Bureaucratic Residence Regimes and the Integration of Syrian Refugee Women in Spain: A Sociological Analysis with Reference to Germany

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Abstract: This article examines how bureaucratic residence regimes shape the integration experiences of Syrian refugee women in Spain, with Germany used as a contextual reference rather than as a fully matched empirical case. Moving beyond dominant integration indicators such as employment, education, and language acquisition, the study argues that legal status and administrative accessibility are constitutive dimensions of integration. The article draws on twenty-six semi-structured interviews with Syrian women residing in Spain and combines these data with an interpretive comparison of the policy and administrative frameworks that structure refugee reception and integration in Spain and Germany. The findings show that residence status is not merely a formal legal category but a lived condition that affects planning, mobility, access to institutions, and emotional security. Interviewees associated bureaucratic complexity with uncertainty, delay, and unequal treatment, and a large majority linked perceived discrimination to bureaucratic settings in Germany. At the same time, interviewees described Spain as relatively more facilitating in terms of residence stability, especially because many had obtained five-year asylum residence permits or had progressed to permanent residence or nationality. The article also highlights the gendered and cultural dimensions of integration, showing how administrative procedures intersect with caregiving responsibilities, language barriers, and differing understandings of family, emotion, and social relations. The study contributes to sociology by conceptualizing bureaucracy as a central mechanism in the production of integration, inequality, and institutional trust. It concludes that integration policy must be understood not only as a matter of social inclusion programming but also as a question of legal architecture and bureaucratic design.

Keywords: Syrian refugees, refugee women, integration, bureaucracy, residence status, Spain, Germany, migration governance.

1. INTRODUCTION

The displacement generated by the Syrian conflict has transformed debates on asylum, reception, and integration across Europe. Since the mid-2010s, European states have been required not only to process protection claims at scale but also to create institutional conditions under which displaced populations can build stable lives. Public and policy discussions often present integration as a matter of labour market access, school enrolment, housing, and language acquisition. These dimensions are undeniably important, yet they do not exhaust what integration means in practice. Refugees first encounter the host state through administrative rules, waiting systems, appointments, documentary demands, and decisions on legal recognition. The bureaucracy of residence is therefore one of the earliest and most consequential sites in which belonging is negotiated.

While existing scholarship has extensively conceptualized refugee integration through domains such as employment, education, and language acquisition, considerably less attention has been paid to the sociological role of bureaucratic regimes as constitutive structures of integration. Legal status is often acknowledged as important, but it is frequently treated as a background condition or a static category rather than as a dynamic process continuously reproduced through administrative interaction. This study addresses that gap by arguing that residence bureaucracy is not simply an administrative layer added to integration after the fact; it is one of the mechanisms through which integration is made possible, delayed, or undermined.

This argument is especially important in the case of refugee women. Syrian refugee women often navigate residence procedures while carrying a disproportionate share of caregiving labour, managing children's schooling, dealing with language barriers, coordinating family life across borders, and responding to expectations around care for older relatives. In such circumstances, the institutional organization of asylum and residence is not a technical issue separate from everyday life. It shapes whether women can attend courses, seek employment, travel, secure housing, access welfare institutions, or imagine a future in the host country. Formal legal rights matter, but their practical value depends on whether administrative systems are intelligible, accessible, and responsive.

The article focuses empirically on Spain and uses Germany as a contextual reference. The two countries are analytically important because they belong to the

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same broader European asylum framework while displaying different administrative styles, integration infrastructures, and public narratives. Germany is frequently described as having a dense and highly structured reception and integration system, including language and orientation programmes administered through the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees. Spain, while receiving less attention in comparative asylum debates, provides an important case of relative residence regularity and everyday administrative facilitation as experienced by Syrian women. Because the empirical interviews in this study were conducted only in Spain, the article does not claim a methodologically symmetrical comparison. Instead, Germany is treated as an institutional reference point reconstructed through participants' comparative accounts and relevant scholarship.

