

“Waiting alone in Aleppo, a lot has changed. Only women and old persons are left.”

Impacts of living apart from the family and effects on gender norms, family roles, and care arrangements for Syrian asylum-seekers in Germany

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Introduction

1.1 Syrian Refugees: Conflict, Forced Migration, and Gender

According to the UNHCR, Syrians are currently the biggest refugee population produced by a single conflict in a generation.¹ By December 2016, an estimated 6.5 million Syrian citizens were internally displaced and 4.8 million have fled to neighboring countries². Within five years, an estimated 400,000 Syrians³ – mostly men and boys⁴ - have been killed and some estimated two million Syrians have been wounded or mutilated. Due to the large-scale destruction of infrastructure, most Syrians have only limited access to water, electricity and food. Around two million of Syria’s children are out of school⁵. The health care infrastructure has been severely damaged or totally collapsed in many areas.

Women and men experience the crisis in different ways due to the gendered division of roles, responsibilities and spaces in Syrian society. Gender ratios of Syrian refugee populations vary in different host countries: in neighboring countries such as Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan, females account for roughly 50% of all Syrian refugees whereas three quarters of the estimated 550 000⁶ Syrian asylum seekers in Germany who have arrived since the beginning of the conflict in 2011 are male.⁷ Since an estimated 500,000 of them are assumed to have come via the Mediterranean and Balkan routes, this can be attributed to two main reasons: (1) the high costs for smugglers made it impossible for many families to escape together and (2) many families decided not to expose women and children to the dangerous journey. When violence began to increase in Syria, many Syrian families hoped that if one male family member made it to Germany and got asylum, the remaining nuclear

¹ UNHCR 2015.

² UNHCR 2016a; UNHCR 2016c.

³ United Nations Radio 2016. For the difficulties of obtaining accurate figures of people killed or injured in wars see Hunt 2010:551.

⁴ See VDC 2016a and former reports. This can be traced back to the fact that there are hardly any women in combat units (except in the Kurdish areas) and that few women have participated in public protests or actions against the regime.

⁵ No lost Generation 2016.

⁶ See Mediendienst Integration; BAMF 2016b:2; Bundesministerium des Innern/Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge 2016: 281. The numbers of Syrian asylum-seekers who arrived in Germany from 2011 until now are based on estimates, because due to the high influx of refugees in 2014 and 2015, many were not able to file their applications for asylum immediately. According to recent data from BAMF (German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees), by October 2016 around 22% of the asylum-seekers who arrived between January 2013 and December 2015 had not yet filed their asylum application (BAMF 2016a: 9,24).

⁷ 78,8 % of the Syrian adult first-time asylum applicants in 2015 who were recorded in the BAMF “SoKo” database are male and 52,9% of all refugees married (Rich 2016: 2-4). In 2016, the percentage of Syrian women increased to 31 % (Neske/Rich 2016: 4). Most probably this can be attributed to the fact that more women undertake the dangerous journey to Germany since family reunification takes too long.

family members could follow suit by claiming their legally guaranteed right to family reunification.

1.2 Scope and research methodology

It is commonly understood that long-term separation of families, particularly in a context of conflict and war, brings about substantial changes of roles, practices, responsibilities, and care relationships across gender and generations.⁸ This paper deals with (changing) German asylum policies and practices and how they affect the experiences and needs of transnational Syrian refugee families who want to settle down in Germany. Looking at the main stages in the process of separation and reunification, we focus on the experiences of wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters. How do Syrian female refugees in Germany deal with the loss of family ties and friendships? How do they reconstruct their lives in a new environment and build new networks and relationships? How do they deal with bureaucratic and legal restrictions as well as shifting asylum policies? How do policy changes affect their capacity to claim and substantiate their rights?

The paper focuses on women and girls while acknowledging that prolonged family separation has also a strong impact on men and boys and that both are often interconnected. The paper is based on data collected through ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2012 and 2016, using the following research instruments:

- Participatory observation and informal talks with around 100 Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers in German reception centers and individual homes
- Semi-structured and narrative in-depth- interviews with 15 Syrian male and female refugees of different generations
- Interviews with volunteers assisting Syrian refugees with bureaucratic procedures during the asylum process
- Interviews with state employees in charge of refugee affairs (camp management, housing, health care, education)
- Interviews with representatives of charity and advocacy NGOs trying to support refugees to obtain their human and social rights

Profiles of interviewed refugees presented as case studies:

- Women and girls who are unable to reunite in Germany with other family members due to legal restrictions.
- Women who have reunited with their spouses and children s after varying periods of separation Members of the same family who fled to Germany at different times via the Balkan or Mediterranean route
- Single women and men who fled to Germany on their own

⁸ Rytter/Olwig (2011:11) E. g. negotiations of positions and structures of authority, identities and notions of being and belonging.

2. Impacts of the Flight on Refugees in Germany and their Families in Syria

2.1 Socio-economic changes and pressures on refugees and family members left behind

Most of the Syrian refugees in Germany we met had to pay between 2,000 and 10,000 Euros for the journey to smugglers. They have had to sell their homes, furniture, cars, jewelry, or other property much below their real value. Some have borrowed money from relatives and friends⁹ and most arrived in Germany with little or no money and very few belongings.

A separation caused by armed conflict or other life-threatening conditions usually occurs under traumatizing circumstances and implies many informal arrangements within asymmetric power relations. Smugglers use their power to extort the highest possible amounts of money; state agents and secret services impose bribes. As a result, refugees and their families have often lost all their financial resources at the end of the flight. Some families were separated during the flight when they ran out of money and all left (extended) family members and friends behind.

