

# [Ebook • From arrival to settlement. Vulnerabilities of asylum seekers and refugees in Europe](#)

Daria Mendola | February 27, 2026



*Italy, one of the strategic entry points into Europe for refugees and asylum seekers, is facing increasing arrivals with a reception system that is not always adequate and not always attentive to people's real vulnerabilities. The ebook edited by Daria Mendola explores the issue from a multidisciplinary perspective, placing Italy within the broader European context and offering concrete policy recommendations for managing vulnerabilities.*

[VIEW THE EBOOK](#)

“Vulnerability” is one of the most frequently used terms in the contemporary debate on migration and asylum. Still, the concept proves remarkably elusive. What does vulnerability actually mean in high-income countries? Who is considered vulnerable, by whom, and on what grounds?

## **The AVRAI Project**

The new open-access e-book produced as part of the AVRAI project (*Assessing the Vulnerability of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Italy*) addresses these questions. The volume invites readers to rethink vulnerability as a dynamic and relational condition, one that emerges at the intersection of individual characteristics, social environments and institutional responses. In doing so, it challenges both emergency-driven humanitarian frameworks and the rigid policy classifications that dominate the European context.

While effective in camp contexts, UNHCR's approaches to vulnerability may not fully correspond to the realities faced by refugees and asylum seekers in Europe. In high-income countries, basic needs such as shelter, healthcare and education are often formally guaranteed. Yet vulnerability persists in a different forms, linked to discrimination, legal uncertainty, labour market exclusion, mental health struggles, difficult access to healthcare, family separation, and limited access to rights.

European asylum systems have struggled to capture these dimensions. EU legislation tends to rely on predefined categories of "vulnerable persons", implicitly treating vulnerability as an inherent individual trait. Situational and contextual factors - such as prolonged stays in reception centres, hostile public discourse or unequal access to employment - are often overlooked. As a result, some forms of vulnerability are placed in the spotlight, while others go unnoticed.

Italy represents a particularly telling case. Migration has been at the centre of public debate for more than three decades, often framed in terms of emergency responses and competition for resources. Yet this intense political and media attention has rarely been matched by solid empirical evidence. Unlike several other European countries, Italy lacks an official, large-scale survey on refugees and asylum seekers.

## **The Italian Refugees and Asylum Seekers Survey (ItRAS),**

The AVRAI project, launched in 2023, was designed to address this gap. Its aim is not only to collect high-quality data on the living conditions of refugees and asylum seekers in Italy, but also to rethink how vulnerability should be conceptualised and measured in a non-emergency context. The project centres around the Italian Refugees and Asylum Seekers Survey (ItRAS), an original data collection effort that provides unprecedented insights into health, employment, housing, food security, legal uncertainty, social relations and economic and social well-being (Mendola et al., 2026).

These survey data are complemented by administrative records from one of Europe's largest first-reception centres (based in Italy), Eurostat statistics and comparative evidence from other European countries, as well as qualitative research on older refugees. The e-book draws upon these multiple sources to explore vulnerability not as a single dimension, but as a constellation of interconnected experiences unfolding over time.

*"From Arrival to Settlement. Vulnerabilities of Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Europe"* presents selected contributions from the **AVRAI project** and reflects the project's multidisciplinary and intersectional nature. It brings together scholars external to the project itself (from Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom), who offer complementary and differing perspectives on sources of vulnerability and on countries at the centre of asylum flows in Europe. Some of the articles have already been published in international journals, while others present the initial findings of on-going strands of analysis.

## **The e-book structure**

The volume is organised into four thematic chapters, each focusing on a key dimension of vulnerability and concluding with reflections relevant for policy and practice.

One recurring theme throughout the volume is how vulnerability can be produced, or intensified, by institutional processes. This is particularly evident in analyses of asylum recognition and reception systems, discussed mainly in the opening chapter. Gender

disparities in asylum decisions across European countries, contradictions in national migration policies, and the effects of hostile political rhetoric all illustrate how vulnerability is shaped not only by personal circumstances, but also by legal frameworks and public discourse. These contributions show that vulnerability often begins at the very moment of arrival, embedded in how protection is granted, denied or delayed.

