

Refugee Researchers in COVID-19 Pandemic

Subjects: Public Administration

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The ongoing 'refugee crisis' of the past years has led to the migration of refugee researchers (RRs) to European countries. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, RRs often had to work from home and/or to continue their social, cultural and economic integration process under new conditions. An online survey carried out to explore the impact of the pandemic on the refugee researchers showed that RRs found it difficult to adapt their everyday working life to the 'home' setting. The majority have had neither a suitable work environment at home nor the appropriate technology. Although they stated that they are rather pleased with the measures taken by the public authorities, they expressed concern about their vulnerability due to their precarious contracts and the bureaucratic asylum procedures, as the pandemic has had a negative impact on these major issues. The majority of RRs working in academia seem not to have been affected at all as far as their income is concerned, while the majority of those employed in other sectors became unemployed during the pandemic (58%). Recommendations are provided to the public authorities and policy makers to assist RRs to mitigate the consequences of the pandemic on their life.

Keywords: COVID-19 ; refugee researchers (RRs) ; researcher at risk ; scholars at risk ; employment ; pandemic ; working from home ; asylum procedure

1. Introduction

The outbreak of the Coronavirus disease COVID-19 has affected all the countries of the world, with 147 million infected and 3.1 million dead at the end of April 2021 ^[1]. Facing limited preparedness to control the spread of the virus, various governments adopted several public health strategies. The applied measures include enforcing complete or partial restrictions to financial and social activities, the so called "lockdowns", restricting international travel, social distancing and the adoption of hygiene practices (masking, hand disinfection) ^[2]. Academic events such as conferences and meetings have been taking place online. Schools and universities closed and started to give classes online. Business activity was restricted.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected significant aspects of economic and social life, forcing millions of people to working from home (WFH) ^[3]. Since the start of the pandemic, almost 85% of knowledge workers in Europe made a shift to the WFH practice ^[4], even though they used to spend more than 80% of their working time in a central office environment ^[5].

At the same time, Europe faced the so called "refugee crisis", with 2.2 million arrivals in the period 2014–2020 in the South European countries and Germany to host almost half of the asylum seekers reaching Europe ^[6]. Scientists with academic and specialized knowledge (refugee researchers—RRs) who have left their country, seeking a safer life, have been trying to integrate into their host countries and continue their research careers^{[7][8]}.

RRs are a vulnerable part of the refugee community (very often waiting for asylum procedures to end). Due to the precarious nature of their research funding, they are strongly dependent on short-term scholarships or research grants that may have been expired during the pandemic, and many are without any financial support for their research, for instance, as they have been waiting for research funding applications to be evaluated. Moreover, RRs employed in industry or in the private sector are potentially in a more vulnerable position due to their generally less stable employment conditions and lower seniority on the job.

2. Analysis on Refugee Researchers' Status During COVID-19 Pandemic

In this section, the results of the questionnaire survey are presented and analyzed. The main finding is that marital status, age and educational level do not play a substantial role in the income and the working status of RRs amidst COVID-19, given that all RRs are relatively well educated. The variable that exhibits the strongest effect of COVID-19 on income and employment status is the working sector, with those employed in the academic sector being the least affected by lockdown measures. In what follows, some descriptive statistics of the sample are presented and, subsequently, detailed results of the bivariate associations are given.

The first country of origin is Syria (37 respondents), followed by Afganistan (6), Palestine (3) and Lebanon (3) (**Figure 1a**). Generally, 95% of the participants come from Asian and Middle Eastern Countries. The hosting countries are Germany (24 respondents), followed by Greece (8), Syria (7), Hungary (6) and Lebanon (3) (**Figure 1b**). Generally, 40% of the participants are hosted in Germany. At this point, it should be noted that five refugees did not answer the questions regarding their country of origin and the hosting country, and, therefore, the aforementioned percentages (valid percent) correspond to a sample of 59 individuals. The majority of the participants are men (77%), and they hold a master's degree (42.2%) or a PhD degree (18.8%) (**Figure 2a**). In total, 30.5% of the participants are students, 32.2% work in a research institute or at a university, 20.3% in a non-governmental organization (NGO) and, to a lesser extent, are entrepreneurs, self-employed, work in public administration or in the family business (**Figure 2b**).

