce a representative sample. Given the intense conflict

¹ Given that the Lebanese government stopped the systematic refugee registration by UNHCR in 2015, data from 2015 is used.

² Our results hold when using any survey wave between 2017 and 2020. Results are available upon request from the authors. Although the 2020 wave is closer to the data collection time of the TRANSMIT surveys, we prefer using the 2019 wave because the sample size is substantially higher than the sample size of the 2020 wave. The reason is that the severe lockdowns and mobility restrictions in Germany following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 seriously impacted data collection activities.



in Syria in the period of study we assume the volume of non-refugees in the studied arrival cohorts (2013–2017) to be negligible. Regarding representativity concerns, the chosen sampling strategy is recognized as the second-best procedure to cost-effectively reach the targeted number of observations when the population of interest represents only a small fraction of the society or is hard to reach (Lynn et al., 2018; Watson and Lynn, 2021).

As the TRANSMIT surveys were designed to resemble the IAB-BAMF-SOEP survey of refugees wherever possible, harmonized items allow for comparison of the Syrian populations in the three countries under study. We restrict the analysis to variables that we are able to construct following the same definition in the three countries of destination. Specifically, gender is measured in two categories (male or female) in all surveys, and age is measured at the time of arrival in the destination country. For education, we distinguish between people who completed high school education or more, and people who did not achieve high school education. We furthermore construct a dummy for individuals who indicate to have arrived with family members at the respective destination country. This includes spouses, children, parents, and an open category for other family members.

Despite their strengths, the datasets we use in this study also come with some limitations. First, we only observe Syrian refugees

in Lebanon, Turkey, and Germany at the time of the survey. We do not observe asylum seekers who set off to these host countries but did not make it. The data at hand therefore suffers from a potential selection bias we cannot quantify. Moreover, the survey data does not include information on outward migration. The fieldwork of the TRANSMIT surveys was conducted in 2020 and 2021, 9 years after the conflict in Syria erupted. We thus do not capture those individuals who passed Lebanon and Turkey and migrated onwards, for example to continue to Europe. This introduces survival bias in the sample and limits the generalizability of our results to those refugee populations that remained in the host countries. We are therefore unable to assess any results related to short term mobility or circular migration patterns.

Second, as described above, the sampling strategy varies between surveys. This could reduce the comparability of aggregate figures obtained for the different host countries. In particular, the lack of registry data to construct sampling weights and account for varying participation probabilities in the surveys in Lebanon and Turkey could generate some uncertainty around the estimated sociodemographic characteristics. We are, however, confident that our approach of comparing cohorts over time is less prone to these weaknesses, as we

expect systematic differences due to sampling to stay constant over cohorts.

3.4 Border crossings and fatalities on migration routes

To measure border crossing activity, we use monthly cases of illegal border crossings into member states of the EU and Schengen associated countries collected by [Frontex \(2022\)](#). This dataset provides monthly aggregates classified for several migration routes, including the Central Mediterranean route, the Eastern Mediterranean sea route, and the Eastern Mediterranean land route. The numbers represent counts of illegal border crossings rather than the number of unique individuals who actually crossed the border in a given location. The same person may thus have crossed the border several times, which implies that we cannot establish the exact number of individuals who have illegally entered Europe at the various crossing points. As we intend to capture border crossing activities, this is not of concern in our analysis.

To assess the risks involved with specific routes, we rely on data from the Missing Migrants Project collected and published by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) since 2014 [[International Organization of Migration \(IOM\), 2022](#)]. The project tracks deaths of migrants, including refugees and asylum-seekers, who have died or gone missing in the process of migration toward an international destination. Information is gathered from official records, including coast guards and medical examiners, media reports, NGOs, social media, and interviews with migrants and survivors. In the Mediterranean region, data are relayed from relevant national authorities to IOM field missions. Data are also obtained by IOM and other organizations that receive survivors at landing points in Italy and Greece. Moreover, the Missing Migrants Project uses social and traditional media reports on migrant deaths which are then verified by local IOM staff whenever possible. All new entries are checked against existing records to prevent double-counting. IOM and UNHCR also regularly coordinate to validate data on missing migrants in the Mediterranean. Note that numbers are not provided separately for the Eastern Mediterranean sea and land route. Since many deaths during migration go unrecorded, the data represent minimum estimates.

4 Syrian refugee migration: paths into Lebanon, Turkey, and Germany

According to the latest figures, more than 6.8 million Syrians have been registered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as refugees as of 2021, following the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011 ([UNHCR, 2022c](#)). The vast majority of the displaced population found refuge in neighboring countries, mostly in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. As the Syrian conflict escalated and capacities for refuge within the region became increasingly strained, a growing number of displaced Syrians sought asylum in Europe, contributing to Germany's largest influx of refugees since World War II in 2015 and 2016 ([Brücker et al., 2020](#)).

4.1 Lebanon: location of first refuge

Located at Syria's Western border and at 30 kilometers distance to Damascus, Lebanon was among the first countries to receive significant numbers of Syrian refugees (see [Figure 2](#)). In 2022, the UNHCR counted over 800,000 officially registered refugees in Lebanon ([UNHCR, 2022b](#)). The real figure is likely much higher, rendering the small Mediterranean country the state with the highest refugee-to-population ratio in the world. Lebanon is no signatory state to the 1951 Refugee Convention and until today does not have an asylum law in place, such that Syrian entry to Lebanon is governed by the domestic regulations on the entry of foreigners. Until 2014, Syrian entry was largely unrestricted: based on the 1993 Lebanese-Syrian free movement agreement, Syrians with valid ID documents were granted legal residency for 6 months upon entry which could be renewed every 6 months without financial cost ([Janmyr, 2016](#)). Overall, Lebanon and Syria share a "long porous border history" ([Carpi and Senoguz, 2018](#)) including a common colonial past, the Syrian occupation of Lebanon until 2005, as well as a long history of labor migration and cross-border ties of families and businesses ([Chatty et al., 2013](#); [Krafft et al., 2022](#)).

Starting in September 2014, a set of restrictions was gradually introduced. The changes had the explicit goal to limit the number of Syrians in Lebanon through restricted entry, new residence renewal regulations, as well as incentives to return ([Janmyr, 2016, 2018](#)). Among others, the largely unrestricted entry for Syrians was abolished and replaced with visa restrictions requiring different sets of documents and, in some cases, the proof of financial means or property [[Norwegian Refugee Council and International Rescue Committee \(NRC/IRC\), 2015](#); [Janmyr, 2016](#)]. The visa category to seek protection from displacement was introduced but restricted to individuals who were accepted to international resettlement schemes as well as to unaccompanied minors and persons with medical needs, conditional on these persons having a relative already residing in Lebanon [[Norwegian Refugee Council and International Rescue Committee \(NRC/IRC\), 2015](#)]. The legal reforms furthermore introduced a set of new requirements for the issuance and renewal of residence permits. Syrians now require either registration with the UNHCR (which comes with an employment ban) or a sponsorship commitment by a Lebanese citizen, employer or institution, and they now need to present a housing commitment. The new framework also restricts circular migration between Lebanon and Syria, a common scheme before 2015 ([Janmyr, 2016](#)). To obtain a work permit, a Lebanese sponsor is now required ([Janmyr and Stevens, 2020](#)). In sum, the 2014/2015 reforms substantially raised the requirements and associated costs for entering Lebanon as well as for staying in the country.

At the same time, the ability and will of the Lebanese government to enforce the policy and border measures has been limited. [Sanyal \(2018\)](#) describes the Lebanese migration policy enforcement as *ad hoc* and arbitrary, for example regarding the carrying out of border controls, the erection of checkpoints by different public and private actors, or the introduction of mobility restrictions for Syrians in some municipalities. The large-scale involvement of local public and private actors has led to a fragmented and decentralized management of Syrian immigration

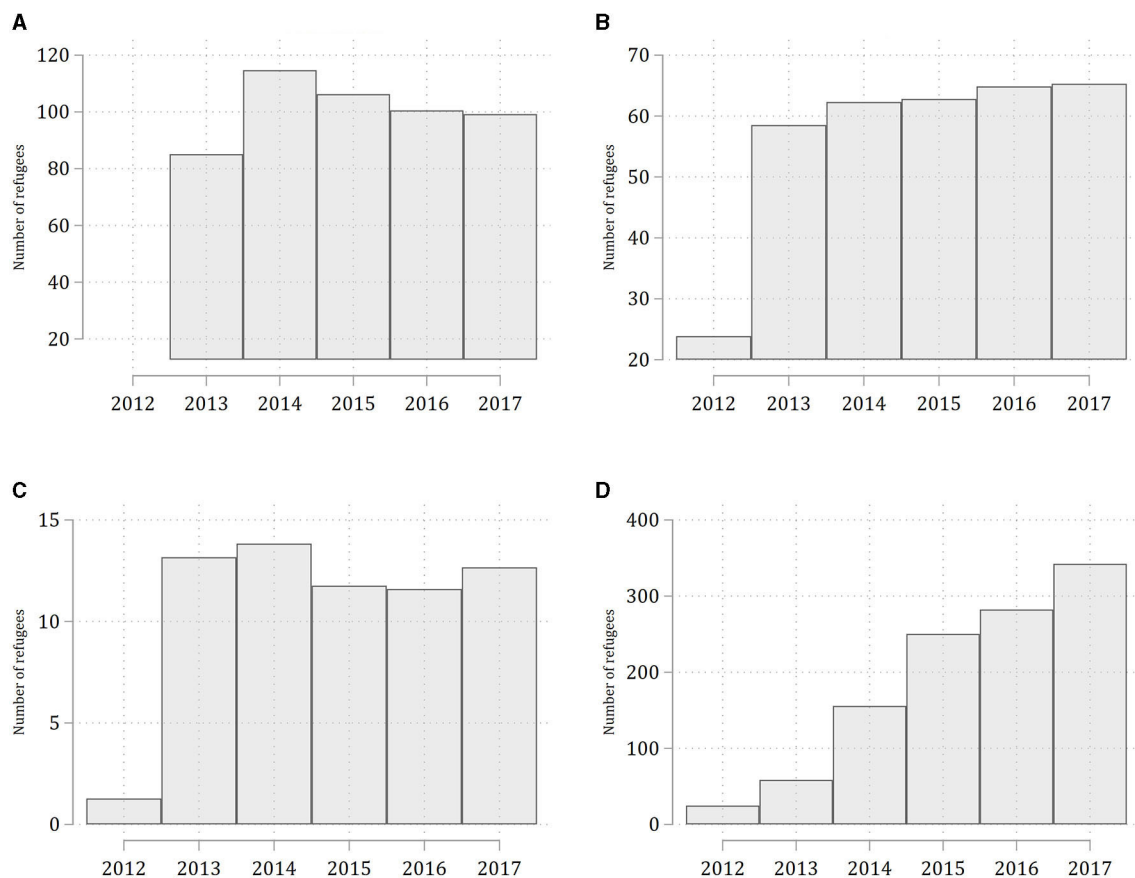


FIGURE 2
Syrian population (in 10,000) in countries neighboring Syria, by year. Source: [UNHCR \(2022b\)](#), own illustration. (A) Lebanon. (B) Jordan. (C) Egypt. (D) Turkey.

(Carpi and Senoguz, 2018). This is partly due to the complex sectarian political setup and the political uncertainty the country has been facing for several years, and in parts stems from Lebanon's continued "policy of no-policy" toward refugees (Geha and Talhouk, 2018, p. 651). The arbitrary policy enforcement is particularly burdensome to the more vulnerable and those with little resources (Sanyal, 2018). In line with this argument, from 2014 onwards, we expect stronger selection effects for Syrians migrating to Lebanon: most importantly, we hypothesize that in the context of the novel restrictions, migrant cohorts show on average higher educational attainment, signaling a higher socioeconomic status (cf. hypothesis 2, Section Literature review: selection under constrained agency). Given the fragmented and arbitrary enforcement of the policies, we expect the selection effects to be low in magnitude.

4.2 Turkey as the second major destination

The 2014/15 legal reforms in Lebanon coincided with the rise of the Islamic State in 2014, an escalation of the civil conflict in Syria and an intensification of violence in Iraq, such that the number of individuals seeking humanitarian refuge remained at historically

high levels. With Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon becoming more hesitant to accept Syrian refugees, Turkey increasingly became a major destination: the number of registered Syrian refugees increased from 500,000 in 2013 to 1.5 million in 2014 and 2.8 million in 2016 (UNHCR, 2022b).

With 3.3 million today, Turkey is currently host to the largest population of displaced Syrians (UNHCR, 2023). The 2009 visa-free travel agreement with Syria was officially upheld until 2016 and was widely lauded as an open-door policy for Syrians fleeing the conflict. As early as 2014, however, partial border closures and denied entrances for Syrians were reported (Amnesty International, 2014). By 2019, despite opposite public claims, the Turkish government had shifted to a closed-door policy, cemented by the construction of an 899-kilometer wall along the Turkish-Syrian border (Gokalp Aras and Sahin Mencutek, 2019).

The legal residency of Syrians in Turkey and their prospects in the country were characterized by legal uncertainty from the start. Although a signatory state to the 1951 Geneva Convention of Refugees, Turkey only recognizes those individuals as refugees who flee from Europe. In 2014, the Turkish government introduced the legal category of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) designed exclusively for displaced Syrians (Yildirim et al., 2019). While TPS grants Syrians access to healthcare, education and other social services (Yildirim et al., 2019), it does not represent a permanent

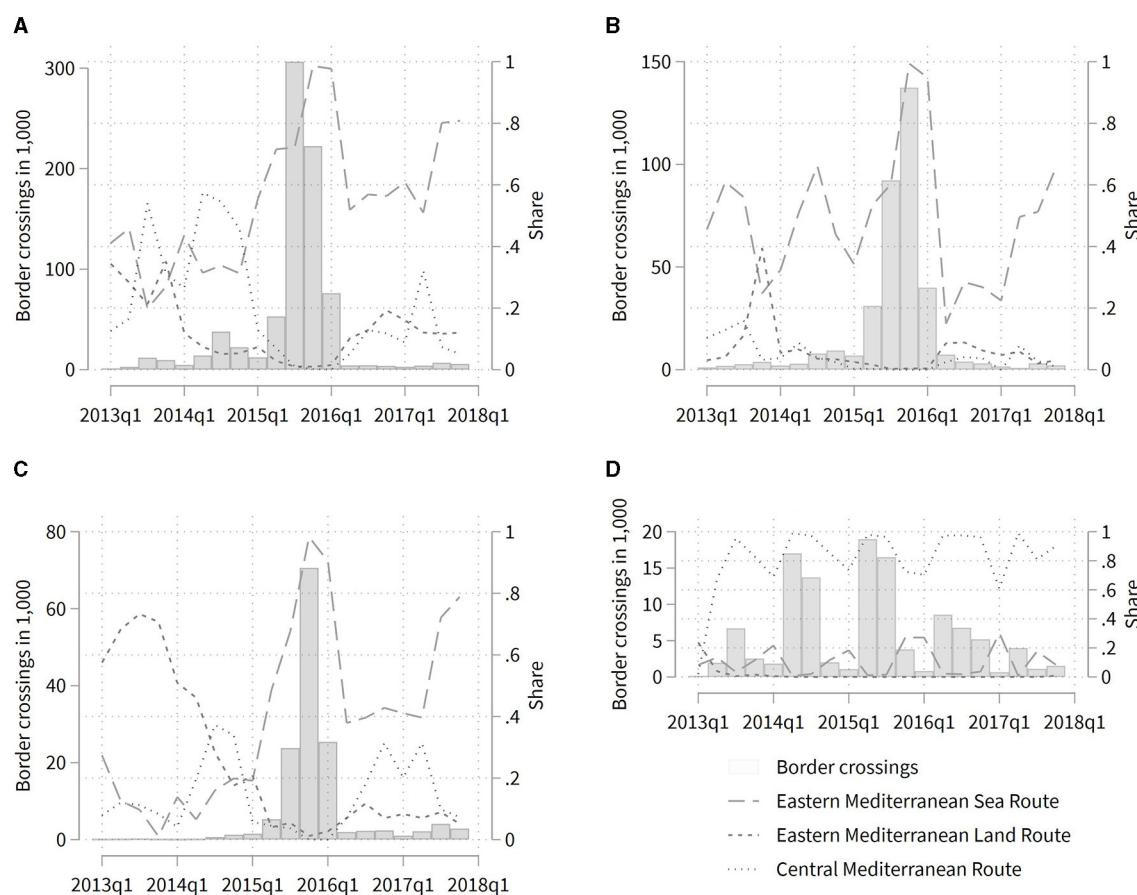


FIGURE 3

Undocumented border crossings by year and routes of Syrians, Afghans, Iraqis and Eritreans. Source: [Frontex \(2022\)](#), own illustration. (A) Share of Syrians. (B) Share of Afghans. (C) Share of Iraqis. (D) Share of Eritreans.

residence permit and offers no path into regular citizenship (Kutlu-Tonak, 2016). At the same time, public and political opposition to the presence of Syrians and other refugees increased over time (Erdogan, 2020). A range of studies attribute the onward migration of Syrians toward Europe to the conditions and policies governing their lives in Turkey, including the lack of a long-term perspective and the perceived hostility (e.g., Hudson, 2018; Ilcan et al., 2018).

Several effects are therefore simultaneously at play: Lebanon and Turkey both tightened entry and residency for Syrians at a point in time when the conflict in Syria escalated into a war with several international actors involved. This resulted in increased internal displacement within Syria, but potentially also motivated migration attempts toward Europe. These were demotivated by the EU-Turkey deal aimed at reducing irregular migration from Turkey to Europe (Haferlach and Kurban, 2017). While border enforcement and return measures outlined in the deal decreased incentives to enter Turkey with hopes of onward migration to Europe, the 6 billion Euros in refugee support promised by the EU in the agreement may have rendered Turkey a more attractive destination for vulnerable groups. Our expectation for the net-effect of the EU-Turkey deal on the selectivity of Syrian migration into Turkey is therefore ambivalent.

In sum, due to its geographical location, Turkey finds itself in the complex situation of being a destination country as well as a transit country to Europe while serving as a buffer state to

prevent irregular migration to Europe, in a period of skyrocketing displacement from Syria. The newly restricted policy framework presumably led to a stronger migrant selection in terms of their sociodemographic characteristics, but the rising displacement pressure from Syria (including migrants with intentions to migrate onwards) may have counteracted this effect. Overall, migration pressure on Turkey increased but entry conditions tightened. Hence, in line with hypothesis 2, we expect some selection in terms of gender, age, socioeconomic status and family context compared to Syrians in Lebanon, but small in magnitude.

4.3 Risky routes into Germany

Between 2013 and 2017, Syrian refugee migration to Germany surged. The peak of arrivals was reached in 2015 with 327,000 Syrian entries [(Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge (BAMF), 2016)]. While both Lebanon and Turkey border Syria, migration to Europe is more complex, both in terms of geography and immigration policies. Entering EU countries with valid travel documentation was not a viable option to most refugees and many relied on smuggling services to bypass border controls. The uncertain access to asylum in Western Europe resulted in substantial costs, both financially and in terms of health and

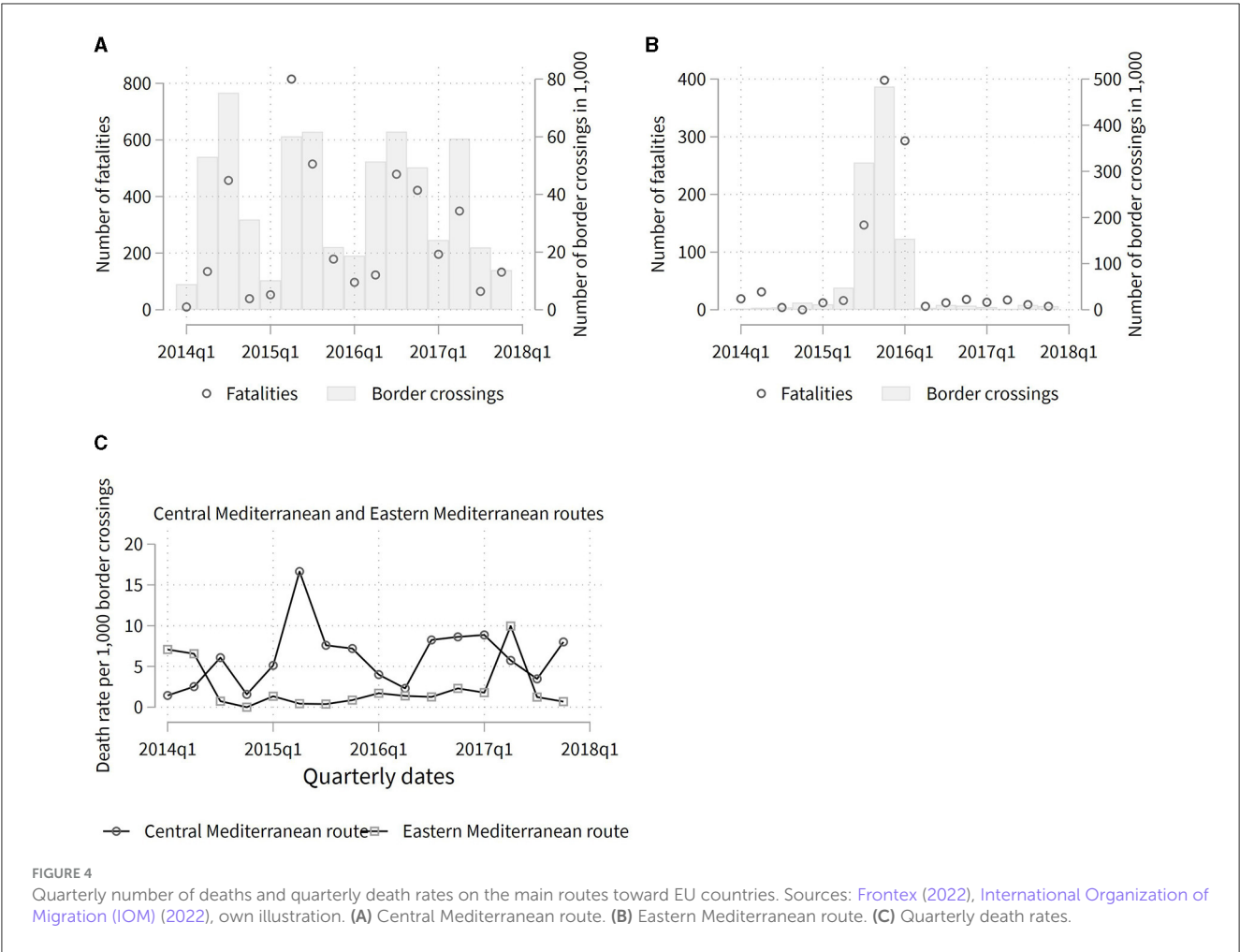


TABLE 1 Death rates per 1,000 border crossings by route and year.