The article makes two principal contributions. First, it contributes to sociological theory by conceptualizing bureaucracy, legal status, and gender as interconnected rather than separate dimensions of refugee integration. Second, it contributes empirically by showing how women themselves interpret residence status as a lived temporal condition that affects planning, trust, and participation. The article asks three interrelated questions: How do bureaucratic procedures influence the integration experiences of Syrian refugee women? In what ways do Spain and Germany differ in the residence regimes and institutional practices that structure those experiences? And how do gendered and cultural dynamics mediate refugees' encounters with bureaucracy?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Integration Beyond Socio-Economic Indicators

A substantial body of scholarship has conceptualized refugee integration as a multidimensional process. Ager and Strang's framework remains one of the most influential models, identifying employment, housing, education, and health as key markers and means of integration while also emphasizing rights, citizenship, safety, and social connections. Their intervention is important because it moves the debate beyond narrow economic indicators and demonstrates that integration is relational, institutional, and legal at the same time. Later work has built on this insight by underlining that integration is not a linear pathway: refugees may advance in one domain while remaining blocked in another, and formal inclusion does not necessarily translate into everyday security.

Yet an important limitation of much integration scholarship is that administrative systems often remain in the background. Rights are recognized, but the bureaucratic mechanisms through which those rights are granted, delayed, translated, or made inaccessible are less frequently analysed as sociological objects in their own right. As a result, research sometimes treats legal status as a stable possession rather than as a condition continuously mediated by procedural demands, documentary proof, renewal schedules, interviews, and discretionary decisions. This study addresses that limitation by foregrounding bureaucracy as part of the architecture through which integration is structured.

2.2. Legal Status, Temporality, and Uncertainty

Legal status occupies a foundational place within migration scholarship. Bloch's work on insecure legal status demonstrates how uncertainty shapes everyday life, restricts mobility, and produces chronic anxiety. Although Bloch focuses on rejected asylum seekers in England, the broader sociological insight is highly relevant to refugee integration more generally: legal insecurity does not merely delay formal incorporation; it alters behaviour, future planning, and relations to institutions. Phillimore similarly argues that integration cannot be reduced to individual effort because institutional conditions strongly structure what refugees are able to do. When policy requires extensive waiting, repeated renewals, or unclear procedural steps, refugees are not simply delayed; they are governed into uncertainty.

This insight is particularly useful for understanding residence permits not only as legal documents but also as temporal devices. The validity period of a permit, the conditions attached to renewal, and the opacity of administrative procedures all shape how individuals imagine the future. A short or uncertain status narrows temporal horizons. A longer and more secure status can widen them, making it more reasonable to invest in employment, education, social ties, and family planning. In this sense, legal status is sociologically important not simply because it confers rights, but because it organizes time, expectation, and agency.

2.3. Bureaucracy as Power, Classification, and Everyday Governance

Migration studies has increasingly emphasized bureaucracy as a site of power. Eule and colleagues show how migrants encounter the state through administrative practices that appear technical but carry

significant moral and political consequences. Street-level bureaucracy theory is especially useful here because it directs attention to frontline officials who exercise discretion within rule-bound settings, translating abstract law into concrete outcomes. Refugees experience this not in jurisprudential abstraction but in queues, interviews, digital portals, file requests, appointment systems, and documentary corrections. Bureaucracy matters not only because it grants or withholds status, but because it categorizes persons, demands intelligibility from them, and compels them to narrate themselves through administrative formats.

From a sociological perspective, bureaucracy is therefore not merely an implementing tool. It is an institutional field in which trust, hierarchy, and inequality are reproduced. Administrative standardization can reduce arbitrariness, but it can also intensify experiences of depersonalization when individual situations do not fit established categories. When refugees experience bureaucratic systems as slow, rigid, or suspicious, they may interpret the state less as a framework of protection than as a hierarchy of surveillance. Such perceptions are important even when they do not establish discrimination in a legal sense, because they shape institutional trust and future engagement.

