

## "Starting below Zero": On the Situation of Women\* in Refugee Camps in Berlin

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'We have to start at zero,' said the woman\* from Syria in the red coat, holding her hand next to the edge of the table. 'We have to start below zero,' she then said, moving her hand under the table. 'We have to start here' (Field notes during group interview, February 4, 2016).

### **Gender definition and its application:**

We use women/woman, men/man, male/female with the symbol \* ('gender star'). This is to highlight how gender is socially constructed and involves more varieties than identified as clearly either male or female (cisgender).

At present, there is little social scientific data available on the situation of women\* living in German refugee camps. Knowing and understanding more about women\*'s experiences and struggles within the asylum system is of vital importance in order to make useful political claims and provide effective support where it is needed and wanted. This aim to better understand women\*'s current situations in refugee camps in Berlin brought together the NGO International Women's Space (IWS) with a group of BA students and two lecturers from the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Freie Universität Berlin. Together, we organized a research seminar, which took place in the winter term of 2015/16.[\[1\]](#)

The IWS has long been engaged in activist work in support of women\* who have fled their country of origin and come to Germany. The NGO is a self-proclaimed group of ['migrant and refugee women coming to Germany from former colonized countries as well as women without that experience coming together to build a base and a common struggle against the effects of Fortress Europe'](#). During the 17 month long occupation of the Gerhard Hauptmann School in Berlin[\[2\]](#), they fought to establish a space for women\* inside the school. After the residents' eviction in July 2014, the IWS continued their work through engagement with women\* living in refugee camps and through activism on a wider political level.

We, the students of the FU Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology – who are active in various political and support contexts ourselves – followed the IWS's suggestion to collect more data in order to better understand women\*'s situations in refugee camps in Berlin. With the support of our lecturers (Kristina Dohrn and Hansjörg Dilger), we designed a research project that adopted an explicitly political stance. Social and Cultural Anthropology offers useful methodological and theoretical perspectives for such a project, embracing methods such as participant observation, participatory research and open interviews. It also leaves ample room for reflexivity and a close engagement with people's life-worlds and the unique perspectives

and experiences they have.

Our research took place in five different refugee camps in Berlin which housed between 200 and 1148 residents each. In selecting the camps, we focused on different types of accommodation for refugees, such as centrally versus non-centrally located, as well as emergency versus more established camps. In five teams of three to six students each, we collected data about the women\*'s social interactions, safety and privacy as well as health and care within the camps. Furthermore, we focused on issues of administration and registration and tried to find out about the demands and needs the women\* living in the camps had.

Due to the fact that every research group had access to a comparatively small number of women\*[3], the data below grants only a small insight into the lives of refugee women\* in Berlin. Furthermore, some refugee camps denied access to our project. Another factor that needs to be taken into consideration in interpreting the collected data is the role of translators, because not all women\* in the camps spoke German or English. This means that the exact words of the women\* may have been altered during the translation process. Since the project had an explicitly political motivation – to point out difficulties in the camps for refugee women\* – the questions focused partly on the possible problems that the women\* experienced. The below presented results focus on *shared* perceptions and experiences of the living conditions created by administrative regulations. However, it is important to emphasize that every person we met has different backgrounds and stories, and the publicly often homogenized group of so called 'refugees' consists of individuals with highly diverse experiences and backgrounds.

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The women\* we met in the refugee camps had highly diverse backgrounds in terms of nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, education and socio-economic status. The majority came from Syria, Afghanistan and Eritrea – and spoke Farsi, Arabic, Tigrinya and Albanian, but also Russian, English, Kurdish, Italian and Turkish. Some women\* told us the stories of their flight, although we avoided asking about this distressing topic explicitly. Most had fled from their country of origin due to war, religious and/or political persecution, or for economic reasons. As

acknowledged by Sesuna from Eritrea, who lives in an emergency refugee camp, 'Nobody leaves their country for no reason.' Two women\* explained that 'back home' they had had a safe living situation with a daily routine, while others could not have stayed one day longer. One woman\* from Syria said:

'Our place was bombed, we were not secure, it takes a while until you understand that you have no chance to live there anymore.'

