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Professionals' key knowledge, competences and practices to promote social inclusion of refugees

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ABSTRACT

Europe witnessed a mass influx of refugees in the last few years, challenging its capability to deal with this humanitarian crisis and calling upon the efforts of all professionals who work with/for refugees, to intervene under a demanding situation. This paper presents the results of four focus groups implemented in Portugal with professionals who work with/for refugees and refugees themselves, developed within two European projects: Advenus and ReGap. The focus groups aimed at understanding the participants' perceptions about key knowledge, competences and practices to work towards refugees' social inclusion. Thematic analysis was applied and the results of the Advenus and ReGap focus groups combined, allowed to identify three main themes: i. Fit the context and meet the needs with a multidisciplinary, pragmatic, and flexible approach; ii. Will to make the change through activism and advocacy; and iii. Embrace diversity by developing empathy, cultural and gender sensitivity and sense of belonging. These main themes promote a reflection about the key knowledge, competences and practices of professionals who work with/for refugees.

Introduction

Europe witnessed in the last few years (mainly in 2015 and 2016) a mass influx of refugees,[1] forcibly displaced due to a combination of political, social, economic and environmental factors. The overwhelming number of 65.6 million people were forced to leave their countries of origin in 2016, 300 thousand more than in 2015 (ACNUR 2017). Since then, thousands of refugees have required for asylum in Europe, challenging its capability to deal with this humanitarian crisis and of its different countries to be host societies at some level. In 2017, the European Union (EU) member states granted protection to 538,000 asylum seekers and received nearly 24,000 resettled refugees (Eurostat 2018; Juchno and Agafitei 2017). Most European countries have agreed to be host societies. Nevertheless, resistance has also emerged from right wing political parties, openly opposing to refugees' settlement in Europe (Freitas et al. 2018). The Portuguese

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government, in 2016, assumed a positive stand, willing to integrate up to 10,000 refugees (Costa and Sousa 2017). This commitment, though, challenged the social structures and the preparation of professionals who work with/for refugees to contribute effectively for their social inclusion.

Guidelines for professionals working with/for refugees

The field of educative, social and community work with refugees involves professionals from diverse areas of knowledge such as social work, psychology, education, sociology, socio-cultural animation, health and law. This interdisciplinary and multi-professional approach combines different expertise's in order to better respond to the target population issues and needs. Regardless of each professionals' specific field of intervention, the work undertaken with refugees towards their social inclusion is developing into a new field of practice, with increasing problematics and demands, requiring specialised knowledge, competences and practices (Nash, Wong, and Trlin 2006). A growing body of research contributes to the definition of major guidelines and competences for professionals who work with/for refugees, highlighting the holistic/ecological approach to intervention, the use of political advocacy, and the cultural and gender sensitivity stance (Al-Makhamreh, Spaneas, and Neocleous 2012; Fike and Androff 2016; George 2012; Khawaja and Stein 2016; Kuo and Arcuri 2014; Okitikpi and Aymer 2003; Russell and White 2002; Wright, 2014). According to these major guidelines, it is important to be actively involved in the development of inclusive societies and in the implementation of social responses committed to social justice principles (Asgary 2016 ; IFSW 2016; Slonim-Nevo and Lavie-Ajayi 2017). Research also suggests that the commitment to social justice, when working with refugees, implies to go beyond the boundaries of intervention, innovate and expand professionals' functions and competences, particularly for advocacy in defence of their rights (Al-Makhamreh, Spaneas, and Neocleous 2012; Asgary 2016; Levine 2001; Nash, Wong, and Trlin 2006). This means that they may seek to challenge the structures that maintain harmful conditions for the people they work with/for, transform the established policies and practices that jeopardise individual well-being, promote empowerment, civic and political participation, equity of opportunities and individual and collective well-being (Goodman et al. 2004).