	Central Mediterranean	Eastern Mediterranean
2014	3.0	3.5
2015	9.1	0.7
2016	5.8	1.7
2017	6.5	2.4
Total	6.2	2.0

Sources: Frontex (2022), International Organization of Migration (IOM) (2022), own illustration.

safety risks. We argue that, overall, costly and risky migration routes led to unequal opportunities to claim asylum for different groups in need of humanitarian protection: the more vulnerable and those with fewer resources at hand were underrepresented. In line with hypothesis 1, we expect that, overall, the dangerous routes into Europe led to an overrepresentation of young men, solo travelers and those with a higher socioeconomic status among Syrian migrants in Germany.

However, health and safety risks as well as accessibility of the major travel routes toward Germany changed over

time. From the Middle East, two main routes into Europe were available for refugees: either via North Africa and the Central Mediterranean or via Turkey. Syrians intensively used the Central Mediterranean route until 2014, embarking boats in Libya or Egypt directed to Italy or Greece. When Egypt introduced visa requirements in July 2013, crossing the Mediterranean Sea from Libya became the main migration option.

Toward the end of 2014, the routes via Turkey gained in relevance: from Turkey, borders into the European Union could be crossed either by land to Bulgaria or by crossing the Eastern Mediterranean to the Greek islands near the Turkish coastline (see Figure 1). Both routes then crossed the Western Balkans to reach Germany. In May 2014, the Bulgarian government started erecting a barrier covering more than half of the Bulgarian-Turkish border.³ In June 2015, North Macedonia as a transit country to Western Europe for migrants arriving from Greece or Bulgaria introduced a paper entitling asylum seekers to legally transit the country. In September 2015, Austrian Chancellor Faymann and German Chancellor Merkel allowed migrants to cross the border

3 The Greek-Turkish border was fenced as early as 2012.

TABLE 2 Age, gender, education and family context at arrival of Syrian migrants in Germany, Lebanon, and Turkey (2013–2017).

	Share with high school education or higher	Mean age at arrival	Female share	Share arriving with family
Germany				
2013	34.0	33.1	42.2	56.2
2014	62.7	29.8	21.3	45.1
2015	46.6	29.5	24.4	58.7
2016	33.8	29.5	42.1	70.8
2017	39.4	35.2	67.1	66.0
Total	43.3	31.4	39.4	59.4
Lebanon				
2013	10.5	26	52.5	89.9
2014	10.6	27.4	44.0	81.8
2015	17.1	26.7	62.8	83.3
2016	17.7	26.7	60.9	81.3
2017	13.3	25.7	51.5	77.3
Total	13.8	26.5	54.4	82.7
Turkey				
2013	34.9	25.7	51.8	92.5
2014	23.1	29.0	53.9	91.8
2015	29.8	26.9	54.6	89.6
2016	25.6	28.0	49.3	92.0
2017	28.2	28.1	43.7	83.9
Total	28.3	27.5	50.7	90.0
Total				
2013	26.5	28.3	48.9	79.5
2014	32.1	28.7	39.7	72.9
2015	31.2	27.7	47.3	77.2
2016	25.7	28.1	50.8	81.4
2017	27.0	29.6	54.1	75.7
Total	28.5	28.5	48.1	77.3

Sources: TRANSMIT survey (2020/2021) and IAB-BAMF-SOEP survey of refugees (SOEP, v37, 2020), own illustration.

from Hungary into Austria and onward to Germany, and buses with migrants began crossing the Austro-Hungarian border.⁴

The sum of these changes substantially reduced the need for smuggler services and the risks and costs of reaching Western Europe via Greece and the Western Balkans, largely redirecting migrants to the Eastern Mediterranean Sea route in 2015 (Zaragoza-Cristiani, 2017). Figure 3 depicts this route shift of Syrian migrants.⁵ This coincided with a rapid increase in the total number of illegal border crossings, peaking in the second half

of 2015.⁶ Importantly, this development also represented a shift toward a much less risky route: throughout the observation period, the Eastern Mediterranean routes were commonly associated with lower risks of death compared to the Central Mediterranean route (Figure 4). In 2015, when migration attempts peaked, one death per 1,000 border crossings was registered on the Eastern Mediterranean route, compared to a ratio of 9 to 1,000 on the Central Mediterranean route (Table 1).

In line with hypotheses 2 and 3 presented in Section Literature review: selection under constrained agency, we expect the 2015 shift toward a less dangerous route as well as the less restrictive

4 For an analysis of the effect of Merkel's announcement on migratory developments toward Germany (see Jasper Tjaden and Heidland, 2021). They could not confirm a measurable effect.

5 Note that this shift is also observable for migrants from Afghanistan and Iraq, but not for migrants from Eritrea (Figure 3).

6 Interestingly, a similar peak is visible for migrants from Iraq and Afghanistan, who also used the Eastern Mediterranean route, but not for Eritreans.

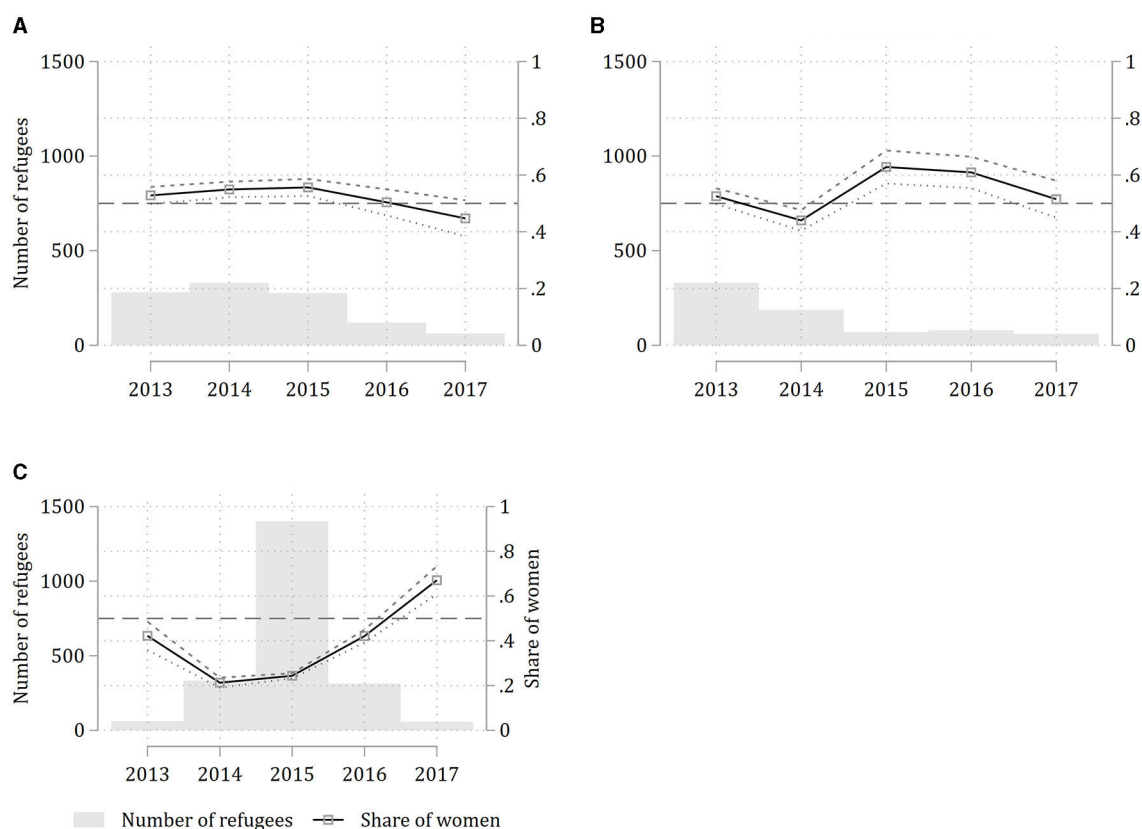


FIGURE 5

Arrival cohorts by gender: Number of refugees and share of female refugees by year of arrival. Sources: TRANSMIT survey (2020/2021) and IAB-BAMF-SOEP survey of refugees SOEP (v37, 2020), own illustration. Dotted and dashed lines indicate the upper and lower bound of the standard error of the mean, respectively. (A) Turkey, N = 1068. (B) Lebanon, N = 728. (C) Germany, N = 2169.

policy and legal frameworks on the Eastern Mediterranean route to be associated with less severe selection patterns for Syrians in Germany, i.e., we expect a higher number of females and family migrants, a higher average age and a lower average socioeconomic background from 2015 onwards as compared to earlier cohorts.

5 Selection patterns of refugees in Lebanon, Turkey, and Germany

We first focus on the gender composition of different arrival cohorts. In Lebanon, where most Syrians arrived in 2012 and 2013 shortly after the onset of the civil war in Syria, women constitute the majority share of the Syrian population (54 women vs. 46% men, see Table 2, also see Figure 5). Neighboring Syria, migration to Lebanon was relatively straightforward, with lower risks, lower financial costs, and relatively little entry restrictions until 2014, such that Lebanon represented a relatively accessible destination (compared to Turkey and especially Germany). Refugee arrivals in Turkey follow slightly different patterns. On average, displaced Syrians arrived in Turkey later than in Lebanon (Figure 2). The largest cohorts arrived in 2013, 2014, and 2015 (see Figures 1, 5). The Syrian population in Turkey is close to gender parity in the observation period (51 percent females), but the time trend is

reversed: women constitute the majority of arrivals in until 2015, then the female share decreases.

Refugee migration to Germany took off much later than in Turkey and Lebanon (Figure 5). The overall share of female migrants arriving in Germany amounted to 39% between 2013 and 2017 (Table 2) and thus was considerably smaller than for the arrival cohorts in Lebanon and Turkey. This likely reflects the fact that migration routes to Germany were much costlier and associated with higher risks. The yearly figures show, however, a substantial increase in the female share of Syrians reaching Germany, from <25 % in 2014 and 2015 to 42 and 67 per cent in 2016 and 2017, respectively (Table 2).⁷ This period is characterized by a major shift toward a less risky migratory route leading to Germany as well as eased travel conditions on the Eastern Mediterranean routes (see Section Syrian refugee migration: paths into Lebanon, Turkey, and Germany). It can be assumed that

⁷ By design, the IAB-BAMF-SOEP survey data includes mostly refugees who arrived between 2014 and 2016. To confirm the gender composition of refugees in Germany over a longer period of time, we resort to the corresponding administrative data from the German federal statistical office (Destatis, 2021). Figure A1 in the Appendix shows a pronounced drop in the female share for the 2015 arrival cohort and a drastic increase to 45 and 50% in 2016 and 2017, respectively, confirming our main findings.

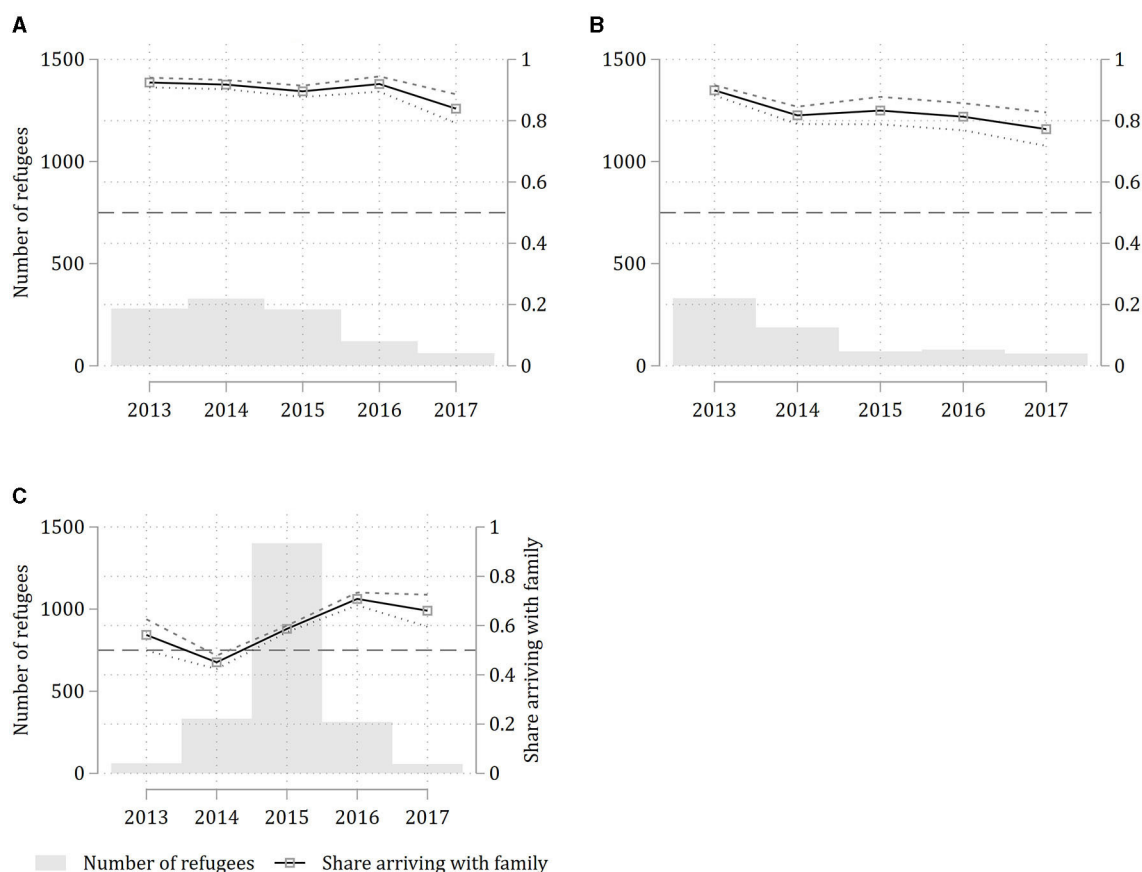


FIGURE 6

Arrival cohorts by family context: Number of refugees and share of refugees who arrived with family members, by year of arrival. Sources: TRANSMIT survey (2020/2021) and IAB-BAMF-SOEP survey of refugees SOEP (v37, 2020), own illustration. Dotted and dashed lines indicate the upper and lower bound of the standard error of the mean, respectively. (A) Turkey, N = 1068. (B) Lebanon, N = 728. (C) Germany, N = 2169.

the overall less risky and less costly travel conditions from 2015 onwards could have encouraged more women to undertake the journey to seek protection in Germany.

A closer look at the family composition of arrival cohorts supports this interpretation. Figure 6 shows the share of refugees arriving with their family members by destination and year. Consistent with lower barriers to entry, the share of refugees arriving with their family members is higher in Turkey and in Lebanon compared to Germany. The share in Lebanon and Turkey on average equals 83 and 90%, respectively, and is relatively stable over time (Table 2). In contrast, the share of refugees arriving with their family members in Germany was considerably lower, ranging at 45% in the 2014 cohort. This coincides with the timing when the riskier and more demanding Central Mediterranean route was the main corridor of access. In 2015, when the less dangerous Eastern Mediterranean route established, the share of refugees arriving with family in Germany increased to 59% and reached 71% in 2016 (Table 2).

Figure 7 compares the mean ages of different migration cohorts across the three destination countries under study. On average, Syrians in Lebanon and Turkey are slightly younger than in Germany (with mean ages of 27, 28 and 31 years, respectively), with little variation over time (Table 2). We thus find moderate

selection patterns by age. Considering age percentiles 25, 50, and 75 instead of mean values, which are more sensitive to outliers, Figure A2 confirms this observation. Overall, the distribution in terms of age at arrival seems to be similar across destination countries. This figure also confirms the limited variation in the distribution over time.

Concerning socioeconomic background, Figure 8 shows the share of Syrian refugees having completed high school or having entered higher education, which we employ as an indicator of socioeconomic background. Syrians in Lebanon have the lowest high school completion rate with 14 percent, followed by Turkey with 28 percent (see Table 2). In Germany, 43 percent of all Syrian refugees in the observation period hold a high school degree or higher. In line with hypothesis 1, Syrians in Germany thus show the highest socioeconomic background on average, followed by Turkey. The share of Syrians in Lebanon and Turkey with a higher socioeconomic background seems to slightly increase for the cohorts arriving after 2014 when immigration conditions became less favorable in both countries, corroborating hypothesis 2. The opposite is the case for Germany: the educational level is highest among the 2014 cohort when Syrian migrants still used the risky Central Mediterranean route. Educational attainment drops for later cohorts, possibly reflecting eased immigration conditions,

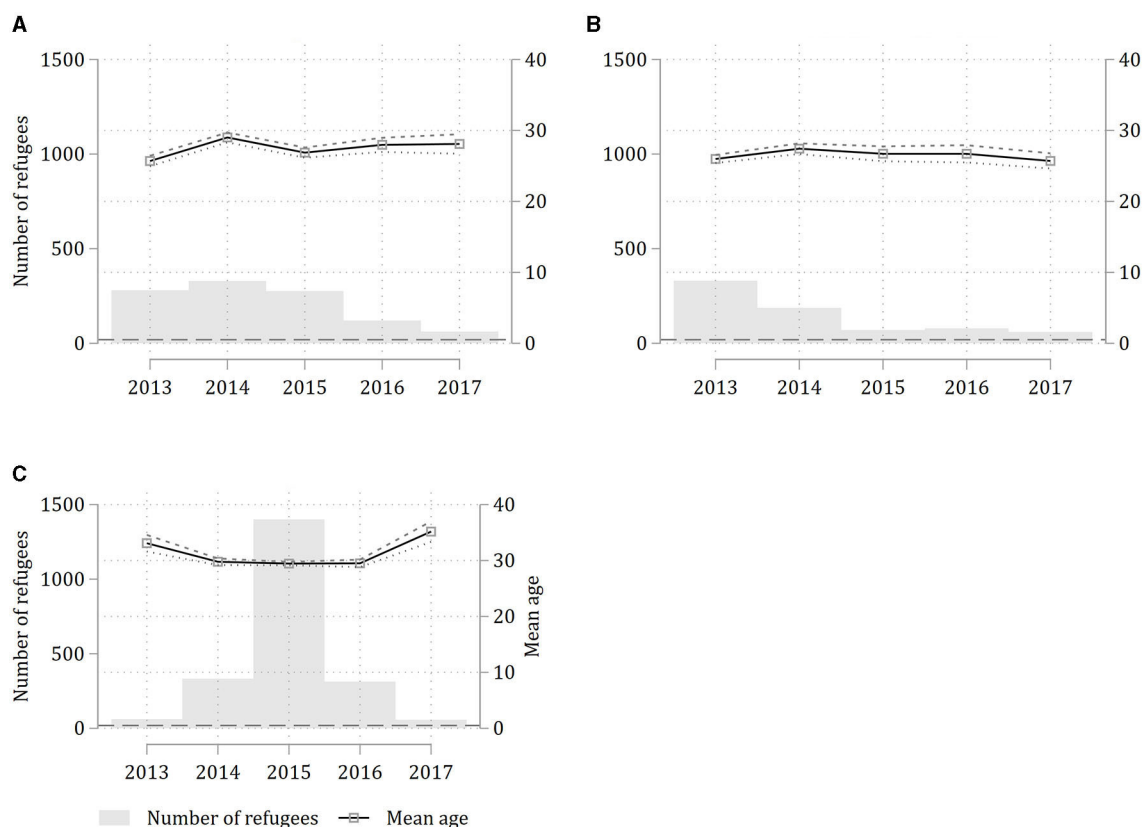


FIGURE 7

Mean age of refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, and Germany by year of arrival. Sources: TRANSMIT survey (2020/2021) and IAB-BAMF-SOEP survey of refugees SOEP (v37, 2020), own illustration. Dotted and dashed lines indicate the upper and lower bound of the standard error of the mean, respectively. (A) Turkey, N = 1068. (B) Lebanon, N = 728. (C) Germany, N = 2169.

including enhanced access to information, and lower risks of death on the routes toward Western Europe. This finding is in line with hypotheses 2 and 3. Note that this cannot be attributed to changes in the gender composition: the educational levels of males only, as shown in Figure A3 in the Appendix, confirm similar patterns to the overall samples. It should be noted that the lower average educational attainment of Syrians arriving in Lebanon could also reflect the geographic variation of educational attainment within Syria prior to the conflict, as the Syrian population in areas closer to the Lebanese border historically displayed lower education levels (Krafft et al., 2022).

6 Discussion and outlook

Global asylum policy, as outlined in the Global Compact on Refugees, formally aims to offer protection to the most vulnerable populations and the victims of conflict and violence. With the resurgence of armed conflicts and violence against civilians as well as the eruption of environmental disasters the question of access to security is becoming increasingly urgent. In general, most countries subscribe to the goals of the 1951 Refugee convention and the Global Compact on Refugees. However, safe territories are often only accessible via risky and costly routes, and the lack of formal options to seek refuge

from abroad introduces the risks and barriers associated with irregular migration.

In this study, we show that refugee migration is a selective process and the composition of refugee cohorts is not independent of the individual resource endowment. We compare socio-demographic characteristics of different arrival-cohorts of Syrian refugees living in Lebanon, Turkey, and Germany. In combination with contextual information on changing border policies, asylum policies, and route characteristics, we outline the varying socio-demographic characteristics of refugee cohorts across destinations and over time within the framework of theories on migrant selection. We find that riskier routes and higher entry barriers are associated with a lower share of female and family migrants, a higher mean age and a higher socio-economic background. Consistent with the outlined theoretical considerations and existing empirical literature, selection patterns were strongest among the Syrian refugee population in Germany. Our narrative approach suggests that less accessible and more dangerous routes imply more severe selection outcomes in terms of migrants' socio-demographic make-up. This holds for cohort differences both between destination countries and over time. The findings from our analysis can be integrated within a theoretical framework of constraint choice predicting that higher external barriers increase migration costs and lead to a stronger refugee selection.