2.4. Gender, Migration, and Institutional Accessibility

For refugee women, these dynamics intersect with gender. Kofman's work on gendered mobilities and vulnerabilities demonstrates that migration experiences are unevenly structured by care work, family status, and social expectations. Freedman's research likewise underscores that women in displacement contexts face specific risks and constraints that are often underrecognized within formally neutral asylum systems. Administrative regimes may appear gender-neutral while in practice penalizing those whose time, mobility, and institutional confidence are constrained by care responsibilities, social dependence, or limited access to transportation and translation. In this sense, bureaucracy can reproduce inequality even when it is not explicitly discriminatory in legal design.

This argument is sociologically significant because institutional procedures are often built around an implicit model of the applicant as mobile, flexible, linguistically equipped, and administratively confident. That model does not fit all refugees equally. Women caring for children, accompanying relatives to appointments, or coordinating family needs across several institutions may face far greater difficulty in meeting procedural demands that seem minor from the administrative side. Missed appointments, incomplete files, or delayed follow-up can thus reflect gendered structural constraints rather than individual incapacity. A sociology of refugee integration must therefore consider not only what formal rights exist, but who can realistically activate them under the conditions of everyday life.

2.5. Culture, Interpretation, and Social Meaning

The concept of culture also matters, but it should be treated carefully. Cultural difference does not explain integration outcomes on its own, nor should it be used to essentialize either refugees or host societies. Nonetheless, interview data often reveal that refugees themselves interpret their experiences through cultural language, particularly when describing forms of social distance, emotional communication, friendship, family obligation, and elder care. Such perceptions matter sociologically because they shape how migrants understand institutions and evaluate belonging. The present article therefore uses culture not as a fixed explanatory variable but as part of the interpretive vocabulary through which interviewees make sense of bureaucratic and social life.

2.6. Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by an integrated sociological framework combining three key dimensions: bureaucratic governance, legal status, and gender. First, bureaucracy is conceptualized as a system of classification and control that structures access to rights and institutional resources. Administrative procedures do not merely implement policy; they actively produce inclusion and exclusion. Second, legal status is understood as a dynamic and lived condition that shapes temporal horizons, mobility, and institutional trust. It is continuously reproduced through bureaucratic processes rather than existing as a fixed category. Third, gender mediates institutional access, since care responsibilities, dependency relations, and social expectations shape how refugee women engage with administrative systems.

Together, these dimensions allow integration to be analysed as a process in which institutional structures and social inequalities are mutually constitutive. This framework also clarifies the article's theoretical contribution. Rather than treating bureaucracy as a

contextual background and gender as a separate social variable, the study shows how bureaucratic design and gendered life conditions intersect to structure access to legal security, social participation, and feelings of legitimacy. Integration is thus approached as a legally mediated, administratively sequenced, and socially differentiated process.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative design based on semi-structured interviews and comparative policy interpretation. Its empirical core consists of twenty-six interviews with Syrian women residing in Spain. The interviews were used to capture lived experiences of arrival, residence, institutional interaction, social adaptation, and future planning. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to understand not only whether bureaucratic barriers exist, but how they are felt, interpreted, and linked by interviewees to wider processes of integration.

Participants were selected purposively in order to include variation in age, arrival period, and legal status. The sample ranged from 15 to 70 years old. Most participants arrived in Spain between 2018 and 2023. Nineteen participants held asylum-based residence permits valid for five years, one participant held permanent residence, and six had obtained Spanish nationality. This distribution is analytically useful because it allows the article to compare experiences across different stages of legal incorporation. Participants were recruited through community networks, non-governmental organizations, and snowball sampling techniques. This approach facilitated access to a population that may be difficult to reach through formal institutional channels because of legal, linguistic, and social vulnerabilities.