Research has shown the interconnected influence of the several social systems for refugees' well-being and health: education, employment, law, health, social welfare (Asgary 2016). The difficulties that refugees face in the access to all these systems require, thus, wider, holistic and comprehensive multicultural and community practices to foster effective work, challenging traditional intervention approaches with individualistic focus (Al-Makhamreh, Spaneas, and Neocleous 2012). Research also emphasises the importance of implementing culturally sensitive interventions when working with culturally diverse groups, mostly with people in particularly vulnerable situations (as refugees). To be culturally sensitive means being 'interested in other cultures, sensitive enough to notice cultural differences, and then also be willing to modify their behaviour as an indication of respect for people of other cultures' (Bhawuk and Brislin 1992, 416). Therefore, professionals additionally need to develop specific skills in this field (Al-Makhamreh, Spaneas, and Neocleous 2012; Asgary 2016; Fike and Androff 2016; George 2012; Khawaja and Stein 2016; Lechner 2007; Santinho 2011, 2013; Russell and White 2002). Specific training should be provided to professionals in order to promote cognitive

intercultural awareness and knowledge and affective intercultural sensitivity that may result in behavioural intercultural competence, i.e. in the adoption of better practices on the interventions with this specific population (Whaley 2008).

When working with multicultural populations it is also of foremost importance to contemplate gender sensitivity within cultural diversity, considering the meaning and interpretation of gender (Al-Makhamreh, Spaneas, and Neocleous 2012). This means to recognise and be aware of how gender interacts with cultural and socio-political factors and may act as a barrier to education, influence pay and occupation, promote inequalities in social roles, rights, health, and justice (West and Zimmerman 1987). Considering the above mentioned, it is important to note that being culturally and gender sensitive can be a difficult challenge (or even an incompatible task) for some professionals who work with/for refugees with different cultural and even religious backgrounds.

Professionals in European countries, including Portugal, are challenged every day to reinforce their role to minimise risks and respond properly to refugees' needs, to defend their rights and promote a sense of social belonging. A group of Portuguese non-governmental organisations published a set of recommendations for the hosting and inclusion process and for professionals who develop work with/for refugees. These recommendations include: (a) the adoption of a human rights approach opposed to a purely paternalistic approach; (b) the creation of a triage centre with qualified human resources; (c) the implementation of mandatory training for all decentralised institutions, carried by specialised institutions; (d) the provision of training for intercultural mediators[2]; and (e) to ensure proactive communication strategies in all targeted public institutions to counter prevailing stereotypes (Amnistia Internacional et al. 2015). All together, these recommendations suggest the need to guarantee the expansion of Portuguese professionals' knowledge, competences and practices to better respond to the refugees' specific needs and in order to promote their effective inclusion in the host society.

These challenges are the focus of this paper: What knowledge, competences and practices are important to promote refugee's social inclusion? Looking to answer this question, this paper presents the results of an exploratory study that triangulates data collected through focus groups (FG) with refugees and with professionals, regarding their views on the knowledge, competences and practices needed to implement an intervention that effectively promotes refugees' social inclusion. The FG were developed, in Portugal, within two European research projects: Advenus and ReGap. The Advenus[3] project (2016–2017) aimed to improve and extend the offer of high quality, culturally sensitive open access e-learning resources to adult refugees between 18 and 40 years of age and their trainers and teachers in EU countries. The ReGap[4] project (2017–2019) gave continuity to the Advenus legacy, aiming to reduce the educational gap for migrants and refugees in EU countries with highly relevant blended learning resources, offering strong social belonging and adopting a focus on gender sensitiveness and social belonging.

Method

Building bridges between the evidence announced concerning the professionals' continuous development to promote refugees' social inclusion and the Portuguese context, this paper presents a qualitative and exploratory study that combines data from the two research projects Advenus and ReGap, aiming to identify the knowledge, competences

and practices needed by professionals who work with/for refugees in order to promote social inclusion. This emerged in the scene of the influx of refugees in Europe and, more specifically, it reflects the Portuguese national questioning about the effective capacity to promote a sustained social inclusion of refugees. The projects that create *corpus* for this study correspond to the demands of Craig and Lovel (2005) for careful, ethical and evidence-based work with refugees; for the promotion of refugees' active participation in the research activities that concern them; and for the definition of guidelines to intervene and develop research with refugees.

