Narrating Agency

'The Refugee Experience' of Women Fleeing to Germany

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Abstract

This dissertation aims to offer an alternative approach to the media portrayal of refugee women coming to Germany as dependent, passive and victimised. Building on an expanded concept of agency as emancipatory resistance from inhibiting structures and capacity for action within structures at the same time, a more nuanced view on refugee women's considerations and decision-making within the context of their flight is achieved. Set against a feminist background of conducting research, the findings of this dissertation are built on the use of narratives as a methodological approach to conceptualising the research partners' agency. For the purpose of this study, 14 interviews were conducted with research partners from various backgrounds in order to assess the steps they had taken to shape their flight to Germany related to inhibiting and enabling structures. The empirical part of this dissertation is thus subdivided into four different categories to illustrate the research partners' individual agency: the departure from their country of origin, their transit to Germany, their considerations of family and relatives, and their arrival in Germany. The dissertation concludes by firstly reiterating the individuality of refugee women's agency and hence experiences within the context of their flight, thus calling for a more differentiated portrayal of refugee women in media and public discourse; secondly, the findings also support the conceptualisation of agency as fluid rather than stagnant concept and stresses the importance of refraining from a polarised depiction of refugee women as victimised and lacking any agency.

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1. Introduction

'Conventional wisdom holds that refugee women are victimized, dependent, and dispirited.'

All too often, refugee women have been portrayed in academia and media as identified by Pessar (2001:462) in the quotation above. This is concerning insofar as the gendered media discourse on asylum seekers has the considerable potential to influence public opinion[1] and views on female refugees in particular and may lead to an adoption of blatant misrepresentations, simplified narratives and gendered stereotypes of refugees in general (Seu, 2003).

This dissertation is motivated by the desire to offer an alternative approach to the portrayal of refugee women, focusing on the individual narratives of refugee women to examine their agency and decision-making in coming to Germany and within structures that pose political, social, cultural and economic challenges to them, both on a systematic and individual basis. An intersectional approach shows us that female refugees have experienced at least a double marginalisation, based on their insecure status as refugees on the one hand and their female gender on the other hand (cf. Vervliet et al., 2014). Yet taking into account the myriad of backgrounds, experiences and individual identities, 'it is important to see refugee women not as a homogeneous, undifferentiated group' (Binder and Tošić, 2005:618). Rather, it is crucial to focus on the personal and individual narratives of refugee women, on which this research is centred as well, in order to highlight the diversity in experiences of female refugees (Reed, 2003).

Within this context, this dissertation addresses the following questions:
1. To what extent, and how, do refugee women exercise their agency prior to, during and after their flight?
   a. How do they exercise their agency when leaving their country of origin?
   b. How do they exercise their agency regarding their intermediate and/or final destinations?

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[1] See Terence Wright (2014) for an excellent piece on the role of political agendas behind representations of refugees, a discussion to which this dissertation cannot contribute due to textual limitations.

2. How do certain structures prior, during and after their flight inhibit or enable the extent to which refugee women exercise their agency?

   a. How, and why, do they adapt the choices about their movement and further steps according to different structures?

I set out to give a brief overview over the academic discussion of the gendered portrayal of refugee women. In order to position this research within the wider theoretical frame of the agency-structure paradigm, I then introduce two different, yet not necessarily opposing, approaches to conceptualising agency as a form of emancipatory resistance against oppressive structures on the one hand and as a capacity for action within structures on the other hand. Following this, the methodological approach of this research is explained, set against a feminist research background and a strong conviction of seeing the women interviewed as partners in research. Subsequently, I present the findings of this research and the ways in which refugee women exert their agency within the context of their flight to Germany in four sections: the exit from their country of origin, their transit to Germany, considerations of family and relatives, and after arriving in Germany. I conclude by reiterating the diversity behind their 'refugee experience' and highlight the various ways in which agency is exerted by refugee women.