Nilufar, a woman\* from Afghanistan who lived in an emergency refugee camp explained her decision to flee:

'[...] This son is known, because he has shot his mother, not his biological mother [...] and murdered her, by himself. [...] And he [...] wanted to marry my daughter and of course we didn't want it. But they were a very well-known and large family and all said that if he wants that, then he does it. And [if we said no] he would tell the whole neighborhood that our little daughter makes sex work and then the other men will kill her. That is why we have come from there, from Afghanistan. Do you think it is not enough? Not enough reason to stay here as refugees?'

Many women\* who talked about their flight experiences described those as very long and difficult. One woman\* from Afghanistan explained that her daughter had almost died along the way:

'After this experience, this intense experience, I cannot think or imagine to be deported or to go back. That won't do.'

The women\* came to Germany in different family constellations. Many of them had travelled with their husband and children, others came only with their children, and some travelled alone. Some women\* had even travelled while pregnant and a young woman\* from Afghanistan reported that she had had a miscarriage during her flight. Most of the women\* we talked to were religious, though they belonged to different denominations within Islam and Christianity. One woman\* went to church every week because she felt free to study the Bible and practice her religion in Berlin; this would have been too dangerous for her back in Iran, where she had lived before. For some women\*, places of religious worship were important sites of networking and social support. For others, religion did not play an important role at all.

The educational and occupational backgrounds of the women\* differed widely, too. Some women\* had never attended school nor were they able to read or write. Others read the Arabic or the Latin alphabet, spoke one or more foreign languages or had studied. Before having left their country, the women\* had had occupations like hairdresser, teacher, architect, engineer, chef, artist, and student. However, due to existing regulations – as well as instances of discrimination – in Germany, most were not able to continue with their work or studies.

Most of the women\* expressed their wish for a stable, peaceful and self-determined life in Germany. Many said that they would like to continue their studies or work in their respective profession: 'I want my son to have the possibility to educate himself,' stated one woman\* from Afghanistan who had been living in an emergency camp for four months. Yet, we also encountered women\* who rather chose to return voluntarily to their home country since they could no longer stand the situation in Germany's refugee camps and the asylum system which very often put them in a position of dependency and uncertainty.

The daily lives of women\* in refugee camps in Berlin are strongly influenced by the transitory nature of their stay and feelings of uncertainty concerning their future. Many women\* declared that waiting for their next appointment at the LaGeSo (*Landesamt für Gesundheit und Soziales*, the State Office for Health and Social Affairs) and hoping for the asylum process to succeed were central aspects of their current living situation. Not being able to influence their living situation was an issue that pervaded all spheres of the women\*'s daily lives. Time was scheduled for them to varying degrees; this ranged from having a fixed time of return to the camp, to schedules for eating and washing clothes, for language courses and other activities:

'Roya describes her stay in Berlin as a period of transition. [...] All she could think about was eating and sleeping. Her days were structured around getting up early to wait an hour in line for 7am breakfast and proceeding to do nothing until lining up again for lunch at 1pm.' (Field notes, interview with Roya, Syria)

The daily lives of women\* varied according to their legal status and social network. Some women\* worked while others were still occupied with the registration process. Their familial situation – meaning whether or not they had a husband or family members to help them with childcare, as well as prevailing gender roles – also had a major impact on women\*'s daily routines. Insufficient childcare hindered women\*'s mobility and their participation in social and educational activities and offers, such as German language courses or visits to the city center. Furthermore, taking care of a child also becomes an additional challenge when handling the registration process, which involves repeated visits to the LaGeSo with long waiting times. Ariana, a young woman from Albania, replied to the question of what is important in her life by saying:

'That my child is provided [for] and goes to the Kindergarten. That I improve my way of communication and learn German.'

The spaces that women\* lived in and had access to had a crucial influence on their everyday lives. '[...] The camp is like a prison,' stated Sesuna, a young woman\* from Eritrea living in an emergency refugee camp. Some refugee camps were specifically constructed as such, while

other buildings had an entirely different function before and had to be converted. Even the buildings that had been constructed as refugee camps were clearly not meant to engender an atmosphere of homeliness, individuality or self-determination. One student from our research team described in her fieldwork diary that:

‘One’s initial impression of the center is reminiscent of a dormitory hall. As is typical of institutionally run accommodation, all furnishings are standardized and a faint odor of industrial cleaning products is present. Each bedroom is furnished with twin-sized beds and yellow lockers similar to those found in schools. Due to sensitive calibrations, the fire alarm can be heard going off randomly at all times of day or night.’