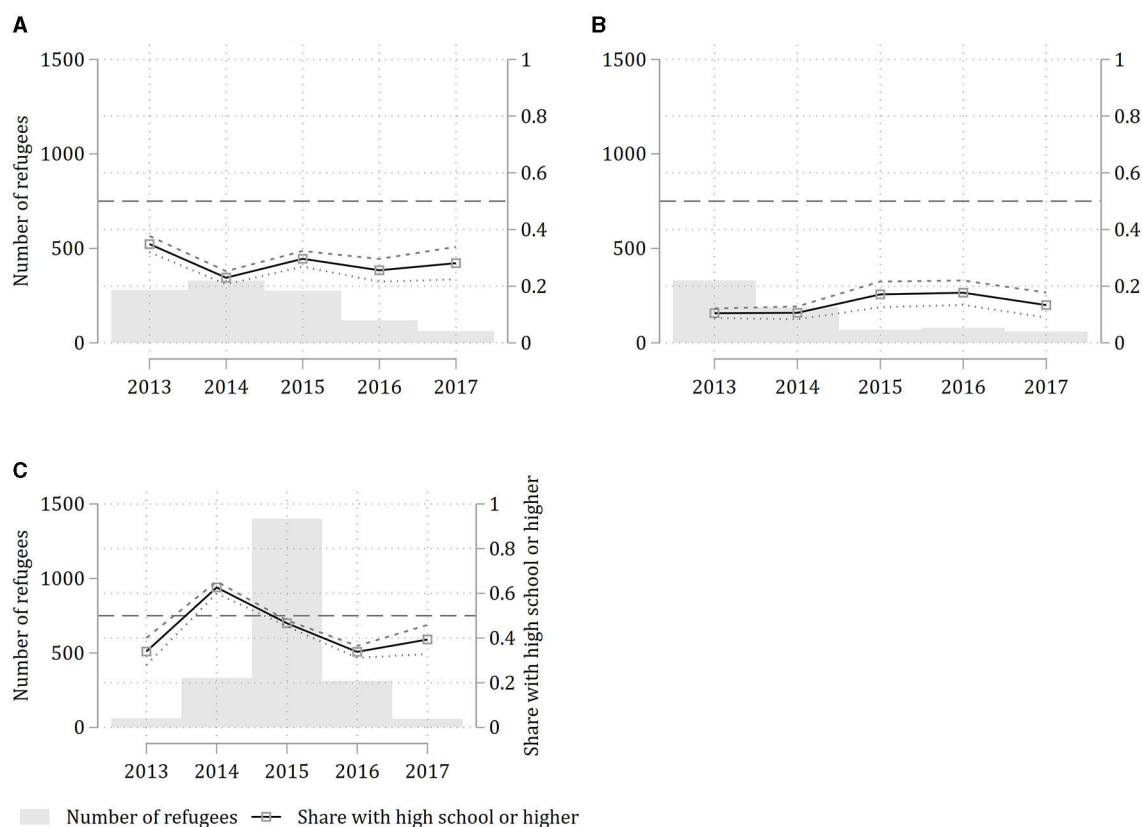


FIGURE 8

Share of refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, and Germany with high school degree or higher. Sources: TRANSMIT survey (2020/2021) and IAB-BAMF-SOEP survey of refugees SOEP (v37, 2020), own illustration. Dotted and dashed lines indicate the upper and lower bound of the standard error of the mean, respectively. (A) Turkey, N = 1068. (B) Lebanon, N = 728. (C) Germany, N = 2169.

We conclude that, firstly, the theoretical frameworks on migrant selection which were designed to explain voluntary migrant selection patterns are also helpful in explaining sorting in forced migration. Our empirical analysis shows, however, that external barriers are particularly crucial in determining forced migration patterns and that the observed selection outcomes are thus unlikely to be a result of utility-maximizing self-selection alone. We thus secondly conclude that the literature on forced migrant selection would strongly benefit from exploring and establishing selectively applied external constraints as a major potential mechanism in forced migrant selection. This refers in particular (but is not limited to) to the (varying) legal and geographical accessibility of countries. Thirdly, a growing body of research shows that both individual and structural characteristics including institutional regulations determine the integration prospects of refugees (Kosyakova and Kogan, 2022). By shaping the characteristics of migration cohorts, external barriers to migration could therefore lay the foundations of medium and long-term integration prospects of refugees in host countries. However, the exact mechanisms through which selection patterns influence the integration of refugees are not yet sufficiently understood. Importantly, the consequences of external barriers on integration prospects depend on how they shape selection patterns both on observable and on unobservable characteristics. Theoretical models applicable to voluntary migration have shown

that migration conditions such as uncertainty about one's prospects or selective policies induce significant self-selection among migrants on unobservable criteria, well beyond the selection on observable criteria (Bertoli, 2010; Bertoli et al., 2016). To what extent such findings are applicable to forced migration remains a promising avenue of future research that can build on the evidence on observable characteristics we present in this study.

The results from our analysis also bear significant implications for policy. Given the cohort differences we found, access to peace and security is not equally distributed. Rather, only a selected set of people in vulnerable situations equipped with the necessary resources are capable of reaching safe places. Our results thus, firstly, highlight the need for improved possibilities to claim asylum in a given country without having to enter it illegally, e.g., through offering valid travel documents to this country tied to the purpose to claim asylum, in order to meet the objective of a needs-based asylum policy. Our results indicate that the ability to embark on risky routes without formal visa and to fund expensive travel arrangements substantially contribute to shaping the composition of cohorts in different countries. As a consequence, the probability of obtaining asylum in Western European countries is not need-based but rather shaped by the ability to overcome long distances and the obstacles involved with irregular migration.

The study results, secondly, call for a coordinated asylum policy between host countries at the global level. Since the countries neighboring conflict areas often represent the first points of refuge due to short distances and more permeable borders, they bear the main burden of accommodating refugees. Given limited resources and greater displacement pressure in these countries, the distribution of resources available for protection and integration of refugees is currently not optimal: comparatively little resources are devoted to vulnerable population groups who are unable to escape over long distances to wealthier countries.

Thirdly, improving family reunification options for refugees who made it to a safe country could be a possible avenue to mitigate the selection effects of restricted access to escape routes and to prevent the death of irregular migrants en route. Expanded family reunification procedures would particularly improve access to security to spouses and children whose family members reached a safe country. In Germany, family reunification for accepted asylum seekers involves lengthy procedures and high requirements. As a consequence, spouses (mostly women), elderly, and disabled persons in protracted situations may remain in danger longer than necessary.

Data availability statement

The data analyzed in this study is subject to the following licenses/restrictions: This study uses the factually anonymous data of wave 2019 of the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees version 37. Access to this data can be requested at: SOEP Research Data Center: https://www.diw.de/en/diw_01.c.601584.en/data_access.html. The study furthermore uses wave 2 of the TRANSMIT survey in Lebanon and wave 1 of the TRANSMIT survey in Turkey. For data protection reasons in this ongoing longitudinal data collection, these data are currently not public but will be available once the data collection is finalized and the data fully anonymized in 2025. Requests to access these datasets should be directed to LG, lidwina.gundacker@iab.de. Border crossings data from Frontex are available at: <http://frontex.europa.eu/we-know/migratory-map/>. Data from the missing migrants project on fatalities are available at: <http://missingmigrants.iom.int>.

Ethics statement

Ethics approval for the TRANSMIT surveys was not required by the funders nor by the hosting institution. However, for the

follow-up data collections in the longitudinal study this data is drawn from in 2022, ethics approval was sought voluntarily. Operating with the same procedure, similar questionnaires and equivalent data protection and consent measures, the research was approved by the Ethics Commission of Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Humboldt Universität zu Berlin (HU-KSBF-EK_2022_0023). Informed consent for participation in this study was provided by participants or their legal guardian/next of kin.

Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fhumd.2023.1171885/full#supplementary-material>

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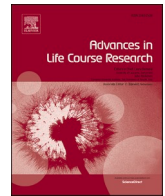
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Appendix 2

The second study was published in Advances in Life Course Research:

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Refugee journeys and the erosion of pre-migration human capital: A sequence analysis approach to post-migration trajectories

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ABSTRACT

More than a decade ago, refugee immigration prominently returned to Europe's political agendas, sparking interest in the factors shaping refugees' economic and societal participation. Adopting a life course perspective, this study addresses the conflicting views in sociology of migration on the importance of pre-migration capital for refugees' post-migration trajectories. While some argue that human capital is accumulated over the life course and retains its value after migration, others describe forced migration as a disruptive event that may severely diminish these resources. Drawing on rich survey and administrative employment data, this article employs sequence analysis combined with cluster analysis to identify typical integration trajectories of refugee women and men in Germany. In multivariate analyses, I demonstrate that pre-migration human capital is associated with a higher likelihood to enter education and employment, underscoring the enduring relevance of resources acquired prior to migration. Straining journeys can, however, reduce available resources after arrival: for individuals reporting long and traumatizing journeys, human capital effects partly disappear. The results highlight the important role of refugee migration experiences that are often neglected in both scholarly and political discourses on integration outcomes as well as migration and integration policies.

1. Introduction

Since 2013, roughly 3 million people have sought humanitarian refuge in Germany (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge BAMF, 2024), returning immigration and integration to the forefront of political discourses. Researchers and policy-makers have shown increasing interest in factors shaping refugees' social and economic participation, with labor market participation being of central importance (Kalter, 2008; Kogan & Kalter, 2020). Prior studies highlight the importance of both pre-migration and post-migration characteristics of refugees as well as the institutional context after migration (Gisselquist, 2021). While a large body of research addresses post-migration factors (Kosyakova & Kogan, 2022), contradicting expectations exist concerning pre-migration factors. Some argue that resources like education and work experience are accumulated over the life course and largely retain their value (Becker, 1993; Phelps, 1972), which has also been shown empirically for migrant populations (see Kosyakova & Kogan, 2022). Others describe migration – and forced migration in particular – as a disruptive life event that can erode these resources by cutting off social networks, interrupting careers, and relocating individuals to entirely

new contexts (Ruiz and Vargas-Silva, 2017; de Valk et al., 2011). Risky and costly journeys can furthermore affect the physical and mental wellbeing of forced migrants (Gundacker et al., 2024; Müller et al., 2018), with consequences for their post-migration biographies. At the same time, migration experiences may also enhance individual resources, e.g. by learning a language or gathering job experience in transit (Lindstrom & Ramírez, 2010).

This paper contributes to this debate by assessing to what extent post-migration biographies are shaped by individual pre-migration human capital endowment and individual migration experiences. In particular, I assess the potential of straining journeys to erode refugees' available resources after arrival. The study's novelty is, firstly, to empirically take into account migration experiences as a factor in post-migration biographies, thereby testing the potential channel of resource-draining refugee journeys. Secondly, it analyses integration experiences beyond single, isolated outcomes. In refugees' post-migration biographies, processes such as asylum procedures, language acquisition, job training, job search and labor market entry are interrelated. They can occur in manifold orders and at various points in time. In a biographical approach, namely sequence analysis combined with cluster

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analysis, I capture the entirety of these trajectories and seek to explore their determinants.

Sequence analysis has become an established tool to examine biographies of migrants (e.g., Kogan & Weißmann, 2013; Kraus, 2019) and refugees (e.g., Söhn, 2019). Combining survey data with monthly administrative records, I first identify distinct types of integration trajectories of refugees, revealing how the timing, order, and duration of states such as education, employment, job search, and inactivity vary across individuals. Multivariate analyses then assess how these distinct trajectories vary by pre-migration human capital endowment and journey characteristics. Contributing to the discussion on the erosion of individual resources through forced migration, I furthermore test whether the effects of pre-migration resource endowments vary with journey duration and the experience of traumatic events. The analyses will differentiate by gender to reflect gendered patterns in migration processes (Fendel & Kosyakova, 2023; Kosyakova et al., 2023; Menke, 2024).

The results, firstly, contribute to the discussion on the persistence of human capital endowment in contexts of forced migration. They, secondly, address the substantial research gap on the relationship between migration and integration experiences. The article thereby speaks to two main pillars in the sociology of migration: human mobility and post-migration incorporation processes (Boswell, 2008; Castles, 2007; Martiniello & Rea, 2014; Amelina & Horvath, 2017). Finally, the findings offer important insights for tailoring integration policies to the diverse needs of refugee men and women with varying backgrounds.

2. Do individual resources erode with forced migration?

Numerous studies underscore the importance of individual resources in the economic and societal participation of individuals. In the literature, this most prominently refers to human capital: formal or informal skills acquired throughout the educational and/or employment career can be leveraged on the labor market, thereby improving one's social status and living situation (Weber (1978)). Formal educational credentials (e.g., job certificates or academic diplomas) certify an individual's skills and signal their value to employers (Weber (1978)). Likewise, skills acquired in previous jobs constitute a valuable resource (Kunze, 2002) with comparable signaling effects. Hereafter, I refer to human capital as individual resources in terms of educational background and job experience. Are these resources still available to the individual after migrating, in particular in the context of forced migration?

Overall, Becker (1993) contends that human capital is embodied throughout the lifetime and generally does not depreciate. Some literature, however, discusses the depreciation of human capital in the case of career disruptions such as parenthood (Mincer & Ofek, 1982), health issues (Cutler & Richardson, 1998), unemployment, and other periods of non-work (Kunze, 2002). For migrants, extensive research consistently indicates better labor market outcomes for the higher educated, suggesting that individual resources do not fully erode with migration (see Kosyakova & Kogan, 2022, for an overview). Nevertheless, much depends on the transferability of skills to the new context (Borjas, 1999; Chiswick & Miller, 2009). Skills that are non-specific or not tied to a single task (e.g., problem-solving skills and critical reasoning referred to as fluid intelligence, Yuan et al., 2006) tend to be preserved and support the navigation of labor markets, educational systems, and bureaucracy in the receiving country. Overall, human capital helps maintain or foster new human capital, social capital, social status, and cultural capital. In other words, individuals with stronger human capital backgrounds are more likely to compensate for resource losses following migration more quickly (Kosyakova & Brücker, 2020).

At the same time, migration constitutes a “critical event in people's life course” which may “lead to serious ruptures” (Söhn, 2016, 197). Unlike short-term movements such as tourism, migration describes a permanent relocation—one that can affect social and economic status, interrupt educational/employment histories, and alter living conditions

(e.g., regarding housing or mobility). Relocation exposes migrants to new social and institutional contexts: social networks are left behind, and associated social status is often partially or fully lost. Knowledge of labor markets, education systems, social support, and norms in the destination must be acquired anew. Thus, “the event of an international migration move is an ideal-type of a life course transition” and represents “a turning point with profound consequences for the migrants and their families” (de Valk et al., 2011, 284).

These biographical breaks are particularly pronounced in forced migration. The decision to seek refuge is typically less prepared and supported by fewer resources than, for instance, labor or study migration: forced migrants face limited options to plan their move regarding destination, language acquisition, work permit and job contracting, entry permit, and the transfer of qualifications. This reduces the match between individual skills and receiving labor markets (Dadush & Niebuhr, 2016). Wars or conflicts that trigger forced migration furthermore disrupt school visits, trainings, job careers, and family formation, leading to a loss of resources. Especially when breaks are prolonged, the likelihood of permanent devaluation increases (Fransen et al., 2017; Kunze, 2002; Mincer & Ofek, 1982).

A specific form of human capital erosion is the devaluation of formal qualifications: job titles and educational degrees earned elsewhere may be recognized only partially or not at all in the destination country (Ruiz & Vargas-Silva, 2017). Employers tend to discount foreign credentials and job experience, particularly from countries whose institutional frameworks differ markedly from those of the receiving country (Aydemir & Skuterud, 2004; Chiswick & Miller, 2009). Also, individual skills and knowledge of a person have to match local labor market demands to actually yield a reward. Kosyakova et al. (2023) find that skilled refugee women are particularly disadvantaged in transferring their qualifications. Their pre-migration jobs were more often knowledge-intensive, requiring country-specific skills and knowledge which cannot or only partially be transferred. Working in their original occupation (e.g., in teaching) would thus require considerable investments.

Furthermore, due to the lack of legal immigration channels, refugee migration is typically characterized by risky and costly journeys (Gundacker et al., 2024). This bears significant threats to physical and mental health (Müller et al., 2018). Potentially traumatic experiences before or during migration, including physical and mental harm and the loss of family members, expose refugees to increased risks of psychological distress, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, physical constraints, or depressive symptoms, which may be exacerbated by post-migration stressors such as social isolation or perceived discrimination (Alemi & Stempel, 2018; Menke, 2024; Stempel & Alemi, 2020). As a consequence, migrants forced into lengthy, hazardous journeys may be less able to access their resources and to actively get involved at the context of arrival (Giuntella et al., 2018; Turner et al., 2003; Gladwell, 2020).

Refugee women can be expected to face additional disadvantages. Previous research constitutes that they are at a higher risk of health impediments than men, potentially due to greater exposure to gender-specific and sexual violence at various stages (Axinn et al., 2013). Also, the majority of women seeking refuge in Germany arrive with family members (Gundacker et al., 2024). While family networks can represent valuable resources, care responsibilities and limited mobility can restrict the opportunity structures of refugee women to build a life upon arrival (Kosyakova et al., 2023). This concerns administrative tasks associated with their legal status, the allocation of kids in school, and access to housing, but also activities such as building social networks, language acquisition, and other educational participation (Menke, 2024). Gender-based disparities like lower self-esteem of women (Bleidorn et al., 2016) as well as common gender norms and stereotypes depicting the woman as less competent or less talented than men further compound these hurdles (Ellemers, 2018). Consequently, women's coping mechanisms and integration biographies likely diverge

from those of men. To account for this, analyses are run separately by gender.

Overall, there is reason to anticipate the erosion of individual resources following refugee migration. Employing a biographical approach, this study tests whether or not pre-migration human capital endowment shapes the integration trajectories of refugee women and men in Germany and investigates potential resource losses associated with straining refugee migration experiences. In a structural understanding of integration, I particularly focus on sequences of education and labor market participation. To assess whether and when labor market entry occurs in the first place, all types of employment are considered rather than distinguishing by skill or wage levels. Note that I use integration as an analytical concept to describe and study a biographical process rather than a normative concept to evaluate and rank participation outcomes of migrants (Penninx, 2019).

3. Administrative context and starting conditions

Between 2013 and 2019, 2.1 million individuals applied for asylum in Germany. During the same period, a comparatively small group was admitted through resettlement programmes (28,000 persons, Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge BAMF, 2020; Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge BAMF, 2024). For most asylum seekers, the migration process is thus risky and costly, given the limited legal pathways available (Gundacker et al., 2024). The waiting times for an asylum decision varied over the observation period (2013–2019) reflecting different levels of administrative workload. The average duration until receiving an initial decision from the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees ranged between 5 and 11 months, while the waiting period for a final and legally binding decision (including court proceedings) extended from eight to 21 months (German Parliament, 2014a, 2014b, 2015a, 2015b, 2016a, 2016b, 2017a, 2017b, 2018a, 2018b, 2019, 2020). Kosyakova and Brücker (2020) furthermore established that asylum seekers with a higher socioeconomic status are not only more likely to receive a positive decision, but also experience shorter procedure durations on average. The authors attribute this to a greater ability to manoeuvre bureaucratic processes efficiently and to coherently present one’s asylum case.

In terms of integration trajectories, the realm of activities that refugees can engage with crucially depends on the institutional access to education, public services, employment, and housing. Importantly, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees classifies the origin countries of asylum applicants according to previous asylum recognition rates of the respective countries, deriving a classification on applicants’ ‘prospects to stay’. Based on this classification, the administration grants differential access to integration measures and the labor market. Those from countries with high previous recognition rates and thus with ‘good prospects to stay’, namely Syria, Iraq, Somalia, Eritrea, and Iran in the period under study, had priority access to German classes, labor market services, and the labor market after a three-month waiting period. Asylum-seekers from designated ‘safe third countries’ with small recognition chances, namely West Balkan states, Ghana, and Senegal, faced employment bans and exclusion from job market and language measures. A third group not covered by either classification obtained labor market access after three months and subordinate access to publicly funded courses and job measures, with priority given to those with ‘good prospects to stay’. Courses provided by private actors had no such entry restrictions (Kosyakova & Brenzel, 2020). Access to vocational training was prohibited for asylum-seekers from so-called ‘safe third countries’ and conditional upon holding a work permit for all others. Regardless of the legal status, refugees could enroll at universities if they could prove completion of secondary education (Informationsverbund Asyl und Migration, 2022).

For all groups with labor market access prior to the conclusion of their asylum procedures, work permits were subject to approval and needed renewal for each job offer. Until 2016, a priority test was in place

to ensure that any job sought by an asylum seeker would preferentially be filled by a German or EU national with comparable qualifications if available. Approved refugees gained unrestricted access to the labor market, labor market services, and vocational training.

4. Data and method

4.1. Data and sample

The study targets male and female refugees who arrived in Germany between 2013 and 2017. I observe their biographies between 2013 and 2019 for up to three years. The analysis is based on a comprehensive longitudinal household survey, the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees (Brücker et al., 2017), linked with administrative employment data (SOEP-CMI-ADIAB, Antoni et al., 2023). Initiated in 2016 and conducted annually, the sample is drawn from the Central Register of Foreign Nationals and is representative for refugees who arrived between 2013 and 2017 (Kühne et al., 2019). Data collection was conducted through computer assisted face-to-face interviewing (CAPI) in seven languages (Arabic, English, Farsi/Dari, German, Kurmanji, Pashtu and Urdu). Auditory instruments facilitated participation of illiterate respondents, and interpreters were available if needed. This study uses the first four survey waves (2016–2019), restricting the analytical sample to refugees aged 18–60 at arrival and those who arrived in January 2013 or later. Respondents with missing information on the arrival date and those who responded to a non-refugee questionnaire are excluded (see Table 1). To construct comparable sequences, citizens of designated ‘safe third countries’ are excluded, and observation begins three months after arrival: this is when all groups but those from so-called ‘safe third countries’ gain conditional labor market access (3).

The administrative individual data stems from the Integrated Employment Biographies (IEB) of the IAB which combine data from five administrative sources of the German Federal Employment Agency. These records provide daily information on employment, benefit receipt, job search and participation in labor market programs. 84 % of all persons that participated at least once in the 2016–2019 IAB-BAMF-SOEP-Refugee Survey consented to the link of their records, and 86 % of those could be merged to the administrative employment data (Antoni et al., 2023). Their administrative logs can be observed despite potential survey dropout. Individuals lacking status information were excluded. The final dataset comprises 5033 individuals (see Table 1) of which 3104 are male.

To control for contextual effects (Phillimore, 2021), I include the yearly unemployment rate (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2024a), the proportion of the foreign population (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2024b) and an urban dummy derived from the Thünen-Typology of Rural Areas (Küpper, 2016).

4.2. Sequence analysis and clustering

The empirical analysis comprises two steps. First, I employ sequence analysis combined with cluster analysis (Abbott & Forrest, 1986; Studer, 2021) to identify common clusters of integration trajectories. The data are structured in person-month observations, with each person being

Table 1
Sample selection.

Selection step	Remaining observations
Original data	8288
responded to non-refugee questionnaire	7903
arrival date is missing	7824
aged < 18 or > 60 at arrival/age at arrival missing	7196
arrived before 2013	7024
citizen from country classified as ‘safe’	6773
no consent to data linkage or not found in IEB	5036
no activity status information available	5033

observed for up to 36 months (178,990 person-month observations in total). The observation window starts three months after arrival (as reported in the survey interview or in the administrative employment data, whatever comes first). If the administrative registry ends within this 3-year period, subsequent months are coded as ‘end of observed biography’. Four percent of all biographies are observed for less than three years and instead have an average length of 24 months (median: 25). The end of the asylum procedure is identified through registry with the Job Center for job search or as subsidiary recipient under the Social Code II/XII in the IEB (both states require an asylum decision). Administrative information on the participation in labor market measures as well as publicly funded language and integration classes (including BAMF-integration courses) is complemented by self-reports in the IAB-BAMF-SOEP survey (for the survey years 2016–2019). Unfortunately, the data is insufficient to include university enrollment and private education activities such as evening classes.

Short gaps (of up to two months) are imputed using the previous month’s status if the adjacent month is identical, eliminating 242 one-month gaps and 299 two-month gaps. The final sample contains gaps for 4093 person-month observations (2 % of all person-month observations). 9 % of the female biographies and 13 % of the male biographies exhibit at least one gap.

