

Friedenskreis Syrien – Peace Group Syria
Discussion Series Syria part III
Syrian Women during their flight and in Germany

Women during their flight and in exile face gender-specific challenges. We find that the topic is given far too little attention, so we conducted a workshop to take stock on the situation of Syrian women in exile in Germany and to find out, what the biggest hurdles are that they face in these three overarching areas: Integration and Everyday Life, Emancipation and Women's Rights and Psychological Effects. We will highlight our results here; they represent the opinions of the participants and not necessarily of the Peace Group. The English-speaking workshop took place on June 17, 2017 in Berlin with both Syrian women who are in exile here and international female* participants working in the field of integration.

*This summarizing paper has been carried out by the organizers of the workshop:
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Psychological Aspects

Violence: Many refugees experienced or have witnessed traumatic incidents like torture, oppression, injuries or violence towards a person close to them, friends and family. In situations of war, gender based violence (sexual, physical, emotional) increases and especially women are concerned. Inadequate protection - especially for women fleeing alone - and a lack of privacy increases the danger of violent acts against women.

Identity: Most Syrian refugees are not able to go back home for an indefinite period of time and this, combined with the unknown future is psychologically difficult to handle. The moment you are forced to leave home, a period starts in which you are stuck "in between". This means a huge challenge for your identity. In the host countries, refugees are forced to get used to a new culture (social and systemic factors) and simultaneously (re)build an identity for themselves - here again women face some special challenges: Social isolation (e.g. forced to stay home because of childcare, no knowledge of where to go, are not able to continue life as they were used to and are mentally not able or not willing to start something new...), excessive demands (e.g. stuck with the "triple burden", household, child-rearing, work) or too much pressure by family members (e.g. refused demand of freedom and independence).

Often, the identity of women is limited to the designation as "refugee" which hinders the process of settling in.

Adapting to a new environment: Trying to build a new life is difficult on different levels. First you have to find the strength to want or accept the idea of a new life and then you have to find the access to people or institutions to support you. These hurdles lead to the danger, that women get used to an unpleasant situation and start to "normalizing negative norms". Beyond the traumatic experiences this contributes to the danger of developing psychological problems like PTSD. This might be visible in physical pains, symptoms of depression, anxiety, flashbacks and social withdrawal.

Emancipation and Women's Rights

Lack of knowledge and access possibilities: Many Syrian women either do not know about their rights or if they do know them, they are unsure how to access the system and in some cases, dare not to use it. Women need to know their rights hence they can deal with the German culture of freedom in the best way. It is also important to involve men in the process, it being equally important for them to understand women's rights, otherwise we are only addressing half of the problem.

Lack of resources: Syrian women have many things to express and could contribute to a better understanding of German citizens of their feelings, experiences and country of origin. But resources and platforms are missing. Moreover, far too often "the public" is only interested in their story of being a refugee rather than understanding the person behind that label. This is highly frustrating and demotivating and a wasted chance to show not only tolerance but respect to these women.

Chances for empowerment: In big parts of Germany it is easier for women to live independently and in a self-determined manner (professional choices, living situation, sexuality...) than in Syria. This offers chances and possibilities, especially for women coming from traditional social structures. Only these conditions make self-determined life possible. This change offers great potential for future generations. Many women coming here as mothers are mostly responsible for childcare. They convey their own values to their kids which can mix with values they adopt living in exile and lending them new perspectives. On the other side it is important to consider that in many parts of Syria patriarchal structures are still prevailing (not neglecting the fact that they are prevailing in Germany). Facing the quite different value system here in Germany could also have an opposing effect and a strong upholding of familiar norms and values. Generally, it is important to consider, how this background can influence the situation of the women here.

Integration and Everyday Life

Expectations: The German expectations concerning the integration of refugees are not immediately clear. There are several aspects of integration and more than one definition of how Germans expect integration to be like. It is most important to consider integration as a two-way process: Both arriving refugees and locals need to support this process.

In contrary, integration is often communicated as learning the language, the country's laws and rules and abiding by them. The danger behind this, is to consider integration as assimilation: to be forced to alienate yourself from your home country, traditions and religion(s). This contradicts the process of building a common base of shared life in Germany.

Everyday living challenges: Women face specific challenges in their everyday life here, especially in refugee shelters: lack of privacy (this resulting in dress codes they have to adhere to, etc.), inadequate or unavailable access to kitchens and washing facilities, bad treatment by security staff or lack of translators are examples that exacerbate their daily life.

Elderly women: often have greater difficulties than younger generations settling here. Younger generations find it easier to see their time in exile as a "new start", elderly generations find it difficult to pick up the language and therefore there is a higher risk of social isolation and lesser tendency to make contacts in their new surroundings.

What should be achieved?

Awareness and open minds on both sides

Humane conditions for refugees; Especially psychological and physical safety for women in shelters

Visibility of chances, facilities, institutions, also through the German government and NGOs

Access: privacy in homes, access to public, activities outside of shelters, easier access to language classes and communities close to their places of residence

Trust- and Safe-Spaces: Creation of a settling feeling, offering help and consultations without presence of children and husbands

Knowledge-Distribution of Laws, Human and German rights, specifically women's rights on all sides

Recognize and target subgroups e.g. illiterate or elderly women

What is needed to achieve them?

Resources: day care centers, alternatives for collective housing, separate washing facilities for women, advisory centers specifically for women

Education on both sides:

Who? Police, Voluntaries, Psychologists, Refugees

What? Trauma-healing, basic psychological knowledge, group-specific education, offer secular ways for Arabic-speaking children to learn their language in writing and reading, integration courses for both sides (Understanding each other's history, culture, customs, laws), separate language classes for illiterate women,

Workshops: Here again access for women in shelters and when they're in their own homes

Content examples: **exchange** and possibility of law and value issues, empowerment of women, ...

Support: Contact to Arabic-speaking people that have been living here to enlighten the arrival, translators, lawyers: Creation of a network so they can be found more easily?

- ❖ What we discussed and abstracted during this Discussion-Workshop might not be new to you. But the topic and the issues that we discussed are still not being sufficiently addressed. Therefore, we still feel the urge to emphasize the shortcomings concerning refugee women and their situation in Germany. The topic is urgent and we want to motivate you and others to spread the word and take action.

We thank all participants and supporters who made this workshop possible!
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