The layout of refugee camps reflects the political agenda that applies to people who come to Germany in search of asylum. Accommodating human beings in a camp makes it easier to watch them and have access to them. Standardization tends to remove individuality. Rules structuring the daily routines of the residents help to supervise and control their activities (Pieper 2010). The location of the camps in relation to the city is another relevant factor for the living conditions of refugee women\*. The infrastructure surrounding the camp as well as public transportation play a crucial role in women\*s mobility and therefore the way they conduct their everyday lives. Two young women\* from Syria explained that they rarely went outside the camp as they were scared of the U-Bahn [subway] and did not understand the subway system.

The classification of refugees through the German asylum system has a major impact on social interactions among refugee camp residents. Since the women\* with whom we spoke shared time together in the language courses, had (or lacked) the same prospect of being allowed to stay, and shared privileges or disadvantages depending on their country of origin, residence status can be seen as a unifying element. Furthermore, social interactions among the residents in the camps were mostly organized along lines of belonging to a certain social group, which was often based on common origin and mother tongue.

The two major social groups we encountered during our research were Arab speaking and Farsi speaking residents. In contrast, women\* from minority groups, such as Albanians or Eritreans, often seemed to be made invisible within the refugee camps. While some women\* described that with some effort they were able to develop relationships with women\* from a different national background, others explained that the support between different social groups was very limited. One woman\* from an established refugee accommodation center explained:

‘[...] If you want to feel comfortable here, you have to create this feeling inside. [...] So if you come from a country where not so many residents are coming from, you have to be communicative and an open minded person or find another way to feel well here. [...] I’m the best example. I’m here by myself, but I know many women and I would definitely

call them my friends, who I can rely on. But I also know that this is not easy and I'm not taking it for granted.'

Social communities in the camps were also essential in providing emotional support and access to information and assistance. Speaking the same language was particularly important for the women\*, since information, experiences, knowledge and contacts – for example to lawyers, doctors, volunteers or other support networks – were only shared orally within these groups and excluded others who did not speak the same language. For some women\*, social relations also played a big role in their experience of safety, especially for those who had migrated alone:

'[...] Here at this place you need to connect to be safe. If you stay alone, especially as a woman, it can get very isolated and even dangerous,' explained one woman\*.

However, these networks could also be experienced as a form of social control, as was expressed by Soraya from Afghanistan:

'In our culture, in Afghanistan, when a woman is alone, all the others try to know everything about her – where I am going, when I am coming back.'

Language not only played a crucial role in the social interactions among residents but also in terms of the interactions between them and the camp's employees, social workers and volunteers which is why people who did not have the support of translators or whose languages only a few people spoke, depended more on the 'goodwill' of others.

In some cases, the women\* mentioned the feeling that their concerns were not taken seriously and that there was a lack of support from the camp employees concerning violations and incidents of sexual assaults within the camps. The fact that the security staff were mostly German and Arabic speaking meant that these camp employees also acted as translators mostly for Arabic speaking residents. This could perpetuate existing conflicts between the communities or individual camp residents, and created an atmosphere of tension, which could cause re-traumatizing experiences: 'Are we in Germany or are we back home?' asked Sesuna from Eritrea, who lived in a non-centrally located emergency camp, referring to the problematic security situation and smoldering conflicts between the residents.

Aside from the communities inside the camp, family ties were mentioned as being very important in order to cope with the situation. Even though the families of most women\* were spread in different countries, often separated by large distances, social media allowed them to take part, at least to a small extent, in their family members' lives. Therefore many women\* stressed the importance of their mobile phones and their access to a stable internet connection:

'[...] If I was not able to communicate with my family, I would be really sad and always worrying about them,' stated a woman\* from Iraq, whose family were still living in Iraq.

Another woman\* from Syria, whose sister was living in Sweden, explained:

'[...] Even if I had a terrible day and nothing worked the way I wanted it, knowing that I can call [...] my sister makes me feel not so powerless. She understands me and we motivate each other.'