2. Literature Review

2.1 (Mis)Representations of Refugee Women

Traditionally, perceptions and representations of refugees and migrants have been centred on male refugees, highlighting men's flight motives and experiences while being gender-blind as to divergent narratives that do not fall into the hetero-normative, male category (Guine and Moreno Fuentes, 2007; Kea and Roberts-Holmes, 2012). Academic representations of female refugees and migrants have been limited to a one-dimensional image of women as dependents who follow their men (Boyd, 1989; Chant and Radcliffe, 1992 in Carling, 2005; Palmary et al., 2010). This is linked to the long-established conceptualisation of women in (forced) migration studies within the context of migrant households (cf. Matsuoka and Sorenson, 1999), thus neglecting any potential for individuality in decision-making or movement. Frequently, refugee women were blended with children in research and policies (Turner, 2000), leading Enloe (1998) to coin the critical term *womenandchildren* and acknowledge that media representations of refugee women 'rely heavily on feminized and infantilized images of 'pure' victimhood and vulnerability' (Sigona, 2014:370). Similarly, Hajdukowski-Ahmed et al. (2008) note three different and evolving levels of discourse related to the identity and agency of refugee women that have persisted from the 1980s until now: first, as vulnerable victims in need of international protection; second, as occupying a victimised position within different systems of power relations; and third, in an essential role within displaced families. Here, one can draw parallels between these conceptualisations of refugee women and their position within refugee protection law, where women were merely covered 'as part of a family unit, as mothers and wives and sisters in need of male protection' (Kneebone, 2005:10). This points to the significant, underlying issue in refugee law of the depoliticisation of females' flight motives (Mascini and van Bochove, 2009), wherein '[the] exclusion of women from the debate on refugee movements at once acknowledges and reinforces their subordinate role and status in society and their association with the domestic sphere' (Bloch et al., 2000:170).

Yet, the academic debate on the representation of migrant and refugee women within their movement to another country has further developed the assumption 'that, although women are victimized in different situations [...], they also work in the junction between oppression and agency to create a better life' (Bailey, 2012:852). This reflects

the growing awareness of a distinction between refugee men's and refugee women's experiences while challenging exclusionary conceptualisations of victimisation and agency (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014). The following two chapters further investigate two academic approaches to this concept of agency.

2.2 Gendered Agency as Resistance

Within this first section, the approach on which further considerations of gendered agency are based originates from the work of Pierre Bourdieu. According to Bourdieu (1996) our experience of the world is structured along the lines of an originary gendered division, which, through repetition, normalisation and bodily inscriptions, comes to be accepted through subjective cognitive categories. As such, he proposes that, on the basis of our acceptance of such social structures, we 'experience […] masculine domination as inscribed in the nature of things, invisible, unquestioned' (ibid:195). His exposition of this elitist and masculinist thought structure that is based on the notion of rationality and control over one's actions, highlights the exclusion of the female subject and both its traditional, and by now out-dated conceptualisation as non-rational and emotional (Benson, 1990). This exclusionary nature led to agency being perceived as a key concern of emancipatory projects of feminism, anti-colonialist and anti-racist movements (Bilge, 2010).

Taking the discussion of gendered agency further, Healey (2010) claims that agency is very much dependent on the relative openness of societal structures vis-à-vis the individual. She proposes that 'patriarchy may lead to women having less power than men due to the way in which resources are allocated. Yet these women still have power within these structures, as agents may always act differently' (ibid:32). This perception of agency is critically grounded on the idea of resisting societal structures that are thought to be intrinsic obstacles to the realisation of women's ambitions. McNay (2002:2) takes a similar approach to gendered agency 'in terms of the inherent instability of gender norms and the consequent possibilities for resistance, subversion and the emancipatory remodelling of identity'. Yet, the idea that the individual's agency is conditional on her divergent behaviour from the norm of the society she is part of (the fluidity of the concept becoming apparent in the context of migration) is one to be cautious of, as it says much about the Western approach to the position and agency of the subaltern (cf. Spivak, 1988), a notion we will return to below. Furthermore, it limits women's capacity for subversive

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or deviating actions to the very ideas of progressiveness and emancipation, a thought that was originally introduced by Butler (1993, 2007) in her conceptualisation of gender as potentially subversive performativity.

Pessar's (2001) study on Guatemalan refugee and returnee women offers interesting insights into the possibilities for women to initiate a 'process of feminist conscientization' (ibid:471) while in exile and to further utilise this when negotiating gender norms upon their return to Guatemala. She thus advocates seeing 'migration [as] a vehicle for women's empowerment' (ibid:463) within the wider context of the feminist project. In general, the agency of refugee women has often been conceptualised in terms of resistance against supposedly overpowering structures of oppression founded on traditions and cultures (Forbes Martin, 2004). This, however, seems to offer a rather one-dimensional assessment of their choices in shaping their flight and life and seems to offer only half of the picture.

2.3 Gendered Agency as Capacity for Action

The above-described conceptualisation of agency is very much grounded on a binary division and categorisation between victim and agent. As such, refugee women are either framed as resisting oppressive structures by exerting their agency and freeing themselves of the shackles of their patriarchal cultures or by staying within their passive and victimised position. As Bassel (2012:92) contends, '[the] subject of debates framed by gender v. culture/religion is either a victim or, through struggle, an agent who opposes or negotiates these identities. This is the speaking subject who can be recognized within a circumscribed vulnerability or agency'. This again points to the importance of the discourse employed within our acknowledgement of refugee women's agency. In general, however, this concept of agency is quite reductionist in its insistence on a binary divide between resistance against domination and capitulation to it.