The following states are considered: (1) employment (including full-time, part-time and mini jobs as well as vocational training), (2) participation in a course or training (such as language classes and labor market measures), (3) inactivity during asylum procedure, (4) job search or inactivity after the asylum procedure, (5) gaps and (6) end of observed biography. In cases of concurrent activities, states are defined hierarchically in numerical order (with 1 as dominant state). With a particular focus on the sequencing of states, I rely on the optimal matching of transitions (Biemann, 2011; Studer & Ritschard, 2016). This procedure is highly sensitive to sequence order and less sensitive to sequence length. Agglomerative hierarchical clustering is performed using the Ward criterion. See appendix for methodological details.

4.3. Regression analyses and interactions

In a second step, I explore how the identified clusters are related to journey characteristics and individual pre-migration human capital endowment. Importantly, pre-migration capital may also affect journey characteristics. To isolate both effects, I perform two separate multinomial logistic regression analyses. In both models, the assigned integration cluster represents the dependent variable, predicted by journey characteristics (Model 1) and pre-migration resources (Model 2). To avoid endogeneity, only explanatory variables measured before or at arrival are included. Models are stratified by gender. Furthermore, journey characteristics may affect the availability of pre-migration human capital after arrival (see 2). I test this assumption in additional gender-specific models including the respective interaction terms. In all models, robust standard errors are applied.

Human capital endowment is approximated by years of pre-migration schooling above the gender-specific sample median (*above-median pre-migration education* taking the values 0 and 1) and by pre-migration work experience (0/1).

As for the journey, the analysis accounts for the individual travel duration. To allow for non-linear effects, I introduce a categorical variable taking the values 1–4, indicating the individual’s *duration of travel* to lie in the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th quantile of the gender-specific sample. The quantiles correspond to travel durations of up to 7 days, 8–16 days, 17–32 days, and 33 or more days for women and up to 10 days, 11–20 days, 21–45 days, and 46 or more days for men, accordingly (for average values, see Table 2). Given that refugee journeys often entail the stay in a transit country, the duration of travel is calculated from the day the person left their last transit country (a stay of three months or more qualifies as transit stay). *Stays in transit countries* are controlled for via a respective dummy. Considering that some stay in third countries for

several years before coming to Germany, this procedure ensures long stays in transit countries do not mistakenly inflate the travel duration measure. The models furthermore include a dummy whether the person reports *traumatic experiences*. Note that a large share of respondents decided to skip the entire survey battery on sensitive items regarding their journey which is captured in a respective dummy (*answered sensitive item battery*). Family status at arrival is binary (*arrived with family*).¹ Missing values are controlled for via corresponding dummies.

Age at arrival enters the analysis as a continuous control variable standardized around the mean. Further controls include the *country of origin group* according to ‘prospects to stay’, additionally identifying the largest country of origin (Syria, Other countries with good prospects to stay, and Countries with limited prospects to stay, see 3) and the grouped *arrival year* (2013–14, 2015, and 2016–18). Both models additionally control for socioeconomic characteristics of the region of residence that may be relevant for integration trajectories, namely the yearly *unemployment rate*², the *share of foreigners*, and an *urban area* dummy, measured on the county level and fixed to the year prior to arrival. I furthermore control for the respective IAB-BAMF-SOEP survey sample (M3/M4/M5) as well as imputed or missing location data and inconsistent course information.

Table 2 provides descriptive statistics. 60 % of the sample stems from Syria which is classified as an origin country with ‘good prospects to stay’. Another 22 % of the sample originate from other countries with ‘good prospects to stay’ (see 3).³ Men are considerably more likely than women to have pre-migration job experience (82 vs 35 %). Men were more likely than women to answer the sensitive item battery including traumatic experiences (66 vs 55 %). Among those who answered this item battery, 55 % of the men and 44 % of the women reported at least one traumatic experience on their way to Germany, corresponding to 36 and 24 % of the full samples, respectively. The majority of the women arrived in Germany with family members (91 % vs 57 % of the men). Mean age at arrival was 32 years.

5. Results

5.1. Typologies of the integration trajectories of women and men

Sequence analysis combined with cluster analysis reveals five gender-specific integration trajectories distinguished by the sequencing, timing, and duration of states. Fig. 1 displays distribution plots (row a) and transition rate matrices of distinct state sequences (DSS, row b) by gender. Fig. 2 displays mean times until first occurrence of states by gender (row a) as well as mean times spent in states by gender (row b).

All trajectories typically start with a phase of inactivity. Mean time spent in inactivity during the asylum procedure is 8 months among

¹ Note that subsequent changes in family composition (like the birth of a child or the reunification with family members) cannot be included in the analysis given the endogeneity this would introduce, see above. For the same reason, I unfortunately cannot include the presence of children: the exact household composition is recorded for the first time in the first survey interview. By that time, individuals may have resided in Germany for a considerable amount of time, such that the gathered information would not reflect the family composition at arrival, hence introducing endogeneity. The variable on the family composition at arrival is less precise in terms of the exact family members present at arrival, but it has the precision on the timing required by the analytical model.

² As labor market characteristics strongly correlate with a municipality’s overall economic situation, I do not include additional economic measures such as gross regional product, tax volume or average household income.

³ Note that these shares are not necessarily representative for the refugee population in Germany in the respective period under study given the selection into the linked dataset (Antoni et al., 2023). As I am not primarily interested in group sizes but rather in integration typologies as such this is not of concern for the analysis.

Table 2
Individual characteristics and control variables by gender.

	Women		Men		Total	
	N/mean	%/sd	N/mean	%/sd	N/mean	%/sd
N	1929	(38.3%)	3104	(61.7%)	5033	(100.0%)
Age at arrival, years	32.28	(9.63)	31.77	(9.99)	31.97	(9.85)
Country of origin group						
Syria	1188	(62.3%)	1825	(59.3%)	3013	(60.4%)
Other countries with 'good prospects to stay'	407	(21.4%)	688	(22.3%)	1095	(22.0%)
Countries with limited 'prospects to stay'	311	(16.3%)	567	(18.4%)	878	(17.6%)
Arrival Year						
2013/14	452	(23.4%)	744	(24.0%)	1196	(23.8%)
2015	1097	(56.9%)	2014	(64.9%)	3111	(61.8%)
2016–18	380	(19.7%)	346	(11.1%)	726	(14.4%)
Above-median years of pre-mig. education						
yes	832	(43.1%)	1384	(44.6%)	2216	(44.0%)
missing	137	(7.1%)	246	(7.9%)	383	(7.6%)
Pre-migration work experience						
yes	666	(34.5%)	2531	(81.5%)	3197	(63.5%)
missing	54	(2.8%)	188	(6.1%)	242	(4.8%)
Travel duration quantile						
1st (average women: 2 days, men: 5 days)	522	(27.1%)	829	(26.7%)	1351	(26.8%)
2nd (average women: 12 days, men: 16 days)	416	(21.6%)	690	(22.2%)	1106	(22.0%)
3rd (average women: 26 days, men: 31 days)	454	(23.5%)	804	(25.9%)	1258	(25.0%)
4th (average women: 132 days, men: 164 days)	459	(23.8%)	690	(22.2%)	1149	(22.8%)
missing	78	(4.0%)	91	(2.9%)	169	(3.4%)
Stay in transit country	758	(39.3%)	1281	(41.3%)	2039	(40.5%)
Traumatic experiences						
yes	461	(23.9%)	1107	(35.7%)	1568	(31.2%)
missing	883	(45.8%)	1089	(35.1%)	1972	(39.2%)
Answered sensitive item battery	1061	(55.0%)	2034	(65.5%)	3095	(61.5%)
Arrived with family						
yes	1756	(91.0%)	1782	(57.4%)	3538	(70.3%)
missing	2	(0.1%)	3	(0.1%)	5	(0.1%)
Survey sample						
M3	562	(29.1%)	1062	(34.2%)	1624	(32.3%)
M4	718	(37.2%)	1008	(32.5%)	1726	(34.3%)
M5	649	(33.6%)	1034	(33.3%)	1683	(33.4%)
Location information imputed from IEB	126	(6.5%)	171	(5.5%)	297	(5.9%)
Location information missing	3	(0.2%)	3	(0.1%)	6	(0.1%)
Inconsistent course dates	11	(0.6%)	13	(0.4%)	24	(0.5%)
Unemployment rate, %	73.25	(247.91)	62.64	(228.24)	66.71	(236.00)
Urban area, Thünen typology, %	108.23	(243.31)	98.43	(224.76)	102.18	(232.07)
Share of foreigners, %	75.71	(247.29)	64.96	(227.71)	69.08	(235.44)

Source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees (2016–2019) linked to the Integrated Employment Biographies (SOEP-CMI-ADIAB, [Antoni et al., 2023](#)) and [Statistisches Bundesamt, 2024a](#); [Statistisches Bundesamt, 2024b](#), own illustration. Refer to [Table 1](#) for sample restrictions.

women and 7 months among men ([Fig. 2b](#), also see [Table A4](#) in the appendix). The most common state following inactivity during the asylum procedure is job search or inactivity after the asylum procedure. Throughout the observed time window, women on average spend 17 months in job search or inactivity after the asylum procedure (men: 11 months, [Table A4](#), [Fig. 2b](#)). On average, 11 and 12 months pass until educational spells occur for the first time in male and female biographies, respectively ([Fig. 2a](#), [Table A3](#) in the appendix). Starting education is thus more likely once the asylum procedure is completed ([Fig. 1b](#); also see [Figure A5](#)). To be precise, if individuals exit the status of job search or inactivity after the asylum procedure, women and men transit into education with a probability of 84 and 71 %, respectively ([Fig. 1b](#)). The average time spent in courses or training is 11 months for men and 9 months for women ([Fig. 2b](#), [Table A4](#)).

Men's probability to transfer from post-asylum procedure inactivity into employment amounts to 23 %, while it is less common among women (with a probability of 6 %, [Fig. 2b](#)). The first employment spell is on average registered 23 months into the observation period for both men and women ([Fig. 2a](#), [Table A3](#)). Chances to enter employment directly after an educational spell equal 5 % for women and 16 % for men; transition into job search or inactivity is more likely (with transition probabilities of 83 and 73 %, respectively, [Fig. 1b](#)). If a state change out of employment occurs, this is a transition into education with a chance of 31 % for women and 28 % for men, while a transition back to

job search has a likelihood of 52 % for women and 58 % for men ([Fig. 1b](#)). Oscillating between job search and course participation is a likely scenario for both men and women ([Fig. 1b](#), [A5](#)).

Overall, male biographies are characterized by a higher number of transitions and visited states than female biographies (mean values: 4.4 vs 3 transitions and 3.4 vs 2.7 no. of visited states, see [Table A5](#) in the appendix). Male biographies are thus on average more diverse (also see entropy index displayed in [Table A5](#); [Gabadinho et al., 2011](#)). Within the male and female samples, variances in the timing, sequencing, and duration of states are high, however.

The sequencing, timing, and duration of states vary substantially across the identified gender-specific clusters. [Fig. 3](#) illustrates the clustered integration trajectories by gender. For cluster-specific duration until first occurrence of states, mean times spent in states, distinct successive state (DSS) transition matrices, state sequence (STS) transition matrices, and entropy indexes, refer to [Figures A1, A2, A3, A4, and A6](#) in the appendix.

To be precise, in two clusters, men and women engage in comparatively little activity. The first group experiences long asylum procedures with little other activity recorded ('deferred transition', [Figs. 1b, 2b, A2, and Table A4](#)). This group shows the longest mean spell duration and the lowest average number of state transitions and visited states per sequence ([Table A5](#)). Transition into job search or inactivity after the asylum procedure on average occurs comparatively late, namely 27 and

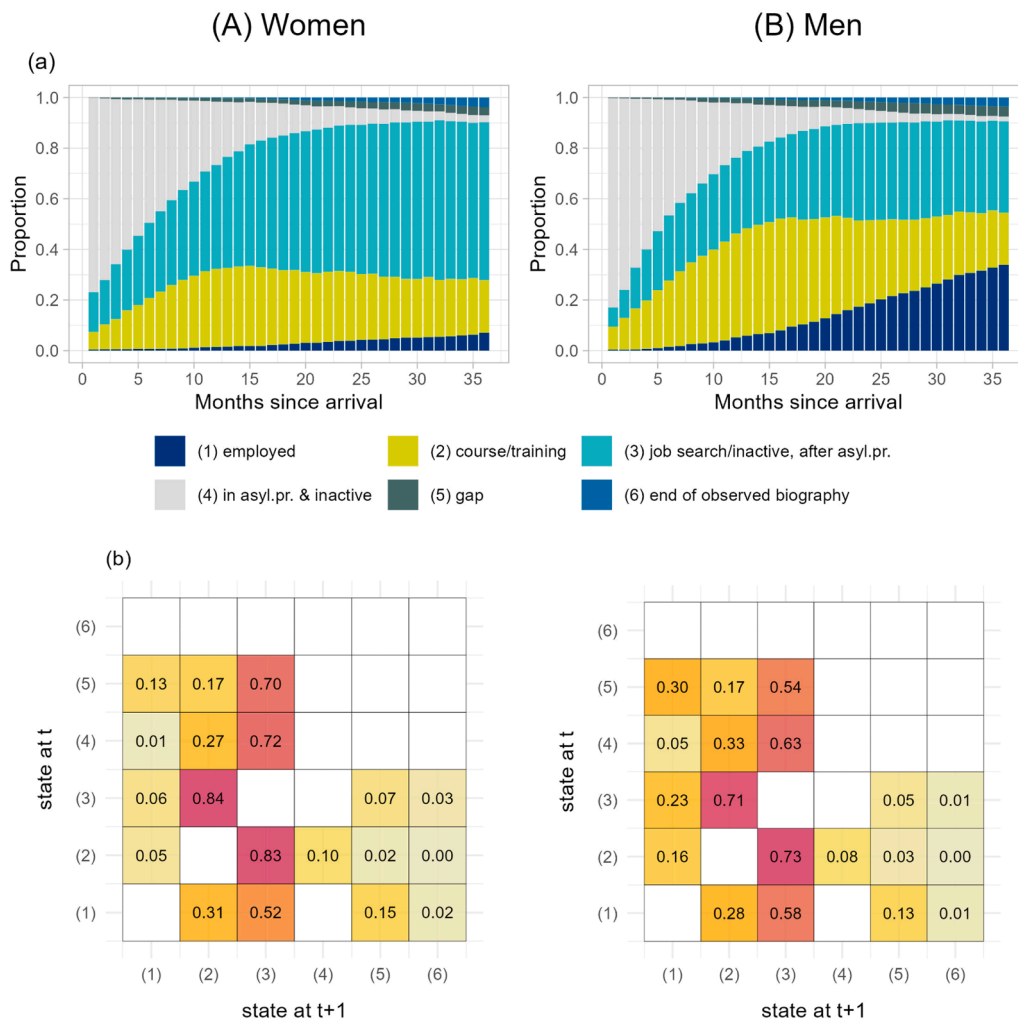


Fig. 1. Distribution plots and DSS transition rate matrices, by gender. *Sources:* IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees (2016–2019) linked to the Integrated Employment Biographies (SOEP-CMI-ADIAB), own calculations. *Notes:* (a) Distribution plots: the graphically displayed frequencies of the different statuses over time represent the proportion of the individuals in each of the statuses according to the time elapsed since arrival (x-axis, in months). Sequences are grouped; a horizontal line does not refer to an individual. (b) Transition rates between spells of distinct successive states, i.e., the probability of moving from one state at time t (y-axis) to another state at time $t + 1$ (x-axis) ignoring the successive repetition of states. For transition rates between spells of any successive states, see Fig. A5 in the appendix. States 1–6 displayed in (b) are equivalent to states defined in legend of plot (a).

32 months after the start of the observation period for women and men, respectively. If members of this cluster transit into education, this on average occurs 18 (women) and 21 months (men) into the observation period (sample means: 12 and 11 months, see Fig. A1 and Table A3 in the appendix). The unpredictability of states is thus comparatively low in the beginning and then notably increases towards the third (fourth) quarter of the observation period for women (men, see entropy indices by gender and cluster displayed in Fig. A6). The average time this cluster spends in educational spells is below-average (Fig. A2 and Table A4). In contrast to the other clusters, education participation typically occurs while still in the asylum procedure (Fig. A3). Employment spells in this cluster are rare (Fig. 3, Fig. A2, Table A4). The ‘deferred transition’ group thus spends a comparatively long time waiting for the asylum decision, seldomly engaging in other recorded activities and if so, comparatively late and short in duration. The sharp increase in state diversity towards the end of the observed biographies suggests that status transitions are more likely in the months to come if they were observed. The majority of this cluster stems from a country with ‘limited prospects to stay’ (Tables A1, A2), such that the scope of their activities is limited by the administrative and legal framework (see 3).

A second group transits into inactivity or job search after the asylum procedure relatively quickly (5 and 7 months after the start of the

observation period for women and men, respectively) and holds this status for an average 27 (25) months (sample means: 17 and 11 months, Table A4). Their mean number of visited states and state transitions thus remain below-average while average spell durations exceed sample means (Table A5). In contrast to the ‘deferred transition’ group, biographies in this cluster are characterized by decreasing longitudinal entropy over time. Educational activity in this group is below-average in length (Fig. A2, Table A4), typically takes place once the asylum procedure is finalized (Fig. A3), and is commonly followed by a return to job search or inactivity (Figs. A3, A4). Employment seldomly occurs (Fig. 3, Table A4). I refer to this group as the ‘non-participation’ cluster: for extensive periods of the observation window, biographies in this group are not in employment, education, or training. The group is mostly comprised of citizens from countries with ‘good prospects to stay’ (Tables A1, A2), which is reflected in their short asylum procedures and early access to courses.

A third trajectory type features early and prolonged educational activity (‘long activation’). Educational spells occur on average 9 (7) months after the start of the observation period for women (men, Fig. A1, Table A3). For men, there is a 34 % chance to transition into education during the asylum procedure, while this probability equals 4 % for women who are more likely to participate in education once the

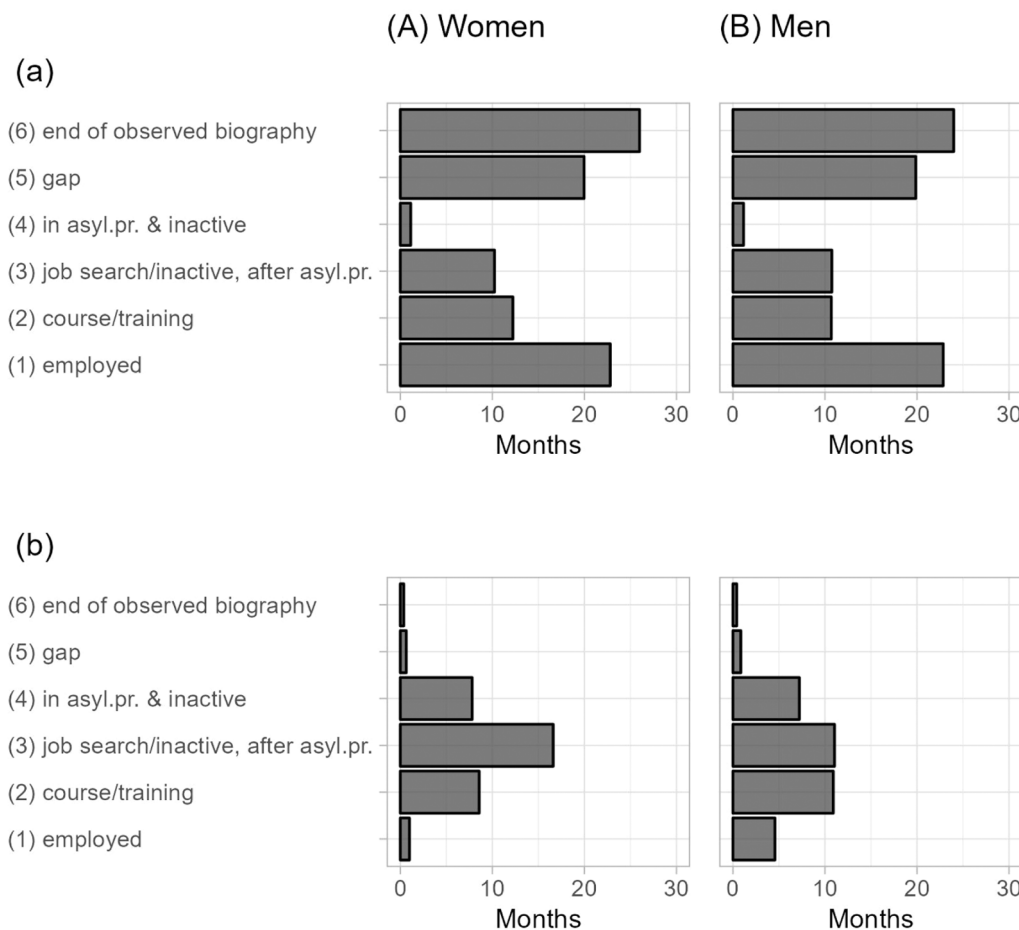


Fig. 2. Mean duration until first occurrence of state (a) and mean time spent in states (b), by gender. Sources: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees (2016–2019) linked to the Integrated Employment Biographies (SOEP-CMI-ADIAS), own calculations. Notes: (a) Mean number of months elapsed until state occurs. (b) Mean number of months spent in each of the statuses over the entire observation period. Spells must not be subsequent.

asylum procedure is finalized. Men and women in this cluster spend an average of 16 months in education and comparatively little time in inactivity (Fig. A2, Table A4). For women in this cluster, employment is uncommon, while for 40 % of the men, being employed is recorded at the end of the observation period (Fig. 3). A direct transition from course participation or job training into employment has a probability of 17 % for men, which ranges slightly above the male sample average. Women in education instead subsequently transfer into job search or inactivity with a probability of 96 % (Fig. A3). Mean entropy and number of transitions ranges above the sample average for the male ‘long activation’ cluster, while the opposite is the case for the female cluster.

Another cluster (‘delayed activation’) remains inactive during the asylum procedure for a comparatively long time (women: 13 months, men: 10 months, Figure A2, Table A4) and enters education rather late (first occurrence on average 17 and 14 months after the start of the observation period for women and men, respectively; sample average: 12 and 11 months, Figure A1, Table A3). Particularly for the male biographies in this group, entropy notably increases and temporarily peaks one year after the start of the observation period (Figure A6), reflecting their increased diversity of states over time. While the overall time men spend in education equals the sample mean of 11 months, their female counterparts in this cluster experience relatively short educational spells of a total of 5 months, typically followed by inactivity or job search (Figures A2, A3, Table A4). Entering the labor market is a rare event in this cluster. For the male sample, the majority of biographies with gaps or early exit from the observed time period are clustered in the ‘delayed activation’ group (Fig. 3, A2, Table A3). Given the overall low occurrence of gaps (see 4.2), I do not expect their grouping to bias the

results.

