

## From Integration to Belonging? Exploring the Trajectory of Integration for Short-term Settled Refugee Women in Berlin

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### Abstract

Since 2015, Germany has welcomed over one million asylum seekers across its borders. While much has been written about their arrival - and the country's initial response - there remains very little research on subsequent integration efforts. Existing literature on refugee integration in Europe too often fails to acknowledge the ways in which women refugees may benefit from or be disadvantaged by established institutional integration narratives and initiatives. This paper therefore, has three main aims: first, to provide a case study that prioritises the perspectives of refugee women living in Berlin as experts re their own experiences; second, to fill a research gap in refugee and migrant integration studies through focusing on the first five years of protracted displacement; third, to reassess the trajectory of integration in light of semi-structured interviews with nine refugee women, aged between 19 and 35. Crucially, the paper emphasises the agency of the interviewees in shaping their unique integration process and outcome. As a project with feminist foundations, this focus on the agency of women refugees, in contrast to their supposed status as vulnerable recipients of aid and sympathy, is of paramount importance.

### Keywords

integration, refugees, gender, Berlin, belonging

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## 1. Introduction

On 24 August 2015, the German government, led by Chancellor Angela Merkel, 'opened the country's borders' to forced migrants mainly fleeing conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Prior to her decision, large numbers of displaced persons had already arrived in Greece, Italy, and the Balkan states, many with the hope of reaching Germany.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, in 2015 alone, Germany accepted nearly 900,000 newcomers, of whom 50,000 were relocated to its capital, Berlin.<sup>2</sup>

However, despite such a large-scale inflow, very little research has been done to understand the experience of forced migrant settlement in Germany since 2015, with even less attention paid to Berlin. As such, this study seeks to build on the research into refugee integration to include a specific focus on women who arrived in Germany during the so-called 'refugee crisis' of 2015. While research into the integration experiences of women refugees elsewhere has been conducted, there exists only limited investigation into the lives and opinions of female forced migrants residing in Europe. This paper has three main aims: first, to provide a case study that prioritises the perspectives of refugee women living in Berlin as experts in their own experiences; second, to fill a research gap in refugee integration studies through focusing on the first five years of protracted displacement; third, to reassess the trajectory of integration based on semi-structured interviews with nine refugee women, aged between 19 and 35.

The word 'refugee' is used in this paper to refer to an individual who had undergone refugee status determination and was granted refugee status in accordance with German law. To narrow the focus, this paper looks only at the experiences of women with refugee status living in Berlin. The terms 'forced migrant' and 'displaced person' are used to refer to all displaced people, regardless of the outcome of status determination procedures.

Several key terms related to integration used in scholarship, policy and public discourse are adopted throughout this paper. 'Integration', 'community', 'belonging' and 'home' are complex and problematic concepts that are often applied interchangeably to describe refugee and migrant settlement. The process of achieving 'integration' is often portrayed as an ideal roadmap that develops over time. From arriving as an individual outsider, a (forced) migrant may gradually join an existing community where she will gain confidence and cultural knowledge to a degree where she feels that she belongs in the national and/or local social fabric and begins to feel 'at home'. It is assumed that through this lengthy process, a refugee will become 'integrated' into the 'host' society. However, the present study will dissect this assumption from the perspective of women refugees who have developed their own trajectories of integration.

The definition of integration is shaped and interpreted by governments and civil society, in most cases with limited, if any, input from refugee and migrant communities themselves. Newcomers are required to accommodate themselves to this institutional narrative and the goal of 'integration' shapes much of the refugee experience: from learning the language to participating in community-building activities with local residents, refugees are expected to and applauded for 'getting involved' with their host society. While this may be beneficial for newcomers in a foreign country and culture, the emphasis in policy, guidelines and journalism is on attaining the vague title of 'integrated'. This paper intends to uncover whether this view of integration is shared by short-term settled refugee women in Berlin.

Scholars and researchers have recently moved towards a significantly more refugee-driven interpretation of 'integration'. The extensive work of Ager and Strang, McPherson and Seethaler has prioritised the views of refugees in the United Kingdom (UK), Australia, and small-town Germany, respectively. But there remains a distinct lack of any field research and analysis of the integration process, its beneficiaries, and its subjective success in the German capital of Berlin, particularly in the context of the so-called 'refugee crisis' in 2015. Furthermore, an examination of integration as a process with a start, middle and endpoint is yet to be conducted. This paper aims to fill the lacuna by combining the expertise of short-term settled women refugees living in Berlin with existing literature on the intertwined themes of integration and belonging. The focus of the field research is on gaining a thorough insight into the experiences of nine refugee women

1 Jane Freedman, 'Women's experience of forced migration: Gender-based forms of insecurity and the uses of "vulnerability"', in Jane Freedman, Zeynep Kivilcim and Nurcan Özgür Baklacioğlu (eds), *A Gendered Approach to the Syrian Refugee Crisis* (Routledge, 2017) 126.

2 OECD, *Working Together for Local Integration of Migrants and Refugees* (OECD Publishing, 2018) 26.

at various points in the integration process, attempting to outline a trajectory of integration.

In this paper, 'community' is used in both its spatial meaning - i.e. to describe a group of people 'living in one particular area' - and as a descriptor of identity - i.e. a group who are 'considered as a unit because of their common interests, socio-cultural identity, or nationality'.<sup>3</sup> The literature on migrant integration frequently uses the term as a synonym for the wider host society, but also refers to specific ethnic, religious, political, or any other identifier communities to which migrants are encouraged to become 'socially connected'.<sup>4</sup> Both community and 'the home' - defined as 'a dialogue that spans place and time, incorporating ideal concepts of home and the homeland, aspirations to return "home", and hopes to achieve a more stable exile'<sup>5</sup> - are associated with a sense of 'belonging' that is noticeably absent in most settings of displacement. A sense of 'belonging' is commonly associated with close relationships with people from diverse backgrounds in the local society wherein respect is mutual and values are shared.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, some see belonging as an emotional and psychological process that is shaped by personal understandings of the self and the place, space or community in which one 'belongs', or would like to 'belong'.<sup>7</sup> While reiterating much of this understanding of 'community', 'belonging' and 'home', many of the women interviewed for this paper provide an alternative view of how the corresponding emotions develop.

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3 Cambridge English Dictionary, 'Meaning of *community* in English'. Available at: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/community>.

4 Alistair Ager and Alison Strang, 'Indicators of Integration: Final Report', *Home Office Development and Practice Report, No. 28* (Research, Development and Statistics Directorate, 2004) 5.

5 Cathrine Brun and Anita Fábos, 'Making Homes in Limbo? A Conceptual Framework' (2015) 31(1) *Refugee* 12.

6 Alistair Ager and Alison Strang, 'Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework' (2008) 21(2) *Journal of Refugee Studies* 178.

7 Kathy Hogarth, 'Home without Security and Security without Home', *International Migration and Integration*, vol. 16 (2015); David W. McMillan and David M. Chavis, 'Sense of Community: A Definition and Theory' (1986) 14(1) *Journal of Community Psychology* 6; Melinda McPherson, "'I Integrate, Therefore I Am': Contesting the Normalizing Discourse of Integrationism through Conversations with Refugee Women' (2010) 23(4) *Journal of Refugee Studies* 546.

## 2. Literature Review

This paper builds on the work of scholars and practitioners in the field of migrant and refugee 'integration', 'community', 'belonging' and 'home'. These interrelated, and hotly contested, topics form the groundwork for theory in, and practice of, (forced) migrant settlement in a host country. Given the limited scope of this research, the focus of this section will be on defining 'integration' as a concept comprising multiple psychological, physical and emotional processes. I have chosen not to delve into the literature on 'local integration' as a 'durable solution', or its alternative 'resettlement', because the case of Germany since 2015 does not fit neatly into either category. 'Local integration' is predominantly used in analysis of refugees who choose to live in urban areas in the Global South, in contexts where they may otherwise reside in refugee camps and is thus inappropriate for this article.

### 2.1 Understanding integration

It is essential to begin with an understanding of 'integration', as a theory and an outcome, that can be challenged, reworked, or confirmed given the interviews conducted with refugee women in Berlin. Despite extensive research into refugee and migrant integration into host societies, a universal definition of the term is yet to be agreed upon. Described as a 'chaotic concept',<sup>8</sup> the term integration is contested and broad in its use and impact. The general understanding of (forced) migrant integration has changed little since Patterson's description of a process of adaptation and acceptance by both newcomers and locals, but where migrants must adapt the most.<sup>9</sup> However, more recent studies offer alternative insights. This paper further adds to the literature by providing a specific focus on short-term settled women refugees in Berlin.

The Council of Europe stresses the influence of national policies on local understandings of migrants and integration.<sup>10</sup> Valtonen notes that the integration process is influenced by the institutions and attitudes of the host society as well as the capacities of individual newcomers.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, some scholars and organisations divide integration into categories, such as structural, social and cultural integration. Vermeulen and Penninx include cultural adjustment, shared norms and social contact between immigrants and natives as indicative of successful integration.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, structural and socio-cultural integration are intertwined, with research demonstrating that, for example, refugees and migrants with stable employment are also more involved in cultural aspects of their host society.<sup>13</sup> From her analysis of the refugee integration literature, Kovacs concluded that integration 'involves a transition from one society to another and is mediated by the unbounded intricacy of human experience'.<sup>14</sup> More explicitly, Da Lomba finds integration to be a 'multidimensional two-way process that starts upon arrival', comprising both public and private elements.<sup>15</sup> In combination, Kovacs' and Da Lomba's definitions provide a solid foundation for analysis of the integration process.

Ager and Strang's work on the indicators of integration is particularly pertinent for this paper inasmuch as it establishes several categories to guide policy-making and integration practices.<sup>16</sup> However, Bakewell contends that policy-focused studies often over-emphasise differences between 'forced migrants' and 'host communities'. By fixating on their identity as 'refugees' or 'forced migrants', researchers fail to see their 'normality': 'we make them exceptional and exclude them from our "mainstream" theories'.<sup>17</sup> This critique

8 Viviane Robinson, 'Defining and Measuring Successful Refugee Integration', *Proceedings of ECRE International Conference on Integration of Refugees in Europe, Antwerp* (ECRE, November 1998) 118.