Mahmood (2001) proposes an alternative way of assessing agency as 'entailed not only in those acts that result in (progressive) change but also those that aim toward continuity, stasis and stability' (ibid:211), as well as 'the capacity to endure, suffer and persist' (ibid:217). For her, there is not a categorical connection between agency on the one hand and the concrete emancipation of women, as stipulated by the feminist progressive project, on the other. Rather, and by opening up the concept of agency to

encompass also what would be described from a Western point of view as illiberal actions in line with custom or traditions, she sees 'agency not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create' (ibid:203). In doing so, she criticises the traditional liberal approach to political theory and scrutinises the involvement of Western feminism in the continued subjugation of Other and subaltern women through discourse (Mahmood, 2011; Spivak, 1988). In her approach, she utilises Foucault's conceptualisation of power as relational and permeating our lives in a number of different discourses, objects or desires (Foucault, 1980). On this basis, the paradox of subjectivication, introduced by Foucault (1980, 1983) and further developed by Butler (1993), allows us to see these instances of relational power as creating both the conditions for subordination of an individual and the opportunities for her agency and self-conscious identity (cf. Mahmood, 2011).

A number of scholars have applied this more multi-layered concept of gendered agency. Toni Wright's (2014) research shows that Kurdish women's ability to exert their agency is very much dependent on the extent to which their movements and actions are monitored by the community. Still, she proposes that the notion of Western liberated women and non-Western oppressed women is not as clear-cut, for her research partners 'located themselves alongside a continuum of women's oppression as somewhere between 'absolutely oppressed' and 'not yet quite fully emancipated' (ibid:745).

Jahan (2011) questions the limits of agency itself by asking research participants from the Bangladeshi diaspora in the UK to refer to agency within the extent to which their lives are affected by cultural constraints. As such, these women were 'living strategically within norms, rather than transgressing them' (ibid:372) and 'exercised agency in the sense of making decision in awareness of social norms' (ibid:379), thus confirming this distinction of agency as embodied capacity to take action as opposed to what one may call the politically prescriptive project of feminism.

A similar approach that refugee women exhibit in actively negotiating relationships with friends or family can be found in Batalden's (2005) study on female African refugees in the US. According to her, for African women (and this over-simplified frame of analysis should not be seen uncritically) it is not uncommon to marry in order to position themselves more favourably before filing an application for resettlement. Yet, Batalden sees this as another way of exerting their agency in order to improve their and

their children's lives, while still negotiating their choices within structures imposed on them by the US government. Similarly, Ghorashi (2005) presents Iranian refugee women in the Netherlands as struggling against the victim status imposed on them by Dutch society. She carves out how her research partners move between the lines of inhibiting and enabling structures in order to re-establish their self-image as active and independent people.

These different approaches to agency against or within structures serve to open up greater possibilities of recognising agency within refugee women's choices and considerations pertaining to their flight. The next chapter further develops this thought by means of literature that engages with refugee women's agency from the methodological approach of narratives.

3. Methodology

'Talking to women about their experiences is a privilege, and one that carries with it an obligation to listen' (Gerard, 2014:17).

Underlying this project is a commitment to the methodological approach and ethics inherent in feminist research, which influenced both the case selection and rationale for using in-depth semi-structured interviews as primary method of qualitative data collection. As such, the use of interviews is very much grounded in the linkage between the concept of agency and its expression through narrative. The interview as a research method offers research participants the chance of constructing 'their own accounts of their experiences by describing and explaining their lives in their own words' (Valentine, 1997:111). This was particularly important for my research for two reasons: first, it allowed for a more individual approach to the women's experiences and narratives, and was thus effectively intertwined with my dissatisfaction with the very homogenising depiction of female refugees in particular in German media and public discourse; second, and more so than other research methods, the interviews gave my research the possibility of including the women more as subjects and partners. I follow Eastmond's approach to narratives in forced migration as a tool for both the researcher and the research participant 'for negotiating what has happened and what it means, but also for seeking ways of going forward' (2007: 251) and thus make sense of disruptions and discontinuities within narratives of individual life stories (cf. Powles, 2002; Kramer, 2003). As such, the narratives have to be conceptualised within a framework of deliberate interpretation by the conscious agent framing and presenting her movement within structures (Gorman and Mojab, 2008).