Laws, regulations and administrative procedures significantly shaped the lives of the women\* we encountered. Most were engaged in bureaucratic struggles over their own or their family members' right to stay in Germany, and they lived in institutions which regulated the most central aspects of their daily lives. German asylum law determines where in Germany women\* are allowed to live (*Residenzpflicht, Wohnsitzauflage*); their access to medical services, as well as to German language and literacy courses; the permission to work and live in private housing; and the amount of financial support they receive.

In the initial reception centers (*Erstaufnahmeeinrichtungen*), where asylum seekers have to stay for a minimum of six weeks, basic provisions such as food, clothing, toiletries and household consumer goods are provided. Standardized provision, however, leaves little room for autonomy and individual needs, implies long waiting times, and the goods are often of poor quality. Central accommodation also limits access to social contacts outside of the camp, as every visitor is registered and needs special permission to stay in the camp later than 10pm. In some refugee camps, registered residents had to wear a bracelet that they were not allowed to take off – a practice which was perceived as dehumanizing.

The women\* we met were in varying stages of their asylum process, and most were caught up in lengthy bureaucratic procedures, such as regularly applying at the LaGeSo to fulfill the requirements to receive public assistance and move their asylum process forward. Their legal status depended on factors mostly outside of their control, such as hierarchies determined on the basis of their documented nationality, length of stay and the extent to which they were able to 'prove' their claims for protection.

Further, women\* travelling with their husbands often had to register as 'wife' and were rarely taken into consideration as independent persons. Therefore, their asylum case depends on their connection with their husbands and it is especially hard to make claims of gender related reasons of flight. Several women\* told us about LaGeSo case officers and translators who transgressed their administrative duties by judging and commenting on the applicant's moral right to even apply for asylum or file claims for specific services or needs. A lack of transparency, and the arbitrariness of laws and administrative encounters, led to feelings of powerlessness, in that they constrained self-determination and active decision-making. Shakufeh from Afghanistan stated:

'If Germany accepts me as a refugee from Afghanistan, our future is bright. Me and my husband could study and learn a profession, my kids could get a proper education and grow up in peace. I hope we can stay here and not be deported.'

Waiting is a central element of daily life: waiting for official decisions, waiting for a forced return; waiting for the permission to work; waiting for one's turn at the washing machine or in the food line; and waiting in front of the LaGeSo. The latter is fraught with negative experiences for women\*, especially those with children and/or disabilities. The women\* reported how exhausting it was to stand in line for hours and to compete with the pushing and running of others to be the first in line and finally enter the building. Having had a recent operation on her leg, Verena from Albania recounted her experiences:

'The men like going faster than us. [...] They are going from the window from container. So they go there before us and the security say: 'You, you, you – go inside. Ten people, ok.' The others wait. We go to the next and I say 'I am sick and this woman has children.' [...] It was raining and this, snowing. And we are outside. And they say: '[...] You have to go in the end of the people [to the end of the line].' [...] We go in the end with these women, five or six women\* with children and me. All others are men. [...] We wait [...] more than one hour outside. My body was very cold. And my leg was shaking because it was very cold. And the men when they get inside, I was the last one.'

Within the German asylum system, everyone has a right to basic medical services and many research participants were content with the medical services they received. At the same time, several barriers hampered access to health care, and most of the women\* we met lived in conditions that were harmful to their physical and/or psychological well-being. The access to health care was shaped by the refugee camps' location and facilities as well as support networks available. It also depended strongly on the individual capacities and mobility of camp residents, and the efforts they were able to invest in care seeking. People had to rely on other camp residents, friends, volunteers and social workers for information on specialized doctors, doctors speaking specific languages – e.g. Arabic, Farsi or Albanian – or doctors and volunteer organizations such as ['Medizin hilft'](#) offering free medical treatment without legal restrictions. Language barriers and the lack of sufficiently trained translators further complicated communication about medical concerns. As one woman\* who lives in a refugee camp told us:

'Before I go [to the doctor], I prepare myself and look on the internet what I want to say and write it down.'