9 Sheila Patterson, *Dark Strangers: A Study of West Indians in London* (Penguin, 1965).

10 Council of Europe, *Measurements and Indicators of Integration* (Council of Europe Publishing, 1997), 1.

11 Kathleen Valtonen, 'From the Margin to the Mainstream: Conceptualizing Refugee Settlement Processes' (2004) 17(1) *Journal of Refugee Studies* 70.

12 Vermeulen and Penninx, *Immigrant Integration*, cited in UNDESA, 'Refugees and Social Integration in Europe' 10.

13 UNDESA, 'Refugees and Social Integration in Europe' 10.

14 Christina Kovacs, 'A critical approach to the production of academic knowledge on refugee integration in the global north' (*Refugee Studies Centre Working Paper Series*, no. 109 2015) 17.

15 Sylvie da Lomba, 'Legal Status and Refugee Integration: a UK Perspective' (2010) 23(4) *Journal of Refugee Studies* 417.

16 Alastair Ager and Alison Strang, 'Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework' (2008) 21(2) *Journal of Refugee Studies* 167.

17 Oliver Bakewell, 'Research Beyond Categories: The Importance of Policy Irrelevant Research into Forced Migration' (2008) 21(4) *Journal of Refugee Studies* 449.

is reiterated by Kovacs, who claims that the labels used in forced migration literature 'reinforce the sense of irreconcilable distance between refugees and non-refugees'.<sup>18</sup> While I fundamentally agree with these observations, the scope of this paper does not allow for a more in-depth conceptualisation of labels and their implications. It is, however, necessary to underline the policy-relevant approach of Ager and Strang's work, since this forms a key premise of my own research.

For the present study, the most relevant aspect of Ager and Strang's indicators of integration is 'social connections', defined as 'different social relationships and networks that help towards integration'.<sup>19</sup> As such, social connections constitute the private aspect of integration highlighted by Da Lomba. Furthermore, their detailed research also provides a useful framework for examining refugee integration. Their concept of 'social bridges' between refugees and local residents are considered an antidote to the possible 'silo'<sup>20</sup> effect of bonds between co-ethnic individuals. Ager and Strang contend that social bridges are instrumental in establishing the 'two way' interaction that forms the basis of many official definitions of integration. However, social bridging alone lends itself to McPherson's criticism of 'conformance based integration policies' where the onus is on refugees to blend into the existing social fabric. McPherson argues that integrationism 'remains concerned with the adaptation by outsiders to local norms', implying that the notion of social bridges requires refugee groups to assimilate into the host community through, for example, participation in youth clubs and voluntary work.<sup>21</sup>

Ager and Strang's technical definition of integration incorporates the need for non-citizens, specifically refugees, to achieve 'public outcomes' such as employment, education and adequate housing to the level enjoyed by other residents of the community. In addition, the authors cite social connections with individuals and groups of both the same and different ethnicities and access to relevant services as equally vital for defining integration.<sup>22</sup> While Ager and Strang do make notable reference to the need for action from refugees and non-refugees alike, in practice this definition still hinges on what Baneke terms 'a preparedness to adapt to the lifestyle of the host community'.<sup>23</sup> Ager and Strang's approach is also raised in UNHCR's Conclusion on Local Integration wherein refugees are encouraged to make:

a conscientious effort to *adapt* to the local environment and respect and understand new cultures and lifestyles, taking into consideration the *values* of the local population.<sup>24</sup> (emphasis added)

Conversely, UNHCR accompanies this with an insistence on the *acceptance* of refugees into the 'socio-cultural fabric' of the host country and highlights four ways of achieving this.<sup>25</sup> In so doing, UNHCR makes both direct and indirect reference to the idea of integration as a 'two-way' process.<sup>26</sup> The Council of Europe notes that without such efforts from the host society, migrants are more likely to stay in separate homogeneous communities and reduce their contact with locals, creating a 'parallel social system' for migrants.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, many scholars of refugee and migrant inclusion in host societies have criticised the overlap between integration and assimilation that occurs in national and international policy and discourse. McPherson, Mulvey, Da Lomba and others argue that integrationism in practice and policy too often defines migrants as the 'other', which in turn locates them as a 'problem'.<sup>28</sup>

18 Kovacs, 'A critical approach to the production of academic knowledge' 22.

19 Alistair Ager and Alison Strang, 'Indicators of Integration: Final Report', *Home Office Development and Practice Report, No. 28* (Research, Development and Statistics Directorate, 2004).

20 Ted Cattle, *Community Cohesion: A New Framework for Race Diversity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), cited in Alastair Ager and Alison Strang, 'Refugee Integration: Emerging Trends and Remaining Agendas' (2010) 23(4) *Journal of Refugee Studies* 598.

21 Melinda McPherson, "'I Integrate, Therefore I Am'": Contesting the Normalizing Discourse of Integrationism through Conversations with Refugee Women' (2010) 23(4) *Journal of Refugee Studies* 552.

22 Ager and Strang, 'Indicators of Integration' 5.

23 Peer Baneke, 'Refugee Integration: Rights and Responsibilities', speech given at 3rd European Conference on the Integration of Refugees (Secretary General of ECRE: Brussels, 25 November 1999), cited in Ager and Strang 'Understanding Integration' 176.

24 UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Conclusion on Local Integration*, No. 104 (LVI) (2005). Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/excom/exconc/4357a91b2/conclusion-local-integration.html>. [Accessed on: 10 October 2019].

25 UNHCR, *Conclusion on Local Integration*.

26 Ager and Strang, 'Indicators of Integration' 6.

27 Council of Europe, 'Measurement and Indicators of Integration' 10.

28 See McPherson, "'I Integrate, Therefore I Am'"; Gareth Mulvey, 'When Policy Creates Politics: the Problematizing of Immigration and the Consequences for Refugee Integration in the UK' (2010) 23(4) *Journal of Refugee Studies* 437; Da Lomba, 'Legal Status and Refugee Integration: a UK Perspective'.

German legal documentation frequently uses the word 'foreigner' (*Ausländer*) to describe 'anyone who is not German within the meaning of Article 116 (1) of the Basic Law, which is primarily based on possession of German citizenship'.<sup>29</sup> Lehr explains that this excludes many people who have lived in Germany for decades, or even those who were born there, but who, due to the many barriers to gaining citizenship, are nonetheless labelled as 'foreigners'. Like McPherson and Da Lomba, Lehr argues that state practices of this kind foreground the 'otherness' of non-ethnic Germans.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Kovacs emphasises the 'preconceived normative framework' that locates the refugee as deviating from the norm. In this construction, integration becomes the process through which refugees can learn to 'fit in'.<sup>31</sup>

In her attempt to define integration as different from 'belonging', Hogarth emphasises the 'otherness' of marginalised populations by encouraging efforts to 'level the playing field' to foster successful integration. For Hogarth, integration is:

[...] a process of bringing marginalized people into the mainstream of society, thus allowing for full access to the opportunities, rights, and services available to the members of the mainstream.<sup>32</sup>

Ager and Strang concur, stating that the interrelated notions of rights and citizenship are critical to any effort to understand refugee integration. They maintain that while the specifics of the rights afforded to residents of a country may differ, the concepts themselves are 'fundamental to understanding the principles and practice of integration' in general.<sup>33</sup> In their research, the authors found that refugees and those who work directly with them in their resettlement communities consistently agreed that in a truly 'integrated' society refugees should have the same rights as their neighbours.<sup>34</sup> Fielden also notes that rights and citizenship are an indicator of successful settlement achieved over time by refugees in their country of asylum.<sup>35</sup> The Refugee Convention can be interpreted as supporting integration premised on citizenship through its emphasis on the state's duty to naturalise refugees.<sup>36</sup> However, this narrows the definition of integration to success predicated only on an outcome of citizenship which neglects key (potential) achievements of integration. The interviews conducted for this study lean mostly towards affirming this argument, but a better understanding of the linkages between citizenship and refugee integration is, nevertheless, required to best support newcomers.<sup>37</sup>

In sum, integration remains an elusive and contested concept. The argument put forward by McPherson and others, that, in practice, integration policies too often become assimilationist in outlook, is particularly appropriate for the German context. On the other hand, Ager and Strang's understanding of integration as a process involving cooperation between newcomers and locals is, by their own admission, a goal to be worked towards.<sup>38</sup> The findings in this study will draw together current definitions and indicators of integration, its relationship to belonging and, crucially, the responses of participants to draw a trajectory of 'integration' for refugee women living in Berlin since 2015.

## 2.2 Conceptualising 'belonging'

A core aim of this study is to discover whether the process of integration follows the roadmap established

29 Federal Ministry of the Interior, *Migration and Integration: Residence Law and Policy on Migration and Integration in Germany* (Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2014), cited in Sabine Lehr, 'Germany as Host: Examining ongoing anti-immigration discourse and policy in a country with a high level of non-national residents' (2015) 2(1) *Refugee Review: Re-conceptualizing Refugee and Forced Migration in the 21st Century* 123.

30 Lehr, 'Germany as Host' 123.

31 Kovacs, 'A critical approach to the production of academic knowledge' 13.

32 Kathy Hogarth, 'Home without Security and Security without Home' (2015) 16 *International Migration and Integration* 786.

33 Ager and Strang, 'Refugee Integration: Emerging Trends and Remaining Agendas' 592.

34 Ager and Strang, 'Understanding Integration' 176.

35 Alexandra Fielden, 'Local integration: an under-reported solution to protracted refugee situations', *UNHCR Research Paper No. 158* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2008) 2.

36 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (28 July 1951), 189 *United Nations Treaty Series* 176, Article 34.

37 S. Castles, M. Korac, E. Vasta and S. Vertovec, *Integration: Mapping the Field*, Report of project at University of Oxford Centre for Migration and Policy Research (Home Office Immigration Research and Statistics Service, 2002) cited in Geri Smyth, Emma Stewart and Sylvie da Lomba, 'Introduction: Critical Reflections on Refugee Integration: Lessons from International Perspectives' (2010) 23(4) *Journal of Refugee Studies* 412.

38 Ager and Strang, 'Indicators of Integration' 6.

by much of the existing policy and research. A better understanding of how a feeling of being 'integrated' develops over time and through a variety of experiences is vital for any effort to improve the common narrative of integration. While recognising that the participants have lived in Berlin for a maximum of five years, the research probed their comprehension of integration as a concept, a process, a goal. In parallel, the interviews investigated whether the women had a desire to 'belong' and how, if at all, 'belonging' translated into a sense of being 'at home' in their new location. The concepts of belonging and homemaking, particularly in the context of displacement, are complex and have been heavily researched from several angles. However, for the scope of this paper, this section will summarise some of the approaches relevant to forced migration and integration efforts.