Data collection

Data was collected through FG sessions, following a set of topics and questions that supported the group discussions and that required participants to reflect on their experiences of working with/for adult refugees, in the case of professionals, and in the case of refugees to reflect on their experiences of involvement in activities of inclusion such as in education and training.

The FG topics were mostly centred on cultural sensitivity issues in Advenus, while in ReGap, built upon the previous findings, the topics were focused on the role of the professionals in developing inclusion activities and their contributions towards promoting a sense of social belonging, and sensitivity towards cultural and gender issues.

An open atmosphere was pursued during the FG sessions, trying to make all participants feel at ease and valued when sharing their experiences, expressing opinions and feelings. This process found some limitations, challenging the researchers and participants' communication and the interaction between participants, due to the different language domains between refugee participants and researchers (e.g. one FG was implemented in Portuguese, English and French, simultaneously). In order to overcome this limitation, translation during the FG sessions was done by the researchers, which affected the time of the session. The sessions had two or three moderators, guaranteeing an equitable participation of all participants.

Participants

A total of four FG was developed, two within each research project: one FG with adult refugees, and one FG with professionals who work with/for refugees.

In Advenus, FG sessions had a total of nine participants. The first FG (FG1) was with professionals and had five participants, of whom three women and two men, assuming diverse professional roles (e.g. social worker, jurist, teacher and project technician) and with one to twenty years of experience working with/for refugees. The second FG (FG2) was with refugees had four participants, all from different nationalities (Russia, Cuba, Myanmar, and Eritrea), who had been in Portugal for one year or more and with a good domain of the Portuguese language, of whom three were women and one a man, with diverse educational and professional backgrounds.

In ReGap, FG sessions had 14 participants in total. The first FG (FG3) was with professionals and had four participants assuming diverse professional roles (e.g. language teacher, jurist, intern and social worker). The second FG (FG4) was with refugees and had 10 participants who had recently arrived in Portugal, settled for less than one year,

from five different nationalities (Democratic Republic of Congo, Ukraine, Cameroon, Romania, Zimbabwe), of whom five were women and five men.

Data analysis

FG were audio recorded and transcribed. The analysis was performed using thematic analysis, looking to identify and describe themes and their interrelations (Braun and Clarke 2006) that can contribute to the definition of key knowledge, competences and practices for working with/for refugees.

Ethical issues were assured in this study. All participants were informed about the study purposes and the data collection process and signed an informed consent form for their participation. Confidentiality and anonymity of the participants was guaranteed through the anonymity of the data collected. In the transcription, a code was given to each participant: Professionals were identified and will be mentioned with the code PG (Professionals Group), adding a number to the participant (e.g. P1) and the reference to the specific FG; and Refugees were identified with the code RG (Refugees Group), adding also a number (e.g. P1) and the reference to the particular FG (e.g. PG_P1_FG1).

Results

This section presents the results of the thematic analysis that combines the data of the FG developed within the research projects Advenus and ReGap. Three main themes were identified as result of the combined analysis: (i) Fit the context and meet the needs with a multidisciplinary, pragmatic, and flexible approach; (ii) Will to make the change through activism and advocacy; and (iii) Embrace diversity by developing empathy, cultural and gender sensitivity and sense of belonging.

I. Fit the context and meet the needs with a multidisciplinary, pragmatic, and flexible approach

The group of professionals who work with refugee is multidisciplinary, integrating professionals from areas such as education, law, social work, language learning or art, which highlights the diversity of competences put to work for the effective inclusion of refugees in the host society. This wide range of competences in this field of intervention, that may be defined as a collective competence, is emphasised in professionals' discourses when they refer to the importance of adopting a holistic approach in intervention. They value this collective competence and see it as essential in this field. In addition, in a more individual perspective, professionals recognise some common demands: having high levels of flexibility and the ability to go beyond their specific domain of intervention, to perform multiple tasks and to adapt strategies for intervention to meet the diversity of refugees' needs, as well as being creative and patient in simplifying and adapting learning resources and approaches.