Family members who stay behind in Syria waiting for reunification face difficulties to secure sufficient income to meet the family's basic needs. This applies particularly to women who account by now for 12-17% of household heads in Syria.¹⁰ With husbands, brothers, fathers and other male relatives as well as neighbors and friends killed, arrested, in hiding or out of the country, many women and girls in Syria have to cope with a range of additional responsibilities. Women are not only caretakers of their children but also of the elderly and family members with special needs due to injuries and disabilities. According to some estimates, between 10 to 25 per cent of the population suffer from injuries and disabilities.¹¹

Women are thus under high pressure to ensure the survival of the family. Since there are only few jobs, many women depend on external cash injections. An increasing number of women are pushed to work, mostly in low-skilled jobs in the informal sector where women represent the majority of the workforce.¹² The increase in female labor is driven by steep inflation, loss of male income sources and displacement in war zones. Women with young children are, however, often not able to work outside the house so that their elder children are forced to work if no other support is available. An example is Maysoon,¹³ a housewife and mother of six children between 4 and 16 years. Her husband Wael is a tailor. When the house of the family was destroyed and Wael fled alone in 2014 to Germany, the eldest son (then 12) had to quit school and started to work to support his mother and siblings. In addition, Maysoon is receiving small amounts of money from family members in the Gulf States and a monthly parcel with basic food and hygiene items from a charity NGO. Wael sends her half of his monthly allowance in Germany.

⁹ This impression which we obtained in our talks with Syrian refugees is also supported by a UNHCR survey of January 2016 among Syrians who were stranded on Greek islands. 41% of them reported that they have financed their journey by borrowing from friends (see UNHCR 2016c).

¹⁰ Care 2015:4.

¹¹ See WHO 2014:12, 15 and 35; Care 2015.

¹² Care 2015:15-16.

¹³ All names of Syrians mentioned in this paper have been changed to protect their identities. In our interviews, we were eager to apply a "do no harm" approach in line with internationally accepted codes of conduct for research on trauma and SGBV.

2.2 Psychological impacts of the flight

The long waiting periods between family separation and reunification are often extremely distressing for refugees who have left their dependents behind. Maysoon's husband Wael is attending a German language course. His learning capacity is, however, seriously hampered by his constant worries about his family which often prevent him from sleeping at night. Various studies document that the separation of persons fleeing war and persecution from their families affect language learning and integration¹⁴ and may cause severe psychological problems.¹⁵ Syrian spouses who have escaped and are more or less safe while their wives or husbands back in Syria face life-threatening situations and have to cope with little or no income at all are usually deeply distressed. In addition, many are afraid of government reprisals or forced conscriptions into the army or militias. Rihab, who had to leave her husband and her two youngest children behind and has been separated from them for more than two years, stated: "My husband is still eligible for conscription and might be recruited by force. Whenever he has to call on authorities to collect documents, I am deeply worried and feel guilty because I left him alone with the children."

Male refugees feel often guilty and fear for the lives of their wives and children when those have to travel through Syria and neighboring countries to reach the German embassy in the context of family reunification procedures. Sexual harassment, sexualized violence and kidnappings are common incidents at the myriads of checkpoints, manned alternatively by government forces, armed rebel groups or ordinary criminals. NGOs and activists have documented hundreds of cases involving arbitrary detention or enforced disappearances of civilians by government forces, pro-government militias, or armed groups.¹⁶ Rima (22), a housewife from Aleppo, remembers that she had to pass around 40 checkpoints on the road from Aleppo to Damascus when she travelled to the German embassy in Beirut. "At each and every single one of them I was afraid that I might be abducted or that something might happen to my three year old son", she says.

Some male refugees fear that their flight is considered as an act of disloyalty by the regime and may lead to reprisals or even arrest of their family. Wael expressed his fears as follows:

"When I left, I instructed my wife to tell everybody asking about me that I went to Sudan for business. When they come to know that you have escaped to Germany, they immediately suspect you to be a regime opponent and this can be dangerous. Last time when my wife went to collect her monthly aid package from a charity, the staff there asked her about me. When she said that I had travelled to Sudan; they asked her for written proof. She was so frightened when she told me the story on the phone, and so was I. We do not know what will happen if they find out that I asked for asylum in Germany. Will she and the kids still be able to receive the aid packages? And will they be able to leave the country? We have been waiting to reunite for two and a half years now. This makes me so nervous that I cannot sleep at night."

¹⁴ See McDonald-Wilmsen/Gifford 2009; Huddlestone/Tjaden 2012: 58-60; Fonseca/Ormon 2008.

¹⁵ See Roussau/Mekki-Barada/Moreau 2001; Schweitzer/Melville/Steele/Lacherez 2006.

¹⁶ See Amnesty International 2016; Amnesty International 2015; Human Rights Watch 2012; Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights 2014; Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic 2015.

The majority of Syrian refugees in Germany have gone through extremely traumatizing experiences, back in Syria, and during their journey to Germany. We have talked to parents who told us that their six-year old child had to witness torture scenes and death during the trip. In 2015, we met a Syrian woman in a reception center at the train station who was incapable of changing her baby's diapers at the rest room and asked volunteers to do it for her. She was too paralyzed to take care of the baby due to the guilt she felt after having been unable to save the life of her other daughter who had drowned in the Mediterranean in front of her eyes.

2.3 Shifting gender roles and practices for women left behind in Syria

After husbands have fled the country, women sometimes face displacement. In March 2016, the Violation Documentation Center estimated that women and children constitute 70% of thousands of families that were displaced by continuous Russian airstrikes and eventually got stuck in emergency shelters with disastrous living conditions at the closed Turkish-Syrian border.¹⁷ The high percentage of women among the displaced reflects the large number of men who have either left Syria or have been killed or arrested.