Hogarth uses feminist theory to ground her study of immigrant women's attempts to find a sense of belonging and home. She adopts the definition of 'belonging' coined by McMillan and Chavis, as distinct from integration insofar as it 'conveys deeper emotional and psychological elements and refers to the personal knowledge that one has about belonging to a collectivity'.<sup>39</sup> Alternatively, Ager and Strang predicate belonging on strong social relationships, mutual respect and shared values across all sections of society.<sup>40</sup> They argue that in most cases belonging is the 'ultimate mark' of integration,<sup>41</sup> a stance that jars with Kovacs' use of the two terms interchangeably.<sup>42</sup>

A restrictive national identity often excludes non-natives from society and divides the population into those who 'belong' and those who do not. This influences a state's approach to integration policy and fundamentally alters the ability of newcomers to develop a sense of belonging. Yuval-Davis *et al.*, writing from a feminist angle, analyse the construction of collective identity and belonging through border controls. In their analysis of the UK government's 2002 White Paper 'Secure Borders - Safe Haven', Yuval-Davis *et al.* take issue with the report's assumption that boundary maintenance and borders are the key to harmonious social relations in multicultural societies.<sup>43</sup> Hogarth argues that the relative permeability of geographical borders today means that belonging can no longer be conceptualised solely through national boundaries. Instead, Hogarth theorises belonging in relation to 'unbelonging' and the notion of the 'us' and the 'other'.<sup>44</sup> Yuval-Davis *et al.* and Hogarth's construction of 'belonging' as ethnic and linguistic in character, and requiring cultural bonds, draws attention to those who do not 'fit in': the migrant or refugee 'other' who represents a challenge to prevailing norms. The idea of preserving the national way of life underpins many countries' approach to integration and collective identity, leading to an assimilationist view of integration whereby belonging is achieved through sharing 'a set of qualities that define the group'.<sup>45</sup>

The notion of 'home' is intrinsically linked to belonging, as demonstrated by Eastmond who defines the home as a place where 'normal life can be lived; it is a place that can provide economic security, a social context, and a sense of belonging'.<sup>46</sup> The Dutch Refugee Council emphasises the safety, security and stability aspects of 'home'.<sup>47</sup> However, both definitions fail to acknowledge the potential impact of social interactions and community on the development of a sense of 'home' as an extension of 'belonging'. This study regards 'belonging' as a multifaceted concept, encompassing, on the meta level, national identity and, on the micro level, relationships, community, and stability. It is presumed that a sense of being 'at home' cannot be achieved without a degree of belonging, but the women interviewed for this paper challenge some of these widely held assumptions.

Ager and Strang also cite safety and stability as instrumental factors for enabling both refugees and locals

39 David W. McMillan and David M. Chavis, 'Sense of community: a definition and theory' (1986) 14(1) *American Journal of Community Psychology* 6, paraphrased in Hogarth, 'Home Without Security and Security Without Home' 786.

40 Alastair Ager and Alison Strang, 'The experience of integration: A qualitative study of refugee integration in the local communities of Pollokshaws and Islington' (2004) 55 *Home Office Online Report* 6.

41 Ager and Strang, 'Understanding Integration' 177-178.

42 Kovacs, 'A critical approach to the production of academic knowledge'.

43 Nira Yuval-Davis, Floya Anthias and Eleonore Kofma, 'Secure borders and safe haven and the gendered politics of belonging: Beyond social cohesion' (2005) 28(3) *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 517.

44 Hogarth, 'Home Without Security and Security Without Home', 784.

45 Ager and Strang, 'Refugee Integration' 593.

46 Marita Eastmond, 'Transnational Returns and Reconstruction in Post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina' (2006) 44(3) *International Migration* 141, cited in Cathrine Brun and Anita Fábos, 'Making Homes in Limbo? A Conceptual Framework' (2015) 31(1) *Refugee* 8.

47 Dutch Refugee Council/ECRE, *Good Practice Guide on the Integration of Refugees in the European Union: Housing* (2001) 5, cited in Ager and Strang, 'Understanding Integration' 172.



to feel 'at home' in their place of settlement.<sup>48</sup> In this way, to feel 'at home' in a place can be defined as a sense of attachment to parts of the social fabric, achieved most notably through the friendliness of people whom refugees and locals encountered on a daily basis.<sup>49</sup> The authors equate personal security and safety with successful integration, stating that if their refugee participants 'did not feel physically safe in an area they could not feel integrated'.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, the lack of stability suffered by many refugees who are forced to move from one location to another significantly undermines their ability to feel connected to the community and thus forge a sense of belonging and home.

Many of Ager and Strang's research participants cited the merits of public services such as religious organisations, schools, and drop-in centres as places to meet others and build relationships, emphasising the necessity of such spaces for stimulating communication between all sections of society. This is indicative of Tomlinson's assertion that refugees have agency to move beyond their representation as the 'other'. However, she also highlights the structural inequality that can impede women's ability to exercise agency in the process of negotiating belonging.<sup>51</sup> Historical, ideological, and political structures 'mark and differentiate the marginalized "other"' and can affect their access to support in many different contexts. For example, it can be reasonably argued that by forming relationships with residents from both migrant/refugee and non-migrant/refugee backgrounds, newcomers can find a sense of belonging while building up a broader local cultural understanding.<sup>52</sup> But if policy and scholarship fail to recognise the barriers to access that are exclusive to women (forced) migrants (such as cultural differences in gender norms, sexism and Islamophobia), women will remain marginalised in integration efforts and excluded from the 'community of belonging'.

While a working definition of migrant integration is undoubtedly vital for governments and civil society to adopt a clear approach to policy and action, a deeper understanding of the phases of integration - encompassing community membership, development of a sense of belonging and feeling 'at home' - from the perspective of refugee women is lacking. This article will provide a new perspective on the trajectory of integration for short-term settled refugee women in Berlin.

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48 Ager and Strang, 'Understanding Integration'.

49 Ager and Strang, 'The Experience of Integration' 5.

50 Ager and Strang, 'Understanding Integration' 183-184.

51 Frances Tomlinson, 'Marking Difference and Negotiating Belonging: Refugee Women, Volunteering and Employment' (2010) 17(3) *Gender, Work and Organization* 280.

52 Ager and Strang, 'Refugee Integration' 597.

### 3. Methods and Methodology

The central role of feminist methodology in social sciences is to produce research that is ‘for women’, as opposed to ‘on women’. As participatory approaches developed, the focus moved to research ‘with women’.<sup>53</sup> Feminist social research is commonly associated with qualitative methods of investigation, which the present study also adopts. Hughes attributes the feminist reliance on qualitative data to the dominant view that it is the ‘most appropriate way of enabling researchers to listen to and give voice to women’.<sup>54</sup>

Hesse-Biber emphasises feminist scholars’ preoccupation with disrupting ‘traditional ways of knowing’ to become both insider and outsider, thus ‘taking on a multitude of different standpoints and negotiating these identities simultaneously’.<sup>55</sup> Beetham and Demetriades also reiterate the need for researchers to consider the ‘different knowledges and experiences’ that influence both the data and the research process itself, and the impact of power relations amongst all involved in the project.<sup>56</sup> Despite recent criticism by some feminist scholars, revolving mainly around the reliance on ‘arbitrary and parochial distinctions’ between ‘refugees’ and ‘host communities’ and the impact of this on knowledge production,<sup>57</sup> the notion that feminists should maintain a commitment to transcending established power dynamics is central to this paper.

Foucault posits that marginality is the outcome of representation in a ‘discursive power/knowledge dynamic’.<sup>58</sup> Feminist scholars are divided on Foucault’s feminist credentials but it is, nonetheless, imperative that researchers address representations of women refugees and the context in which such representations are formed. Smith condemns the ‘monolithic picture of women as passive, dependent, vulnerable victims and thus [...] without agency’ that is so firmly ingrained in attitudes towards refugees across disciplines.<sup>59</sup> Freedman elaborates on this, stating that ‘problems in trying to “help” refugee women and asylum seekers often arise from representations of them as without agency’.<sup>60</sup> Such characterisations of the ‘vulnerable refugee woman’ are not based on evidence, as Seethaler demonstrates in her conversations with refugee women living in Wertheim, Germany:

[...] it became clear that they do not see themselves merely as victims but also as resources and change-makers, which makes it essential to include their input and voices in the design and assessment of relief programs [...] Their stories defy gender norms regarding agency, family protection, and political activism.<sup>61</sup>

Seethaler spent time with members and beneficiaries of *Willkommen in Wertheim* (‘Welcome to Wertheim’) (WiW), a refugee organisation in a rural town in Germany that ‘attempts to implement the feminist recognition that gender plays a crucial part in working with displaced communities’.<sup>62</sup> Her research upheld the need to incorporate gender into integration initiatives. She also used an intersectional feminist approach for her analysis in order to form a holistic view of the female refugee’s lived experience and how it is shaped by sexism, imperialism, racism, xenophobia and, in some cases, Islamophobia.

Feminist forced migration research has striven to overturn the view of women refugees as invisible ‘un-agen-

53 Christina Hughes, ‘Feminists really do count: The complexities of feminist methodologies’ (2010) 13(3) *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 190.

54 *Ibid.*

55 Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis*, Second Edition (Sage Publications, 2012) 3.

56 Gwendolyn Beetham and Justina Demetriades, ‘Feminist Research Methodologies and Development: Overview and Practical Application’ (2007) 15(2) *Gender and Development* 202.

57 Christina Kovacs, ‘A critical approach to the production of academic knowledge on refugee integration in the global north’ (*Refugee Studies Centre Working Paper Series*, no. 1092015) 22.

58 Michel Foucault, ‘Two Lectures’, in C. Gordon (ed.) *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977* (Harvester Press, 1980), cited in Melinda McPherson, ‘“I Integrate, Therefore I Am”: Contesting the Normalizing Discourse of Integrationism through Conversations with Refugee Women’, *Journal of Refugee Studies* (2010) 23(4) 549.

59 Megan Denise Smith, ‘Rethinking gender in the international refugee regime’, *Forced Migration Review*, vol. 53 (October 2016) 65.

60 Jane Freedman, *Gendering the International Asylum and Refugee Debate*, Second Edition (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) 109–110.