The interview guide explored five areas: migration trajectory, interactions with administrative institutions, residence status and renewal processes, access to work and services, and perceptions of cultural and social adaptation. Interviews were analysed thematically. Recurrent patterns were coded around legal stability, bureaucratic burden, perceived discrimination, social distance, institutional trust, and gendered responsibilities. The coding strategy moved iteratively between empirical themes and the theoretical framework in order to interpret how legal status, bureaucracy, and gender intersected in participants' accounts.

Ethical considerations were central to the research design. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation. Interviews were conducted in a manner intended to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, and identifying details were removed from transcripts and reporting. Given the potential vulnerability of refugee participants, special care was taken to avoid distress, to allow participants to decline questions, and to ensure that participation remained voluntary at every stage. The study does not rely on personal identifiers and reports interview excerpts through anonymized codes.

One additional quantitative indicator supplied within the study materials was incorporated into the analysis: 86.4% of respondents associated the greatest discrimination with German bureaucracy. This figure requires careful interpretation. Because the German side of the article is based primarily on participants' comparative accounts and secondary policy literature rather than a matched field sample interviewed inside Germany, the percentage should be understood as an indicator of perceived institutional discrimination rather than as direct measurement of demonstrable discriminatory practice in Germany. The point is sociologically significant because perceptions of institutional discrimination affect trust, willingness to engage with the state, and the sense of whether formal rights are meaningfully accessible.

This design generates both strengths and limitations. Its strength lies in the depth of the interview material and in the ability to connect legal categories to everyday experience. Its principal limitation is that the empirical interviews were conducted with women in Spain rather than with parallel interview samples in both countries. The article addresses this limitation explicitly by presenting Germany as a contextual and comparative frame built from respondents' references, documented institutional structures, and existing scholarship. The goal is therefore interpretive comparison rather than statistical generalization. This moderation of comparative claims is essential to the analytical integrity of the study.

4. SAMPLE OVERVIEW

The sample composition is analytically meaningful. The predominance of women with five-year asylum residence permits means that the study primarily captures the perspective of refugees who have achieved a significant degree of legal recognition but who may still remain institutionally vulnerable. The smaller group with nationality or permanent residence provides a contrast that makes visible how changes in status transform everyday navigation of the state. The

Table 1: Distribution of Interviewees by Residence Status and Age Range

Characteristic	Category	N	Share
Residence status	Asylum residence (5-year permit)	19	73.1%
Residence status	Spanish nationality	6	23.1%
Residence status	Permanent residence	1	3.8%
Age range	15-70 years	26	100%

sample also captures broad age variation, which is relevant because bureaucratic navigation is often shaped by life stage, educational background, and caregiving responsibility.

5. FINDINGS

The analysis yielded five interrelated findings. First, residence status strongly shaped women's sense of temporal security. Second, bureaucracy functioned as an everyday site of stress, evaluation, and dependence. Third, many participants associated Germany with a more burdensome and discriminatory administrative order, though these claims must be interpreted as perceptions rather than direct observation within Germany. Fourth, cultural difference and gendered family expectations mediated how institutions were experienced. Fifth, progression in legal status altered not only administrative conditions but also feelings of legitimacy and institutional trust.

5.1. Legal Stability and the Temporal Horizon of Integration

The first finding concerns the importance of legal stability. Across interviews, residence status appeared not as an abstract legal label but as a practical resource that structured planning. Women with Spanish nationality or permanent residence described more confidence in making long-term decisions, seeking work, changing cities, investing in training, or imagining a future for their children. By contrast, women holding asylum-based residence permits frequently spoke about paperwork, appointments, renewal anxiety, and the need to remain constantly attentive to legal timelines. Even when the permit period was relatively long, the existence of bureaucratic conditions still produced a sense that stability depended on administrative compliance rather than on a settled social place.

