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Asylum Procedures and Forced Labour of Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Italy

Abstract

Introduction: Most researchers agree that a relationship between asylum system and human trafficking exists, but its nature remains unclear and under-researched. Since 2016, Italy has identified between 2,100 and 3,800 potential forced labour victims each year. Numerous sources highlight the significant proportion of asylum seekers and refugees among the survivors. Anti-trafficking network representatives have noted an increase in survivors and potential victims of forced labor among this group in Italy, especially after 2015. Researchers point to the "profugization" of the labor market and exploitation.

Aim: The primary aim of this dissertation was to explore the relationship between asylum procedures and forced labor among ARs in Italy. This research was motivated by the lack of studies focusing on specific aspects of the asylum system in this context. The main research question was: to what extent do asylum procedures and their implementation reduce or facilitate forced labor among ARs in Italy? To achieve this, I detailed the stages and types of asylum procedures, considering access to procedures, registration, identification processes, and the two levels of the reception system. Additionally, I reviewed and analyzed asylum procedures to assess their impact on forced labor among ARs. The study also examined these procedures through the lens of structural injustice theory. Finally, I aimed to develop a theory of change to provide practical recommendations for practitioners and stakeholders based on the findings.

Methodology: Adopting an exploratory stance, I employed a mixed-methods approach using a sequential explanatory design. Consistent with (constructivist) grounded theory, I continuously adapted the conceptual framework throughout the research process. In the first phase, I conducted a quantitative two-phase systematic review, which informed the subsequent research steps. For the qualitative component, I conducted seven focus groups with representatives from the asylum system and the anti-human trafficking network in Italy. No studies have considered the perspective of the anti-human trafficking network, which works with both survivors of trafficking and ARs. This research fills that gap by integrating the perspectives of stakeholders directly involved in asylum and anti-human trafficking systems. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the collected data, with qualitative coding supported by MAXQDA software. Examples of code development were included during data analysis, enabling the construction of a substantive grounded theory.

Findings: The key findings highlight the dual nature of asylum procedures, showing how they can both protect and expose ARs to forced labor. Specific procedural elements, such as the length of the process, access to information, and reception conditions, play crucial roles in shaping these outcomes. This duality underscores the complexity and significance of the relationship between asylum policies, procedures, and the exploitation of ARs. The integrated data allowed the creation of a substantive grounded theory focused on the dual nature of asylum procedures and the concept of a "safe host country". Moreover, this research emphasizes the avoidable nature of structural injustice within the asylum system and introduces the concept of SHC as a potential solution.