Rima who waited almost two years with her five year old son in the government-controlled part of Aleppo for family reunification with her husband in Germany, described how men have gradually disappeared from Aleppo, particularly from summer 2015 onwards:

“Waiting alone in Aleppo a lot had changed. Only women and old persons were left. Except for those who study, all men have to join the army but many fled the country instead, mostly to Turkey but also to Germany. Only few men remain and continue their studies. If you walk in the streets, you see only women and occasionally one man among them. It is a very unnatural situation.”

Rana, 66, explained: “The young men in Syria all leave. Men have to join the army, women don't. Once in the army, men are sent to the front and have to kill. If they refuse, they will be killed. What shall they do? Of course they all hide or flee; it is their right to defend themselves.”

Some families manage to reunite with parts of their extended families or social networks in remote areas. In most cases, however, displacement entails a total loss of the former structure of social relations. This is harder for women to cope with than for men because traditional norms and the gendered division of spaces provide plenty of opportunities for men to go out and communicate with the outside world whereas conformant women are largely confined to the house which restricts their opportunities to choose whom they want to relate to.

The absence of husbands and fathers forces (and enables) women and girls to adopt responsibilities which were formerly assigned to males. Moreover, the non-availability of male refugees as providers and protectors has increased women's labor participation rate which stood at a low 22% before the crisis.¹⁸ Both change factors have triggered shifts in

¹⁷ VDC 2016b: 16-18.

¹⁸ Care 2015:15-16.

traditional gender roles. Some authors argue that shifts in roles through war may open up new spaces for women's agency.¹⁹ Other researchers are more cautious, citing findings which indicate that changes in gender roles are often incomplete as women remain in charge of most household duties while men who lose their role as sole breadwinners often feel emasculated – a development may create or exacerbate family conflicts.²⁰

The flight of male refugees entails also a loss of social control and protection. Some women experience this as a chance to gain more freedom. Most women, however, say that they feel lonely, isolated, overburdened with responsibilities, and vulnerable²¹ because they fear that people might start gossiping and harm their reputation. To remain in conformity with social norms, some families appoint a male family member to replace the father during his absence, usually a brother or the eldest son.

Despite modifications in gender related practices which offer women more role and career options than before, prevalent gender norms and stereotypes seem to change at a much slower pace.²² Certain ideas, e.g. that women and girls should not live alone, continue to prevail. Many men and women subscribe to the notion that women and girls are in need of male 'protection' and 'control' to preserve their 'honor' and the reputation of the family. There are many variations in how these notions are translated into practice but at least in conservative families women are still expected to confine themselves largely to private spaces and to limit their interaction with male strangers.

In addition, the lack of male protection increases women's and girls' fears – and actual risks - of being sexually harassed, abducted or raped. Cases of sexualized gender based violence (SGBV) are reported not only from checkpoints, but also from collective IDP shelters and at different kinds of aid supply facilities.²³ Fearing stigmatization, rejection and exclusion, most women and girls never talk openly to their families about these experiences.

3. Family Separation and German Immigration Policies

3.1 Legal framework and asylum policies

Article 16 of the German constitution guarantees the right to asylum in line with the Geneva Convention. Both the constitution and German asylum laws differentiate between asylum seekers and refugees. German law grants three different levels of protection: (1) *Refugee status* in accordance with Art.1 of the Geneva Convention as defined in Art.2(e) of Directive 2011/95/EC - (2) *Subsidiary protection status* as defined in Art.2(g) of Directive 2011/95/EC for those who would face a real risk of suffering serious harm when returning to their home countries - (3) *Permission to stay for humanitarian reasons* which are, for example, granted to sick people or unaccompanied minors.²⁴ The competent authority for receiving and

¹⁹ See Snyder 2009.

²⁰ Care 2015: 14; Care 2016: 5. The same told us social workers in Syrian refugee camps in Jordan.

²¹ See UNHCR 2014: 45-50.

²² Breslin/Kelly 2010.

²³ Interviews with social workers and activists who need to remain anonymous for safety. See also SREO 2015.

²⁴ Bitoulas/Juchno 2016: 3; see also Ostrand 2015: 259.

processing applications for asylum is the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF).²⁵

The increasing numbers of refugees and asylum seekers have triggered significant changes in the constitution and asylum legislation at several stages, particularly in 1993, in 2015 and in 2016. In addition, several modifications were made to bring German legislation into conformity with EU directives. Most of these changes have severely affected the family life of refugees in Germany.

In 1993, Article 16 (GG Art. 16a/§1) of the German constitution was substantially changed, when the so called “Third State Rule” was introduced: henceforth, refugees who had passed through another EU state or a safe non-EU state on their journey to Germany were not eligible for asylum status anymore.²⁶ Since 2003, the “Third State Rule” has been further restricted the introduction of the so-called “Dublin II” and “Dublin III” regulations of the EU which prescribe that refugees have to apply for asylum in the country of entry into the EU, regardless of whether they want to stay there or to continue their trip to another EU state.²⁷ The Dublin regulations affect many refugees heading for Germany via the Mediterranean and Balkan routes. Refugees arriving in Italy, for instance, have to apply there for asylum even if they have relatives in Germany whom they want to join. If they continue their journey, the German authorities are allowed to send them back to Italy. The German government announced in summer 2015 the suspension of the Dublin procedure for Syrian refugees but started soon to apply it again in November 2015. Since then, many refugees in Germany have been notified that they will have to return to the EU states where they were first registered. Although most of them were actually not sent back, the lack of certainty about their future remains a severe source of distress for many Syrians who are still waiting for asylum and hope to bring their family, too.