Treating chronic diseases is aggravated due to insufficient financial support from the LaGeSo coupled with insufficient co-payments for medication. Equally, camp residents with permanent or temporary disabilities were generally provided with assistance and care services informally. Some camps provided a doctor or midwife on-site, however due to their limited capacities many residents had to seek the aid of doctors and specialized clinics outside of the camps. In cases where a doctor was provided by the camp administration, residents usually did not have a choice in terms of the doctor's gender. Alarming, the living conditions imposed by the asylum system in some instances produced health problems. In one of the camps, the lack of windows and ventilation prevented fresh air from coming in. Fara, a Palestinian woman\* from Syria told us:

'I have asthma. I struggle with breathing and my daughters are always ill because of the bad air inside the camp [...].'

The lack of sufficient toilets, showers and possibilities for food storage led to unsanitary conditions, which could result in wound infections, genital inflammations and food poisoning. In camps where washing was organized centrally, clothes and even clothing donations were reported as remaining unhygienic and sometimes causing rashes, mycosis and spreading lice. Reduced mobility, special dietary needs and allergies were usually not accommodated for and women\* often described the camp environment as restless and noisy. One woman\* who had just given birth to twins said:

'Now I can still carry them, but who knows how long we are staying... how will I be able to carry the two of them all the way up to the 4th floor?'

The uncertainties about the asylum process and enforced passivity produce psychological stress leading to sleeplessness, despair and homesickness. The necessity to repeatedly describe the reasons for their flight, along with emerging conflicts in the camps, may trigger memories of traumatic experiences. The long waiting hours outside the LaGeSo resulted in stress, and sometimes injuries and illness.

For most women\* in the research, 'safety' meant the absence of war, terrorism and (sexual) assault, as well as the certainty of obtaining asylum. It was important for them to be able to move freely in the streets as well as in the camps and to know that they and their children were safe in Germany and that their lives were not in danger. Overall, the issue of security staff came up frequently and seemed to play a major role with regard to the experience of safety within the refugee camps. The camps that were part of our research were guarded by security staff, but during the night and on weekends their presence was reduced and there were only very few female\* security guards working in the camps. This meant that there was mostly male\*

personnel within a space that is anyway dominated by men\*.

While the security staff was partly involved in solving conflicts, it was not always perceived as being neutral. In one instance, an Afghan woman\* reported that:

‘Once a woman got home late and was pushed into a room by several men. When the security staff intervened they told the woman to not speak about the incident to the *Heimleitung* [camp management] in order to prevent trouble.’

The fear of being sexually assaulted did not only concern women\* who had been directly assaulted, but was also caused by hearing or reading news about sexual assaults. Above all, the fear and shame related to speaking about assaults was very high. Verena from Albania said:

‘I know some people from my country [who] said that there have been so many, how to say, rapes, but not to show it. [... You] don’t say anything because it’s shame.’

In addition to the safety *inside* the camp, the feeling of safety *outside* the camp was very important for the women\*. As one woman\* from Afghanistan explained:

‘Women themselves rarely go out on their own. This is because they fear for their safety, and especially their husbands, brothers, fathers do not really want them to go outside. They say that outside bad things may happen: drunk men might try to kiss them or worse.’

In particular, situations in which persons had been racially discriminated against and stories of refugees being menaced made the women\* feel unsafe in Germany. Roya from Syria reported that:

‘[My father] was once in a place in the east [Marzahn] with lots of Nazis, with [my] mother, they were looking for an apartment. [My] mom wore a headscarf and they were asking ‘What’s that?’ The neighbors were saying: ‘It isn’t good for you to be here’.’

In the first months in one of the emergency camps, there were assaults committed by people from the neighborhood, who threw potatoes at the inhabitants. The camp administration warned the inhabitants of ‘racist German people trying to harm them.’ Sesuna reported that during Christmas they were told by the camp administration not to accept food donations ‘because they could be poisoned.’ The women\*’s experience of safety was also closely connected to the lack of privacy in the refugee camps, which was a pressing issue for the women\*, especially in camps without separate and lockable rooms. Thus the women\*’s sense of privacy was closely linked to the layout of the camps, and the female\* camp residents had to make active efforts to create zones of privacy:

'In the sleeping places, one could only find bed bunks standing close to each other. In the women\*'s sleeping place, the lower part of the bunks were covered with towels and clothes so as to cover the people lying in the beds from the light' (Field notes).