Health represents another central axis of the volume, examined in depth in the second chapter. Rather than treating health as a purely individual condition, the contributions highlight its close relationship with reception systems, length of stay in institutional settings and experiences of discrimination. Physical and mental health vulnerabilities emerge as cumulative processes, influenced by uncertainty, isolation and restricted access to resources. At the same time, resilience is introduced as a key, if often overlooked, element. It is an active resource that can mitigate the effects of vulnerability and reshape health trajectories, particularly when refugees are able to exercise agency and build social connections.

Vulnerability is also explored through the dimensions of economic participation and labour market integration, primarily in the third chapter. Employment is shown to matter not only for economic self-sufficiency, but also for subjective well-being and life satisfaction. Yet access to stable and meaningful work remains highly unequal. Gender and origin play a crucial role, with female refugees and asylum-seekers disproportionately concentrated in part-time, precarious or informal employment. These patterns reveal how labour market structures can reinforce vulnerability long after arrival, even in contexts where formal integration policies exist.

## **Beyond the individual level**

The volume also draws attention to forms of vulnerability that are frequently overlooked because they do not fit individual-centred policy models. As shown in the final chapter, family relationships, gender roles and intergenerational ties are central to this perspective. Forced migration often leads to prolonged family separation and the emergence of transnational families spread across multiple countries, creating emotional and social strains that rarely enter vulnerability assessments. At the same time, the e-book critically examines reception practices themselves, showing how systems designed to support autonomy may, in practice, undermine it by producing dependency and limiting personal agency.

Running through all these themes is a shared argument: vulnerability is neither a static condition that can be identified once and for all, nor a simple sum of personal characteristics. It is a process that evolves over time, shaped by interactions between individuals and institutions, and that is deeply embedded in social and political contexts. Recognising this complexity is essential if migration policies are to move beyond emergency responses and towards long-term, evidence-based planning.

The e-book concludes by translating these reflections into policy recommendations, arising from a round table, that speak directly to practitioners, institutions and actors involved in asylum reception and integration. By combining original data, comparative perspectives and conceptual innovation, the AVRAI volume aims to contribute to a more informed public debate - one that replaces simplified narratives with empirical evidence and analytical depth.

Freely available for download, thanks to funding from the NRRP, this e-book is intended for a broad audience of scholars, students, policy professionals, journalists and readers interested in understanding how vulnerability is produced and experienced in contemporary Europe. At a time when migration, and forced migration specifically, is increasingly recognised as a

structural feature of global inequality, this volume offers a timely invitation to look beyond labels and to rethink vulnerability as a shared social responsibility rather than a fixed personal trait.

## Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the European Union - NextGenerationEU—National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) - M4C2 Investment 1.1. PRIN 2022, Project AVRAI (Project ID - CUP: B53D23016960006 - proposal code: 2022XSM5SX).

## References

Busetta, A., Mendola, D. (2026). Time and resilience. Evidence from a new survey of refugees and asylum seekers in Italy. *Italian Journal of Economic, Demographic and Statistical Studies*, LXXX(1), 191-202, <https://doi.org/10.71014/sieds.v80i1.555>

Mendola, D., Busetta, A. (2025). Resilience and discrimination: Unravelling the multifaceted nature of refugee health in Germany. *Genus*. 81(1),15. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41118-025-00252-5>

Mendola, D., Cela, E., Ortensi, L.E., Ambrosini, M., Arcaio, M., Barbiano di Belgiojoso, E., Busetta, A., Impicciatore, R., Miaci, E., Parigi, M., Parroco, A.M., Stranges, M., Tosi, F. (2026). The vulnerability of refugees and asylum seekers in Italy: Insights from a nationwide survey. *Plos One*, 21(3): e0341950. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0341950>

Ortensi, L.E., Piccitto, G., Morlotti, S. (2024). A female advantage in asylum application decisions? A gendered analysis of decisions on asylum applications in Italy from 2008 to 2022. *Genus*, 80, 13. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41118-024-00218-z>

Parroco, A.M., Arcaio, M., Mendola, D. (2026). Employment and life satisfaction among refugees and asylum seekers in Italy: evidence from the ItRAS Survey. *Italian Journal of Economic, Demographic and Statistical Studies*, LXXX(1), 75-86, doi: <https://doi.org/10.71014/sieds.v80i1.551>