3.2 Impacts of Family separation and obstacles to family reunification

3.2.1 Entitlements and restrictions of family reunification

Refugees with a close relative in Germany are legally entitled to family reunion. This covers, however, only spouses, minor children as well as parents of unaccompanied minor refugees.²⁸ Children above 18 and other family members are not permitted to reunite with their families, although organizations such as the UNHCR advise to facilitate family

²⁵ BAMF website in English: <http://www.bamf.de/EN/DasBAMF/dasbamf-node.html>.

²⁶ This meant that only persons who directly arrived at a German airport, coming from an “unsafe third state” outside the EU would have a right to apply for asylum

²⁷ No 604/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013.

²⁸ According to Section 36 (2) of the German Residence Act, other family members can only apply for family reunification if the rejection of their application would present an “exceptional hardship”, which cannot base on reasons like displacement or financial stress but on the proof that the relative needs care that can only be provided by family members in Germany. Auswärtiges Amt 2016. There are no official numbers of successful applications for these cases available, but most probably they are very few since as a whole, until end of September 2015 only around 18 400 Syrians entered via family reunification. Deutscher Bundestag 2016.

reunification for extended family members to provide protection and better opportunities for refugees to rebuild their lives.²⁹

Because of Dublin regulations, since the closure of the Balkan route, around 60 000 refugees (most of them Syrians) are stranded in Greece. According to a UNCHR Survey in Greece in January 2016, almost half of them arrived there seeking reunification with family members in other EU countries.³⁰ If persons have a core family member with refugee status in Germany (or any other EU country) they are entitled to legal reunion under the EU's Dublin Regulation, but procedures are slow and not prioritized.³¹ Refugees in Greece interviewed in July 2016 by Amnesty International had been given appointments for 2017,³² which means that reunification is still far away. These long waiting periods deprive refugee children - who have often already been out of school for months or even years due to the war - even longer of their right to education.

In Germany, only persons who are formally acknowledged as refugees are allowed to apply for reunification with nuclear family members in Syria. Since 2013 onwards, Syrians in average have had to wait 10 months to submit their asylum application and another five months for being granted asylum.³³

Applications for family reunification have to be filed with the Foreign Office via a special online system within three months following the notification that refugee status has been granted.³⁴ If refugees fail to apply within the stipulated period, they have to pay for the travel expenses and livelihood of their relatives, a condition which they usually cannot meet.

In addition, the German government has recently put into effect several legal and procedural changes which have effectively restricted access of Syrian refugees to asylum status. One is the so-called "asylum package II" from February 2016. It strips refugees with a subsidiary protection status of the right to apply for family reunification until March 2018 and limits the duration of their residence permits from three years to one year. At the same time, the BAMF changed decisions in asylum applications of Syrians. While before, almost 100% of Syrians were obtaining full refugee status, in 2016, around 40% were granted only subsidiary protection.³⁵ Many refugees who had already spent a year or more in Germany waiting for their turn to formally apply for asylum and later for family reunification were shocked to realize that they were no longer able to reunite with their wives and children in Syria in case they were only granted subsidiary protection. Samir, a husband and father of three children, who has been granted only subsidiary protection, feels trapped:

²⁹ UNHCR 2014: 28.

³⁰ UNHCR 2016b.

³¹ Amnesty International 2016a; Amnesty International 2016b: 14-16; Karas 2016.

³² Amnesty International 2016b: 16-17.

³³ BAMF 2016a: 24-25.

³⁴ See Auswärtiges Amt 2016a.

³⁵ BAMF 2016b:2. See also ECRE 2016; Pro Asyl 2016. At the same time, officials of the BAMF estimated that there might arrive around 500 000 family members of Syrians via reunification which was often cited by xenophobic right-wing groups as a sign for failed politics.

“If I go back, they will kill me. We didn’t come to let our wives and children die in the war”, he says. “I read in the decision that I couldn’t convince them in the interview that I am a refugee. What else shall happen in Syria? It is clear for everybody that Syria is destroyed and that I didn’t come here as a tourist but fled from death and murder and war. It is my duty to be with my family. Why do they separate us?”

Until October 2016, almost 20,000 refugees in Germany, mostly Syrians, had filed official complaints against the subsidiary status with German courts. Until November 2016, more than 1,400 court verdicts had been issued, ruling that the subsidiary status was not in line with German and EU legislation. In response, the BAMF has started to appeal against the judgments³⁶ which imposes time-consuming law suits on many refugees. Some human rights and migrant support organizations suspect that the German government tries to reduce the number of refugees through undermining the right to family reunification by deliberately delaying family reunification procedures and introducing ever more bureaucratic obstacles.³⁷

3.2.2 Obstacles to reunification and risks involved for family members left behind

In parallel to applications for family reunification filed in Germany, family members abroad have to apply online for an appointment to submit their own written applications and a personal interview at a German embassy.³⁸ Since the German embassy in Damascus has been closed since 2012, Syrians have to cross the border and turn to German embassies in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, or elsewhere in the region. Going to Turkey or to Jordan has become extremely difficult for Syrian citizens because of the demanded entry visas.

The waiting periods for family reunification interviews in neighboring countries are very long: In autumn 2015 Syrians had to wait for up to 16 months for their interview with the German embassy in Beirut.³⁹ As a result of the time-consuming and extremely bureaucratic procedures, some families end up being separated for three or even four years. Ahmad, a 43 year old former university lecturer, arrived in Germany in 2014. His wife’s interview with the German embassy in Beirut is scheduled for summer 2017, which means that her reunification visa is expected to be issued sometime in 2018. In some cases, the interview appointment comes too late. Ahmad’s friend Jabbar, for example, who arrived in Germany in 2015 and has not yet been recognized as a refugee learnt in August 2016 that his wife and his two children had been killed in an airstrike in Aleppo.