This finding is important because it shows that legal recognition does not eliminate uncertainty. A five-year permit may be comparatively secure, yet participants still described the psychological burden of knowing that formal continuity remains administratively mediated. Some women spoke less about the rights attached to status than about the felt difference between being able to plan and being forced to wait. Legal status therefore shaped the rhythm of everyday life. Stable status widened the temporal horizon of integration; uncertain or contingent status narrowed it.

5.2. Bureaucracy as Lived Experience

The second finding concerns bureaucracy as lived experience. Participants described bureaucratic navigation as time-consuming, emotionally draining, and often opaque. Administrative encounters were not experienced simply as neutral state procedures. They were moments in which women had to prove legitimacy, understand unfamiliar terminology, manage deadlines, and depend on institutional responsiveness that they did not always find predictable. Several women linked these experiences to an atmosphere of vulnerability: missing a document, misunderstanding an appointment, or being unable to communicate effectively could have consequences that felt disproportionate to the mistake.

These accounts suggest that bureaucracy affects integration not only through formal outcomes but also through affective experience. Anxiety, uncertainty, and procedural opacity consumed time and energy that might otherwise have been invested in work, study, social participation, or family life. In this sense, bureaucracy was not external to integration; it was one of the domains through which integration was experienced. The empirical material repeatedly demonstrates that institutional accessibility matters as much as institutional existence.

5.3. Perceived Institutional Differences between Spain and Germany

The third finding is the perceived contrast between Spain and Germany. According to the result provided in

the study, 86.4% of respondents associated the greatest discrimination with German bureaucracy. Participants explained this not only in terms of interpersonal hostility but in terms of administrative categorization. In their view, large bureaucracies sort people through language proficiency, nationality, ethnicity, disability status, family composition, and documentary completeness. Standardization may serve consistency, but for interviewees it also created the sense that a person could be reduced to a file category and treated unequally through procedural rigidity.

This finding should be presented cautiously. It does not prove legal discrimination in a narrow juridical sense, and the study does not provide a direct German interview sample. What it captures is perceived institutional discrimination as reported by participants and linked to the way large administrations process difference. Sociologically, such perceptions are highly significant. They shape whether refugees expect help or suspicion, clarity or obstruction, and inclusion or distance when they encounter the state.

Spain, by contrast, was often described as relatively more facilitating in relation to residence stability. This did not mean that Spain was represented as free of barriers. Participants still referred to bureaucratic slowness, labour market obstacles, and social distance. Nevertheless, many women experienced legal continuity in Spain as more manageable, particularly because a substantial proportion had obtained five-year asylum residence permits and some had progressed to permanent residence or nationality. The practical significance of this contrast lies less in idealizing Spain than in showing how administrative style affects the lived meaning of legal status.

5.4. Gender, Care Work, and Administrative Accessibility

The fourth finding concerns the gendered character of bureaucratic experience. Administrative systems often presume that applicants can travel easily, wait, gather documents, interpret forms, and attend appointments with flexibility. These assumptions fit poorly with the realities of many women in the sample, especially those caring for children, coordinating schooling, accompanying relatives, or depending on others for transport and translation. What appears procedurally neutral can therefore become substantively unequal.

Participants' narratives suggest that care work shaped not only time use but also institutional legibility. A missed appointment or incomplete file could be read administratively as individual irresponsibility, while from the participant's perspective it might reflect competing obligations, mobility constraints, or limited access to information. This finding strengthens the article's claim that gender should not be treated as a secondary identity variable added to migration after the fact. Rather, gender is one of the mechanisms through which institutional requirements become unevenly experienced.