> I do a little bit of everything, I speak with technicians of the municipal councils, I speak with applicants and beneficiaries of protection, I have been arranging houses, I have been dragging furniture … (PG_P5_ FG1)

More than simplifying the language, as jurists what we can do is to always be open to explain [the law], one, two, three, four times, as many times as necessary. (…) I can explain 1000 times, all that matters is that in the end the person understands the rights, the duties, and above all, the law of this new country, and what it allows or doesn't allow to do. In what concerns refugees, the law is protective here. Protective of rights, freedoms, guarantees, and it is on their side, not against them. (PG_P7_FG3)

Language is much more than just language or vocabulary. (…) a trip to a museum, a festival (in which we can work the issue of music) (…) there is a concern to speak Portuguese, to have interaction, to help each other, to learn the language, because communication is always in Portuguese (…) and after we have the evaluation of the activity and also the sharing of this activity, because some people could not attend. (PG_P6_FG3)

II. Will to make the change through activism and advocacy

All professionals referred that their motivation to do this work results from a combination of personal and professional interests. All shared both, awareness about the value and perceived impact of their work on refugees' lives, and a will to contribute to social justice.

(…) it has to do with my professional career, but obviously also with the desire and the will to be able to exert some change (…) (PG_P1_FG1).

I felt the need to make a stronger public intervention about asylum and refugees in Europe and about the role of the EU in the process and I thought it was a good opportunity to stop to be just talking and start working hard on it. (PG_P5_FG1)

Therefore, activism emerged as a reason for professionals to get and stay involved in this field of work. This sense of activism implicates advocacy actions as a way of implementing and fulfilling a political role, by defending human rights, sensitising key actors for non-discrimination, or advocating for policies that effectively meet the refugees' needs.

(…) I can say that I think my life as an activist was fundamental to do this work, to do this work better. (PG_P4_FG1)

All of us, as humanitarian workers, have the role of changing the laws (…) to show that many times the policies implemented are not meeting the needs encountered. (PG_P2_FG1)

The refugee participants also value professionals' activism, particularly recognising their immersion in the work, persistence and engagement in guaranteeing refugees' rights.

Thanks to teacher P1, we managed to do many things, she fought, she fought, she fought with us, she did everything, she did everything possible. (RG_P4_FG2)

They recognise professionals' activism as a joint commitment that simultaneously has a positive effect on the work relationship between them and on refugees' personal feelings to overcome fear.

It seems that we are always trying to build, trying to reach some goal all together and this way the fear goes extinct little by little. (RG_P1_FG2)

Both professionals and refugees recognise that intervention in this field requires intense personal involvement, availability, sensitivity, commitment and concern with the 'other'.

I think that if we understand activism as something very broad (…) the work [developed in the organization] is an activist job, let's say, it's not a job that we can be here seven hours a

day and goodbye, we go home and we don't think about it anymore. (…) It really has a vocational part too, maybe the word is not activism, but it is vocation. (PG_P4_FG1)

The role of teacher P1 is much more than that [teaching Portuguese] (…) She can see it in our face. [She asks] "Do you have any problem? Tell me". (…) So, you open yourself to her. And she's not only listening, she brings the help that is needed. (…) she has immense patience for us, and she teaches us a lot of things. We have built a friendship, and everyone says she's our Portuguese mother. (RG_P3_FG2)

III. Embrace diversity by developing empathy, cultural and gender sensitivity and sense of belonging

The ability to build quality relationships between professionals and refugees is a key competence frequently mentioned in the FG sessions by all participants. Most professionals emphasised the importance of having empathy, the ability to put oneself in the place of the other, or to have 'mental and affective agility' and 'emotional intelligence'.