Religious aspects and the wish to have a safe space – such as a women\*'s room – or separate rooms for each family were important issues that were raised by the women\*. Soraya from Afghanistan, who lived in an emergency camp, reported that she had to wear the *hijab* 24/7 because there was no area without non-family members or only women\* where she could take it off. Due to this, there was a lack of freedom for the women\* who wear the *hijab*. Furthermore, women\* mentioned the lack of space for women\* to breastfeed quietly without men\* surrounding them.

A key aspect with regard to the women\*'s experience of privacy and safety in most of the camps were the shower and toilet facilities. The toilets and bathrooms were shared in the camps and often not lockable. Most of the women\* were scared to go to the toilet or bathroom in the night. Aisha from Syria said:

'Showering at night isn't safe. So many young boys without supervision who think nothing can happen to them because they're free in a new country. How can I protect myself alone here?'

With this research, we wanted to shed light on the specific experiences of women\* within the German Asylum system. Even though the female\* perspectives on their living conditions can differ greatly from male\* refugees, women\* are rarely given the opportunity to speak about the specific challenges that they face. The five refugee camps in Berlin, where we conducted the research, had very different structures, layouts and support networks. The type of accommodation and its general layout had a significant impact on the living conditions of the residents. In general, we observed that most of the women\* living in emergency refugee camps accepted the problems and restrictions inherent in living in a cramped space full of people. Nevertheless, as the duration of the stay in emergency camps is prolonged over many months, the makeshift character of these accommodations can no longer serve as a justification for the often precarious living conditions.

In conclusion, we want to point out the fact that the women\*'s experiences were not only shaped by their position as female\* refugees, but also by other factors such as their citizenship, religion or educational background. Especially the legal status in Germany depends strongly on the country of origin of the asylum-seeker and the label 'safe' or 'not safe' that the German government attributes to this country. Taken together, all these factors had a significant impact on the legal rights, privileges (or lack thereof) and finally on the living conditions of the individual women\*. In spite of this heterogeneity, however, we found that many of the women\* living in

refugee camps in Berlin shared similar experiences (positive and negative). They also expressed similar demands and needs which all concerned their status as female\* refugees in Germany as well as the constraints on their personal freedom that their legal status and their living situation imposed on them. In the following we summarize the most important aspects that need to be addressed for improving the situations of women\* in accommodation centers in Germany:

**Asylum process – waiting and uncertainty:** The preoccupation with their legal status and the outcome of their request for asylum was extremely relevant in the daily lives of the women\* we met during the research. Not knowing whether they would be allowed to stay in Germany greatly influenced their day to day life and kept them in a state that did not allow them to fully ‘arrive’ in Germany or to make plans for their future. Even if a decision about their asylum status might imply their deportation, many women\* said that they would prefer knowing what possibilities they had over the constant state of uncertainty with regard to their future.

**Translation and access to information:** Many women\* mentioned that they did not feel well informed about the asylum process and their rights as refugee women\*. Especially the women\* from so called ‘safe countries of origin’ said that it would be easier for them if they had more information in their own languages about the asylum process, their rights and the political situation in Germany in general. In order to improve women\*’s access to information about the asylum process, medical treatment or offers especially for women\*, the availability of proper translation services is required. There is often a significant lack of trained translators and translators assumed a very powerful role in the process of accessing information. It was mentioned repeatedly that sometimes translators passed on information selectively or mistranslated. Additionally, minorities inside the camps, for example Romani, Tigrinya, Urdu or Kurdish speaking people, had less access to information because a lot of information was passed on in Farsi and Arabic.

Information was often provided in written form (i.e. on announcement boards). However, this posed a problem for those women\* who were illiterate or did not speak one of the main languages in a camp (mostly German, English, Farsi and Arabic). They therefore had no access to essential information, which is why more forms of oral information such as specific information events were requested. Another important aspect in gaining access to information was the availability of (free) internet in the camps. Many women\* said that internet access was crucial, not only to be able to look for job opportunities, education, and apartments, but that it was also their only means of communicating with family and friends who were not in Berlin.