61 Ina C. Seethaler, ‘Female Refugees in Rural Germany: A Local Aid Agency’s Efforts to Build on Women’s Experiences and Needs’ (2019) 40(2) *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 168.

62 Seethaler, ‘Female Refugees in Rural Germany’ 169.

tic victims' or 'in need of civilised, Western charity'.<sup>63</sup> Representations of women refugees, power dynamics and knowledge production are all relevant for the study of women's lives and opinions, specifically when the intended outcome is to advance gender equality. The gender and development (GAD) methodological framework provides a strong foundation for feminist research, premised on the idea that 'gendered subordination is constructed at many levels and through many institutions, including the household, the community, and the state'.<sup>64</sup> GAD recognises women as 'agents who can be empowered to improve their position in society',<sup>65</sup> which, I contend, is exactly what the participants in this study have demonstrated.

### 3.1 Research methods

The data collection for this project took place between November 2019 and January 2020 in various locations across Berlin. While acknowledging the merits of Jacobsen and Landau's recommendation of systematic sampling techniques,<sup>66</sup> a lack of funding and other resources made it necessary for this research to rely on qualitative interviews with a relatively small number of participants. In total, nine women were interviewed, recruited through local organisations and snowball sampling. Six of the interviewees are from Syria, one is an Iranian national, one woman is Kosovar and another is from Eritrea. This roughly reflects the demographics of those who have arrived in Berlin since 2015, but slightly over-represents Syrian women: IOM reported that half of all arrivals in 2015 alone had fled civil war in Syria.<sup>67</sup> The women are aged between 19 and 35 years and are living in different parts of Berlin. Semi-structured one-to-one interviews - defined as 'open-ended but [following] a general script and [covering] a list of topics'<sup>68</sup> - were conducted with each participant, lasting 30 to 45 minutes. An interpreter was present for three of the interviews to translate from Arabic to English; all other conversations were conducted in English.

The participants have lived in Berlin since at least 2015; the range is from two to five years. This restricts the scope of the research to generalisations about the initial period of protracted displacement and residency in Berlin. While all the women interviewed for this research had made efforts to grasp the intricacies of their 'host' society, the length of their stay in Berlin has strong implications for the research conclusions. As previously noted, the focus on an arrival date post-2015 ensures that the work provides a new perspective on the process of integration in its early phases.

### 3.2 Ethical considerations

As with all research *with* and *for* refugee participants, the need for full, genuine, and informed consent was at the forefront of planning and executing my data collection. Mackenzie *et al.* advocate an iterative model of consent for 'non-emergency and non-camp situations', which is appropriate for this study.<sup>69</sup> They insist that a 'fundamental re-conceptualization of the nature and aims of the research relationship' is required to fully achieve informed consent.<sup>70</sup> Such a re-conceptualisation must be underpinned by the principles of 'respect for persons' and 'beneficence'. The iterative consent process calls on those working with refugees to remain constantly aware of the power dynamic and its potential to alter the validity of resulting data. More

63 Doreen Indra (ed.), *Engendering Forced Migration* (Berghahn Books, 1999), H. Johnsons, 'Constructing Victims: Visual Images, Victimization and Imagining the Female Refugee', *Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association, San Diego* (International Studies Association, 22 March 2006) and K. Choules, 'The Shifting Sands of Social Justice Discourse: From Situating the Problem with "Them" to Situating it with "Us"' (2007) 29(5) *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* cited in McPherson, "I Integrate, Therefore I Am" 551.

64 Beetham and Demetriades, 'Feminist Research Methodologies' 201.

65 Jane L. Parpart, M. Patricia Connelly and V. Eudine Barriteau, *Theoretical Perspectives on Gender and Development* (International Development Research Centre, 2000), cited in Beetham and Demetriades, 'Feminist Research Methodologies' 202.

66 Karen Jacobsen and Loren Landau, 'The Dual Imperative in Refugee Research: Some Methodological and Ethical Considerations in Social Science on Forced Migration' (2003) 27(3) *Disasters* 187.

67 UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)/International Organisation for Migration (IOM), 'A million refugees and migrants flee to Europe in 2015' (22 December 2015). Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2015/12/567918556/million-refugees-migrants-flee-europe-2015.html> [Accessed on 4 February 2020].

68 H. Russell Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (5th Edition, AltaMira Press, 2011) 156.

69 Catriona Mackenzie, Christopher McDowell and Eileen Pittaway, 'Beyond "Do No Harm": The Challenge of Constructing Ethical Relationships in Refugee Research' (2007) 20(2) *Journal of Refugee Studies* 306.

70 Mackenzie *et al.*, 'Beyond "Do No Harm"', 306.

importantly, the duty of care that researchers have towards participants can only be achieved through a continuously evolving consent system that prioritises the concerns of interviewees. This is particularly appropriate for feminist research.

To achieve an appropriately flexible, dynamic consent process, I provided participants with a consent form and information about the project in advance of the interview. All participants were given the opportunity to change or adapt the terms of their consent and could withdraw their participation before, during or after the interview. In doing so, I aimed to achieve a 'shared understanding of what is involved at all stages of the research process'.<sup>71</sup> Mackenzie *et al.* insist that this approach establishes 'a partnership' based on trust and an 'ethical relationship' between researcher and participant.<sup>72</sup> Interviewees could request changes to the interview structure or questions; however, none of the participants chose to do so. Crucially, Mackenzie *et al.* argue that individuals can only exercise true autonomy in 'supportive and just relationships' in which their basic rights are respected.<sup>73</sup> To this end, efforts were made to ensure the comfort and safety of the interviewee. For example, the interviews took place in a location chosen by the participant and casual conversation was built into the start of the session, in which I shared information about myself and reiterated the aims of the interview and research.

Mackenzie *et al.* also encourage interviewers and participants to discuss the 'reciprocal benefits' at the start of the process. In keeping with the theme of transparency, attempts were made to avoid misunderstandings with regards to the 'beneficence' of the research. Unrealistic expectations of the benefits of the research may arise, thus requiring transparency about the researcher's professional role and the limits of the study.<sup>74</sup> For example, one participant asked prior to the interview if I could help her find an internship. This misunderstanding occurred before she was given detailed information about the aims of the project. To mitigate this issue, I provided a full description of the limits of the research, my role in the study, my profession, and my status in Berlin. In doing so, I hoped to level-out any perceived power imbalance and minimise potential harm from misunderstandings about reciprocal benefits. I also provided an opportunity for the participant to cancel our scheduled interview. This interaction did, however, make clear to me the importance of reciprocity in the research process. As a result, a recommendation section will be included in the conclusion of this paper, guided by the insights and experiences of the participants. Turton and Jacobsen and Landau implore researchers to achieve outcomes that will, by some measure, benefit the lives of their informants; what Jacobsen and Landau term the 'dual imperative' of refugee study.<sup>75</sup>

It is of critical importance that interview questions do not cause harm to the participant.<sup>76</sup> This requires sensitivity and careful prior consideration of the types of harm that the interview settings and content could potentially cause. Seethaler raises the need to avoid 're-traumatization'.<sup>77</sup> I did not ask participants to discuss their journey to Germany and provided the research themes and questions before the interview took place. This enabled interviewees to alert me to any specific issues or experiences they would like to bypass. Throughout the interviews, the women were invited to decline to answer any question they did not feel comfortable discussing. Furthermore, each interview began with a 're-introduction' of the interviewer and the project aims, as recommended by Seethaler.<sup>78</sup> To gain a deeper understanding of how to broach the topics of integration, belonging and home with refugee women, two informal conversations were held with members of staff from two Berlin refugee organisations. Here, I was advised to avoid personal questions about family relationships and to be aware of potential cultural differences in notions of gender roles.

The anonymity of participants was maintained throughout the research and analysis process. This was detailed in the consent form, wherein each participant indicated whether their anonymised interview responses could be used in the final paper. All the participants consented to this. In addition, no names were

71 *Ibid.* 307.

72 *Ibid.* 306-307.

73 *Ibid.* 310.

74 *Ibid.* 303.

75 David Turton, 'Migrants and Refugees', in Tim Allen (ed.), *In search of Cool Ground: War, Flight and Homecoming in Northeast Africa* (Africa World Press, 1996) 96; Karen Jacobsen and Loren Landau, 'Researching Refugees: Some methodological and ethical considerations in social science and forced migration', *New Issues in Refugee Research: Working Paper No. 9* (UNHCR, 2003) 1.

76 Ranjit Kumar, *Research Methodology: A Step-by-Step Guide for Beginners* (SAGE Publications, 2014), 286.

77 Seethaler, 'Female Refugees in Rural Germany' 170.

78 *Ibid.*

recorded in the interview tapes and consent forms were scanned immediately and stored in a secure cloud storage system, along with the recordings and transcripts. Only the researcher had access to all consent forms, interview recordings, transcripts, and participant data. This ensured confidentiality throughout the research process. Overall, I am confident that my work moved beyond 'informed consent' to the 'promotion of autonomy' and a participant-negotiated iterative consent process that achieved the principle of 'respect for persons' hailed by Mackenzie *et al.*<sup>79</sup>

### 3.3 Limitations

There are several limitations to the research methods adopted in this project. Due to time and financial restrictions, nine women were interviewed for 30 to 45 minutes each. The relatively short length of the interview reduced the number of topics that could be discussed in depth and may therefore have prevented some participants from delving into the nuance that this qualitative research would benefit from. In addition, a translator was present in some sessions to translate from Arabic to English. As such, there is a distinct possibility that some detail may have been lost in translation.

Jacobsen and Landau exhort scholars to identify participants using a random sampling method to reach a truly representative cross-section of the target population. However, snowball sampling was the most efficient and effective method of finding interviewees in this study. Jacobsen and Landau argue that snowball sampling 'runs a high risk of producing a biased sample.'<sup>80</sup> Admittedly, the sampling method may have created the rather narrow age range of the participants: the women interviewed were between the ages of 19 and 35. Nevertheless, since 71 per cent of asylum seekers who arrived in Germany in 2015 were under the age of 30,<sup>81</sup> this is a fairly accurate representation of the age range. But in combination with the small sample size and short date collection interviews, this presents problems for generalising the research findings as it neglects older age groups. This research provides a solid foundation for future studies with, and for, refugee women in Berlin but a larger sample size and a more scientifically rigid sampling system should be used, but the core principles of qualitative feminist research must remain at the core of the process.

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79 Mackenzie *et al.*, 'Beyond "Do No Harm"' 311.