I think we all have a great empathy (…) the capacity to stand in someone's shoes. How would I feel if I was in that situation? (PG_P3_FG1)

Refugees also emphasised the value of professionals' ability to have empathy and sensitivity as characteristics that contribute to generating trustworthy relationships that promote feelings of belonging. Recognising that this requires considerable emotional investment from both – professionals need to invest in building trust while working with refugees, recognising that refugees when arriving in the host country tend not to trust anyone.

She's [teacher P1] worried about everyone, it's not just about me (…). To her, we are all human. We feel that. She treats everyone the same way. I feel safer with her and I talk more easily. I do not talk to anyone else, but I talk to her, at ease. She is a fantastic person. (RG_P3_FG2).

Intervention contexts that involve close and regular contact between professionals and refugees (e.g. language classes, art projects), were mentioned by professionals as contexts that tend to favour the development of relationships of trust and mutual respect. These constitute privileged spaces for sharing, growth and learning, but simultaneously challenging in dealing with the frustration of not being able to always meet refugees' needs and integrate their opinions and choices.

I think that here, in the social department, we are obliged to have the necessary capacity to distance ourselves from the person and that on one hand we are understanding and putting ourselves in the place of the other, but on the other hand we cannot be affected in our personal lives with the story they are telling us. (PG_P4_FG1)

Building feelings of trust and social belonging is a slow process, affected by the bureaucratical requirements, and sometimes colliding with pressing survival needs, in particular at the moment of arrival.

Refugees no longer belong to their country, or in some way they feel as if they lost it, but they still don't feel that they belong in this country. And it won't happen overnight, just because they know how to go to the city centre or know how to go to social security, or even when they start working. This feeling of belonging requires a lot of trust, it takes a long, long time to create these ties. (PG_ P6_FG3)

Professionals identified behaviours that should be avoided, such as having a condescending and/or a victimising attitude towards the refugees. Additionally, they recognised as important to take a constructive stance in their work, informing the refugee about all their options and respective consequences, accepting and respecting the other person's decisions. Refugees' also underlined their feelings of trust towards professionals when recognising their activist role.

> In the end, the decision will always be theirs. (…) there has to be almost a parity and treat the person as a person, as an adult who knows what he/she is doing. (PG_P3_FG1)

> At the beginning I was very afraid to talk to people (…) but when you find people like the ones in this organization, who are with you and it seems that they are on the same team, they are there to fight for the same thing (…) it seems that the fear turns into courage. (RG_P1_FG2)

It was also deemed important by the professionals to transmit refugees the confidence in the host country's services and laws, by showing them that these were created to protect and integrate them. However, professionals also shared feeling overwhelmed with the big amount of people who had arrived and with whom they had to work, feeling at times unprepared to deal with this demanding situation.

> I think we are a really welcoming country. I think we have a society concerned, and highly available to understand integration, religious differences … But we are not prepared, our services are not prepared to receive the volume of asylum seekers that we had. We have very complex services, very bureaucratic and time consuming, and we have no answers to give to people who come with pressing needs. (PG_P9_FG3)

The analysis also allowed identifying respect and interest for diversity and the sensitive adaptability to a different culture, as key competences for professionals. Cultural diversity may constitute the first aspect to consider in the social inclusion process, because both refugees and professionals are challenged to have the capacity to understand, accept and adapt to diverse cultural backgrounds. Learning the language and to know the history and culture of the host country was identified by most refugees as essential for effective social inclusion and sense of belonging. Refugee participants shared some of the experiences they considered most effective in promoting a sense of belonging. For instance, activities that require contact and full immersion in the host society culture, such as field-trip visits to different cities, were described as a major contribution to gain cultural, geographical and language knowledge, to create communication opportunities and facilitate contact with people outside the support organisation. This kind of initiatives allowed everyone involved to make new friends, contributing positively to refugees' social inclusion.