After the family members have succeeded to submit all documents and complete the interview, they have to go back to Syria or to their current places of residence. There, they have to wait again because the processing of the submitted files may take up to eight months or even more. During this time, they need a valid telephone number and an email-address to be able to communicate with the German embassies.

The collection of the documents required for the application for family reunification can entail life risks or be totally impossible. For example, Syrians with passports issued after the 1st of January 2015 in the provinces Raqqa, Hasaka or Deir ez-Zour which are governed by

³⁶ Informationsverband Asyl & Migration 2016.

³⁷ Flüchtlingsrat Niedersachsen 2016.

³⁸ Auswärtiges Amt 2016b.

³⁹ Deutscher Bundestag 2016.

the IS or other insurgent groups are requested to bring a new passport issued by an authority in a different province. However, meeting this request is in many cases impossible for persons living in these areas. In other cases, family members who have fled to neighboring countries have difficulties to renew their expired passports. There are documented cases of women with children who had to leave relatively secure shelters in Turkey and travel back to Syria to renew their passports.⁴⁰ In other cases, family members have problems to collect personal status documents such as marriage or birth certificates. All documents are not only required to be translated into English or German but need also a pre-certification stamp from the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs which has to be issued no later than 2012.⁴¹ For Syrians from rebel-held areas and those who are listed as opponents of the regime, the appearance in a government institution to apply for documents and stamps can be extremely risky.

Laila, a 53 year old medical doctor, explained to us: “You never know... for some of my friends it was no problem to ask the authorities for something but others were detained.” For Randa (26), the required documents made it impossible to follow her husband to Germany via the official reunification program. They had married only shortly before her husband deserted from the Syrian Army with no other choice than to leave the country. Due to the fact that army conscripts in Syria are not allowed to marry during their military service, Randa and her husband resorted to a customary form of marriage called *zawaj 'urfi* at a religious leader, which is quite common in Syria and does not require official registration.⁴² Couples often decide only later to register an 'urfi marriage. Randa, however, had no option to register her marriage since the Syrian government considers her husband a criminal. Lacking registered marriage documents, she could not file for family reunification and had to flee to Germany on her own via the Mediterranean Sea and the Balkan route. As several studies show, the dangerous route is even more dangerous for women and girls travelling alone, because they can be exposed to various forms of SGBV.⁴³ Zein (29) who had to face similar problems expressed her frustration:

“So many people left without anything and they do not know if they will ever come back. When you leave your house, you don't plan to go and of course you don't have everything you need with you. Some come back and find their house damaged or destroyed. I got married in 2013 when I was in a rebel-held area. How am I supposed to get a marriage certificate?”

Family members who managed to collect and submit all necessary documents and have finally obtained their reunification visa usually travel to Germany as soon as possible. The journey represents another hurdle for many families, because the German government does not cover the travel expenses or provides loans.

⁴⁰ Deutscher Bundestag 2016.

⁴¹ See Deutsche Botschaft der Bundesrepublik Deutschland Beirut 2016.

⁴² Van Eijk 2016: 144.

⁴³ UNHCR/UNFPA/WRC 2016: 7-8; Care 2016: 7.

3.3 Family separation within Germany

Since the beginning of 2016, the German government has increasingly restricted the mobility of refugees which makes it difficult for them to reunite with their extended families and sometimes even with their closest relatives. All refugees who arrive after spring 2016 are supposed to be sent to centralized reception centers which are operated by the Federal States. A nation-wide system called EASY determines the federal state and the shelter where the asylum seeker is eventually accommodated. The geographical distribution follows a certain quota ("Königsteiner Schlüssel").⁴⁴

On 6 August 2016, a new "integration law" came into effect in Germany to ensure equal distribution among the federal estates and to avoid social imbalances in certain areas. One important part of this new law (German Residency Act §12a/1)⁴⁵ prescribes that all asylum seekers who have been accepted as refugees after 1 January 2016 are required to stay in the federal state to which they have been assigned for a period of three years. This obstructs the reunification of families with members who came to Germany separately and at different times.

Human Rights and advocacy organizations like "Pro Asyl" are criticising the new regulation as hampering integration and as violating Article 26 of the Geneva Convention as well as Article 33 of EU regulations which stipulate that refugees and persons who have received subsidiary protection status have the right of freedom of movement.⁴⁶ The European Court of Justice (ECJ) on the Residency Act concerning a person with subsidiary protection ruled in spring 2016 that restrictions on the right of freedom of movement needed to be based on substantiated justifications. For example, integration needs of refugees and other migrants have to be considered and it has to be proved that restrictions of movement do not hamper the integration process.⁴⁷ Pro Asyl warns also that the assignment of a compulsory place of residence can counteract any integration measure because refugees are usually more likely to enter the labour market or attend integration classes if they have access to information and assistance provided by family members and other networks.⁴⁸

The restrictions on mobility create various problems for many Syrian families, especially when core family members did not flee as a group and arrived in Germany at different times in different places. In this case, families may be subjected to long-term separation inside Germany. The family of Majeda (24), a former student of economics in Syria, is an example. Due to separation during the flight, she, her parents, two sisters and a brother arrived in Germany in the beginning of 2015 at different times in different federal states. Majeda, her mother and her handicapped sister Ola (14) were assigned to one state, her other sister Khitam (22) to a second state and her 28 year old brother and father who became blind during the flight to a third state, around 600 Km from the place where Majeda, her mother and her youngest sister live. The individual family members eventually obtained refugee status at different dates in different states between December 2015 and October 2016. The

⁴⁴ BAMF 2016b: 16-17.

⁴⁵ See Integration Act 2016.http://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/aufenthg_2004/BJNR195010004.html.

⁴⁶ Pro Asyl 2016b.

⁴⁷ EDAL 2016.