80 Jacobsen and Landau, 'Researching refugees' 6-7, 12.

81 Sabrina Juran and P. Niclas Broer, 'A Profile of Germany's Refugee Populations' (2017) 43(1) *Population and Development Review* 152.

## 4. The German Context

The decision taken by the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, and her government to 'open the borders' and welcome refugees who had travelled across Turkey, the Mediterranean Sea and European countries such as Greece and Hungary, put Germany's asylum laws under the spotlight and attracted many hundreds of thousands of refugees to its urban areas. In 2015 alone, Germany accepted 890,000 refugees and received 476,649 formal applications for political asylum.<sup>82</sup> Of this figure, 286,483 asylum seekers were fleeing conflict in Syria.<sup>83</sup> Refugee status (*Flüchtlingsschutz*), in accordance with the Refugee Convention, is codified in Section 3, Paragraph 1 of the German Asylum Act. Almost all Syrians were granted *Flüchtlingsschutz* in 2015, but in the first seven months of 2016 alone this level dropped to 20 per cent.<sup>84</sup>

Once refugee status has been granted, a residence permit valid for three years is issued. Only after this period - following a thorough assessment of the refugee's 'efforts to integrate' and the situation in their country of origin - can the applicant apply for permanent settlement.<sup>85</sup> The general assumption is that this process will end in naturalisation, with much of German legal and policy documentation on immigration and integration promoting citizenship as the ultimate level of integration. However, migrants can only apply for naturalisation after eight years of living in Germany with a valid residence permit and many refugees face long delays in receiving such recognition. Lehr writes that this leaves refugees in a state of limbo, spending as long as 'a decade without a passport and without full citizenship rights.'<sup>86</sup> Such a precarious situation restricts the ability of refugee populations to begin the integration process in earnest.<sup>87</sup>

Lehr details the links made in German law and guidelines between integration, citizenship, 'co-existence' and identity. The German federal government's 2014 policy report *Migration and Integration* stated:

Immigrants are expected to make efforts - supported by government services - to learn German and become acquainted with Germany's legal system, history and culture as well as values that are important in Germany.<sup>88</sup>

Specific reference was made to integration as a means for 'peaceful co-existence' in relation to Germany's four million Muslim residents.<sup>89</sup> The earlier version of this document, published in 2011, demonstrated more explicitly the German government's preoccupation with the question of whether or not Muslims are 'capable' of successfully integrating into German society:

The aim of integration should not be merely to organize the co-existence of people from different cultures. A society cannot long endure an internal divide based on cultural differences.<sup>90</sup>

While the wording may have changed in more recent publications, the spirit of 'co-existence' remains in place and continues to influence integration policy in Germany.<sup>91</sup> The current Immigration Act (*Zuwanderungsgesetz 2005*) sets out the government's aims for integration based on:

[...] the ability of the immigrant to participate in German society, asking immigrants to assume a

<sup>82</sup> Stefan Trines, 'Lessons From Germany's Refugee Crisis: Integration, Costs, and Benefits', *World Education News and Reviews* (2 May 2017). Available at: <https://wenr.wes.org/2017/05/lessons-germanys-refugee-crisis-integration-costs-benefits> [Accessed on 22 October 2019].

<sup>83</sup> Federal Ministry of the Interior, 'Continued high asylum access in October 2015', *Bundesministerium des Innern, für Bau und Heimat: Pressemitteilung* (5 November 2015). Available at: <https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/pressemitteilungen/DE/2015/11/asylantraege-oktober-2015.html> [Accessed on 22 October 2019].

<sup>84</sup> Federal Ministry of Migration and Asylum, *Das Bundesamt im Zahlen 2015* (2015), cited in Nanette Funk, 'A spectre in Germany: refugees, a 'welcome culture' and an 'integration politics' (2016) 12(3) *Journal of Global Ethics* 291.

<sup>85</sup> Marcus Lütticke, 'Syrian Refugees in Germany', *Deutsche Welle* (10 June 2014), cited in Sabine Lehr, 'Germany as Host: Examining ongoing anti-immigration discourse and policy in a country with a high level of non-national residents', *Refugee Review: Re-conceptualizing Refugee and Forced Migration in the 21st Century*, vol. 2, no. 1 (ESPMI Network E-publication, 2015) 117.

<sup>86</sup> Lehr, 'Germany as Host' 117.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* 118.

<sup>88</sup> Federal Ministry of the Interior, *Migration and Integration: Residence Law and Policy on Migration and Integration in Germany* (Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2014), cited in Lehr, 'Germany as Host' 119.

<sup>89</sup> Lehr, 'Germany as Host' 119.

<sup>90</sup> Federal Ministry of the Interior, *Migration and Integration*, p. 54, cited in Lehr, 'Germany as Host' 119.

<sup>91</sup> Lehr, 'Germany as Host' 119.

certain level of responsibility for the integration process.<sup>92</sup>

More recently, a report on migration and integration compiled by the German Federal Government refers multiple times to the responsibility of migrants for their own integration.<sup>93</sup> The report states:

'[...] they must find accommodation, learn *our language*, become familiar with the laws and customs of the host country, find a job and participate in the life of society.'<sup>94</sup> (emphasis added)

The paper qualifies this rather blunt statement by acknowledging that all actors must contribute to the process of welcoming and integrating migrants into German society. However, there is no further detail about how society can fulfil their duty. This attitude is summed up in the report's approach to integration efforts:

All integration measures are to be put together in the form of one strategy based on the principle of giving support *but expecting newcomers to do their bit*.<sup>95</sup> (emphasis added)

The stress here is firmly on the individual migrant or refugee to adapt to the 'normal' standard of their new society, with involvement of government or civil society organisations required only to facilitate this form of re-education. The use of the phrase 'our language' is particularly alarming. From the outset, Germans are framed as a collective 'us', while newcomers are devised as 'them'. The use of more neutral vocabulary ('the German language') would go some way to making such guidelines more open and inclusive in tone. Wodak highlights the potential for discourse to 'problematize, marginalize, exclude or otherwise limit the human rights of ethnic/religious/minority out-groups'.<sup>96</sup> A restructuring of the narrative in Germany is, therefore, essential for achieving a more inclusive starting point for integration strategies.

In 2005, the German government introduced 'integration courses' that are designed to 'expedite the assimilation of approved asylees' through language lessons and courses in cultural skills and understanding.<sup>97</sup> A mandatory 60-hour cultural 'orientation' unit introducing German society and culture and 600 hours of German language classes - with the stated aim of enabling participants to obtain an intermediate-level language certificate at B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages - became compulsory for all asylum seekers in 2016. Sustained absence could lead to loss of benefits and the legal right to remain in the country of.<sup>98</sup> Legislation of this kind, Lehr argues, demonstrates a growing tendency to link 'linguistic assimilation and acculturation on the naturalisation trajectory'.<sup>99</sup>

The idea that naturalisation is the ultimate form of integration is written into immigration laws in Germany, but the opportunity for citizenship is narrowing as requirements become stricter. In addition, the notion of a homogeneous German identity continues to limit the opportunities for meaningful social integration. A study by the Institute on Integration and Migration Research (BIM) found that nearly 100 per cent of its respondents regarded fluency in the German language as a central tenet of 'Germanness', but forty per cent argued that to qualify one must speak the language without a foreign accent.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, eighty per cent of interviewees saw 'Germanness' as German citizenship and forty per cent claimed a woman who wears a headscarf cannot be German.<sup>101</sup> The papers by BIM and Lehr show that, while Germany may be generous in its temporary protection of refugees, permanent settlement and, crucially, two-way integra-

92 UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *A New Beginning: Refugee Integration in Europe* (UNHCR, 2013), cited in Lehr, 'Germany as Host' 120.

93 Federal Government of Germany (*Die Bundesregierung*), 'Migration and integration - what is the German government doing?', *Bundesregierung: Refugee policy, migration of skilled workers, asylum procedures* (12 August 2019). Available at: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/migration-und-integration-1659206> [Accessed on 22 October 2019].

94 Federal Government of Germany, 'Migration and integration'.

95 *Ibid.*

96 Ruth Wodak, "'Us' and 'Them': Inclusion and Exclusion - Discrimination via Discourse', in Gerard Delanty, Ruth Wodak and Paul Jones (eds), *Identity, Belonging and Migration* (Oxford University Press, 2008) 55.

97 Trines, 'Lessons From Germany's Refugee Crisis'.

98 *Ibid.*

99 Lehr, 'Germany as Host' 120.

100 Naika Foroutan, Coşkun Canan, Sina Arnold, Benjamin Schwarze, Steffen Beigang and Dorina Kalkum, *Deutschland postmigrantisch I: Gesellschaft, Religion, Identität - Erste Ergebnisse* (BIM, 2014), 26.

101 Foroutan et al., *Deutschland postmigrantisch I*, 28, 52.

tion are more difficult to achieve.<sup>102</sup>

The understanding of (forced) migrant integration as a top-down process places the host state in a supportive role but fails to draw attention to both the agency of individuals and the ways that local communities must adapt to allow for successful integration of newcomers into the socio-cultural fabric. The assumption that host governments and civil society organisations must only facilitate access to integration courses, the jobs market and education and support administrative processes (such as applying for state benefits) is indicative of the inability of Germany, and many other refugee-receiving countries, to recognise the need for a change in the conceptualisation of refugees and migrants and their rights. A genuine commitment to creating a sense of safety, stability and belonging, for *all* members of the community, is critical for meaningful integration.

#### 4.1 Berlin and the 'refugee crisis'

According to UNHCR figures, by 2017 Berlin was home to 83,222 refugees.<sup>103</sup> Media outlets and academics have been largely positive in their reporting of the ways in which the Berlin government and civil society organisations have rallied around the refugee population since 2015. A vast array of service providers sprung into action, assuring both immediate and longer-term support for the city's newcomers. Initiatives such as 'Refugio', established in 2015 and spread over six floors in Berlin's Neukölln district, encompasses shared living space for refugees and non-refugees, event space and a cafe. 'Give Something Back to Berlin' (GSBTB), a 'project platform and network fostering community integration, intercultural dialogue and participation among Berlin's diverse migrant populations',<sup>104</sup> has supported the refugee integration process beyond the institutional operation. GSBTB hosts an 'Art Shelter', language practice sessions, a music school and an 'Open Kitchen', where newcomers and locals share recipes and cook together. Following Ager and Strang's framework, such initiatives facilitate 'social bridging' through cultural activities, volunteer projects and co-habitation.