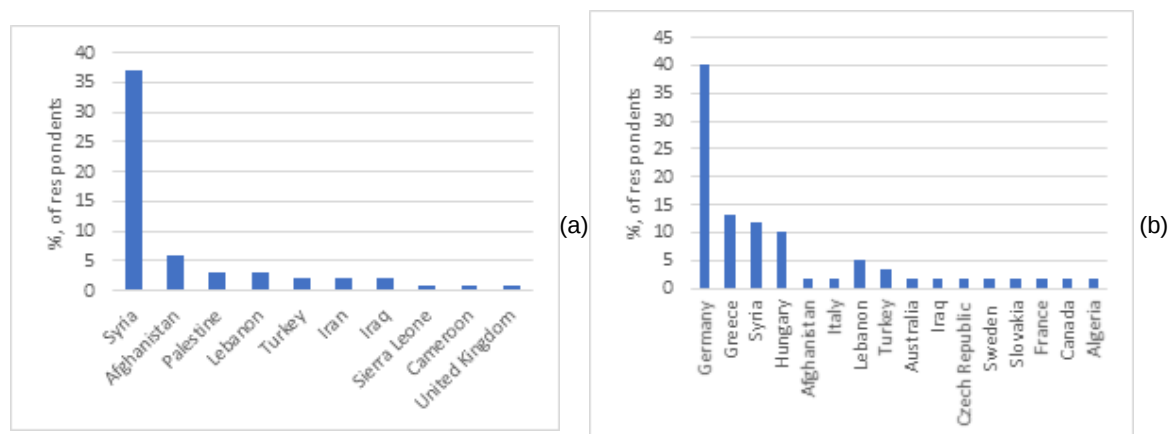


Figure 1. (a) Origin country of refugee researchers (RRs); **(b)** host country of RRs.

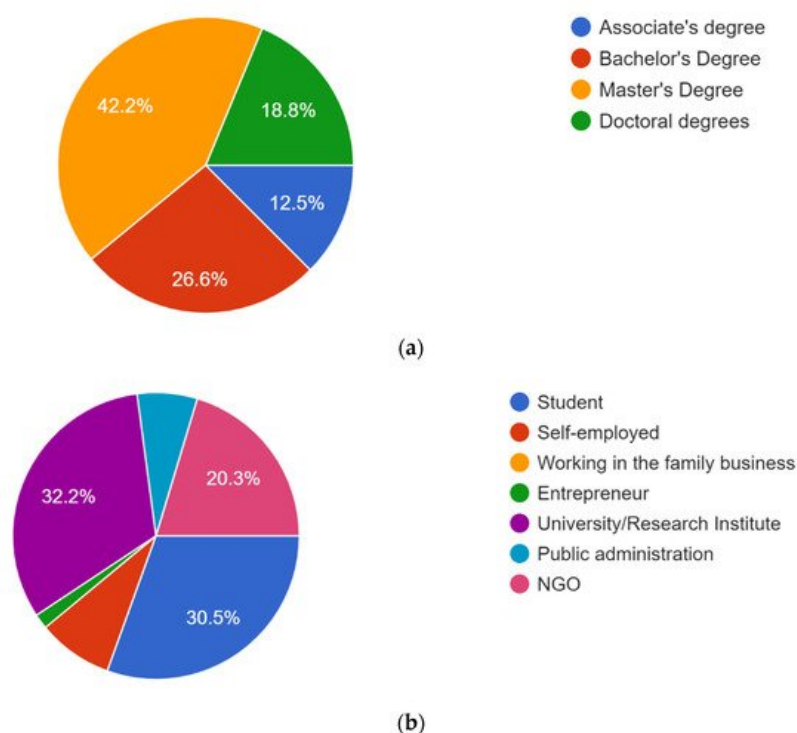


Figure 2. (a) RRs' educational level; **(b)** RRs' working sector.

The pandemic introduced changes in RRs' lives with 40.6% of the participants declaring that their employment status was negatively and strongly affected, while only 22% were not affected at all. (**Figure 3a**) As far as their health is concerned, 15.6% stated that were strongly affected by the pandemic (**Figure 3b**). The participants' level of uneasiness, interest and affection due to the current COVID-19 crisis on a 5-point Likert scale ranges from moderate (32.8%) to high (21.9%) up to very high (28.1%). Many lost their job, friends, family or feel uncomfortable to face the changes in their daily life. A large minority of the RRs face difficulties with coping with their income (46.9%).