**Childcare and the gendered division of tasks:** In the mostly gendered division of tasks between the residents of refugee camps, childcare was often seen exclusively as the responsibility of the mothers. It was mostly women\* who looked after their children, while the men\* attended German classes and took care of the registration procedures for the entire family. Therefore, most of the women\* with young children expressed the wish for good and reliable childcare, at least for a few hours per day, as it was very difficult to find a kindergarden or even schools for their children. It is a severe hindrance for women\* to lead independent lives, if they are not able to learn German or if they are not able to navigate the city and the public transport system and therefore remain dependent on male\* relatives.

**Hygiene and Health care:** Mistranslation of communication concerning health issues can have serious medical consequences. Many women\* we talked to were not sure how to access emergency medical care and medication, as well as essentials in childcare like baby-formula or diapers. Furthermore, many women\* expressed the wish that medical care and medication should be fully covered by the health services as otherwise it was sometimes not possible to pay for important medication and treatments. The women\* also complained about the often unhygienic situation in the camps. Mostly, the showers were in a bad condition or extremely dirty; others did not have hot and/or clean water or there were an insufficient number of showers for the number of women\* in the camp. Finally, it seemed important to provide psychological care for women\* who suffer from mental health issues caused by experiences made in their countries of origins, during their escape as well as by their burdensome situation in Germany. These services ideally should be provided by doctors, psychologists or counselors that share a language with the person seeking help/medical or psychological support. Alternatively, a professional translator who enjoys the patient's trust should be involved in any kind of psychological care.

**Self-determination:** Many women\* expressed the strong desire to live a self-determined life. They felt forced into a constant state of waiting in order to finally be able to regain some control over their lives. Women\* also expressed the need to have lockable doors (or, at least, lockers for valuables) in order to create a feeling of safety and privacy – not only for their rooms but also for the showers and toilets. Additionally, the women\* expressed the strong wish for exclusively female\* spaces – a room where they could breastfeed their children, change clothes, remove their headscarf for a while and where there is an opportunity for retreat and silence. Many women\* in our research also stated that they wanted to cook and eat food of their own choice and according to their cultural and individual preferences. They also wanted to (re)gain control over the timing of their meals and the amount of food they ate, as well as the variety of food they consumed.

In general, the women\* felt forced into extremely regulated schedules and a constant state of waiting in all aspects of their lives. In this system, the refugee camps serve the purpose to register, control and monitor a person in a way that takes away the possibility to lead an autonomous life over a period of many months or even years. Pieper argues that refugee camps are political instruments that are used to control, regulate and socially exclude people who have fled (Pieper 2010). We want to highlight that many of the problems that women\* face in accommodation centers are tied to this form of strictly regulated housing which does not allow its residents to lead self-determined lives. Therefore, it can be concluded that only an adjustment of the German asylum system, and especially a change to the forced living in camps, will advance the overall situation for refugees in the long run. Without being able to make decisions with regard to their daily life and without the possibility to work and study in Germany, it is not possible for the women\* to overcome trauma and to build a viable and independent pathway to their future according to their own hopes and aspirations.

Dilger, Hansjörg & Kristina Dohrn (eds.), in Collaboration with International Women Space. 2016. [\*Living in Refugee Camps in Berlin: Women\\*\\*s Perspectives and Experiences\*](#). Berlin: Weißensee Verlag.

Pieper, Tobias. 2010. Das Lager als variables Instrument der Migrationskontrolle. In: Hess, Sabine & Bernd Kasperek (eds.). Grenzregime. Diskurse, Praktiken, Institutionen in Europa. Berlin & Hamburg: Assoziation A., 219-228.

[1] More information on the situation of women\* in refugee camps in Berlin is soon to be found in a publication by the Weißensee Verlag Berlin ([Dilger and Dohrn, in Collaboration with International Women Space, 2016](#)). The book will include the complete research reports of the seminar as well as a postface by the International Women Space.

[2] After the tragic death of Mohammad Rahsepar, an asylum seeker who hung himself in a camp in Würzburg, Bavaria, a group of refugees marched 600 km in protest of the inhumane asylum laws. This march culminated in a protest camp on Oranienplatz in Berlin, which became a central reference point for self organised political work and support, and later resulted in the occupation of the empty Gerhard Hauptmann School in 2012.

[3] In total, we talked to more than 40 women\* in individual and group interviews and with many more (>80) through informal conversations.