A final cluster is dominated by employment spells (summing up to an average 17 and 16 months for women and men, Table A4, Figure A2) that occur on average 19 and 18 months after the start of the observation period for women and men, respectively. Transition onto the labor market is more likely to occur after than during the asylum procedure (Figures A3, A4). Phases of inactivity are comparatively short for members in this cluster (Table A4, Figure A2). Time spent in courses or training is below the average, particularly for the male sample (5 months vs a sample mean of 11, women: 8 months vs a sample mean of 9, Table A4, Figure A2). The education spells occur relatively early (on average, after 6 months for women and after 10 months for men), and particularly women in this cluster are more likely than others to enter education already during the asylum procedure (Figures A1, A3, Table A3). Female biographies in this cluster show an above-average number of transitions and visited states, while men in this cluster range at the male average (Table A5). For both genders, the likelihood to transfer from a course or training directly into employment is comparatively high (probability rates: 42 and 40 %, respectively, Figure A3, also see Figure A4). The same holds true for the transition from job search/inactivity to employment (probability rates: 34 % for women and 50 % for men, Figure A3). The transition matrices suggest that employment states are fairly stable (Figures A3, A4). I thus refer to this integration cluster as the ‘employment trajectory’.

5.2. Multivariate results

Figs. 4 and 5 display the average marginal effects of travel

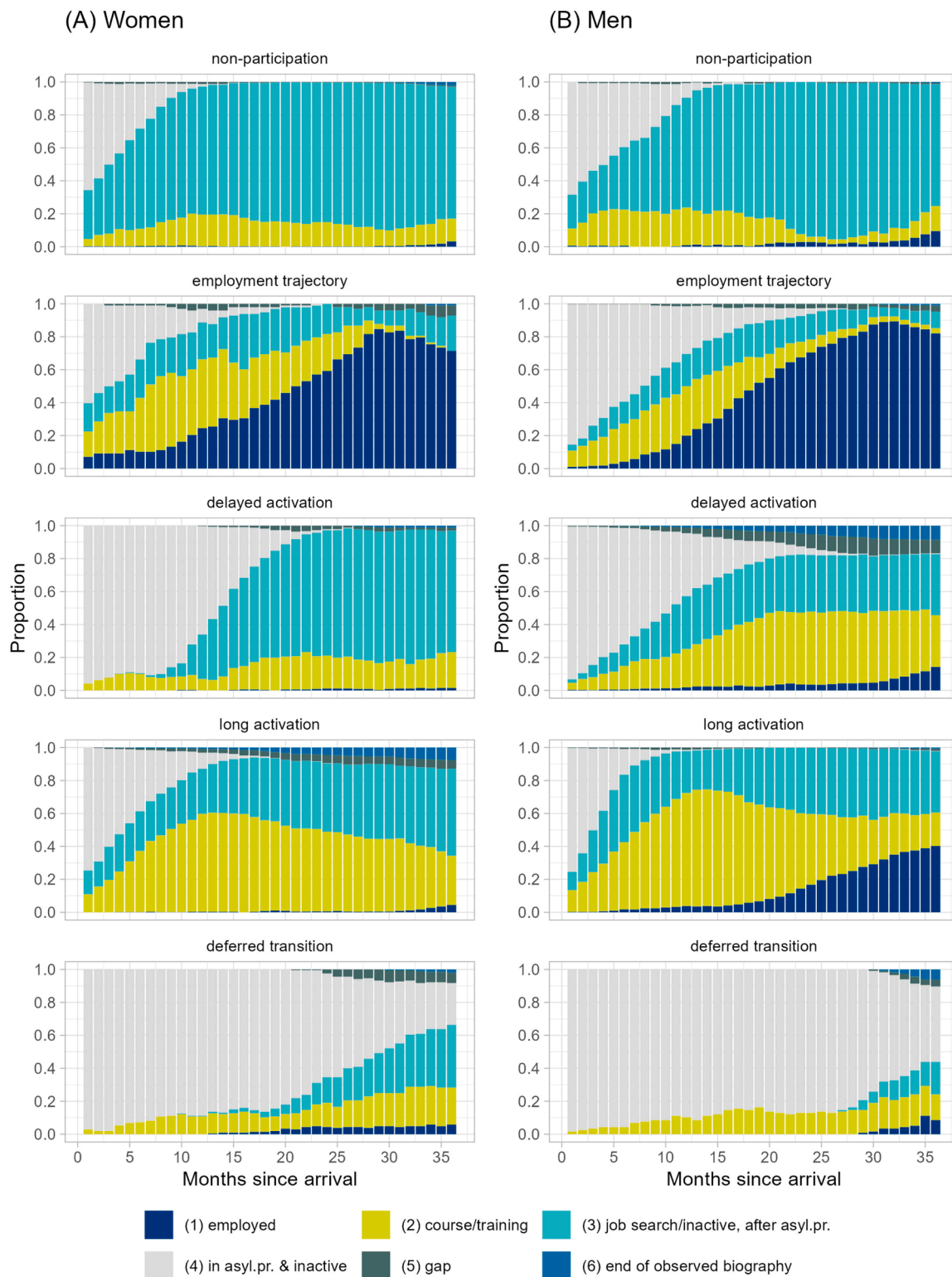


Fig. 3. Distribution plots by gender and integration trajectory type. *Sources:* IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees (2016–2019) linked to the Integrated Employment Biographies (SOEP-CMI-ADIAB), own illustration. *Notes:* the graphically displayed frequencies of the different statuses over time represent the proportion of the individuals in each of the statuses according to the time elapsed since arrival (x-axis, in months). Sequences are grouped; a horizontal line does not refer to an individual.

characteristics (model 1) and pre-migration human capital (model 2) on cluster membership probabilities estimated in separate gender-specific multinomial logistic regressions. Effect sizes are displayed if statistically significant at the 5-percent level. For the full models, refer to Tables A6, A7, A8, and A9 in the appendix.

The results show that post-migration integration trajectories vary by travel duration. Longer travel durations are associated with a higher likelihood of ‘delayed activation’ for both men and women (Fig. 4). For women (men) with extraordinarily long travel durations, i.e. durations exceeding 32 (45) days, the likelihood of ‘delayed activation’ increases

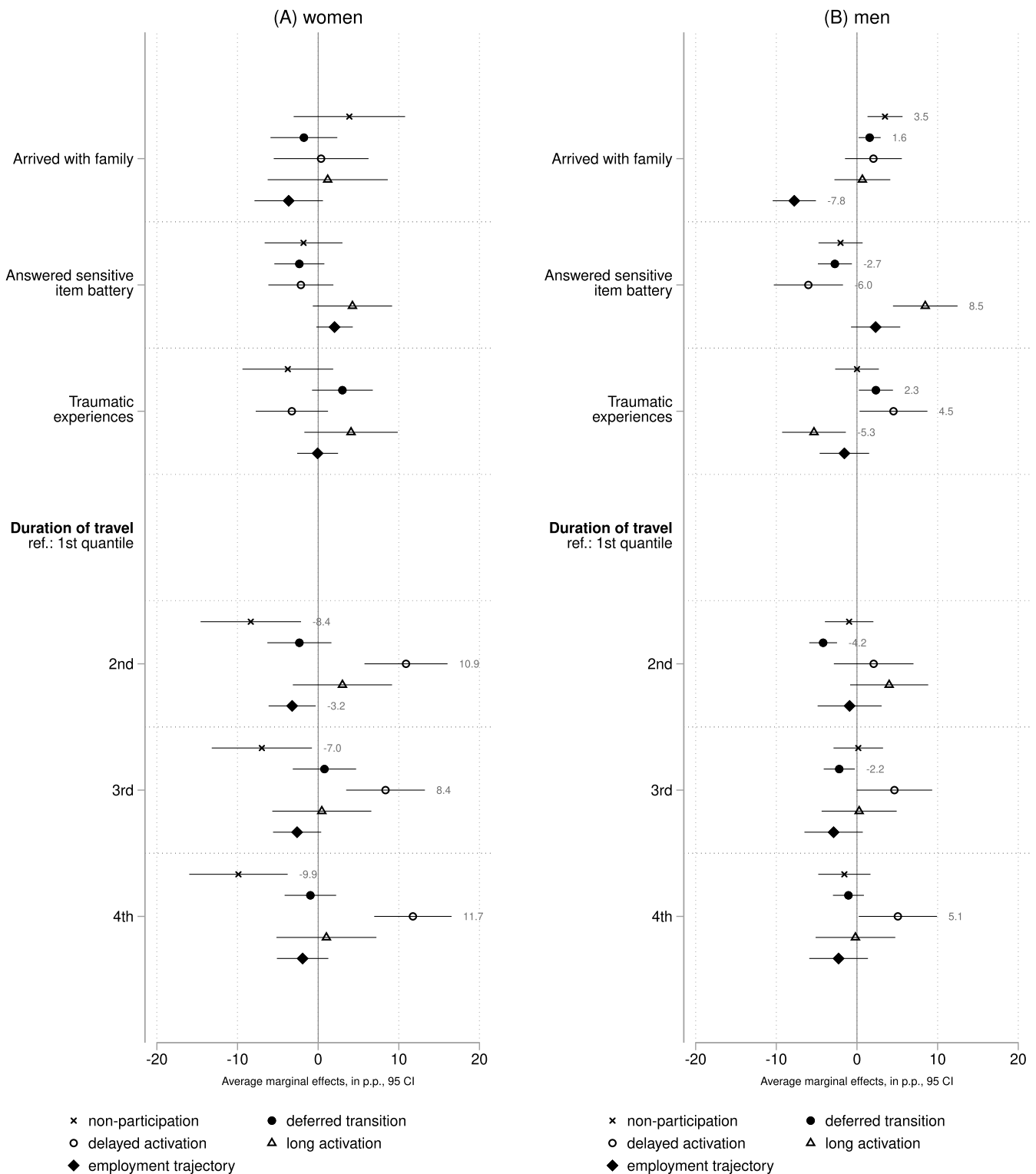


Fig. 4. Model 1: Multinomial regression results, by gender (average marginal effects, 95 % confidence intervals, and effect sizes in p.p. if statistically significant at the 5-percent level). *Sources:* IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees (2016–2019) linked to the Integrated Employment Biographies (SOEP-CMI-ADIAB, [Antoni et al., 2023](#)), own calculations. *Notes:* For full models refer to Tables A6 and A8 in the appendix. Models control for country of origin, year of arrival, imputed dates, sample, missings indicators, unemployment rate at county level, share of foreigners at county level, and an urban dummy at county level. Robust standard errors are applied.

by 11.7 (5.1) p.p. for women (men) compared to those with a travel duration of up to 7 (10) days. Women with longer travel durations furthermore are less likely to enter a ‘non-participation’ trajectory. Regarding traumatic experiences, remember that only 55 % of the female sample and 65 % of the male sample agreed to answer the

respective item battery (see [Table 2](#)). Response to this item is associated with a higher post-migration activity compared to the non-responders: male respondents are 8.5 p.p. more likely in long activation and are by 2.7 and 6.0 p.p. less likely ‘deferred’ or ‘delayed’. Non-response to the trauma battery may thus not be random but may rather reflect especially

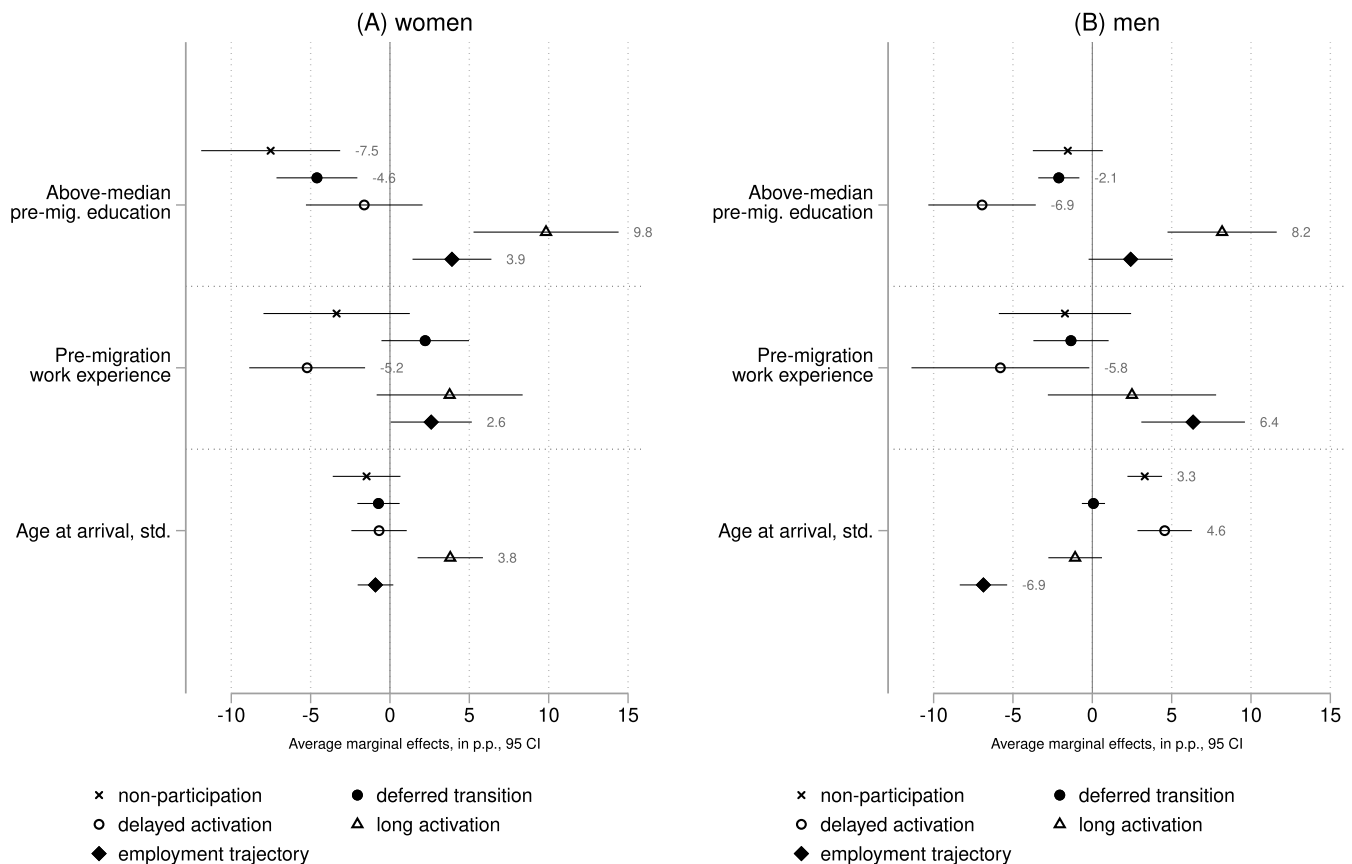


Fig. 5. Model 2: Multinomial regression results, by gender (average marginal effects, 95 % confidence intervals, and effect sizes in p.p. if statistically significant at the 5-percent level). Sources: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees (2016–2019) linked to the Integrated Employment Biographies (SOEP-CMI-ADIAB, [Antoni et al., 2023](#)), own calculations.

disruptive journeys.

Men who indicated traumatic experiences more likely follow inactive trajectories: they are 2.3 p.p. and 4.5 p.p. more likely in ‘deferred transition’ and ‘delayed activation’, respectively, and 5.3 p.p. less likely in ‘long activation’, compared to men who did not report traumatic events. Results for women are inconclusive. The quantitative measurement of traumatic experiences remains challenging, not only due to the associated stigma but also due to the difficulties to quantitatively assess and compare extent and impact of these experiences. Given the high prevalence of violence and abuse women face on their routes towards safer destinations ([Hourani et al., 2021](#); [International Organization for Migration \(IOM\), 2017](#)), the differentiation between women who report traumatic experiences and those who do not is limited in its informative value. The findings should thus be interpreted cautiously and in conjunction with the information whether someone answered the item battery in the first place.

Notes: For full models refer to Tables A7 and A9 in the appendix. Models control for country of origin, year of arrival, imputed dates, sample, missings indicators, unemployment rate at county level, share of foreigners at county level, and an urban dummy at county level. Robust standard errors are applied.

Finally, more than 90 % of the women arrived with family members, compared to 57 % of the men. The likelihood of men who arrived with family to enter the ‘employment trajectory’ is 7.8 p.p. lower compared to men who arrived without family. Men who arrived with family are instead more likely to experience a ‘non-participation’ biography (+3.5 p.p.) or ‘deferred transition’ (+1.6 p.p.). Their female counterparts show a similar trend, but results are not statistically significant at the 5-percent level. While family networks may represent an important source of resources, the results may nevertheless reflect the impediments

and immobility patterns coming with a family life, e.g. because of shared living spaces, care obligations or scarce financial and material resources. At the same time, family status may indicate unobserved differences such as physical fitness or risk preferences (see [Lindstrom & Ramírez, 2010](#), on the concept of pioneer migrants).

Women tend to participate more actively in education at a higher age: Their likelihood of ‘long activation’ increases by 3.8 p.p. with a one-standard-deviation increase in age (equal to ten years). This potentially reflects periods with fewer care obligations due to the higher age of children. Men, in contrast, seem less active with age. A one-standard-deviation increase in men’s age (equal to ten years) increases their likelihood of a ‘non-participation’ or ‘delayed activation’ trajectory by 3.3 and 4.6 p.p., respectively, and decreases chances of the ‘employment trajectory’ by 6.9 p.p. ([Fig. 5](#)). With respect to recorded activities, an age penalty is thus prevalent for men, and an age premium for women.

Pre-migration human capital endowment is an important predictor of the post-arrival trajectory type. Both men and women with above-median education acquired before arrival are significantly more likely in the education-heavy trajectory (‘long activation’, +9.8 p.p. for women, +8.2 p.p. for men) or in the ‘employment trajectory’ (+3.9 p.p. for women, statistically insignificant for men) and less likely in ‘deferred transition’ (-4.6 p.p. for women, -2.1 p.p. for men) compared to their respective counterparts with lower education. Women with above-median education are furthermore 7.5 p.p. less likely to enter the ‘non-participation’ cluster than women with less education. For men in the ‘delayed activation’ cluster, the difference in membership probability by education amounts to 6.9 p.p. Similarly, pre-migration work experience facilitates economic activity: the probability to take the ‘employment trajectory’ increases by 2.6 p.p. (6.4 p.p.) for women (men) with work experience compared to those without, and ‘delayed

activation' chances decrease by 5.2 p.p. (5.8 p.p.), respectively.

Finally, it is worth noting that a higher regional employment rate is consistently associated with a lower likelihood of the 'employment trajectory' for both men and women. A higher share of foreigners furthermore increases men's chances of the 'employment trajectory' and men and women's probabilities to enter 'delayed activation' (Tables A6 and A8).

5.3. Interaction effects

As discussed in 2, straining refugee journeys may affect the extent to which individuals can draw on their pre-migration resources. This hypothesis is tested in models that separately interact journey characteristics with pre-migration human capital. Figs. 6, 7, and 8 display average marginal effects of pre-migration education and job experience on cluster membership probabilities at different levels of trauma experiences and duration quantiles, respectively, if differences between coefficients are significant at the 10-percent level. Results for all interactions and corresponding significance tests are provided in Tables A10 and A11 in the appendix. Figs. 6, 7, and 8 indicate effect sizes in p.p. if statistically significant at the 5-percent level.⁴

On average, men's probability of the 'non-participation' track does not significantly vary with their educational level (see 5.2 and Fig. 5). The interaction analyses reveal that for men who do not report traumatic events an above-average educational background significantly decreases their chances of 'non-participation'. Once traumatic events are reported, this effect turns positive and insignificant ($p = .03$ for the difference in coefficients, Table A10). Similarly, a stronger pre-migration education significantly increases the likelihood of men to participate in 'long activation' (Fig. 5). This effect does not hold for men who report traumatic experiences, suggesting that straining journeys may have affected the availability of men's individual resources after arrival ($p = .02$, Table A10, Fig. 6).

Pre-migration human capital effects furthermore vary with travel duration. Women with pre-migration work experience are more likely in the education-heavy track ('long activation'), but only if their travel duration remains below 8 days (in other words, within the first travel duration quantile of the female sample; Fig. 8, Table A11). Women with above-median education are less likely in the 'non-participation' cluster or in 'deferred transition' and more likely in the 'employment' track if their travel durations remain below 8 days (up to 16 days for 'deferred transition'). For longer travel durations, the respective effects of education are statistically not different from zero anymore ($p = .03$, $p = .05$, $p = .05$ for the differences in coefficients between the 1st and 4th quantile, respectively, Table A11, also see Fig. 7). Similar to their female counterparts, higher-educated men are less likely in 'deferred transition' but only if their travel duration remains in the first travel duration quantile ($p = .06$, Table A11). These findings support the notion that pre-migration human capital may be less easily accessible to refugees if their migration process was lengthy and/or straining.

Two more significant interaction results are worth reporting, illustrating the complexity of the underlying mechanisms. Work experience significantly increases men's probability to enter 'non-participation', but only for reported travel durations in the 3rd quantile (that is, between 21 and 45 days). The observed time trend is not linear, however, and rather follows a U-shaped pattern (Fig. 8). Possibly, a lengthy migration process deteriorates the capacity and/or willingness to pick up on pre-migration employment biographies, conceivably because of deteriorated mental health or a perceived devaluation in social status. The absence of this relationship at extraordinarily long travel durations (in the 4th quantile) could reflect that additional resources such as new skills or contacts unlocked during migration compensate the deteriorating effects. Another possible explanation is that men with work

experience and different travel durations systematically vary on characteristics that are not observed in the analysis. A second ambiguous finding concerns the effect of education on men's probability of a 'deferred transition'. This effect is negative and statistically significant, but only for travel durations above 10 days (Fig. 7, Table A11, level of statistical significance of AMEs at 3rd and 4th travel duration quantiles: $p = .07$, $p = .06$, not displayed).

While the underlying mechanisms cannot be entangled in the analysis at hand, the findings suggest that, overall, traumatic events and longer durations alter the effects of pre-migration human capital on post-migration trajectories. Prolonged and potentially traumatizing refugee journeys have the power to override or shrink the effects of pre-migration education or job experience. The interaction effects with travel durations thereby do not necessarily follow a linear time trend, suggesting that different mechanisms may be at play here. Prolonged journeys disrupt labor and education biographies, thereby devaluing qualifications and skills. The consequences of straining refugee journeys related to physical and mental harm, the loss or harm of family members, and the loss of material resources represent an additional mechanism. At the same time, longer travels may equip individuals with additional resources such as language skills or networks (see 2). Those with longer travel durations may furthermore represent so-called pioneer migrants facing larger obstacles during their journeys (Lindstrom & Ramírez, 2010). Overall, the interaction analyses provide robust evidence that the availability of pre-migration human capital can vary with refugee migration experiences, thereby modifying post-migration trajectories.

6. Discussion

More than a decade ago, refugee admission has prominently returned to the political agendas in Europe. With that, researchers and policy-makers have devoted increasing attention to factors shaping refugees' participation in receiving societies, labor markets and education systems. Drawing on a life course approach, this article examines pre-migration resources and migration experiences as potential drivers of the integration outcomes of refugee men and women in Germany. Applying sequence analysis techniques and cluster analysis, I categorized post-migration biographies into typical integration trajectory types based on three years of post-arrival activities. Multinomial regressions were then employed to assess whether individual human capital endowment erodes as a consequence of refugee migration or whether it continues to shape integration trajectories after refugees' arrival.