⁴⁸ Pro Asyl 2016b:5.

new residence regulations apply thus to some but not to all of them. In principle, it is possible for nuclear family members to reunite in cases of exceptional hardship. This was, however, not applicable to Khitam and her brother because they are above 18 and therefore not legally considered as nuclear family members and not eligible for reunification. Only with the help of social workers and committed volunteers, the family eventually managed to obtain an exceptional reunification order on the ground that both the youngest sister and the blind father are in need of care by family members. As of November 2016, the family was, however, not yet transferred to one place due to the unavailability of suitable housing.

Another case is Ayat (56), a teacher and women's rights activist from Damascus. Being divorced, she was sharing a flat with her 25 year old daughter Wiam in Syria. In 2013, Wiam managed to flee to Germany. When Ayat was threatened with imprisonment in early 2016, she decided to escape to Germany as well. She was not eligible for family reunification because her daughter was over 18. When Ayat arrived in Germany, she was assigned to a different state than the one where her daughter lives. Following the new immigration law, it will probably take her around three years to be able to move to her daughter's place.

Almas (24), a housewife and mother of three from the suburbs of Damascus, arrived in Germany two years ago with her husband and three children (9, 5, 3 years old). During the first year, they stayed in a sports hall and were then transferred to several other shelters. With the help of friends, they found a flat in another state in Germany and moved there in February 2016. Recently, they were notified that they will have to move back within weeks to the state where they applied for asylum. Almas is desperate because she finally felt a kind of stability in her life and fears to be transferred back to a mass shelter with a hundred people in one room.

The dynamics of the flight as well as coincidence tend to determine where people finally arrive. Scholz has shown for instance, that when an illegal migrant runs out of money or is detected by the authorities of a country that was only intended to be a transit country, this country may eventually become the destination country.⁴⁹ The same applies to cities. In the chaos of 2013 and 2014 some refugees were able to make their own way to other cities in Germany or even other countries, while others were stopped by police. Officials often did not know how to react and acted in different ways. At the train station of Cologne/Bonn airport, for example, where between September 2015 to April 2016 around 30 000 refugees arrived from the Austrian-German border, among them increasing numbers of women and children,⁵⁰ refugees were transferred with buses to different reception centers within the federal state of North Rhine Westphalia. In most cases, the refugees did not even know the name of the city. Nagat, who arrived in November 2015, was shocked when she realized that she was sent to North-West Germany, although her husband was staying close to Munich in the very South. With the help of volunteers, she was able to buy another train ticket back to Munich. Similar experiences had many others, who arrived at this station. Around 30 per cent of them continued travelling on their own to other federal states and cities where they could join relatives or friends. Others tried to continue to other destinations in Europe or Scandinavia.

⁴⁹ Scholz 2013: 84-85, 122-123.

⁵⁰ This shift in the gender ratio probably happened due to the announced new restrictions for family reunification and time-consuming procedures for reunification.

Since February 2016, however, these “free movements” are forbidden in Germany, mainly due to security reasons because some persons registered in different cities under different names. Newly arriving refugees are now always delegated to the central reception centers first. Reunification with other family members who arrived in Germany before has become more difficult. Zein, for instance, who arrived in the end of 2014, was happy when her husband managed to escape from Syria in the beginning of 2015 but had to wait for six months after his arrival in Germany before she could settle with him in the same location. Siwar (28), who arrived in Germany one year and a half after her husband, was sent to a shelter about 100 km away from her husband.

Others try to circumvent the bureaucratic obstacles. Samira (46) who arrived in Germany with her six year old daughter has two other grown-up daughters who arrived several months before and were accommodated in two different parts of Germany at a distance of roughly 500 km. One of her daughters, Nour (21), was ill and had to spend more than once several weeks in hospital. Since Nour lived alone with her two children and had nobody to take care of them during her stay in hospital, Samira decided not to register and to stay some weeks illegally in Nour's city to take care of her daughter and grandchildren. German friends of Nour offered her a place in their home. Originally, Samira wanted to pass Germany only as a transit country in order to join her husband and son who escaped to Sweden, but when Nour fell ill, she decided to stay in Germany to help her daughter. When she registered some weeks later, she was sent to an accommodation in a city around 200 km away from Nour. Knowing that it might take three years before she could join her daughter again, she left the reception center and travelled (illegally) to her husband in Sweden.

4. Gender-related Impacts and Coping Strategies after Reunification

4.1 Common problems after reunification

In general, family reunification entails enormous emotional and psychological challenges. After two or three years of separation, family members may experience a gap of experiences. The family member who has arrived in Germany first has already built networks of friendships and acquaintances, which are completely unknown to the newcomers. Distrust may develop between spouses as to whether the partner has been loyal despite the long period of separation. They may feel insecure as to whether they are still attractive for their partner and able to resume their sexual relations after such a long time. Many refugees feel a strong wish to revive the past, and find it difficult to accept that they are not the same as before in light of radically different circumstances. Some women may have become more self-confident after having adopted the role of the breadwinner and head of the family for a prolonged period of time. In some cases, the eldest son has assumed the role of the father during the long time of separation. In other cases, the eldest daughter has become the only interlocutor with the outside world and the most important source of support for the family.

Most women and girls who have newly arrived in Germany experience the challenges resulting from these changes as distressing. They are glad to be finally in a safe place and expect to return to “normal” life as soon as possible. However, many have to realize that returning to any kind of normality takes much more time than expected due to emotional but also other reasons. Many are surprised by the lengthy bureaucratic procedures and find

their living conditions very far from what they expected. “Everything is difficult and slow”, says Fatema, a 32 year mother of four children. “It took us half a year to place my teenage daughter in a school and one year to find a kindergarten place for the four year old twins. I have to care about them and have no time to learn German.” Fatema is, nevertheless, lucky because she is living in a decent apartment.