> The tour we did through the whole country, from city to city, to know the country, to know the history of the country, to visit all sides, helps in the integration, communication, to make friends and to meet other people. (RG_P4_FG2)

In the FG held with professionals, cultural sensitivity emerged in the unanimous statements of participants striving to stand free of stereotypes and prejudices about refugees and their cultural backgrounds; and to be understanding, sensitive and interested in refugees' experience and wisdom. Cultural diversity was also understood as a factor that brings motivation to work in this field, presenting constant challenges to professionals' ability to learn from them.

(…) first the respect and then the will and the interest in knowing the other, in being open to the other, in perceiving the side of the other in some way. (PG_P1_FG1).

I think this is what is extraordinary about this team (…) we can all put ourselves in that person's place and take off a little bit the idea that 'I am European and this is what I take for granted', we can understand the perspective of someone coming from Mali, who comes from Pakistan, from other countries. (PG_P3_FG1).

Regarding cultural sensitivity, professionals mentioned that it is important to demonstrate to a culturally diverse population such as refugees that, in general, Portugal is a welcoming host country, respecting inclusion of culturally diverse people. Nevertheless, it is also necessary to convey the information that, in spite of all the efforts, they may experience some situations of discrimination or limitation of services, some also lived by host country citizens. Furthermore, refugees must be informed of their rights and incentivised to negotiate and balance rights and duties (e.g. the right to pause to pray during working hours).

There is a time when it is not a matter of being a refugee or a migrant, it is a problem of the system itself. There are difficulties that the Portuguese also face. (…) This is also part of the social belonging feeling. (PG_ P7_FG3)

I agree that it is very important to have religious freedom, but I also believe that people can't close themselves inside their religious communities because otherwise they will not have a job, and if there is no job how will they integrate? (…) This integration is bidirectional; it has to be on both sides. (PG_ P6_FG3)

Professionals' requirements to have sensitivity regarding gender in refugees' diverse cultures was highlighted as a key aspect. It was stressed that it is crucial to address gender equity without disregard of cultural beliefs and diversity. Activities such as language learning classes and courses about employment were mentioned as a good starting point to address gender roles and rights in the host country.

Once, we were rehearsing for a job interview with a refugee and he never looked us in the eyes, he always looked at the ground, because in his country it was considered disrespectful to look at someone, higher in the hierarchy, eye to eye. Our work is to prepare them for interviews while giving them confidence and to pass them on our social codes. (PG_P8_FG3)

When we talk about professions, we use images that reflect aspects that are very important to us! First of all, non-discriminatory, and also the gender issue. (…) We are very concerned about having a great diversity in the images; there is this concern, to try to deconstruct from the beginning some ideas that one might have. (PG_ P6_FG3)

Discussion and conclusions

This research provides evidence of key dimensions – knowledge, competences and practices – of educational, social and community intervention for refugees' social inclusion in the Portuguese context.

The evidence draws from the three main themes identified in the data analysis – (i) Fit the context and meet the needs with a multidisciplinary, pragmatic, and flexible approach; (ii) Will to make the change through activism and advocacy; and iii. Embrace diversity by developing empathy, cultural and gender sensitivity and sense of belonging – and finds echo in the international research about intervention with multicultural populations in diverse settings. It indicates major guidelines and competences for intervention with

refugees, underlining a holistic/ecological approach to intervention, the use of political advocacy, and a cultural and gender sensitivity stance (Al-Makhamreh, Spaneas, and Neocleous 2012; Khawaja and Stein 2016; Kuo and Arcuri 2014; Russell and White 2002). The global increase of refugees' influx has brought into the organisations, institutions and all its professionals, the pressure to develop new practices and learn at a fast pace. To better understand how professionals and refugees are dealing with these challenges it becomes crucial to share their perspectives, to call on them to talk about their own experiences, needs and proposals for the future.