The identified clusters reveal substantial variation in post-migration trajectories. While all groups experience initial periods of inactivity, some are more likely to exit inactivity early. Higher pre-migration human capital markedly increases that likelihood. Educational participation is the most prominent subsequent activity. Although language classes and job training are more likely to be attended after the asylum procedure than before, there are some exceptions: women with a comparatively high likelihood to enter the labor market as well as men engaging heavily in education are more likely than others to begin education already during the asylum procedure. Interestingly, women with comparatively strong labor market attachment display rather short educational spells occurring relatively early. Among refugees with above-average human capital, transition into education is more likely for both genders, but subsequent labor market entry is much more common among men. For those in paid jobs, employment patterns have shown to be fairly stable.

Pre-migration human capital background is a robust predictor of these patterns: above-average education and pre-migration job experience substantially increase chances for both men and women to enter either education- or employment-dominated trajectories. Integration trajectories furthermore vary with individual migration experiences. Men reporting traumatic events are more likely to follow trajectories

⁴ Full models are available on request.

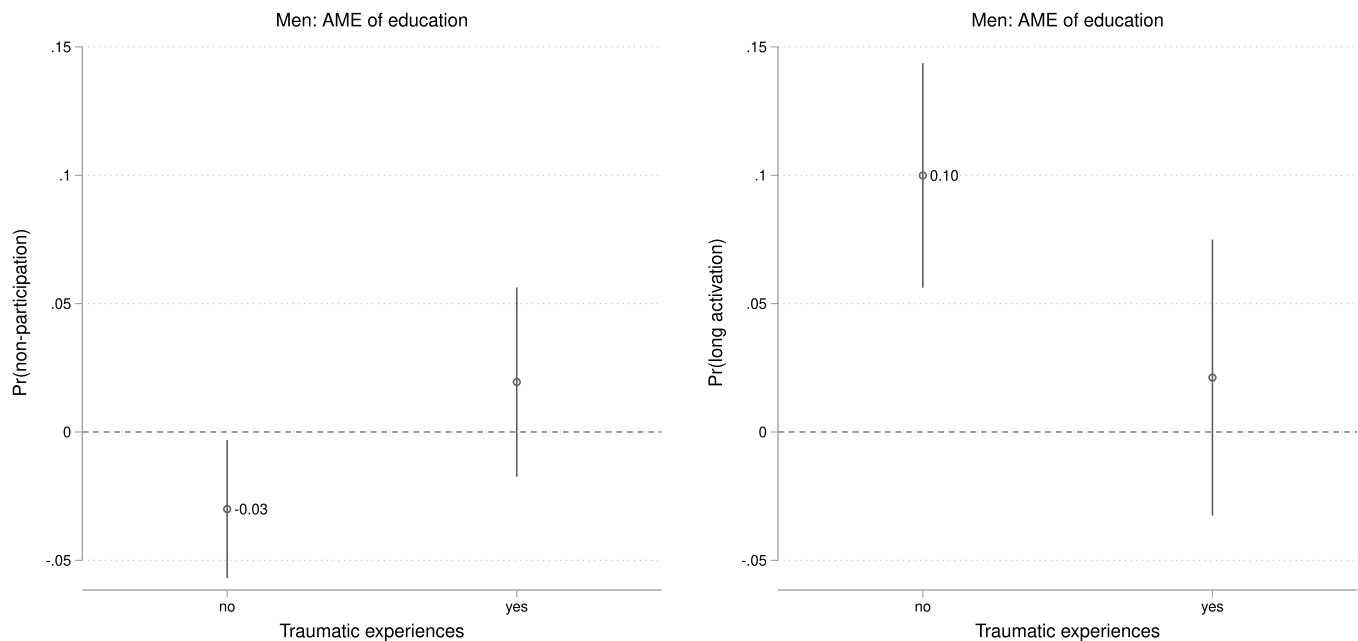


Fig. 6. Average marginal effects (AME) of pre-migration education interacted with traumatic experiences, selected interactions, by gender and cluster, displaying 95 % confidence intervals and effect sizes in p.p. if statistically significant at the 5-percent level. *Sources:* IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees (2016–2019) linked to the Integrated Employment Biographies (SOEP-CMI-ADIAAB, [Antoni et al., 2023](#)), own calculations. *Notes:* Displays interactions with coefficient differences that are statistically significant at the 10-percent level. For full interaction results, see Table A10 in the appendix. Differences to Table A10 due to rounding.

marked by longer inactivity spells and are less likely found in an education-heavy trajectory. More inactive trajectories are also more prevalent among men and women with longer journeys. In addition to these direct effects, straining refugee journeys seem to deplete available resources after arrival: once men report traumatic events or longer travels, their educational background no longer decreases (increases) their likelihood to enter inactivity (education-heavy) trajectories. A similar tendency is observed among women: the higher likelihood of more educated women to enter the employment trajectory rather than predominantly inactive trajectories diminishes with longer travel durations.

Taken together, the findings suggest that pre-migration resources shape refugees' integration trajectories, such that human capital acquired before arrival does not fully erode. Protracted and hazardous journeys can deplete refugees' available resources, however. Put differently, straining refugee migration experiences have the power to undermine the ability of refugees to draw on their pre-migration human capital. Expanding legal and safe pathways for humanitarian migration would be a policy response to counteract these resource-depleting effects. The negative consequences of refugee migration experiences also call for sensitive integration policies, particularly given the effects post-migration stressors like material and social constraints can have on refugees' wellbeing and participation patterns ([Hynie, 2018](#); [Menke, 2024](#)). Individuals with resource-draining migration experiences might require additional support to cope with health issues, trauma, and adaptation difficulties in order to settle, feel safe, and reliably access their individual resources. Further research should unpack the respective mechanisms.

With regard to inactivity patterns, two groups characterized by limited recorded activity during the observation period merit particular attention from scholars and policy-makers. The first group experiences short asylum procedures and early but short educational participation, followed by extended spells of inactivity or unsuccessful job search; men in this group are older than the average and more likely arrived with family. The second group's trajectories are instead marked by extraordinarily long asylum procedures and educational activity only towards the end of the observation window. In contrast to the first group, a large

share of individuals in this trajectory faces institutional disadvantages related to the classification of their 'prospects to stay' based on their origin countries. Also, men reporting traumatic experiences are more likely to follow this deferred trajectory. If their early activation is politically desired, abolishing administrative hurdles and providing gender-sensitive support schemes to address migration-related strains seems advisable. Individuals in both groups tend to carry below-average education and may benefit from individually tailored support in acquiring Germany-specific human capital, both in terms of language skills and job-related training.

Their activation also carries an important gendered dimension. While this study could only broadly proxy family context, the obstacles women face due to their provision of unpaid care work are well documented (e.g., in [Fendel & Kosyakova, 2023](#); [Menke, 2024](#)) and likely account for a large share of their lower activity profiles. In addition to their delayed and shorter educational participation, women are less likely to transition into the labor market. This holds true even for women with above-average human capital backgrounds with comparatively long spells in courses and training. Given the country-specific human capital these women typically carry, they may benefit from less formalized skill assessments to identify suitable fields of study or training ([Kosyakova et al., 2023](#)). Moreover, given that 9 out of 10 women arrived with family members, their participation thus likely depends on systematic support that addresses both the financial and care needs of their households.

One important limitation of the analytical framework is that, due to endogeneity concerns, events or individual changes occurring during the analyzed biography period – such as changes in family structure, legal status or the acquisition of language skills – cannot be incorporated. Interactions of family formation, educational, and employment career could be addressed in future work using a multichannel sequence analysis approach ([Gauthier et al., 2010](#)). Moreover, shifting individual preferences and aspirations remain unobserved, and the data structure does not allow research on non-heteronormative individuals. The available proxies may also fail to fully capture the multifaceted impacts of individual migration experiences, including unanticipated events en route, existential experiences such as the loss of family members or

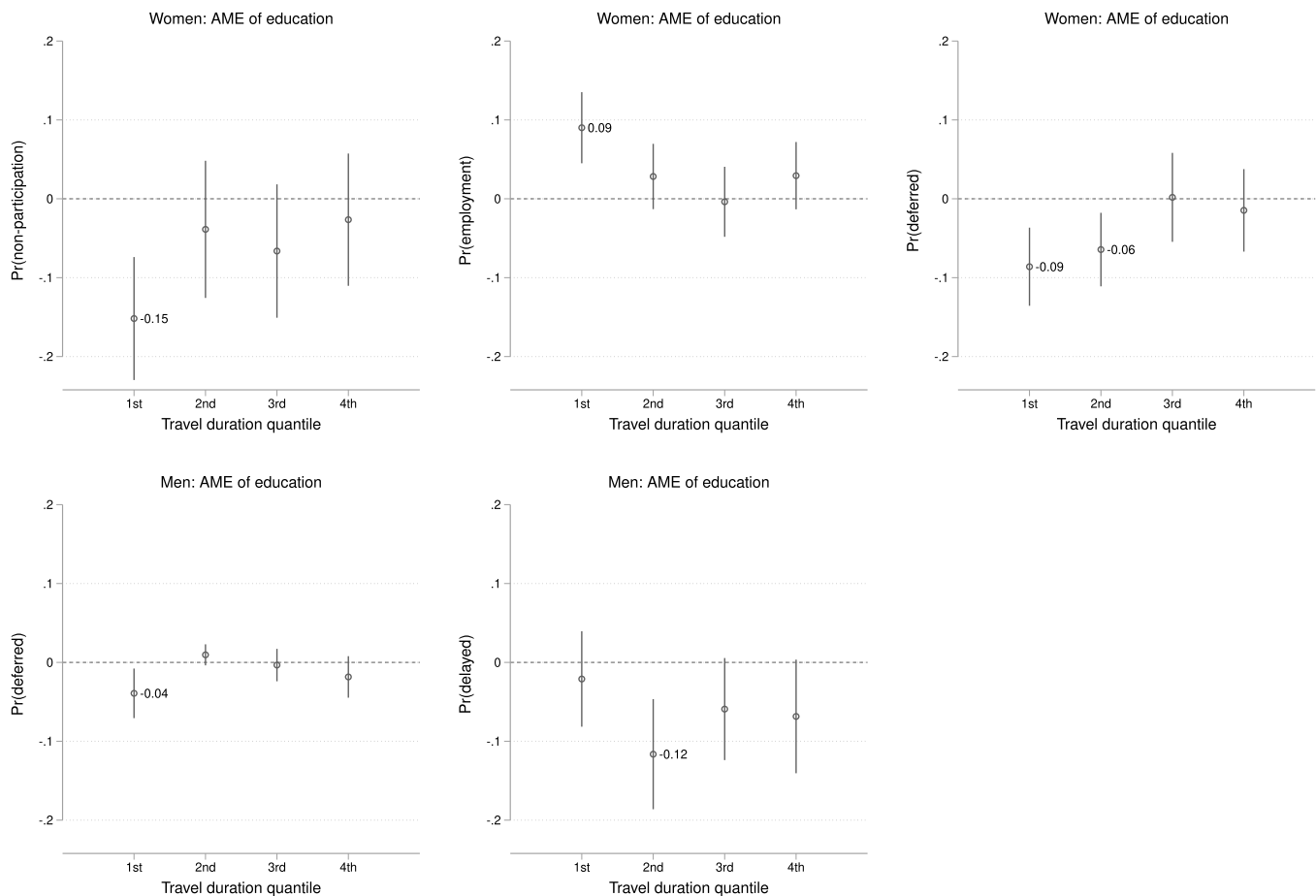


Fig. 7. Average marginal effects (AME) of pre-migration education at different journey duration quantiles, selected interactions, by gender and cluster, displaying 95 % confidence intervals and effect sizes in p.p. if statistically significant at the 5-percent level. *Sources:* IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees (2016–2019) linked to the Integrated Employment Biographies (SOEP-CMI-ADIAB, [Antoni et al., 2023](#)), own calculations. *Notes:* Displays interactions with coefficient differences that are statistically significant at the 10-percent level. For full interaction results, see Table A11 in the appendix. Differences to Table A11 due to rounding.

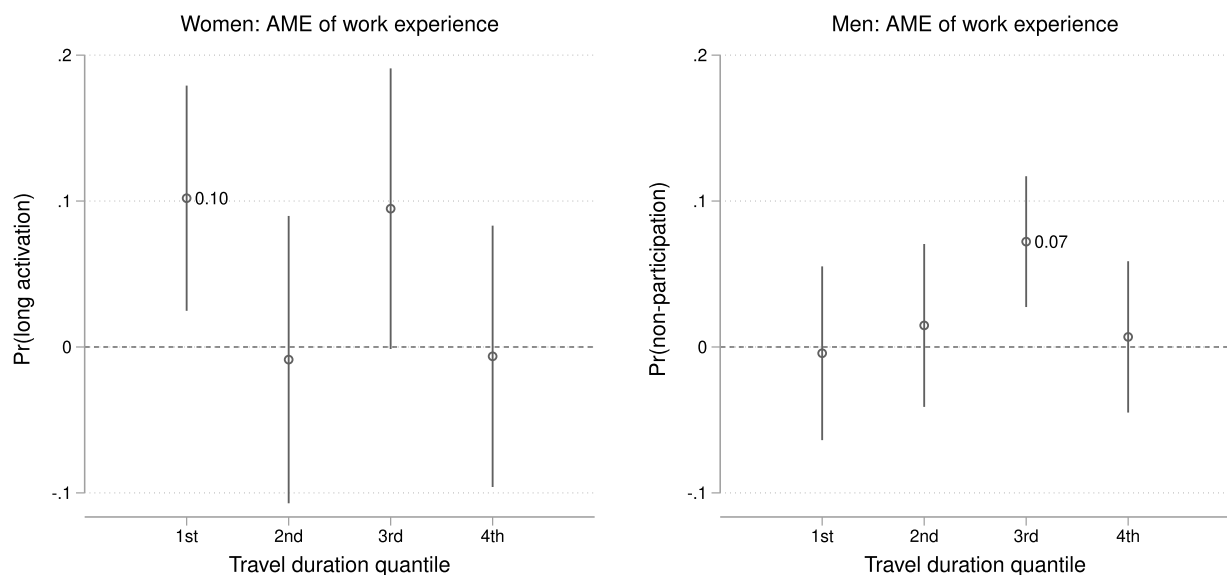


Fig. 8. Average marginal effects (AME) of pre-migration work experience at different journey duration quantiles, selected interactions, by gender and cluster, displaying 95 % confidence intervals and effect sizes in p.p. if statistically significant at the 5-percent level. *Sources:* IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees (2016–2019) linked to the Integrated Employment Biographies (SOEP-CMI-ADIAB, [Antoni et al., 2023](#)), own calculations. *Notes:* Displays interactions with coefficient differences that are statistically significant at the 10-percent level. For full interaction results, see Table A11 in the appendix. Differences to Table A11 due to rounding.

travel partners, financial hardship, physical and mental challenges associated with irregular migration routes, developments in the home country, uncertainty about migration outcomes, and the associated mental stress. Regarding labor market participation, the analysis does not distinguish job types and qualities; future studies could focus specifically on the labor market trajectories of employed refugees. Social participation which not necessarily overlaps with educational or labor market outcomes remains unexplored. Finally, by design, clustering based on sequence analysis simplifies complex realities and, therefore, cannot fully capture mixed or ambiguous trajectory types (Helske et al., 2023).

Nonetheless, sequence analysis techniques offer an innovative way of describing and analyzing the heterogeneous biographies of refugee migrants, yielding fine-grained insights into the mechanisms shaping the integration trajectories of refugee women and men. This article contributes to the sociology of migration literature by examining the persistence of pre-migration human capital in the context of forced migration and by addressing the substantial research gap on the effects of refugees' migration experiences on their integration trajectories upon arrival. Studies on the integration of refugees which neglect migration contexts and selection processes risk to overlook crucial aspects and draw invalid conclusions. The heterogeneous effects of refugee migration processes on post-migration biographies intersecting with selection mechanisms remain an underexplored research area that warrants further scholarly investigation. The findings also underscore the need for gender-disaggregated analyses and gender-sensitive theoretical approaches to dynamics of international migration and post-migration incorporation processes.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Lidwina Gundacker: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial, financial or personal relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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March, 2022 and July, 2022), at the IMISCOE Conference in Oslo (July, 2022), the Metropolis Conference in Berlin (September, 2022), the DeZIM Conference in Berlin (October, 2022), the SLLS Conference in Munich (September, 2023), the Sixth Joint Doctoral Conference in Trento (November, 2024), the RC28 Spring Meeting in Milan (March, 2025), the Migration Conference in London (June, 2025), and the Wittgenstein Centre Conference in Vienna (November 2025).

Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found in the online version at [doi:10.1016/j.alcr.2026.100741](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alcr.2026.100741). Computation files for the presented analyses are available at the author's OSF profile at <https://osf.io/6rp9z/>.

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Appendix 3

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How regional attitudes towards immigration shape the chance to obtain asylum: Evidence from Germany

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Abstract

Asylum recognition rates in advanced democracies differ not only across states but also vary within them, translating into fluctuating individual chances to obtain protection. Existing studies on the determinants of these regional inequities typically rely on aggregate data. Utilizing a German refugee survey and leveraging a quasi-natural experiment arising from state-based allocation rules tied to national dispersal policies, we test two explanations for the perplexing regional differences. Drawing on principal-agent models of administrative decision-making, we test whether asylum decision-makers consciously or unconsciously comply with regional political preferences between 2015 and 2017 in Germany, one of the major European destination countries for refugee migration. We furthermore explore whether such biased decision-making amplifies in times of organizational stress as suggested by the statistical discrimination theory. Using mixed-effects logistic regressions, our analyses confirm a lower approval probability in regions with more immigration-averse residents or governments. We cannot confirm, however, that this association is mediated by high workloads or large knowledge gaps. Our results thus suggest that regional political biases affect the individual chance of asylum-seekers to obtain protection irrespective of temporal administrative conditions.

Keywords: Refugees; asylum procedure; immigration-averse public mood; statistical discrimination; street-level bureaucrats

1. Introduction

Persecution, armed conflict, and human rights violations force people to leave their homes every day. The past decade saw the number of forcibly displaced persons grow to over 112 million by the end of 2022, strongly driven by the conflicts in Syria, Ukraine, Afghanistan, Venezuela, South Sudan, and Myanmar (UNHCR 2023). Less than a third of the displaced population seeks refuge abroad. Yet, the global dynamics of forced migration have triggered a worldwide increase in the number of asylum claims (UNHCR 2023).¹ The resulting pressure on national migration regimes (e.g. Zunes 2017) has intensified calls across receiving countries to restrict the granting of asylum. Still, almost 150 states remain parties to

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the two key multilateral treaties that create a binding framework for national asylum legislation: the Geneva Convention and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees.

Public officials have interpreted the obligation to protect asylum-seekers differently across time and space. The people who decide on asylum requests are, to use Lipsky's (1980) catchphrase, 'street-level bureaucrats' who operate in a context of constrained resources, high workloads, and ambiguous rules. The empowerment of these agents has arguably contributed to the vast divergences in recognition rates that characterize the asylum regime and translate into highly fluctuating individual chances to obtain protection.

Past research indicates that the resulting inequities are at least partly a consequence of two interrelated pressures that the street-level bureaucrats face—different regional attitudes towards migration and varying capacities to evaluate the merit of asylum applications carefully. Cross-country comparisons have identified the political preferences of the governing parties (Winn 2021) and public attitudes against immigrants (Hatton 2023) as key drivers of asylum recognition rates. The attitudes of the receiving society towards foreigners explain to some extent why the chance for asylum-seekers differs across Swiss cantons (Holzer *et al.* 2000a) and German states (Riedel and Schneider 2017). At the same time, the chance to obtain protection crucially depends on the volume of asylum applications currently running or filed in the past (Holzer *et al.* 2000b, Toshkov 2014).

The aggregate protection numbers on which these examinations typically rely, however, do not allow the researchers to assess whether attitudes towards migration and administrative capacities affect the decisions of bureaucratic agents on individual applications.² In this article, we address this problem in a detailed analysis of a representative survey of asylum-seekers in Germany. We draw on principal-agent models of administrative decision-making to identify the conditions under which street-level bureaucrats give in to the anti- or pro-migration attitudes of the population and the regional government (e.g. Holzer *et al.* 2000a). In light of the uncertain facts and imprecise legal standards characterizing the asylum decision (Baum 2010), we expect that the bureaucrats possess considerable discretion in the asylum domain. This facilitates asylum decisions that mirror the political preferences of the regional public and governing bodies. Our principal-agent framework thus suggests that the influence of the informal regional peers on the case-workers explains to some extent why the chance to obtain protection varies considerably across time and space.

The administrative leeway increases further in times of organizational stress and high costs to evaluate asylum claims properly. We thus also expect that the scope for regional political preferences to shape the asylum decision expands if the available information on a case is scarce or if the administrative workload is high. These conjectures align with Lipsky's (1980) concept of street-level bureaucracy and the statistical model of discrimination (Phelps 1972; Arrow 1973).

Based on this theoretical framework, our article investigates whether regional political preferences filter into asylum decisions in Germany, one of the primary European destination countries for asylum-seekers (Eurostat 2020), and whether information costs mediate this relationship. To test our expectations, we exploit variation across regions and conduct a detailed analysis of a unique data source, the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees. The state-based allocation of refugees to the German federal states and counties upon their arrival—predominantly based on regional economic strength and population size—allows us to mitigate the refugees' initial regional self-sorting bias (see also Aksoy *et al.* 2023; Kanas and Kosyakova 2023 for similar arguments). This natural experiment design enables us to minimize the challenges in the causal identification of how the regional political context shapes the individual chance for asylum-seekers to obtain protection in Germany. The survey covers a representative sample of asylum-seekers and refugees who arrived in Germany between 2013 and 2016. This data source provides detailed information on where and when the individual asylum procedure was processed and also includes a variety of

individual characteristics that influence the decision on an asylum application (Kosyakova and Brücker 2020).

Using mixed-effects logistic regression models, we find strong support for our public preferences hypothesis: asylum-seekers whose applications are decided upon in regions with more immigration-averse residents or governments face a lower chance to remain in Germany as recognized refugees or as (temporarily) protected individuals. We find, however, no consistent support for the hypothesis on administrative information costs. An immigration-averse public mood does not systematically decrease the individual asylum chance further if the workload is high or if information is scarce. In sum, our analyses suggest that regional political biases affect the individual chance of asylum-seekers distributed across Germany to obtain protection. The temporal administrative conditions under which such decisions are made do not mediate these outcomes.

2. The discriminatory potential of asylum decision-making

2.1 Asylum decision-making as a principal-agent problem

The concept of asylum has existed for millennia, but it only became a global norm in the aftermath of World War I and II, when millions of people fled persecution and violence. The Geneva Refugee Convention and the Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees have since then been translated into national legal frameworks that grant asylum to those applicants who have a well-founded fear of persecution (Joppke 1997). If this relatively strict requirement is not fulfilled, the principle of *non-refoulement* enshrined in the multilateral treaties forbids states to deport applicants who are likely to face harm in their country of origin.