Due to the shortage of proper housing facilities, many newly reunited refugee families were and are being placed in crowded mass accommodation shelters such as sports halls. Housam (39) and Mariam (29), a couple from Qamishli, arrived in Germany in 2015 and still live with their three children (3, 5, 2 years old) in a sports hall. They can hardly bear the noise and lack of privacy any longer. Plenty of refugees have been and are still being sent from one reception center to another for weeks and months.

As the majority of persons accommodated in sport halls are male, men dominate the space while women usually do not have any specific spaces for retreat and although showers are gender segregated, they can often not be locked.⁵¹ The lack of privacy creates also protection risks for women and girls and exposes them to SGBV and other violations of their rights.⁵² Counseling offices have reported cases of sexual harassment, in particular if single women arrive alone.⁵³ Women with headscarves have to wear the scarf there all the time and pregnant women often have to sleep for months on camp beds. Hanin, a volunteer who takes care of pregnant women in sport halls describes their situation as follows:

“Most women I met who arrived pregnant appear depressed and apathetic; some cry the entire day. In most cases, this changes after giving birth and the housing office manages to offer them a flat or at least a separate room in another accommodation when they leave the hospital. But sometimes, they have to return to the sports hall which is a nightmare for them. One fell ill immediately and had to return to hospital for two more weeks. It is also very difficult to organize the preparations for delivery. In the hospital there is not always a translator. Since it is not common in Syria that husbands accompany their wives to hospital to give birth, many women without an extended family come alone. Even if the husband would like to join her, he is often unable to do so because he has to take care of smaller children which he cannot leave with extended family members.”

Many women we met miss their kin and friends. Care in a broader sense, defined as “multidirectional flows of emotional, personal, practical and financial support via the circulation of people, ideas and material objects”⁵⁴ varies in form and structure in different families⁵⁵. The focus on the immediate nuclear family which is not only emphasized in German asylum policies but also in general in Western concepts and social constructions of the ‘family’ ignores the importance which extended family members and kin in general may have.⁵⁶

Bureaucratic requirements are time-consuming and exhausting. Refugees often feel lost in what they perceive as a jungle of bureaucracy. The system is intransparent and inefficient,

⁵¹ See Rabe 2015:10.

⁵² See Commission on Human Rights 2006.

⁵³ See Rabe 2015:10.

⁵⁴ Merla 2014: 129.

⁵⁵ See Bernardes 1986.

⁵⁶ See Georgas/Mylonas/Bafiti 2001; Fonseca/Ormon 2008: 106; Baldassar/Merla 2014.

involving many different bodies which do not communicate with each other so that procedures are extremely slow. This creates an atmosphere of uncertainty and insecurity, of powerlessness and disappointment. A huge amount of voluntary helpers who assist refugees in bureaucratic procedures and daily life has a mitigating effect, but their number is not sufficient and decreased during 2016 due to spreading islamophobic and xenophobic tendencies as well as exhaustion among many volunteers who felt that they substitute state obligations.

Many women feel isolated. Zein and her husband who first stayed for six months in a shared accommodation with wooden walls between families' beds were then transferred to a small three-room flat in a little village at the Belgium border which they have to share with two other couples. Zein describes the previous distressing lack of privacy: "Since one year my husband and I have never been alone in a house and I find it hard that I never can be alone in a room" but also the equally distressing social control in the new accommodation by their fellow residents. One of the two couples is very religious and criticizes her for neither praying nor wearing a veil, while the other couple are enthusiastic supporters of the Assad regime:

"They represent exactly what made me flee and now I have to live with them without any privacy. I try not to have confrontations, only hello and good-bye. When the man enters the kitchen, I go out."

Since she will only be entitled to attend language courses after her recognition as a refugee and no volunteer language courses are available in the little village, she and her husband have nothing to do but to wait: "It's like you escaped from a prison and come to be in another prison. It's just a more sophisticated prison."

Zein worries a lot about her future and fears that after her recognition as a refugee the new integration law will force her to stay another three years in that little village with hardly any working opportunities instead of moving to the city in which her parents and siblings stay. This and the traumatizing memories of the atrocities she saw in Syria and which are now haunting her in nightmares, make her feel stuck, wasting her life with waiting: "My patience is running out because so much time is being wasted. You've gone through hell for five years, escaped death and come here to stay alive and start a new life. It got me to a dead-end and I have to start all over again from zero. I have to make so much effort to establish myself and get the government to like me as a 'good person'. This is insane. I need support." A month ago, she and her husband were able to move and stay at her parents' house, but she is not sure if they are actually allowed to do so or if they break a law, because they received contradictory information from different officials which she finds extremely confusing.

Sometimes, families are re-separated after reunification. This is the case with Ibtisam, a 40 year old Syrian woman who has a crippled foot which limits her mobility. When she arrived in Germany, it was obvious that she needed to be with her husband to help her with all the daily tasks. However, Ibtisam was placed in a shelter at one end of the city and her husband in another shelter at a distance of about 15km which is difficult to reach by public transportation. When we met her, she was already three months in this situation with no solution in sight. Ibtisam said: "I lost hope. Without my husband, I cannot attend a language course and transportation is too costly for him to come every day and pick me up."

Husbands, fathers and brothers on the other hand who escaped to Europe on their own are making very different experiences. Some arrive in Europe with preconceived ideas and prejudices about the lack of sexual morality in Europe due to the acceptance of extramarital sex. But after having overcome a first “cultural shock”, their perceptions are questioned and they develop more differentiated perspectives. Wael, for instance, anticipates that the difference in experiences will become an issue when his family arrives. He tries to prepare himself as well as his wife and children: “I tell them that they may be shocked by certain things which they will see when they arrive. [...] To be frank, I would also like my wife to be a bit more modern. She is wearing a headscarf and a long jacket, and I find this good but I would like her to wear more modern clothes when she comes to Germany, like blue jeans. And I would like to teach her how to ride a bike.”

