

What is the difference between a migrant, asylum seeker and refugee?

These words have legal definitions. They are also connected to politics.

According to the dictionary, a migrant is someone who has moved from one country to another voluntarily for economic, political or cultural reasons. It implies free choice. However, the term is so general, it does not adequately explain all the motivations for why the individual has moved. During the present crisis, it has increasingly had a pejorative meaning and can easily dehumanise the individual person.

According to the [Geneva Convention](#), a refugee is *“someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.”*

All refugees are migrants but not all migrants are refugees.

An asylum seeker is someone asking permission to be given the legal status of refugee and thus being allowed to stay in a certain territory. The decision process varies from country to country in Europe and can take from many months to several years to complete.

An undocumented asylum seeker is someone who has not yet registered for asylum or whose asylum process has ended. This is common among displaced people who are trying to reach a destination where they can reunite with family/friends or find a language they speak. It is also increasingly common because governments are beginning to reject asylum seekers on mass, despite knowing it is unsafe to return these people home. So they become undocumented, in limbo, and incredibly vulnerable to exploitation.

At times of war and humanitarian crisis, the UNHCR states that migrants should generally be considered to be refugees. This means that, for example, most Syrians would surely therefore count as refugees.

Refugees have legal rights. Once someone gains the status of refugee, then a country has a duty to allow them to remain.

EEA and the Refugee Campaign tend to use the term “refugee”, not because all the individuals have gained this status, nor because we dismiss the idea that, among the crowds, there are economic migrants. We have chosen generally to use this term because we would rather communicate in a way that errs on the side of grace than of refusal to want to help.