Other organisations help refugees to learn more tangible skills; 'Kiron Open Higher Education' assists refugees' future planning by providing free access to online educational courses and support in applying for university. In addition, Wood *et al.* found at least ten refugee-led organisations in Berlin, including an Arabic library, a cultural hub bringing together Syrians and Germans and a leisure facility.<sup>105</sup> It is difficult to measure the success of these initiatives, but their existence in such great numbers demonstrates the grassroots 'welcoming attitude' (*Willkommenskultur*) Berlin and many other German cities were praised for at the start of the so-called 'refugee crisis'.

OECD data shows that, while Berlin is below the German average on factors such as income, employment, and life satisfaction, it surpasses the national average for a 'sense of community'.<sup>106</sup> For a large city with a diverse population made up of 190 different nationalities,<sup>107</sup> this statistic is remarkable. With twenty per cent of the population in 2018 born abroad, some areas of Berlin qualify as a 'super-diverse neighbourhood' where 'there is no coherent majority culture and/or [...] populations are frequently super-mobile'.<sup>108</sup> In public discourse, this is summed up by the term '*Multikulti*', short for '*Multikulturell*' (multicultural). *Multikulti*, 'the catch-all term for dealing with difference' in Germany, can be used to positive, negative, or neutral effect.<sup>109</sup>

<sup>102</sup> Lehr, 'Germany as Host' 117.

<sup>103</sup> Niall McCarthy, 'Germany is home to the most refugees', *Statista* (29 June 2018). Available at: <https://www.statista.com/chart/14494/germany-is-home-to-the-most-refugees/> [Accessed on 26 March 2020].

<sup>104</sup> Give Something Back to Berlin, 'About', <https://gsbtb.org/about/history/> [Accessed on 19 February 2020].

<sup>105</sup> Jennifer Wood, Evan Easton-Calabria and Yahya Alaous, 'Syrian refugee-led organisations in Berlin' (June 2018), 58 *Forced Migration Review* 62-63.

<sup>106</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Working Together for Local Integration of Migrants and Refugees* (OECD Publishing, 2018) 27.

<sup>107</sup> Berlin for Business and Technology (*Berlin für Wirtschaft und Technologie*), 'Demographic Data', *Berlin Business Location Center*. Available at: <https://www.businesslocationcenter.de/en/business-location/berlin-at-a-glance/demographic-data/> [Accessed on 6 February 2020].

<sup>108</sup> Aleksandra Grzymała-Kazłowska and Jenny Phillimore, 'Introduction: rethinking integration. New perspectives on adaptation and settlement in the era of super-diversity' (2018) 44(2) *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 180.

<sup>109</sup> Kelly Miller, 'Whose *Multikulti* Is It? The elusive definition of multiculturalism', *Collidoscope* (10 July 2013). Available at: <https://collido->



Despite its long history as a transit and settlement hub on migration routes and its national and international reputation for diversity, some commentators argue that popular attitudes towards 'multiculturalism' in the German capital remain divided. Indeed, police recorded 160 attacks on refugees or asylum seekers in Berlin and the state of Brandenburg, accounting for one in four of the 600 assaults against refugees nationwide in the first half of 2019, all of which were classified as 'politically motivated right-wing crimes'.<sup>110</sup> But events such as the *Karneval der Kulturen* ('Carnival of Culture') continue to take place each year and the districts of Neukölln and Kreuzberg, with their streets of Arabic and Turkish supermarkets, kebab restaurants and baklava bakeries, are a source of great pride for many Berlin residents.

Initiatives aimed at women refugees do exist in multiple forms in Berlin, but they are somewhat lesser known by refugees and non-refugees alike. 'Bikeygees' offers cycling lessons and bike repair training for women refugees and relies on donations of bikes and volunteer teachers. Other organisations, such as '*Kontakt- und Beratungstelle für Flüchtlingen und Migrant\_innen*' (KuB), provide free consultation sessions, language 'tandem' partners and assistance in legal and administrative processes for women. KuB also offers mental health support and runs a bi-weekly 'women's cafe' with childcare facilities, where refugee and non-refugee women can meet in a safe space.

However, Funk notes that some of these initiatives, in Berlin and beyond, acted *for* refugees, rather than empowering them to be agents for themselves.<sup>111</sup> She found that very few opportunities were available for women to influence the activities and projects they participated in. Furthermore, media reports about integration efforts in Berlin focus almost exclusively on the voices of male refugee participants of social integration and intercultural communication initiatives.

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scopeberlin.com/2013/07/10/whose-multikulti-is-it-the-elusive-definition-of-multiculturalism/ [Accessed on 20 February 2020].

110 *Deutsche Welle*, 'Germany: Over 600 attacks on refugees in the first half of 2019' (5 September 2019). Available at: <https://p.dw.com/p/3P2Pw> [Accessed on 28 February 2020].

111 Funk, 'A spectre in Germany' 292.

## 5. Research Findings: A Case Study of Women Refugees in Berlin

The main contribution of this paper is to provide a case study of short-term settled refugee women in Berlin. The following sections will bring together the interview responses of the nine participants to develop an in-depth understanding of the integration process for women with refugee status living in Berlin. In addition to questions about integration, the interviewees were asked about their experiences with residents, government-mandated courses and how they assess their sense of belonging in the city. The aim here is to share the experiences and opinions of the participants and draw attention to the ways in which the trajectory of integration for refugee women may differ from the institutional narrative. In doing so, I hope to guide policymakers and civil society activists to better facilitate the inclusion of refugee women in Berlin society.

### 5.1 'The first step towards integration is mutual respect'

The underlying (if often unintentional) assumption in integration policy is that refugees must shoulder the vast majority of the burden of their own integration. Indeed, much of German law and guidelines uses the term 'foreigner' (*Ausländer*) to describe even some un-naturalised residents born in the country. The 'othering' of non-citizens is well-researched and is documented in a vast array of contexts. Hogarth's depiction of the 'other' that challenges prevailing norms is upheld by the women interviewed for this study. The interviewees largely recognised their 'othering' and some saw it as a key barrier to their integration into German society. Despite the relatively progressive nature of Berlin culture, some participants explained that their religious identity (Muslim) made it even harder to be accepted into the community. One woman who had worked in a care home for the elderly said:

The headscarf was a major problem. Because my language wasn't perfect and I wore a headscarf I got some really negative comments from people there. (Participant 7, Syria)

The same woman was later rejected for a job in a pharmacy for the sole reason that she wears a headscarf. To this she said:

[...] sometimes when something negative happens I am reminded that I will always be a foreigner, I'll never be perceived as someone from this community.

Other respondents also described their difficulty in 'fitting in' to perceived European or German norms because of their religious expression. One woman went as far as to say:

They're scared of me because I wear a headscarf. Even though I speak German. (Participant 6, Syria)

While others reflected on their identity as 'foreigners' and the exclusionary tactics they experience in day-to-day life:

Yeah, like how I see things from the outside. And also how I look. And also the people - what knowledge do they have about me? It's not so easy. (Participant 3, Kosovo)

[...] the way people look at us... They say something to us, like "go home". (Participant 5, Iran)

The key to successful integration that many participants directly and indirectly voiced was mutual respect:

The first step towards integration is mutual respect. It's not just the foreigner who has to accept the new laws and culture and language, it's also the hosting community that has to show respect to the foreigners and their culture, and often their religion too. (Participant 7)

For me, [belonging is] when the country you go to is welcoming and when you have the feeling that you are independent and you can do what you want without feeling in danger or outcasted. (Participant 6)

When I go to Hermannstraße [a street in the Neukölln district known for its abundance of Turkish

and Arabic outlets] I feel like I'm back home. So nothing is really missing. I find people who speak my language, I find my groceries, I'm not banned from practising my religion, I'm not banned from saying I'm a Muslim. (Participant 2, Syria)

The respondents emphasised the need for their culture and values to be respected by the locals to feel integrated, rather than assimilated. This is a core element of the criticisms levelled at many current integration policies in the Global North: sustainable integration cannot be achieved without conscious and continued efforts on the part of the host society. The interviewees in this project did not ask for a fundamental change in Berlin culture in the wake of the 2015 'refugee crisis'; a shift in attitude towards the city's new residents is their only request.

They don't have to love us, they just have to accept that we are here. (Participant 5)

Several interviewees, nevertheless, gave positive evaluations of their inclusivity into the local community:

I have a good feeling here and I can't say I have less freedom but I think it's just difficult here. One of the main things that's changed is that I have more hope, more hope for the future. I feel that I have more power to reach my goals. (Participant 5)

I have learnt a lot of local history and this is what I really love about Berlin: people are really welcoming and open to sharing their history and stories of what happened. (Participant 6)

Berlin is a multicultural city and I never felt like I was an outcast in it. (Participant 6)

Moreover, the interviewees reported relatively few negative experiences with non-refugee residents and they shared a degree of affection for Berlin.

I love Berlin and I think it's a really good city to live in. (Participant 1, Syria)

People are very nice [...] especially in *Refugio* [see p. 21 for details] or Kreuzberg and Neukölln. Everything is perfect there. (Participant 4, Eritrea)

[...] in Berlin there are a lot of foreigners... And Berliners are used to foreigners being around and living amongst them. (Participant 5)

In this way, the participants demonstrated a certain attachment to parts of the city's social fabric. Their responses corroborate the findings of Ager and Strang insofar as the friendliness of fellow residents was critical for the development of such conditions. From the responses here, it can be reasonably argued that the first phase of the integration process is a welcoming attitude and a sense of openness shown by the receiving society.

## 5.2 'Breaking the language barrier'

The importance of learning the German language cannot be understated. Perhaps unsurprisingly, all nine participants cited 'breaking the language barrier' as central to their endeavour to build a new life in Berlin.

No matter how much you love the city and you love living in it, not knowing the language is just a huge barrier. You can't understand the people, you can't understand what to do, where to go, how to live. So breaking the language barrier is, in my view, the most important thing that you have to do once you move to a new city. (Participant 2)

If you are learning German you are on your way to integrating. (Participant 6)

[...] language courses have helped remove the block that's been keeping me from meeting other people. (Participant 7)

When I was in Syria I had loads of ambition, with regards to my education. I was studying physics at university. But when I came here I felt like all that stopped because of the language barrier. I've

definitely become more shy since moving here. (Participant 8, Syria)

When asked what integration means to her, one woman regarded fluency in the German language as an essential step:

When I speak German and I can communicate with Germans and I have German friends, I will feel integrated. Having German friends is important for me. (Participant 8)

As a young mother, Participant 8 also cited the need for language skills to interact with other parents in the local area and, ultimately, to integrate:

I find German really difficult to learn so I can't communicate properly with people. When I'm at the mother and baby groups, the people are really nice and they love my baby, but I can't have a proper conversation with them. But I would love to feel integrated one day.