4.2 Gender-related effects and re-orientation

Some authors argue that gender relations become more egalitarian as a result of (forced) migration⁵⁷ because women’s economic power tends to increase while men’s financial contributions to the family income are often reduced as a result of unemployment or low-paid jobs.⁵⁸ They conclude that as a result, men lose the ability to maintain complete control of decision-making in the family and may gradually become more involved in domestic tasks.⁵⁹ Our findings suggest, however, a more differentiated picture with conditions and effects that differ from family to family. Some women experience in fact an improvement of their gender status such as Nadine (25) who was the first to be offered a language course. Her husband is now taking care of the children while she is at school. Other refugee women feel isolated and more restricted in their freedom than in Syria. Ubayda (49), for example, is a rather conservative woman and so is her husband. In Syria, she has frequently visited kin and neighbors. In Germany, she feels often lonely and complains that her husband does not take her out of the house. The radically different social environment is difficult to adapt to for many women and may produce both empowering and disempowering effects.⁶⁰

Rihab expresses the ambiguity she feels about her experience. When asked whether the prolonged separation from her family has increased her agency, Rihab’s answer is mixed: “On the one hand, I feel more free and more respected”, she says. “When I need to go out, I do not have to ask anyone for permission.” On the other hand, she feels restricted and powerless because of her refugee status:

“For months, I did not know whether I would be sent to Italy. I am a recognized asylum seeker now, but I have been separated from my daughters for more than two years. This has all been extremely exhausting. Sometimes I feel sad and depressed and so guilty that I fall ill. I cannot sleep and I am unable to follow up on my German. This is a big problem, because I feel extremely powerless when I do not understand the language. I have been here for two years and I still depend on other people’s goodwill when I have to deal with papers and documents. Each time when they ask me about what I want to do in the future, I think about the life, which

⁵⁷ See Pease 2009; Handagneu-Sotelo/Messner 1994; Handagneu-Sotelo 1992; Kofman et al 2000: 22; Shahidian 1999.

⁵⁸ Pease 2009: 80.

⁵⁹ Handagneu_Sotelo & Messner 1994; Pease 2009: 94.

⁶⁰ See Martin 2004.

I lost. I loved my work, to earn my own money and to support the family. Now I depend on social aid, and I find it is against my dignity”.

To overcome her depression and feelings of guilt, Rihab is trying to build a new network of friendships and social contacts. She also keeps herself busy sewing for friends and works sometimes as an intern at a kindergarten next door..

Asma, 28 years old and a mother of four, has seized the opportunity to break free of the patronizing and oppressive control of her actions and movements which her father and mother in law had imposed on her in Syria and tried to continue to impose in Germany. She came to Germany together with her husband and children in 2015. They were soon joined by her parents-in-law. Social workers tried to find a permanent accommodation for the entire family to allow for more flexible family care arrangements. However, neither Asma nor her husband were willing to stay together with the old people. In a four-eye conversation with a social worker, Asma explained that her father in law was a violent person and that already back in Syria she had wished that he would live in a different place. In the end, the two nuclear families were separated and placed in two different apartments in different and distant parts of the city. Asma was satisfied with this arrangement. Her main problem is now the language. “I have a lot of housework and the children need much energy and time”, she says. “If I knew German better, I would certainly feel stronger.” Mariam decided to get a divorce when she realized that the monthly allowances for her and her children are independent from those of her husband and that living alone with children in Germany is much easier than in Syria.

5. Conclusion

Our paper has demonstrated that changing German asylum policies and practices increasingly restricts reunification prospects for newly arrived Syrian family members. New regulations for subsidiary protection effectively deprive a large number of Syrians of their right to bring their wives and children safely to Germany and the lengthy bureaucratic processes severely obstruct reunification for even more families who have the right to apply for it. Family members left behind in Syria are mostly women and children who live in the difficult and dangerous circumstances of armed conflict which expose women in particular to many risks and human rights violations. Bureaucratic requirements for family reunification such as the obligation to collect official documents expose them to even greater risks, particularly in war zones and in cases in which the husband has fled from state persecution. The concept of the “nuclear” family prohibits the reunification of extended families, although these play often an important role in the family’s care arrangements. Being separated even in Germany itself has a particularly negative effect on women who can no longer rely on the help of siblings and other extended family members for childcare and other domestic duties. Furthermore, it can also increase their distress, can obstruct their ability to overcome traumatic experiences and hampers integration. Many Syrian refugee women and families in Germany cannot find appropriate accommodation and have to spend months up to a full year in mass shelters without sufficient privacy and protection. For women who had experienced traumatizing events back home and/or during the flight psychological help is only limited available. Emotionally and physically exhausted, many

women find difficulties to study German, others have no access to language courses which constitutes an obstacle for them to know their rights, take their own decisions and make use of the opportunities that may come along with the forced migration. Arabic-speaking, professionally trained female social workers who accompany women and girls upon their arrival in Germany are rarely available. The same applies to badly needed counseling for spouses and parents to help them to prepare for and cope with potential challenges after reunification in the new environment. Simplifying family reunification procedures and drop requirements, which put the lives of applicants in danger, would help many refugees. The concept of the nuclear family as a basis for reunification should be revised. Women who travel alone with children should be offered housing in women-only units, where they can move more freely and cook their own meals. Newly reunited families should not be placed in mass shelters either but in individual apartments or housing units which are in line with their special needs. Self-help groups where women and girls can exchange about their experiences could also have a positive psychological effect.

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