The multidisciplinary nature of the work with refugees is evident on the study participants' narratives and was identified as a keystone to develop intervention successfully. Regarding the knowledge and competences needed by professionals to work in this field, flexibility to adapt to the target population and their needs, was emphasised by all groups, which highlights cultural sensitivity as essential in intervention with culturally diverse people (Bhawuk and Brislin 1992). This adaptation and sensitivity emerged from the discussions as well as the need for professionals' permanent self-analysis and self-reflection about the intervention, conscious of the need to adjust their behaviour 'as an indication of respect for people of other cultures' (Bhawuk and Brislin 1992, 416) and to foster holistic and community practices (Al-Makhamreh, Spaneas, and Neocleous 2012). Professionals seek to be free from stereotypes and prejudices regarding refugees and its cultural background, assuming a tolerant, empathic and sensitive attitude, reflecting and demonstrating their sincere interest in the experience and wisdom of their target population and respect for their choices.

Regarding the motivations to develop this work, results allowed to identify four main motives, which are embodied in concrete practices. First, the professionals relate their involvement with this work with a personal and professional interest in learning more deeply about issues of asylum and refugees' integration, and using that knowledge to contribute to positive changes in their life, promote social justice and gain new knowledge, competences and skills (Asgary 2016; IFSW 2016; Slonim-Nevo and Lavie-Ajayi 2017). Second, the commitment to social justice values, activism and advocacy is also emphasised, coupled with sensitiveness regarding the situation and needs of the target population, and with a personal involvement that, many times, goes beyond work hours. This willingness to contribute to changing the lives of refugees and promote their well-being, and the political action, through activism, advocacy and sensitisation activities, represents, as research suggests, a commitment to social justice that goes beyond the boundaries of intervention (Al-Makhamreh, Spaneas, and Neocleous 2012; Asgary 2016; Levine 2001; Nash, Wong, and Trlin 2006). Third, the active involvement of professionals in fighting for refugees' rights, that was expressed by the group of refugee participants as a joint commitment between professionals and refugees, in which everyone actively participates. This suggests that professionals invest in the empowerment of the population they work with, promoting their civic and political participation regarding issues that concern and affect them (Goodman et al. 2004). Fourth and last but (definitely) not least, the will and ability to establish emphatic and trustful relationships, clearly emerged in the results from refugees and professionals' groups. This ability implies sensitivity, interest in knowing each other, equitable treatment, tolerance and a humanised intervention approach, providing care and attention and promoting safety feelings. Within this, cultural sensitivity is shown to foster sense of belonging

and promote social inclusion of refugees, according to refugees and professionals who work with them daily (Al-Makhamreh, Spaneas, and Neocleous 2012; Santinho 2011, 2013; Russell and White 2002). Participants acknowledged that these processes are not simple, nor unidirectional, and many times professionals suffer from the pressure of having a rapid solution in order to increase the chances of success in integration (e.g. to be in a better position to find a job), consequently endorsing the 'acculturation' of refugees to correspond to the expectations held by host society. However, gender sensitivity is a paradigmatic example of how diversity in cultural values may function as an obstacle for refugees' social inclusion. There is still a long way to go before gender equity is achieved in most of host societies, but laws and practices aiming to promote this equity may collide with refugees' origin culture values. This underlines how relevant it is to recognise and be aware of how gender interacts with cultural and socio-political factors, and that it may act as a barrier to refugees' rights and their social inclusion (West and Zimmerman 1987).

This was an exploratory study regarding the challenges involving refugees' reception and inclusion in Portugal, particularly for professionals working with/for them. It aimed to portray a particular vision of both, refugees and professionals, about the essential knowledge, competences and practices they all value in the intervention in this field, that brought contributes to the activities developed in Advenus and ReGap projects, and hopefully may motivate further studies and better interventions in this specific field.

Notes

1. The reference to refugees in this paper includes also the asylum seekers.
2. Usually a representative of a sociocultural minority group (e.g. refugees) that aims to facilitate communication with other social groups and institutions, in order to promote social belonging and inclusion, through the support in access to information and services.
3. Advenus Project 'Developing online training resources for adult refugees' http://www.advenus.net
4. ReGap Project 'Reducing the educational gap for migrants and refugees in EU countries' http://www.regap-edu.net

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