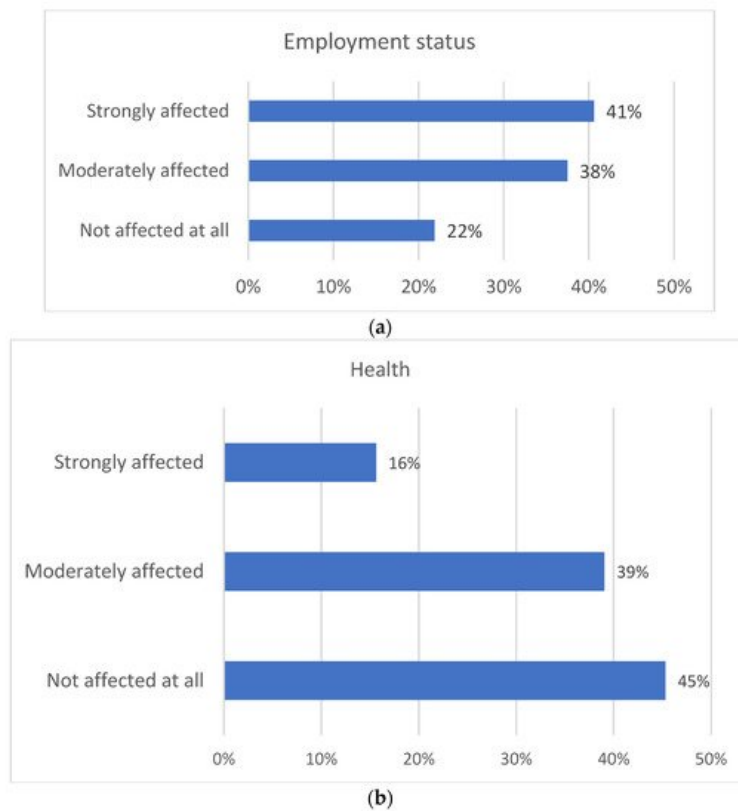


Figure 3. (a) Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on RRs' employment; (b) impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on RRs' health. Source: online survey that took place between December 2020 and March 2021. N: 64.

The major challenges of the RRS to WFH are to deal with (a) lower productivity (56.3%); (b) the loss of feeling part of a physical team (45.3%); (c) keeping work and home life separate (42.2%) (**Figure 4**), since the majority of them (59.4%) do not have enough space to set up a home office for remote work. Other studies agree that researchers' self-perceived productivity has been lowered during the lockdown [9]. As for the access to information technology devices, the majority of the respondents have had a personal computer (84.4%) as well as access to online collaboration software (60.9%), whereas a minority had a second display monitor (23.4%) or fast broadband speed (15.6%) (**Figure 5**).

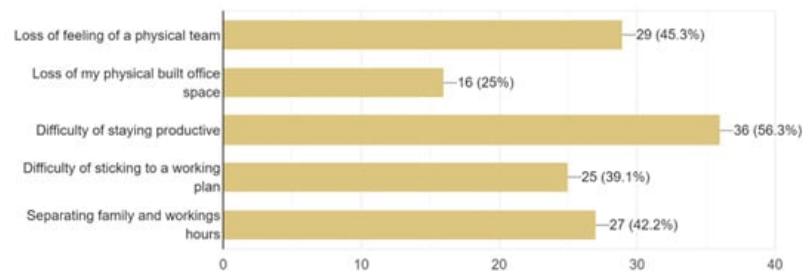


Figure 4. The two most significant difficulties in working from home (WFH). Source: online survey that took place between December 2020 and March 2021. N: 64.

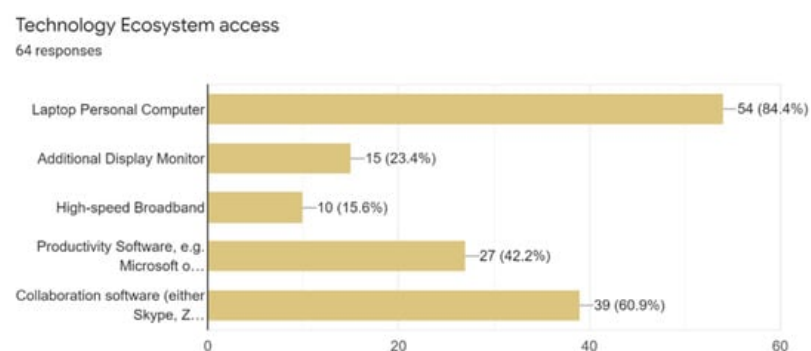


Figure 5. Access to information technology devices in working from home (WFH). Source: online survey that took place between December 2020 and March 2021. N: 64.

Married educated refugees reported being more comfortable with their current income (37%) than their single counterparts (20%). There are two divorced persons in our sample that responded that they were just coping with their present income. This relationship is statistically significant at the 10% level of significance (p -value < 0.1), but it is a weak to moderate relationship (Cramer's $V = 0.26$). Non-Pharmaceutical Interventions (NPI) and lockdowns seem to have affected equally refugees' income regardless of marital status. A great percentage of both married (48%) and single refugees (46%) have been strongly affected. The differences in the percentages are not statistically significant.

In a gross generalization, we could say that the lower the educational level of refugees, the stronger they have been affected by measures to tackle a virulent disease. In total, 60% of those with an associate's degree (a level of qualification between high school and university) or bachelor's degree have been strongly affected by the crisis, while 41% of those with a Master's degree and "only" 25% of those with a PhD degree have been strongly affected. This relationship has a small chance of arising by chance alone, though it is not statistically significant at the 0.05 level of significance (p -value = 0.17). The value of Gamma (-0.4) denotes a moderate relationship. It is important that WFH affects equally the young and the older respondents. It is moderately challenging for a great percentage of both age groups (47% for younger migrants, 44% for older), while it is highly challenging for 39% of the young and the older as well. The majority of refugees did not like working from home during the pandemic, and this attitude did not change with age. In contrast, 70% of the researchers found the increasing time of WFH in the post-pandemic period favorable and efficient ^[10].