Evaluating the claims through which asylum applicants seek to obtain protection is challenging for at least three reasons. First, any assessment of asylum claims ultimately boils down to a life-changing ‘binary yes-or-no decision’ (Taylor 2007: 176), while other administrative and judicial decisions frequently entail a range of options (e.g. the length of prison sentences).

A second challenge for decision-makers arises from the political prerogatives that they receive. The Geneva Refugee Convention and national asylum laws leave the definition of ‘political persecution’ or ‘well-founded fear’ to the decision-makers (Law 2005), granting them considerable discretion to interpret asylum legislation. This scope may, consciously or unconsciously, be used to take political preferences into account: evaluators of asylum claims may live in a region where the attitudes towards foreigners and the granting of asylum might markedly differ from the spirit of the national asylum regime and global norms. The local implementation of nationally or globally designed standards might exacerbate the principal-agent problem that characterizes policy implementation in states with a highly decentralized decision-making apparatus (Pressman and Wildavsky 1984). Specifically, the empowerment of regional agents to implement asylum law becomes problematic when street-level bureaucrats include their prejudices and stereotypes or the anti- or pro-migration attitudes of their regional peers in their asylum decisions. Such extra-legal considerations distort the asylum procedure, favouring some groups at the expense of others.

Thirdly, even the most sophisticated proceedings do not allow responsible administrators to completely overcome the informational asymmetry that they face in comparison to the applicant. Such informational barriers manifest in a lack of language skills, limited political and cultural knowledge of the asylum-seeker’s country or region of origin, and a rudimentary understanding of the applicant’s life circumstances. Hence, ‘a case may be difficult because legal standards are imprecise, the facts are uncertain, or both’ (Baum 2010: 1509). An increased workload and time pressure can exacerbate these problems.

Asylum outcomes consequently differ not only across states (Vink and Meijerink 2003, Toshkov 2014) but also within them. This could be confirmed, for instance, for

Switzerland (Holzer *et al.* 2000a, b, Spirig 2021), the USA (Ramji-Nogales *et al.* 2007; Keith *et al.* 2013), and the UK (Jennings 2009) and is attributed to residents' attitudes towards foreigners, the current media salience of immigration topics, the political ideology of judges, and changing workload levels, among others.

Similar variations in asylum outcomes can also be observed in Germany—the country examined in this study. Figure 1 displays the varying protection rates across federal states and countries of origin between 2015 and 2017 (also see Supplementary Table S1). For Afghans, the average protection rates range between 37 and 69 per cent, for Eritreans between 78 and 95 per cent, and for Iraqis between 40 and 93 per cent. For Syrians and applicants from the West Balkans, the divergences are more moderate, with an average protection rate of 96 per cent and 1 per cent, respectively.

2.2 Regional political preferences on asylum decision-making

The federal states only possess limited discretion in asylum policy-making. Specifically, the handling of asylum claims is in the hands of the German Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), an agency under the jurisdiction of the Federal Ministry of the Interior. Regional BAMF offices, spread throughout the country, render verdicts on individual asylum applications.³

In the period under study, asylum-seekers were registered and assigned to federal states based on an allocation key considering the states' tax revenues and population size (*Königssteiner Schlüssel*). Within the federal states, asylum-seekers were subsequently distributed by local authorities based on a similar quota logic (Geis and Orth 2016). After the initial allocation, refugees can formally apply for asylum. This first residential allocation is binding. Although housing capacities were restricted at the beginning of 2015, calculations by Gehrsitz and Ungerer (2022: 599) could not establish an 'obvious discernible pattern in the allocation of asylum-seekers within states'. Similarly, Kanas and Kosyakova (2023) ruled out concerns that regions were able to choose refugees they wanted to host.

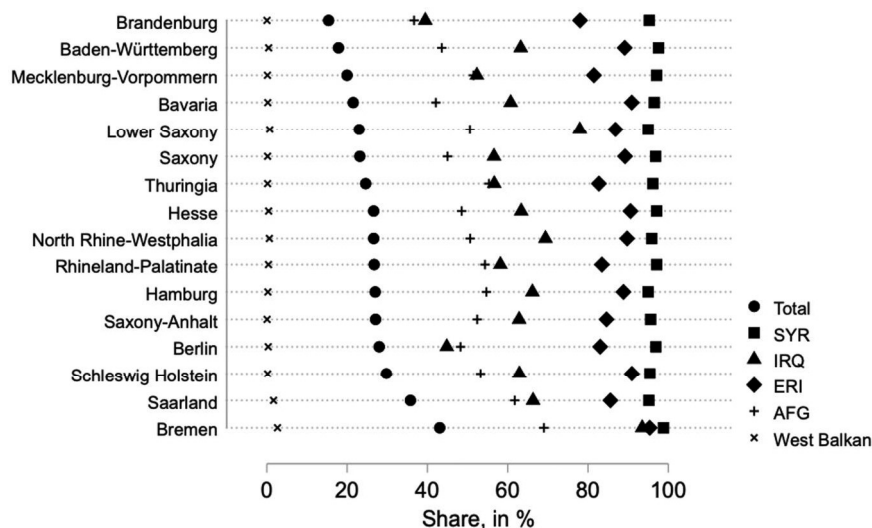


Figure 1. Protection rates by German federal states and selected countries of origin, 2015–7.

Notes: Protection rates display the share of recognitions relative to all decisions. Recognitions include refugee protection, subsidiary protection, and humanitarian protection. Decisions are first-instance decisions including decisions based on the Dublin convention. West Balkan includes Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. For further information, refer to Table S1 in Supplementary Material.

Data source: BAMF (2017), own calculations.

Applications of asylum-seekers from the major countries of origin (e.g. Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, or Eritrea) are processed in all regional BAMF offices, while some less frequent nationalities, such as Mongolia, are processed only in designated BAMF offices.⁴ No other individual features of adult asylum-seekers enter the allocation mechanism.

In their decision on an application, BAMF officials rely on the reasons given by the applicant for their application as well as on internal and external reports on the situation in the applicant's home country and region. The interview and the asylum decision are assigned to one BAMF official only. Yet, in 2016, the process was temporarily split between one BAMF official conducting the interview and another administrator taking the asylum decision (Deutscher Bundestag 2019).⁵ Asylum-seekers can appeal a decision by the BAMF at an administrative court. Furthermore, the principle of *non-refoulement* implies that negative judicial decisions do not necessarily force failed applicants to leave Germany.

The delegation of decision-making power to regional BAMF branches grants its agents considerable discretion. This represents an administrative leeway through which preferences of street-level bureaucrats or their regional peers may shape asylum decisions (Jennings 2009). As we do not possess data on the decision-makers, we focus on the preferences of the state government and the public attitudes in the region in which the street-level bureaucrats operate. The salience of migration and asylum issues grew in the mid-2010s when increasing numbers of asylum requests challenged the administrative capacities of the German government. Hartland (2023) shows that higher importance attributed to migration and asylum amplified the role of immigration preferences in asylum decisions in Germany and the UK. We thus expect that the attitudes of the population with regard to immigration weigh heavily in the period under study (2015–17).

To manage the sky-rocketed numbers of asylum applications, the BAMF quadrupled its staff in this period (Grote 2018). These new decision-makers were often recruited from other units of the regional administration (Janda 2018), fortifying the regional attachment of the decision-making bodies in charge. Additionally, the BAMF case workers typically operate in tandem with other regional administrative units—in particular, with immigration offices—to coordinate the logistics of the asylum process and to gather information on the individual asylum applicant (Wittmann 2018). The expertise of the BAMF may at the same time be consulted by immigration officers (Wittmann 2018), who are in charge of immigration enforcement and the supply of social services. In this way, regional BAMF officials are regularly in touch with the regional immigration offices who are bound by the directives of their respective regional government. As a result, the individuals who decide on asylum cases are confronted with local administrative conditions and the immigration preferences of regional governments and their voters on a regular basis. Thus—consciously or subconsciously—BAMF officials might be sensitive to regional political concerns and the political agenda of the regional government when they decide on an asylum request.

Along these lines, various studies have revealed that agents' political predispositions (e.g. Ramji-Nogales et al. 2007; Keith et al. 2013) as well as regional political preferences translate into a varying chance of a positive asylum outcome (Holzer et al. 2000a; Salehyan and Rosenblum 2008; Riedel and Schneider 2017; Schneider et al. 2020). The study by Rottman, Fariss, and Poe (2009) on asylum recognition rates in the USA before and after the 9/11 terror attacks also suggests that a changing public mood affects asylum-seekers' chances to obtain protection. Jennings (2009) and Spirig (2021) show similarly that judicial asylum decision-making in the UK and Switzerland crucially depends on the public mood.

In line with the classic literature on implementation (Pressman and Wildavsky 1984), these findings strongly suggest that street-level bureaucrats take decisions that can contradict the federal prerogatives at least partly. We contend that the divergences from the global norm can to a certain extent be traced back to the preferences of the administrators' informal peers. These secondary principals can be both regional government actors and

citizens living in the surrounding of an asylum centre where the BAMF caseworkers decide on applications. Our theoretical framework thus suggests that the ideology of local actors shapes the federal decisions on individual asylum requests.⁶

H1: Individuals placing an asylum claim in a region with a higher share of immigration-averse residents (*H1a*), with a more conservative ideology of the public administration (*H1b*), or in a region where the state government expresses a more restrictive attitude towards refugees (*H1c*) have a lower chance of a positive asylum decision.

2.3 The role of information costs

The unequal treatment of asylum-seekers might also result from insufficient knowledge about the merits of an individual application. Difficulties in assessing a particular file can prompt unbiased administrators to resort to readily available information about the group to which an asylum-seeker belongs. Such stereotyping is akin to the model of statistical discrimination in labour markets developed by Arrow (1973) and Phelps (1972). Supporting this idea, Kaas and Manger's (2012) field experiment on hiring decisions in Germany has shown that pertinent information reduces the chasm between majority and minority job applicants. Employers' discrimination against candidates with Turkish vis-à-vis German names contracts considerably when job applications include reference letters with favourable information from previous employers.

Considerable knowledge gaps plague asylum decision-making as well. The ambiguity of both facts and law has two important consequences for asylum decision-makers. While it generates an 'enormous leeway for choice' (Baum 2010: 1511), it also encourages 'motivated reasoning' (Baum 2010: 1512, also see Kunda, 1990). As uncertainty increases, personal or public preferences for one conclusion over another gain importance in the decision-making process (Legomsky 2007). Correspondingly, BAMF officials might be more prone to regional political preferences in the absence of readily available objective evidence to support the claim. This may result in considerable regional variation in individual asylum decisions (Baum 2010).

In the case of Germany, asylum decision-makers rely on external sources such as governmental or non-governmental reports on the situation in the applicant's country or region of origin.⁷ The need to consult external evidence is mandatory for non-refoulment decisions when the case workers have to assess the human rights situation in the country or region of origin of an applicant. An illustrative case is the overruling of the rejected asylum claim of a homosexual Palestinian asylum-seeker by the administrative court of Chemnitz. The BAMF had argued that the applicant could just move to Tel Aviv to establish a life without fear of persecution. The judges rejected this argument based on information obtained from the Foreign Office: 'A Palestinian from Ramallah with an identity card issued by the Palestinian Authority cannot establish legal residence in Israel' (VG Chemnitz 4 K 2610/17.A., p. 11, own translation). This example illustrates how gathering sufficient background information on a case may be critical and a failure to do so may result in the judicial revision of a BAMF decision.⁸

While we cannot assess the merit of individual asylum applications in the setup of our study, we assume along the lines of the statistical discrimination framework that the influence of regional peers on BAMF decision-makers can rise in the presence of large knowledge gaps.

H2: The absence of external sources confirming the endangerment an applicant would face in their home country reduces the chances of receiving a positive decision for applicants whose claims are decided in a region with a higher share of immigration-averse residents (*H2a*), with a more conservative ideology of the public administration (*H2b*), or in

a region where the state government expresses a more restrictive attitude towards refugees (*H2c*).

Similarly, given that the search for externally accessible information requires time, decision-makers facing a heavy workload are more likely to rely on preferences (Andersen and Guul 2019). Previous research suggests that a stressful context affects judicial asylum decision-making (e.g. Spirig 2021). As Baum (2010) argues, decision-makers under stress are more prone to stereotyping and at a greater risk of responding ‘in terms of their general attitudes toward asylum and asylum claimants’ (Baum 2010: 1519). Time pressure could be particularly relevant in the German context, as the country faced 422,000 first-time asylum applications in 2015 and another 722,000 in 2016; almost 50 per cent of the cases submitted in Europe in this period were received by Germany (Eurostat 2020). Compared to 2014, the number of first-time asylum applications has grown by a factor of 2.6 and 4.2 in 2015 and 2016, respectively (Kosyakova and Brücker 2020).

From an administrative perspective, a large case backlog can shift the administrative focus from coherent to swift decision-making (Lipsky 1980; Baum 2010). This is what happened in Germany in the analysed period when the so-called accelerated asylum management was introduced to decrease waiting periods and to increase efficiency in asylum decision-making.⁹ We expect that in tight situations with few resources for case-specific research, decision-makers increasingly consider, consciously or unconsciously, the political preferences of their regional peers.

H3: Growing asylum workloads reduce the chances of receiving a positive decision for applicants whose claims are decided in a region with a higher share of immigration-averse residents (H3a), with a more conservative ideology of the public administration (H3b), or in a region where the state government expresses a more restrictive attitude towards refugees (H3c).

3. Data and methodology

3.1 Data

We rely on individual-level data from the longitudinal IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees in Germany (2016–17) (Brücker et al. 2017). The survey covers all individuals seeking asylum or any other form of protection, irrespective of their current legal status, who arrived in Germany for humanitarian reasons between 2013 and 2016 and who were officially registered by January 2017. The survey was carried out in two waves at 169 representatively selected sampling points across Germany and included responses from 7,430 adult persons. Our study targets refugees with a first-instance decision on their asylum application in the period from January 2015 to December 2017, such that the analytical sample covers 3,972 individuals (see Supplementary Material for further details on data and sample).

We augment the survey information with data on either the municipality or the federal state of the applicant’s initial residence (depending on context and data availability) and with data on their country or region of origin. Note that all regional variables are dated to the year of the asylum decision if not stated otherwise.

3.2 Outcome variables and statistical method

The dependent variable is an indicator measuring whether the *asylum application* has been *approved* (yes = 1, 0 otherwise). We do not distinguish between different forms of protection (recognition as refugee, recognition as asylum-seeker, or subsidiary protection), as we assume all forms of protection to be subject to political preferences and the public

sentiments towards allowing a foreigner to stay or not. The share of applications in our sample resulting in a protection status amounts to 90.1 and 77.9 per cent in 2016 and 2017, respectively.

The unit of analysis is an individual who is nested in both the country of origin and the initial region of residence in Germany. Testing the data structure revealed (1) a high residual intraclass correlation between countries of origin and (2) a negligible residual intraclass correlation between origins within counties, given the covariates. The latter result was expected: In Germany, asylum-seekers are subject to regional state-based allocation rules according to national dispersal policies that are exogenous to the asylum-seekers' characteristics. This assignment is regulated by the German Asylum Act and carried out by the so-called EASY system, an IT application run by the BAMF. This rules out potential biases that might have arisen as a consequence of the applicants (self-)selecting regions with better approval chances (Kosyakova and Brücker 2020). The allocation rules also reduce the potential for area effects.

To increase computational efficiency, we rely on mixed-effect logistic regression with random intercepts for countries of origin (Snijders and Bosker 1999). We decided against adding country of origin random slopes: this approach did not improve the model fit. Furthermore, for some origin countries, the data set includes a limited number of observations. We report our results as average marginal effects (AME). Full models are reported in the Supplementary Material.

3.3 Explanatory variables and hypotheses tests

Our theoretical framework implies that BAMF administrators consciously or unconsciously take the preferences of their regional peers into account when they decide on applications. To measure the political preferences of the regional residents and governments, we consider the municipality of the respondents' initial residence. We employ five measures of the regional public attitudes present among the population, in the government of a federal state and its public administration.

To approximate the influence of immigration-averse citizens (*H1a*), we consider the *share of residents* who indicate that they are *very concerned about immigration to Germany* in the county of residence based on data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP 2019).¹⁰

The conservative ideology of the public administration (*H1b*) is measured via two proxies for the political orientation of the regional government: (1) a *center-right minister* indicating whether the current prime minister of a federal state belongs to a conservative party (CDU/CSU, FDP) and (2) the number of *years of centre-right dominance* in the federal state since 1991 through a variable assembled by Schneider et al. (2020) and the authors (see e. g. Henkes 2008, and Bultmann 2002, for a use of this proxy in studies on regional differences in naturalization decisions).

To measure the restrictive attitudes of the current regional government towards refugees in particular (*H1c*), we consider the *application of the restrictive residence obligation* by the federal states. Introduced in August 2016 but not applied by all federal states, this policy requires refugees to reside in their federal state of residence for three years after asylum approval (*Wohnsitzauflage*, §12a, Residence Act). German federal states furthermore decide whether or to what extent to provide benefits to asylum-seekers in kind or in vouchers instead of monetary payments (Deutscher Bundestag 2020), with a maximum amount of 143 and 216 Euros for individuals in shared accommodations and private accommodations, respectively (BGBI 2015). As vouchers for specific shops or products as well as in-kind deliveries of food, clothes, or hygienic products restrict asylum-seekers in their free choice of goods, the provision of non-monetary benefits reflects a restrictive policy as opposed to a cash pay-out. We use the yearly *share of the non-monetary benefits* every federal

state provides to *asylum-seekers* to proxy state government attitudes towards refugees, with a lower share reflecting a more restrictive attitude.

Our theory also implies that a lack of time or information fuels biases in asylum decision-making. To test the hypotheses of information costs, we interact in separate models the regional characteristics with knowledge gaps on the one hand (*H2a, 2b, 2c*) and with the workload of asylum decision-makers on the other (*H3a, 3b, 3c*). To proxy for knowledge gaps, we account for the absence or existence of external sources assessing whether applicants are endangered if returned to their respective country of origin. We rely on two measures that we expect to reflect the lower bound of information available to BAMF decision-makers: (1) the Freedom House Political Rights and Civil Liberties Index (FIW), which assesses the extent to which political and civil rights are upheld in the origin countries on a yearly basis (Freedom House 2018) and (2) the log-transformed number of monthly conflict-related deaths in the region of origin (on NUTS 1 level) in the month and year of the asylum decision (Sundberg and Melander 2013; Pettersson and Öberg 2020). FIW and casualties data are widely recognized and publicly accessible. We assume that this kind of data source also informs internal government reports on the main countries of origin of asylum-seekers or resembles information therein (also see note 7). Suppose these data sources do not confirm deadly conflicts or high levels of human rights violations in the applicant's country or region of origin. In that case, we assume a larger knowledge gap: case workers would need to run individual research on the background and the level of potential endangerment of the individual asylum applicants.

The *workload of asylum decision-makers* is reflected in the monthly ratio of the number of pending asylum claims to the number of decided asylum claims in the federal state of residence. The required data is published monthly (BAMF 2018).¹¹ We expect that higher administrative information costs facilitate biased asylum decision-making if the effects of regional characteristics increase with lower levels of political and civil rights violations in the country of origin (i.e. a higher FIW score), with lower numbers of conflict-related deaths in the country of origin, or with the rising workload of asylum decision-makers.

Several individual-level and contextual variables enter our analyses as potential confounders. On the side of the individual asylum-seeker, *age* is controlled for since it correlates with the probability of migration. Gender measured through a *male* dummy, *religion*, and pre-migration *years of education* are further confounders that enter the analysis. We control for *traumatic experience on route* (a dummy equal to 1 if such an experience was indicated and 0 otherwise) because having experienced traumatizing events on the way to Germany may result in contradictory statements and misunderstandings in the interviews with an applicant, reducing the credibility of the asylum-seeker's testimony (Rousseau and Foxen 2010). We furthermore consider whether the respondents report that they *fled* their countries of origin *because of violent conflict or war, forced recruitment, persecution, or discrimination*. The reasons to seek refuge were pre-coded in the questionnaire, and respondents could tick multiple answers which we transformed into separate dummy variables.

To facilitate decision-making and lessen public criticism, the BAMF maintains lists of so-called '*safe countries of origin*' and countries with '*good perspective to stay*' (for details, see ft. 9). As the countries listed under these categories receive priority status in the processing of asylum applications, we include two respective dummy variables. A further control is whether an asylum-seeker *arrived via a safe third country*. If the authorities possess this information, they are likely to deny protection, partly based on the controversial Dublin regulation. We also control for *population density*, the *share of the foreign population*, and the *unemployment rate* at the municipality level (BBSR 2021). To account for systematic differences in the survey design data, the estimations include the *sample of the survey*.¹² We further control for cases where *information on the application/decision dates* and *type was replaced* with the registration date in Germany or with information provided in later

Table 1. Descriptive statistics on explanatory and control variables.

Variables	Mean/ share	Standard deviation	Range	Share of missings (% of sample)
Regional characteristics				
Share of residents very concerned about immigration to Germany	41.33	16.24	0–100	0
Years of centre-right dominance	12.21	7.89	0–27	0
Centre-right minister	0.39		0/1	0
Application of the restrictive residence obligation	0.21		0/1	0
Share of the non-monetary benefits to asylum-seekers	51.95	17.44	0–88	0
Workload				
Workload of asylum decision-makers	65.91	45.71	–0.2 to 465.3	0
Knowledge gaps				
FIW score	9.77	15.68	–1 to 84	0
Conflict-related deaths	494.29	859.83	0–3,805	5.06
Controls				
Fled because of forced recruitment	0.81		0/1	0.65
Fled because of persecution	0.43		0/1	0.65
Fled because of discrimination	0.50		0/1	0.65
Fled because of violent conflict or war	0.44		0/1	0.65
Male	0.61		0/1	0.00
Muslim	0.74		0/1	1.11
Years of education	9.79	5.04	0–22	5.16
Age when filing asylum application	32.03	10.49	18–87	0.76
BAMF Cluster				
Good prospects to stay	0.80		0/1	0
Safe countries of origin	0.02		0/1	0
Other	0.18		0/1	0
Arrived via safe third country	0.09		0/1	0.68
Traumatic experiences on route	0.51		0/1	37.29
Population density	183.77	219.88	1–998	0
Share of foreign population	11.36	5.38	1.9–29.0	0
Unemployment rate	6.23	2.61	1.3–15.1	0
Information on application/decision dates/type was replaced	0.05		0/1	0
Sample:	0.30			0
M3			0/1	
M4	0.33		0/1	0
M5	0.37		0/1	0

Notes: In the multivariate model, we control for missing values in the variables of interest.

Data source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees in Germany, 2016–7, own calculations.

survey periods. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the explanatory and control variables.