Interestingly, for many of the participants integration was also intrinsically linked to their knowledge of German culture and understanding of 'how Germans think'. The majority of women interviewed for this study were open to learning about and even adopting elements of German culture, albeit as part of or secondary to mastering the language.

And after you've learnt the language it's time to learn the culture and the ideologies of how the German people think [...] But for me it's not really a problem because most of my friends are German. (Participant 6)

I've researched the laws and regulations in Germany - well, not just Germany, Berlin also. And understanding German culture, or here specifically Berlin culture because it's not like the overall German culture, it's much different. (Participant 2)

I think that it's good to understand a little bit about the culture. [Through communicating with locals] you can understand more about the culture and the mentality of the people. (Participant 1, Syria)

I don't know yet exactly what Germany is or exactly how to interact with the people. (Participant 4)

Participant 5 went as far as to say:

We don't want Iranian things at home because we want to try new things and be open to German culture.

Several respondents referred to 'learning the rules' of Berlin and of Germany as an element of their cultural understanding and, thus, integration:

[If] you live here and you don't bother anybody and you respect the rules for the country, I think you are always integrated. (Participant 1)

[...] I think it's important to learn the rules of the country. You need to learn so much, not just German language, so that you can live here. Learning the culture is really important. I would like to stay in Germany and Berlin because I've learnt most of the rules here. (Participant 5)

[...] what [Germans] think and what I think is different like night and day. And that is hard for me. I can't think like a German. My head can't change like that immediately - I need lots of time. Maybe after 30 years, then I can think like a German, but that's hard for me. (Participant 4)

These statements affirm Ager and Strang's conclusion that knowledge of 'national and local procedures, customs and facilities' is a defining feature of integration.<sup>112</sup> Furthermore, Ager and Strang found that such an understanding can be most effectively garnered through regular and meaningful interactions with non-migrants/refugees ('social bridging'). They posit that, in forming relationships with residents

112 Alistair Ager and Alison Strang, 'Indicators of Integration: Final Report', *Home Office Development and Practice Report, No. 28* (Research, Development and Statistics Directorate, 2004) 4.

from non-migrant backgrounds, refugees can find a “ready-made” sense of belonging’ while building up a broader local cultural understanding.<sup>113</sup> This is perhaps an overly simplistic view of the integration process and, while many participants in this study noted the value of cross-cultural interaction, only three participants had gained their insight into German culture through social bridging.

But for me [learning about the culture] is not really a problem because most of my friends are German. (Participant 6)

Once a week a Syrian doctor at Humboldt University would gather Arabic students and they would talk German and learn German from volunteer German students and after a while they started to do field trips around Berlin. So that made me feel more welcome here. (Participant 6)

[Contact with locals] is kind of important, because I know a lot about German society from my flatmates that I haven’t learned in the courses I attended. (Participant 9, Syria)

The remaining interviewees cited the mandatory German language and culture courses as their main source of local knowledge, and most were still attending such classes at the time of interviewing. In addition, most respondents highlighted the need for a wider support network of friends from different cultures, particularly German, to feel more connected to the country and its capital:

Yes, all the courses have taught me how to have a good life in Germany. They teach you how to find a good job and, all in all, I can say that they have taught me everything I need to know. [...] I have learnt about German politics, how to find information and how to communicate with locals. It was really good for me. (Participant 5)

For me, integration is when you speak the language, you work or study and you get to know the German people. (Participant 9, Syria)

On the other hand, two participants emphasised that integration does not mean *adapting* to the German way of life:

You can understand more about the culture and the mentality of the people but it’s not that important for me. (Participant 1)

Integration, for me, means that I don’t necessarily have to live the way that Germans live. I have to find my comfort zone in living the way I am, in a city that doesn’t share my beliefs. (Participant 2)

Participant 2 went on to clarify that this does not contradict the need to understand at least some of the intricacies of German culture:

I wouldn’t feel integrated if I just sit and stay away from the locals. I wouldn’t understand anything, I won’t practice my language, I won’t understand the culture, I won’t understand the ideologies. [...] So it’s finding that comfort zone and being able to comprehend and understand the norms of where I’m living while being comfortable in living the way I was raised my entire life.

It is evident from these responses that the German language and culture courses, which are compulsory for all refugees to attend, are a valuable aspect of the government’s efforts to integrate refugee women in Berlin. The interviewees were largely aligned with the official ideal of integration as linguistic and cultural comprehension, but their efforts to understand Germany and Berlin were often not matched by non-refugee residents. The national and local governments should pay greater attention to educating citizens and other non-refugee residents on the benefits of two-way integration and the inclusion of all members of society into the community. Additionally, the experiences of the participants in this study suggest that more should be done to facilitate contact across different ethnic, religious, and social barriers.

### 5.3 'Like a mother's hug'

Many scholars have detailed the interrelated concepts of 'integration' and 'belonging'. Participants in this study were asked about how 'integration', as a process largely defined by policy-makers and service providers, relates to the development of a sense of 'belonging'. Only one respondent described feeling that she 'belongs' in the city and, interestingly, much of her reasoning is reminiscent of the goals for refugee integration:

For me, belonging is when the country you go to is welcoming and when you have the feeling that you are independent and you can do what you want without feeling in danger or outcasted. It's like a mother's hug. It's welcoming and warm. I started feeling like that after 1.5 years in Germany. (Participant 6)

All other interviewees reported that they had not yet developed a strong enough attachment to Berlin to feel that they belong:

Berlin just doesn't belong to me. I can't say I was born here or that this is my country. I can't be exactly like the people here. (Participant 4)

[Belonging] comes from your own goals: if you want it, you can do it. I think I can make this happen and it would make me feel integrated. (Participant 5)

I don't really know Berlin that well and I don't know everything it has to offer. So I would definitely miss it if I left, but I don't feel like I belong here. (Participant 7)

When we first came here I really felt the cultural clash: it's not the culture or the language and the traditions I know from Syria. Now I have sort of got used to it, but I wouldn't say I belong to Berlin. (Participant 8)

I think I have to get the German nationality to belong to Berlin or Germany generally. I don't feel like I belong here yet. Maybe after two or three years when I get the nationality I'll feel belonging. (Participant 9)

It is noteworthy that Participant 9 emphasises the need to have German nationality to achieve belonging. This is a structural view of collective identity mediated through citizenship and reflected in German law. Participant 9 rests her chance of developing a sense of belonging in Germany on gaining a German passport. If the long-winded process of attaining citizenship is required to have a sense of belonging in the host country, 'belonging' is achieved much further along the trajectory of integration than many scholars have previously argued.

On a cultural level, participants 2 and 8 went into more detail about the differences they perceive between their shared home country of Syria and their 'host', Germany, and the impact of this on the development of a sense of belonging:

[...] belonging to a society that I have only lived in for 2 years - even if I had lived more than this, I have been raised in a completely different society for more than 20 years, so belonging for me, I think, I will never reach it 100% because everything I was raised with is stuck with me. Like, socially, religiously, every other single factor. So throwing that all away and just belonging to a completely different society, that's extremely hard. (Participant 2)

Feeling belonging is that you're capable of sharing the same traditions. Having the ability to celebrate what they celebrate here, from holidays to ways of life. Also language is a really important factor: you can communicate, you can express your feelings, you can share experiences. This is belonging. I don't have any of that here, yet. But I hope one day I will. (Participant 8)

These observations highlight the difficulties of achieving Berry's definition of integration in practice: 'cultural maintenance of one's original culture while engaging in daily interactions with other groups.'<sup>114</sup> Par-

Participant 2 cites her upbringing, as a Muslim in a country where religion and everyday life are fundamentally intertwined, as a barrier to achieving 'belonging' in Berlin. For Participant 8, sharing cultural events and traditions is important for developing a sense of belonging. This comment shows an internalisation of the 'adaptation' required by many popular definitions of integration while also hinting at a hope of finding shared traditions between refugees and locals.

Two interviewees noted that their perception of whether they belong in Berlin came from the actions of others more than it did from within themselves. Participant 3, a 19-year-old from Kosovo, said:

Sometimes I really feel at home. But sometimes when I'm out and the people look at me weird then I don't really feel properly at home.

Similarly, Participant 7 reflected on the way negative interactions with locals remind her that she 'will always be a foreigner' and will 'never be perceived as someone from this community'. This is an important point for policymakers and organisations to acknowledge as it again underscores the need for a genuinely two-way conceptualisation of the integration process. The insights provided by participants 3 and 7, and comments from other interviewees, draw attention to the impact of natives on the formation of a newcomer's personal identity, their understanding of the community and internalisation of what it means to belong. A concerted effort from the host society to participate in a two-way partnership could quicken the pace of the integration process and help refugees to reach a sense of belonging sooner than the women in this study have reported.

#### 5.4 From 'belonging' to 'home'?

Contrary to the common perception that 'belonging' is a key prerequisite to feeling 'at home', many of the women described a sense of being 'at home' in Berlin prior to developing a sense of 'belonging'. As mentioned above, participants 2, 3 and 7 reported that they are yet to develop a strong enough bond with Germany and its capital to feel that they belong there. However, they candidly spoke about their sense of being 'at home' in their community:

I used to believe that it's a place where family is, but now I feel like home is a place where I can be free and live with dignity. [...] I've already made home here. (Participant 2)

[...] for me it means feeling happy somewhere - in a city. Where I speak the language, where I have friends, where I feel at home. And so if I feel at home, then that's integration for me. (Participant 3)

Berlin is the place where I started from scratch. That's what makes me feel like Berlin is home. It's the first chance I have had to start building my own life, to plan for my own future and do everything on my own. But I still think there is a huge difference between where you were born and raised in and the place you were given a second chance to start over. Both are home but they are two different versions of home. (Participant 7)

It is interesting that Participant 3 sees integration as a product of feeling 'at home'. This approach differs to that of the other respondents and many existing studies and sets a higher standard for achieving integration. She went on to say that such a feeling of being 'at home' was, nonetheless, contingent on the host society's reaction to her presence:

[...] I've lived here for 5 years, I have friends here, I have everything here. And if I go somewhere else then I have to look for another 'home'. Home for me is when I'm happy and where friends are there for me, and the people are happy to have me, then that's home for me.