Lockdowns imposed by governments have not had the same impact on refugees' income. On the one hand, the majority of those working in academia have not been affected at all as far as their income is concerned. Other studies show the researchers' loss of academic work as a potential financial impact due to the need for additional funding for repetition of work affected by lab closures ^[9]. On the other hand, the majority of those RRs working in other sectors (NGOs, public administration, self-employed) have seen their income reduced during the lockdown. The working sector has also played an important role in job security during the pandemic. The majority of those employed in the academic sector were still being employed during the pandemic (74%), while the majority of those employed in other sectors became unemployed during the pandemic (58%). The European Commission refused to grant paid extensions to Marie Skłodowska Curie (MSCA) fellows, who had to put their research on hold during the coronavirus lockdown ^[11].

With the sudden onset of the pandemic and the strict protection measures, the RRs have faced multiple changes that the crisis has brought about in all areas of life. Almost 15.6% of the RRs feel the impact of the pandemic on their health and 45% on their income, whereas 46.9% find it difficult to live comfortably with their current income and worry about the current health crisis. RRs working in the non-academic sector have had great difficulties in coping with issues, such as unemployment, during the pandemic. It has been found that unemployed refugees and student refugees have experienced economic issues coping with present income, and are extremely anxious that COVID-19 will significantly affect their income and employment ^[12].

The COVID19 pandemic has caused massive decline in the economic growth of all EU countries, especially the countries hosting RRs ^[13]. This has caused a change in employment prospects, and a sharp decrease in labor market offers ^[14]. Furthermore, working from home (WFH) has become the new standard for most of the jobs across different disciplines ^[15] ^[16]. As for RRs, WFH has become a major issue. Many of them live in crowded home spaces ^[17] with many family members in most cases. Thus, there is limited space to set up a home office for remote work. Although social communication tools have been improved drastically over the past year, the aforementioned issues have caused massive distress factors to the RRs' lives. In contrast to the findings of recent studies ^[18], RRs have been struggling to find a work-life balance in WFH and to remain productive.

During the COVID19 pandemic, the asylum procedures over the EU have been affected drastically. In total, 87.3% of the respondents in the current study believe that the COVID-19 pandemic has had negative consequences on asylum procedures. Many of the applications have been put on hold for many months ^[19]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the asylum seekers have been left in limbo by the governmental bodies ^[20]^[21].

The social distancing that the pandemic brought to RRs' lives generated serious obstacles to create new networks of contacts, accessing job information and obtaining employment ^[22]. On the one hand, priority was given to the protection of public health, ignoring the need for improving infrastructures and protecting mental health ^[23], intensifying interpreters' (or cultural mediators') contribution to collective accommodation centers ^[24] and protecting jobs during COVID-19 ^[25]. Less attention has been paid to the loss of lifestyle due to decreased physical activity ^[26] and increased likelihood for stress and mental health problems ^[27]^[28]^[29]. Being employed on precarious contracts or unemployed, refugees live in overcrowded camps or houses, with limited chances for social distancing, poor nutrition and sanitation ^[30].

On the other hand, many digital tools have been developed to support RRs to restart their research career. The Science4Refugees (S4R) tool was recently been launched by the Euraxess-EU ^[31]. This tool helps RRs look for places and opportunities at various European universities. Furthermore, the BRIDGE II project has launched a mentoring program that allows RRs to look for mentorship either by finding peer mentors or other types of mentors that can help RRs in their path back into research life ^[32]. Financially, there have been efforts by multiple groups, including the BRIDGE II pilot peer group, to advocate for proper funding mechanisms for refugee scientists. In Germany, multiple funding mechanisms have been established. The Philipp-Schwartz Initiative of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation is one of them. They help RRs, who have a PhD in their pursuit to re-enter academic life by providing more than two years of funding as a post-doctoral researcher. Furthermore, the German Research Foundation (DFG) facilitates DFG-funded researchers to access extra funding for a RR as a PhD candidate. SCIREA and BRIDGE II projects provided funding for internships across Europe before the pandemic, and some online internships have been provided throughout the pandemic.

3. Conclusions

The socioeconomic and health consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have increased RRs' vulnerability, especially those found in asylum procedures. It was observed that RRs were greatly worried about the current health crisis, insecure about health protection and lacked resources to effectively WFH, in particular, through lack of working space and access to IT hardware and software. The decrease of income, the loss of employment and the difficulty with staying productive in working from home are important concerns.

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