4. Results

4.1 Regional differences in asylum chances

In this article, we examine in line with earlier aggregate findings on asylum decisions whether preferences of regional peers filter into the decisions on asylum applications. Our theoretical framework distinguishes three potential sources of bias: the attitude of residents towards immigration, the general ideology of the public administration, and the

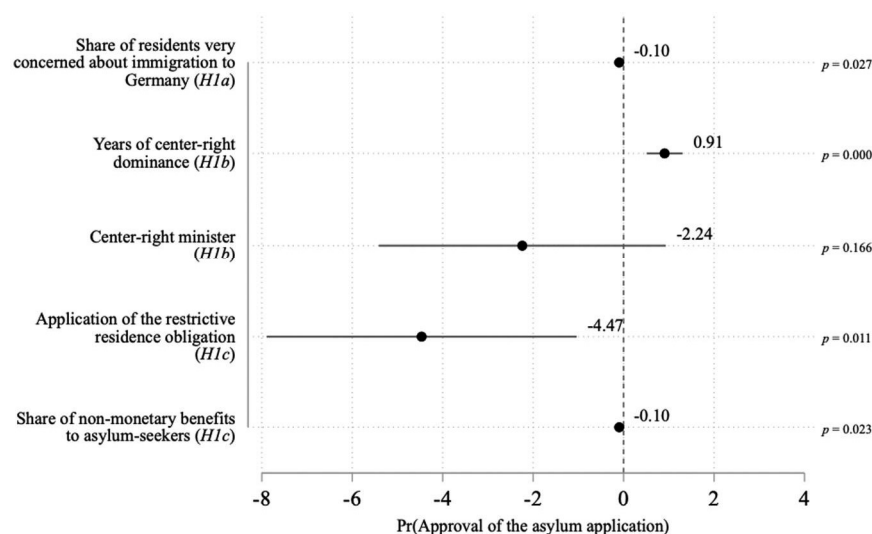


Figure 2. AME of regional characteristics on the probability of approval of the asylum application, in percentage points (with 95% confidence intervals).

Notes: Results from a mixed-effect logistic regression with random intercept for origin countries, for full model see Table S2.

Data source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees in Germany, 2016–2017, own calculations.

administration's refugee-specific attitudes (see Fig. 2, for the full model, refer to Supplementary Table S2).

In line with *H1a*, asylum applications are less successful in regions with more immigration-averse residents. A ten percentage points higher share of residents who express concerns about immigration to Germany decreases the probability of protection by one percentage point. *H1b*, conversely, is not empirically supported as the presence of a centre-right regional government is not significantly related to the chance of receiving protection. Also, a long-term dominance of the Christian democrats in the political history of the state increases rather than decreases the approval probability. We further find that in regions with a more restrictive administrative approach towards refugees, the chance to obtain a protection status lessens (*H1c*). In regions applying a restrictive residence obligation on refugees, the probability of a positive outcome is reduced by four percentage points. Likewise, an increase in the share of non-monetary benefits to asylum-seekers by ten percentage points is associated with a decrease in approval probability by one percentage point. The disparate findings on *H1* suggest the absence of long-term influences of the regional government's political tradition, highlighting instead current regional public opinion on immigration as crucial in shaping asylum decision-making: the immigration preferences of the voters and the current government are more important than the overall political tradition of the regional government in shaping the caseworkers' asylum decisions.

Finally, screening the results for the control variables revealed per se substantially lower approval chances of Muslims and males (Supplementary Table S2), resembling findings on asylum determination in Denmark (Montgomery and Feldspang 2005) and France (Emeriau 2023). Whether these unequal approval probabilities reflect political preferences or the lower eligibility of some groups for asylum cannot be established in our analysis.

4.2 Knowledge gaps

To assess the role of knowledge gaps in biased asylum decision-making, we interacted the different facets of regional political preferences with two proxies for the absence or

presence of external sources with which the possible endangerment of applicants in their home countries could be assessed. Specifically, we tested the association of political preferences with individual asylum chances at different levels of the FIW score and the number of conflict-related deaths, respectively. These two indicators proxy the lower bound of general information that decision-makers could acquire regarding the human rights situation in the asylum-seeker's country of origin. The two operationalizations thus reflect the severity of knowledge gaps (*H2a*, *2b*, *2c*). Note that each set of hypotheses was tested in separate models (for full models, see Supplementary Tables S3 and S4).

Figures 3 and 4 depict AMEs for the characteristics of interest at different levels of the FIW score and conflict-related deaths, respectively. The graphs also report the Wald Test results for the interaction effects. We expected an additional penalty for applicants in regions with more conservative local or governmental attitudes when knowledge gaps were large. However, this cannot be confirmed. To be precise, in regions with a more immigration-averse population individual approval probabilities do not decrease further when knowledge gaps are large. Hence, *H2a* is not supported.

H2b expected growing information gaps to amplify the negative effect of a more conservative regional public administration on approval probability. We can confirm this for the

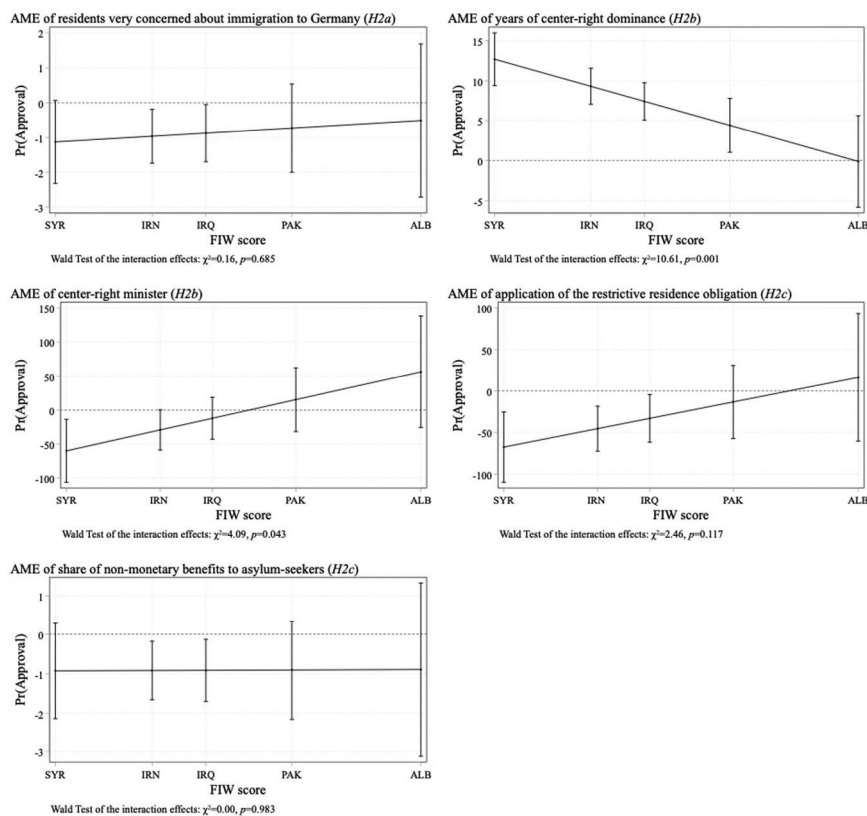


Figure 3. AME of the FIW score on the probability of approval of the asylum application, in percentage points, at different levels of FIW score (with 95% confidence intervals).

Notes: Results from mixed-effect logistic regression with random intercept for origin countries, for full models see Table S3. For each interaction effect, we performed a Wald test. To illustrate the interaction effects, we calculated the average marginal effects of the regional characteristics at different levels of the FIW score.

Data source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees in Germany, 2016–2017, own calculations.

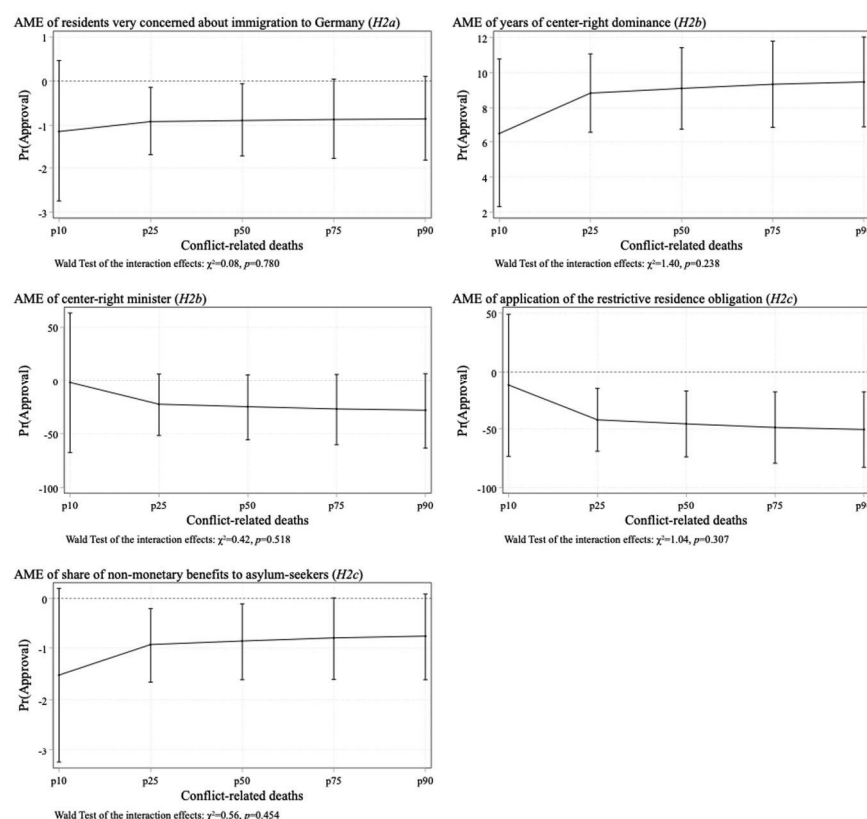


Figure 4. AME of conflict-related deaths on the probability of approval of the asylum application, in percentage points, at different levels of conflict-related deaths (with 95% confidence intervals).

Notes: Results from mixed-effect logistic regression with random intercept for origin countries, for full models see Table S4. For each interaction effect, we performed a Wald test. To illustrate the interaction effects, we calculated the average marginal effects of the regional characteristics at different levels of conflict-related deaths.

Data source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees in Germany, 2016–2017, own calculations.

political tradition of the regional administration, but not for the current government's attitudes. Firstly, using the FIW proxy for knowledge gaps, the higher chance of obtaining asylum in regions with a longer conservative tradition decreases as information gaps grow (Fig. 3). Secondly, the penalty for applicants in regions with a current conservative government decreases and disappears with increasing knowledge gaps (using the FIW proxy). At the same time, neither of the indicators for the government's general ideology significantly vary by knowledge gaps as measured by the number of conflict-related deaths (see the Wald test results in Fig. 4). Hence, *H2b* finds only some tentative support, and results are remarkably sensitive to the proxies we use.

The results also contradict *H2c*. The penalty for applicants in regions with a more restrictive governmental attitude towards refugees does not amplify if knowledge gaps are larger. This holds for both proxies of knowledge gaps and both proxies of the government's attitude towards refugees (see Figs 3 and 4). Altogether, these findings suggest that contrary to the expected, regional political preferences are not more important when decision-makers have less information on an asylum-seeker's home country. We furthermore observe a high sensitivity on the proxies applied. In other words, we cannot confirm that knowledge gaps would amplify the role of regional preferences in asylum decision-making.

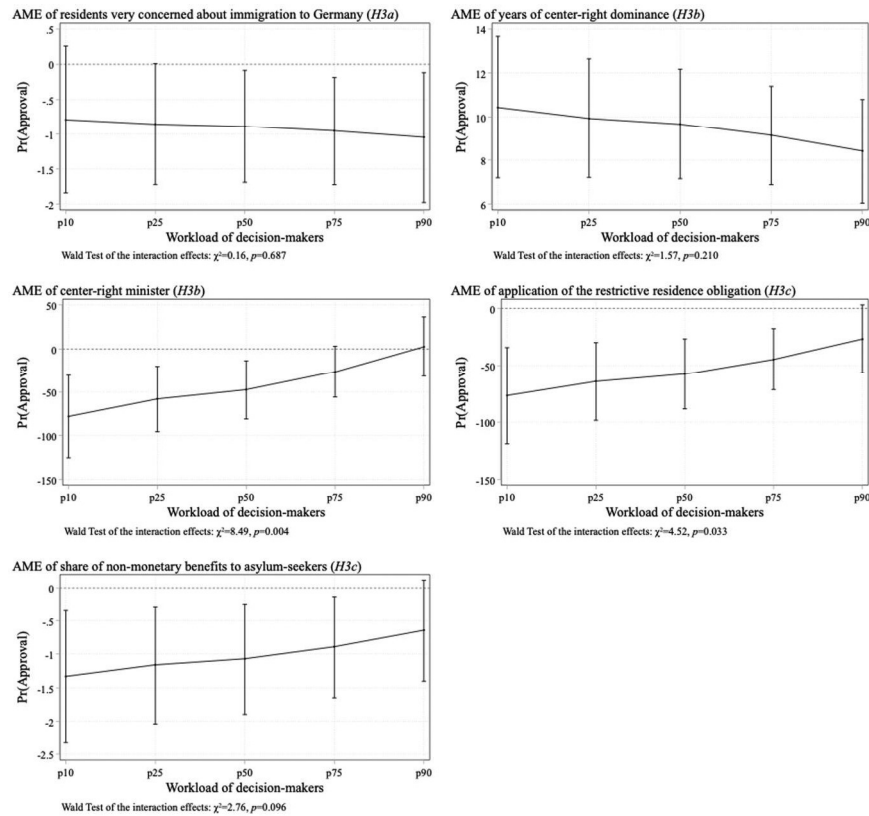


Figure 5. AME of workload on the probability of approval of the asylum application, in percentage points, at different levels of workload (with 95% confidence intervals).

Notes: Results from mixed-effect logistic regression with random intercept for origin countries, for full models see Table S5. For each interaction effect, we performed a Wald test. To illustrate the interaction effects, we calculated the average marginal effects of the regional characteristics at different levels of workload.

Data source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees in Germany, 2016-2017, own calculations.

4.3 Workload

We posited that a high workload and the resulting time pressure on decision-makers is a second source of biased decision-making as suggested by the theory of statistical discrimination (*H3*). Figure 5 illustrates whether the chance of approval declines under decision-making stress, conditional on the regional political preferences (for full models, see Supplementary Table S5). The evidence strongly suggests that time pressure does not systematically intensify the role of regional political preferences in shaping asylum decisions.

The results instead suggest that the probability of approval in regions with a more immigration-averse public does not decrease further if workloads are high. *H3a* thus remains without empirical support. *H3b*, which expected a lower approval probability in regions with a more conservative government tradition when workloads were high, is not supported either. First, the interaction effect between the workload variable and the ideological tradition of the regional government (proxied by the years of centre-right dominance) is negative, but not statistically significant. Secondly, the negative association of a current conservative government with the chance to obtain protection weakens if the workload of the caseworkers is higher. Likewise, the prediction of increased negative effects of more restrictive policies towards refugees on the chance of approval when the workload is high is not empirically supported (*H3c*).

On the contrary, the negative association of more restrictive policies towards refugees and approval probabilities is weaker when decision-makers experience high workloads (significant interaction effect of the residence obligation indicator and no significant interaction of the non-monetary benefits indicator as suggested by the Wald test).

In sum, we cannot establish that knowledge gaps or time pressure systematically mediate the regional variation we found in the individual chance to obtain protection. Irrespective of information costs, regional attitudes towards immigration remain a constant factor in shaping the chance to obtain asylum in Germany. This highlights the considerable discretion that the street-level bureaucrats had in the implementation of the federal asylum policy in the period under study. The empirical evidence strongly suggests that the actual decision-making context does not reduce the extent to which the caseworkers are guided by the regional public mood towards immigration and asylum and that situational factors are of little importance in this context.

5. Discussion

Studies examining the varying chance of asylum-seekers to obtain protection have often faced limitations due to scarce information on the applicants' backgrounds. Applying principal-agent models, this article breaks new ground by investigating whether the BAMF caseworkers who decide on asylum applications on behalf of the German federal state cave into the preferences of the regional population or the regional government. We furthermore examined whether this influence could be attributed to high information costs, as suggested by the theory of statistical discrimination. Specifically, we expected regional variation in the chance to obtain protection along the lines of regional political preferences to be particularly pronounced when decision-makers lacked sufficient information or time to judge the credibility of an asylum claim.

By leveraging a rich refugee survey and the state-based allocation rules linked to national dispersal policies of both federal and regional governments in Germany, our analysis provides robust insights into the complex interplay of regional political preferences and asylum decision-making outcomes. The quasi-experimental design allows us to address potential endogeneity concerns and enhances the validity of our findings. The resulting empirical evidence sheds light on the influence of regional political contexts on asylum processes, contributing to both the policy discourse and the scholarly field of migration studies.

The mixed-effect logistic regressions unambiguously demonstrated that asylum decision-making in Germany is indeed associated with the prevailing regional public attitudes towards immigration and asylum. Asylum applications were inherently less successful in regions with a more immigration-averse population or a government with a more restrictive stance towards refugees. These findings strongly suggest that the responsible caseworkers of the BAMF—an agency working on behalf of the federal government—consciously or unconsciously aligned with the current immigration preferences of their regional peers.

Following the theory of statistical discrimination, such variation in decision-making may be mediated by significant information costs. Caseworkers who face large knowledge gaps or high workloads may thus—knowingly or unknowingly—be even more prone to filter regional preferences into their decisions. Yet, our tests of the two information cost hypotheses did not find confirmation. In other words, regardless of workload or knowledge gaps, regional political preferences towards immigration and asylum consistently shaped the individual chance of asylum-seekers to obtain protection in Germany in the period under study.

In conclusion, our study confirmed that political biases enter the asylum decision-making process. However, the tests did not systematically confirm that such biases were amplified through high information costs. This indicates that the regional political sentiments that permeate the asylum decisions by the federal administrators represent a significant source of biased asylum decision-making in Germany. Global norms and national laws mandate that an asylum decision should solely be based on the merits of an individual

asylum claim. Yet, our analysis provides compelling evidence that regional political preferences distort the German asylum procedure.

Our study comes with some limitations that mainly result from scarce data. We have no information on the distribution of tasks between BAMF officials or varying responsibilities of BAMF branches for different nationalities, on the number of caseworkers employed by the federal agency, and on the actual information used to assess the eligibility of an asylum claim. We thus have to rely on measures that approximate workload and information gaps. More detailed asylum statistics would not only improve research on the German asylum procedure but potentially also help the BAMF in increasing the transparency and fairness of its decision-making. As we were unable to assess the eligibility of individual asylum claims, we cannot fully rule out the possibility that unobservable factors blur our analysis. Coupling statistical analyses with interviews with applicants and administrators would be a promising avenue for future studies. Also, it should be noted that our analysis focuses on a special period in Germany's history of immigration. In 2015 and 2016, the country experienced the largest influx of asylum-seekers since World War II, challenging local and federal administrations alike. This may have exacerbated existing deficits, such that the results should be interpreted carefully. Choosing this period of observation, however, also bears the chance to unveil existing imbalances that might go unnoticed in less stressful periods. In fact, our statistical analyses have shown that irrespective of changing workloads and information gaps, caseworkers are influenced by the regional public mood. These findings support the assumption that immigration attitudes in the surroundings of street-level bureaucrats shape asylum decisions in a way that contradicts the spirit of the global asylum regime and German federal legislation. It is beyond the scope of this article to explore the extent to which these attitudes are shaped by government ideology.

Our results strongly suggest the need for reforms on the federal level that enhance the objectivity of the asylum procedure. To counteract the influence of regional biases, caseworkers need to receive regular and uniform training in how to obtain and make use of objective information when assessing the credibility of individual asylum claims. Regular supervision sessions for BAMF officials can furthermore provide the scope to reflect, discuss, and address potential (internal and external) political biases filtering into asylum decisions. Moreover, mandating regular and systematic internal or external reviews of asylum decisions may help to limit the arbitrariness in decision-making. The systematic documentation and publication of (changing) BAMF proceedings in the asylum decision-making apparatus would represent another constituent of external control. These envisioned measures and other reforms will assist the German government in insulating asylum decision-making from the political prerogatives of the regions in which the street-level bureaucrats apply the federal asylum policy.

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Supplementary data

Supplementary data are available at *Migration Studies Journal* online.

Conflict of interest statement

None declared.

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Data availability

This study uses the factually anonymous data of waves 2016–19 of the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees (doi: 10.5684/soep.iab-bamf-soep-mig.2019). The survey is conducted jointly by the Institute for Employment Research (IAB), the research data center of the Federal German Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), and the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) at the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW). Data access was provided via researchers' contacts at the IAB. External researchers may apply for access to these data by submitting a user-contract application to the SOEP Research Data Center (https://www.diw.de/en/diw_02.c.222836.en/data_access_and_order.html). The computer codes for data preparation and analyses can be found at <https://osf.io/xtm2a/> (doi: 10.17605/OSF.IO/XTM2A).

Notes

1. Our data do not cover the recent refugee flow in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Due to the European Union (EU) Member States' activation of the so-called 'Mass Influx Directive', which exempts Ukrainian refugees from applying for asylum, the governance of refugee migration from Ukraine differs from other refugee groups (Brücker 2022).
2. Holzer et al. (2000a) and Spirig (2021) rely on individual-level administrative data from Switzerland, but only basic sociodemographic information on applicants was available.
3. In 2016, there were 40 regional BAMF offices (Kosyakova and Brücker 2020).
4. See Supplementary Material for robustness analyses restricted to the major asylum-seekers' countries of origin.
5. Although these administrative particularities could differ by regional units, the BAMF does not disclose any such information that we could include in our analysis.
6. While previous studies have also stressed economic factors, the results are contradictory: Following Toshkov (2014), European recognition rates correlate positively with national income and negatively with the level of unemployment, whereas Neumayer (2005) finds no such effects. In Germany, Riedel and Schneider (2017) find a negative impact of local unemployment rates and economic growth on regional recognition rates, whereas Schneider, Segadlo, and Leue (2020) find that local GDP per capita reduces rejection rates.
7. In a personal interview with BAMF officials, we learned that such country reports exist to inform asylum decision-makers, but they were not disclosed to us.
8. The judgement was obtained from the platform Juris (Juristische Informationssystem für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland [Legal Information System for the Federal Republic of Germany]).
9. A system was introduced to cluster asylum-seekers based on the approval chances of their application (*cluster A*: approval rates of origin countries above 50 per cent, such as Syria or Eritrea; *cluster B*: safe countries of origin, such as Albania or Serbia), expected complexity of cases (*cluster C*: complex cases, such as Afghanistan), and travel route (*cluster D*: cases subject to the Dublin Agreement) (see Kosyakova and Brücker 2020).
10. We follow previous literature and consider immigration concerns to measure immigration-averse citizens (e.g. Poutvaara and Steinhardt 2018). Note that immigration concerns are also referred to as salience elsewhere (e.g. Spirig et al. 2021).
11. An even more precise measure would be the number of pending cases per caseworker. Unfortunately, the BAMF does not disclose the required information to construct this measure.
12. Controlling for decision date fixed effects (aggregated into 6-month periods) did not improve the goodness-of-model fit. Thus, we opted for a model without these controls.

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