5.5. Cultural Interpretation and Social Distance

The fifth finding concerns the cultural framing of integration. One participant summarized this contrast forcefully: "Our culture differ [sic] from 1 to 1000, because it is as simple as that: We come from a high context culture, we care a lot about feeling, but in contrast they don't, besides the bureaucracy here is so slow, in addition they are very careful when picking friends, a great deal of seniors are at the shelters while in our culture, it is impossible to send away your elderly parents in a senior housing" (I10). The quotation is analytically significant because it combines several dimensions at once: emotional communication, social distance, elder care, and bureaucratic tempo. It shows that refugees do not separate administrative adaptation from moral and social comparison.

These interpretations should not be read as objective descriptions of national cultures. Their importance lies in showing how participants make sense of institutional life through broader understandings of reciprocity, community, and family obligation. Bureaucracy is therefore interpreted not in a cultural vacuum but through moral expectations about care and sociality. For some women, this intensified a sense of alienation from administrative systems that were already experienced as slow or difficult to navigate.

5.6. Age, life course, and differentiated integration

Age also mattered. Younger participants were often better positioned to learn the language, enter school or training environments, and form peer networks outside the family. Older participants more often described bureaucratic navigation as exhausting and culturally disorienting. The sample therefore suggests that legal status, age, and care responsibility interact in shaping integration. Integration is not one process that all

refugees experience equally; it is filtered through life stage, family obligation, and institutional legibility.

5.7. Progression in Status and Institutional Trust

A final empirical theme concerns movement from asylum residence to permanent residence or nationality. Women who had reached these statuses described a change not only in administrative ease but also in how they understood themselves in relation to the state. Permanent residence and citizenship were associated with reduced procedural fear, greater autonomy, and a stronger sense of legitimate presence. This suggests that legal progression does not merely reward successful integration; it can also help produce it by stabilizing identity, widening planning horizons, and fostering trust in institutions.

6. DISCUSSION

The findings support the article's central argument that residence bureaucracy is constitutive of integration rather than supplementary to it. A common assumption in policy discourse is that integration begins after status is granted. The interview material suggests the opposite: integration begins inside the status process itself. The quality of administrative interaction influences whether refugees can imagine continuity, trust institutions, and allocate energy to social and economic participation. Where bureaucracy is experienced as slow, rigid, or selectively suspicious, it narrows refugees' temporal horizon. When residence is more stable and procedures are more navigable, that horizon expands.

This point is especially clear when read through the Ager and Strang framework. Employment, education, health, and housing are often described as integration domains, but each depends on underlying legal and procedural infrastructures. Without stable documentation, it is harder to sign contracts, enrol in programmes, access services, or move between institutional spaces with confidence. The present study therefore reinforces the view that rights and citizenship are not background conditions; they are among the central means through which all other integration domains become practicable.

The article also contributes to sociological theory by demonstrating that institutional trust is not merely an outcome of integration but a precondition for it. When bureaucratic systems are experienced as opaque or discriminatory, they undermine refugees' willingness to engage with formal institutions and intensify reliance on informal mediators. Such dynamics can reproduce exclusion even in states that formally provide robust rights. Perceptions matter here. The study does not claim that participants' comparative accounts amount to legal proof of discrimination in Germany. Rather, it shows that perceived discrimination has real sociological effects because trust in institutions depends not only on formal rules but also on how administrative systems are encountered in practice.

The Spain-Germany comparison further suggests that integration cannot be evaluated solely by the formal generosity or comprehensiveness of policy programmes. Germany is internationally associated with a robust integration architecture, including official integration courses and vocational language programming. That infrastructure is real and significant. At the same time, the interview material shows that dense administrative systems may be experienced as overbearing, classificatory, and difficult to navigate, especially by women who carry family care burdens. A highly organized system can still generate exclusion if its procedural form creates stress, delay, or a sense of suspicion. Conversely, Spain may offer fewer celebrated integration instruments while still being experienced as more facilitating when residence pathways feel more stable and bureaucratic access is more manageable.