The intersection between 'belonging', 'home' and 'community' is also important to examine here. Most of the interviewees said that they felt, or would at some point in the future, feel 'at home' when they had some form of 'community' around them, in the shape of friends and/or family members close by:

You just feel happy when you have the feeling that people are there. Or just the society. Then you feel happy and at home. (Participant 3)

I found those people who make me feel at home... I've found the people I can depend on and those people who don't make me feel alone. (Participant 6)

I spend almost all of my time at home but I'm friends with my neighbour and we go to each other's apartments. This makes it a bit easier: I get to practice German and have some company. I hope this will increase so I can improve my German and grow my confidence. (Participant 8)

Maybe when I have my family here or if I make my own family, I'll feel at home then. (Participant 9)

Participant 2's response supports Bauman's assertion that community - particularly co-ethnic community bonds - provides an 'alternative home'<sup>115</sup>:

Finding a new community is extremely important, of course. It kind of repairs a cultural bond that you've left behind... It's a rebirth... Like what you left you are already living again here. And you have a second chance of living it, although it's not in your home country.

For others, finding a sense of being 'at home' came from fulfilling ambitions and finding employment or further education. Participant 8 said that this would have to wait until her young son reached school age, but she expressed a longing to feel settled in her new life in Germany:

For me, home is the place I find myself in. All those ambitions and dreams I had - home is a place where I feel like I can pursue them without having to feel that I'm scattered all over the place or I'm lost and don't know how to navigate myself. I might find it here later, but not yet. I need to continue my education and find a job. Maybe when my son is a bit older I can work on that.

The relationship between 'integration', 'belonging' and 'home' felt by many of the respondents in this research demonstrates the cognitive and emotional turmoil that refugees must negotiate in the process of integrating into a new society and culture. The complexity of this operation results in a unique trajectory of integration for each individual, whereby a sense of 'belonging' and being 'at home' develop at different rates and may or may not result in feeling 'integrated'.

## 5.5 Gender/Sex and integration

Most of the participants in this study claimed that their sex had not negatively impacted their integration efforts. The most common concern amongst the Syrian interviewees was of how Arab men have failed to adjust to gender norms in Germany:

For many women [displacement] is a chance to start over and develop themselves far from the male-dominant culture we got used to back home. (Participant 2)

The bottom line is there are problems that the men here think they are still living in the same social condition as back home, where men are dominant. Here a woman who can freely express herself and be independent would be thought of, by some Arab men I have met, as only doing it because they are in Europe. (Participant 6)

Integration of Arabs within the Arab culture is always in favour of the man [rather] than the woman. If I was really affected by my culture I would struggle even more to integrate, which is a problem in the Arab community I think. (Participant 7)

The perceived impact on women refugees of this cultural clash is that:

<sup>115</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Community: Seeking safety in an insecure world* (Blackwell, 2001), cited in Kathy Hogarth, 'Home without Security and Security without Home' (2015) 16 *International Migration and Integration* 785.



[...] some married women - whose husbands are pretty much happy and convinced of their male dominance and refuse to understand that this does not work here - would remain stuck and slowly start convincing themselves that this is how they will survive in a new country under their husband's wings and not find it important to go out and develop themselves. (Participant 2)

There is a difference, maybe because men have a much wider range of connections. For work, friends, socialising - everything, they have all types of connections that women don't have or have to work harder on. (Participant 8)

While none of the women stated that they had been adversely affected by such a gendered imbalance in access to resources and opportunities, it is noteworthy that none of the nine participants had attended, or even heard of, most of the integration initiatives listed above, including those aimed at women. Participant 2 told me that this was likely due to the absence of any such organisations in their country of origin (in this case, Syria) so women simply did not think to search for them. It is important, then, that future research deciphers whether this is a widespread problem among refugee women in Berlin. If so, it would represent a significant challenge to governments and civil society indicating that more must be done to make integration opportunities more recognisable and accessible for women, not only in terms of childcare facilities and women-only spaces.

## 5.6 Integration takes time

It is important to acknowledge that cultural understanding, as advocated by Ager and Strang as a means for social bridging, develops over time. The women in this study have lived in Berlin for a maximum of five years. From the data, it can be convincingly argued that this is insufficient time to develop concrete social bridges across both linguistic and cultural barriers.

I can't be exactly like the people here. I'm a refugee, here for five years. [...] I don't think I've been here long enough. Perhaps after more time I'll be able to understand better and say okay that's Berlin and it belongs to me. (Participant 4)

I like Berlin, but there are lots of things which are complicated. Just to know things is complicated. And it's big. I've been here four years and I still don't know what the streets are called. (Participant 9)

I don't really know Berlin that well and I don't know everything it has to offer. So I would definitely miss it if I left, but I don't feel like I belong here. I don't think it would stay with me for long after I left. (Participant 7)

These responses show that, while they generally revere Berlin as a place to live for refugees, most participants regard their own integration as a process of learning that can be drawn out over several years and requires the tying together of many strands. Even those who had completed the compulsory language and so-called 'integration' courses, and who had lived in the city for four or five years, cited more time and experience of the German way of life as vital for developing any roots in the country. The institutional narrative and definition of integration, that promises an end status of 'integrated', fails to account for differing processes of integration based on factors such as personal upbringing, family life, the specific location in the city in which they reside and, crucially, gender. In this sense, this paper serves to emphasise the need for cooperation between newcomers and locals to overcome such hurdles and commit to a gradual approach to the process of refugee integration.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This research originally intended to challenge the existing literature on refugee integration, aiming to move beyond current ideas of what it means to be integrated in and 'belong' to a society. Policy-makers, civil society, and international organisations share a basic understanding of what (forced) migrant integration should look like, as a process and an outcome, though they may differ on the specifics. But there is little discussion of how integration develops as a trajectory, be it from community participation to 'belonging' or from a sense of being 'at home' to feeling 'integrated'. Crucially, I noticed an absence of women refugees' voices in this debate, resulting in only a limited understanding of issues peculiar to women. Especially lacking was a detailed account of short-term settled refugees, both male and female. This paper, therefore, sought to fill a lacuna by interviewing refugee women who arrived in Germany no earlier than 2015. The project also serves as a case study of Berlin.

The semi-structured interviews with nine refugee women overwhelmingly reiterated that integration takes time. The participants shared insights into their experiences with mandatory German language classes and 'integration courses', referring to the need to understand 'how Germans think' to truly feel included in the social and cultural make-up of the country and, more specifically, Berlin. In this respect, the women's experiences were in line with Ager and Strang's indicators of integration. Notably, most of the participants reported needing more interaction with local people to feel included in the socio-cultural make-up of the city. The multicultural nature of Berlin combined with the participants' efforts and ambitions - through tandem language learning, employment, voluntary work and parent and child groups - demonstrate a commitment to embed themselves in the city's social fabric. This reinforces Ager and Strang's advocacy of 'social bridges' between refugees and non-refugees and across socio-cultural boundaries. Specifically, it emphasises the agency of the interviewees in shaping their unique integration process and outcome. As a project with feminist foundations, reiterating the agency of women refugees, in contrast to the supposed vulnerable recipients of aid and sympathy, was of paramount importance.

Contrary to the initial hypothesis, the research participants largely shared the same conceptualisation of integration as the scholars and practitioners examined in earlier in this paper. The interviewees' ambitions for their 'new' lives, in general, aligned with the indicators of successful integration outlined by Ager and Strang and UNHCR: from finding employment, to making friends with local people, the women shared a commitment to finding their place in Berlin. However, the 'roadmap' of how to reach the coveted status of 'integrated' develops in myriad ways. It is clear from the data that various factors affect the ways 'integration', a sense of 'belonging' and feeling 'at home' are found and each of these elements is achieved at different points on the trajectory. Significantly, positive interactions with locals were widely regarded as just as important for developing an attachment to Berlin as personal efforts to 'integrate'.

Overall, the women in this study were positive about the progress they had made in weaving themselves into the social fabric of Berlin. Nonetheless, the development of a personal identity in the context of displacement, false representations in politics and public discourse, a language barrier and cultural clashes presented the greatest challenge to attaining a degree of attachment to the city and its culture. As such, policy-makers and advocates should focus their attention on better supporting the host society to welcome - rather than fear - refugees. In addition, by resolving to value the expertise of women refugees as agents of integration and a commitment to shaping policy around their specific needs, governments and institutions would adopt a more suitable supportive role to women in situations of protracted displacement.

More research is needed into the lives, opinions, and ideas of (forced) migrant women with the explicit aim of incorporating their concerns into integration and migration debate and adapting policy where necessary. This paper provides a starting point for this by bringing together feminist approaches to integration and representation and the prevalent understanding of integration as a process. Moreover, Beetham and Demetriades insist that, while sex-disaggregated data are of significant value to gender studies, it is only when this data is accompanied by an analysis of gender relations that meaningful changes to the lives of women can be achieved.<sup>116</sup> As such, research into the parallel experiences and representations of *male* ref-

<sup>116</sup> Gwendolyn Beetham and Justina Demetriades, 'Feminist Research Methodologies and Development: Overview and Practical Application' (2007) 15(2) *Gender and Development* 203.

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ugees residing in Berlin since 2015, and analysed in conjunction with the data in the present study, would provide greater insight into women's and men's understandings of displacement and signpost areas for improvement in policy and infrastructure in the city.

To deepen the analysis, further study should examine the cultural context from which refugee women originated and their lives pre-displacement. This will provide a more accurate and, ultimately, more useful understanding of how best to facilitate the integration of women and the reasons for the limited success of current initiatives. For example, one interviewee for this study explained that women in Syria are 'used to the unequal treatment of men and women in society' so that, when asked about discrepancies in the way men and women refugees experience displacement and integration, women may not consider that the system could be any different. Moreover, such data may also show that more should be done to promote the existence of women-focused social integration organisations, advice centres and safe spaces because the absence of such initiatives in Syria (for example) may prevent refugee women from actively seeking help. The examination of knowledge formation and assumptions in interview settings and transnational gendered experiences is a vital element of feminist understandings of integration. Further research of this kind will move integration policy and practice closer to assuring appropriate support for both (forced) migrant women and host societies.

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