This does not mean that Spain should be romanticized. Participants still described bureaucratic slowness, labour market difficulty, and social distance. The argument is comparative and relational: legal continuity and relative administrative facilitation matter enormously, even in settings where economic integration remains incomplete. Economic precarity and bureaucratic obstruction are related but not identical forms of exclusion. This distinction helps refine sociological approaches to integration by showing that institutional accessibility is itself a dimension of social inclusion.

The findings also strengthen gendered migration studies by showing how administrative regimes intersect with care work. Bureaucratic procedures often assume an applicant who can appear flexibly, wait without cost, assemble documents quickly, and interpret formal communication independently. These assumptions fit poorly with the realities of women caring for children, coordinating schooling, supporting elderly relatives, or depending on others for transport and translation. When bureaucratic systems fail to account for these conditions, formally neutral

procedures become substantively unequal. A missed appointment or incomplete file is then not simply an individual failure; it may reflect the gendered distribution of time, labour, and responsibility.

The cultural material deepens this interpretation. Participants evaluated bureaucracy through moral expectations about respect, care, and family obligation. Whether or not one agrees with each characterization, these narratives reveal that integration also involves moral translation. Refugees do not encounter institutions as culturally empty structures. They interpret administrative life through prior understandings of reciprocity, emotion, and social duty. Policies that ignore this interpretive layer risk misunderstanding why some institutional settings feel alienating even when they are procedurally standard.

Taken together, the findings advance an understanding of integration as a legally mediated and institutionally structured process. They also indicate that long-term legal progression should be viewed not only as an endpoint of successful integration but as one of the mechanisms through which deeper integration becomes possible. Stable status enlarges the space of action; unstable or burdensome status contracts it. In this sense, residence regimes shape not only the legal condition of refugees but also the social conditions under which belonging can be built.

7. CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the integration of Syrian refugee women in Europe cannot be understood adequately without close attention to residence status bureaucracy. Drawing on twenty-six interviews with Syrian women in Spain and a contextual reading of German and Spanish integration regimes, it has shown that bureaucracy is not a neutral background mechanism. It structures time, mobility, trust, and possibility. Refugee integration begins in administrative encounters long before it becomes visible in labour market outcomes or public indicators of participation.

The study makes four main contributions. First, it shows that legal stability is a key precondition for integration. Women who held nationality or permanent residence described greater security, stronger planning capacity, and fewer institutional barriers. Second, it demonstrates that bureaucracy is itself a lived domain of integration. Delays, documentary demands, and opaque procedures affect social and emotional life as much as they affect formal status. Third, it highlights the comparative significance of administrative style. Germany's extensive institutional infrastructure can coexist with refugee perceptions of procedural burden and discrimination, while Spain's comparatively more facilitating residence pathways can generate a greater sense of practical stability despite ongoing socioeconomic challenges. Fourth, it shows that gender and culture shape the experience of administration. Care responsibilities, social norms, and moral expectations about family and emotional life all affect how bureaucracy is navigated and interpreted.

These findings have several implications. For sociology, they suggest that bureaucracy should be repositioned as a central analytical category in the study of migration and integration. For policy, they indicate that administrative accessibility matters as much as programme provision. Clearer communication, interpretation support, simplified renewal systems, appointment flexibility, and bureaucratic procedures designed with care responsibilities in mind would likely improve integration more than policy debates often acknowledge. Legal progression should also be treated as an integration tool rather than as a distant reward after successful integration has already occurred.

The article also points toward future research. Parallel interview samples in both Spain and Germany would allow researchers to test more precisely how refugees describe direct institutional encounters across national settings. Further work could explore differences by age, marital status, class background, and urban versus rural reception contexts. More attention is also needed to how digitalization changes accessibility, particularly for women whose time, mobility, or technological confidence may be constrained. Despite its limitations, the study offers a clear conclusion: if integration is to be meaningful, it must include institutional forms that recognize refugees as social actors rather than merely as cases to be processed. A humane and effective migration regime is therefore not only one that protects, but one that organizes protection in ways that are legible, stable, and livable.

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