3.1 Case selection

The field research for this dissertation took place in the summer of 2016 and was situated in the German federal state of Baden-Württemberg, more precisely in the cities of Mannheim and Karlsruhe, and surroundings, due to their important position as

Landeserstaufnahmstelle2 further distributing refugees in the area. The background of the research partners was varied. I conducted 15 interviews in total. Out of these, 14 were conducted with female interview partners and one with a male interview partner3. Of these 14 female interview partners, 13 had either already been granted refugee status or were in the process of applying for asylum, while one interview was conducted with a woman of German citizenship working with refugees to gain more knowledge about the situational context of refugee aid in Mannheim. The following table allows for a more conclusive outlook on the different backgrounds of the research partners:

Table 1: Overview of research participants

Country of origin	Pseudonym used for research	Date of Interview
Macedonia	Ayse (Interview 2)	15 June
Somalia	Shamso (Interview 3)	20 June
	Iman (Interview 13)	3 July
	Faduma (Interview 14)	3 July
Iran	Sahar N.4 (Interview 4)	22 June
	Darya (Interview 7)	28 June
Eritrea	Maryam (Interview 5)	26 June
	Semret (Interview 6)	26 June
Syria	Amira (Interview 8)	29 June
	Reem (Interview 9)	29 June
	Zahra (Interview 11)	30 June
	Firas (Interview 10)	29 June
Pakistan	Sabina (Interview 12)	1 July
Iraq	Leyla (Interview 15)	Written response

All interviews were either conducted in German, especially with individuals who had been living in Germany for quite a number of years, or in their respective mother

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2 Centre of first reception.

3 While this study focuses on refugee women's narratives, it was helpful to take into account this male research partner's account as well, as it offered a rich and, for the purposes of this dissertation, complementary view point on his wife's and his flight from Syria.

4 This name was used following the explicit wish of the research partner.

tongue. I was assisted in conducting the interviews by interpreters speaking Somali, Tigrinya, Farsi and Arabic. The interpreters were largely known to the research partners through professional or informal networks and in all but one case shared a cultural background, thus leading to a more confidential and relaxed atmosphere. Yet, as Fiddian (2006) points out, researchers should not take a common cultural background as a given in establishing a good rapport between the research partners, for instance with regard to differing clan affiliations or family networks. I chose not to be assisted by professional interpreters as this could have impacted negatively on the interviews in terms of a heightened sense of formality. This was a big concern as, initially, most of the research partners drew parallels between our interview and their *Anhörung*[5], the latter of which was a source of considerable stress (cf. Kea and Roberts-Holmes, 2013:98).

3.2 Ethical Considerations

As a researcher I was aware that the interviews, both in terms of content discussed as well as how they were conducted, could take a possible psychological toll on the research partners. Therefore, I was careful to fully describe the project, whenever needed via an interpreter, to them by briefly explaining the wider context, introducing myself as a researcher and my background with UCL, as well as raising my intention of audio-recording our conversation and explaining the consent form[6] I would give all research partners to sign (Mackenzie et al., 2007). Here, I would keep one copy myself and give the research partner another copy, as well as print outs of all details of the research project covered before, which also included my contact details in case they had further questions after the interview.

As I was aware of the potentially stressful topics discussed in the interviews, I approached the research with the strong conviction of, at the very least, 'doing no harm' (Mackenzie et al., 2007). As I anticipated the possibility of talking about traumatising events, I prepared a list of organisations that could be of assistance to the research partner. Furthermore, I stressed her control over deciding whether to stop the interview at any point or take a break. I phrased the questions with a focus on the steps the research

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[5] Official hearing that constitutes a crucial part of the asylum-seeking process in Germany.
[6] Please see Annex 7.3 for the information package given to research partners.

partner had taken to change her circumstances, rather than discussing traumatising experiences that preceded her flight to avoid a re-traumatisation of the research partners and, for instance, did not probe as to their experiences prior to their flight. Yet most of the women I talked to did in fact offer insights into such topics, which in some cases led to the interview taking an emotional toll on the research partner (cf. Eastmond, 2007). On other occasions, research partners would tell me the story of their flight in an uninterrupted manner and seemed to use the conversation and myself as a medium for narrating their experiences, sometimes appropriating and reworking the questions (cf. Chambon, 2008).

3.3 Limitations

It is worth noting that, of the 13 interviews conducted with refugee women, only six could be audio-recorded following the consent of these interview partners. Relying on my written notes for the remaining seven naturally affected the extent to which I could use direct quotes in these cases, as I had to resort to another form of content analysis (cf. Yow, 2016) other than digital coding. I decided not to pressure the research partners into recording our conversation, since this could have created parallels again to the more formal and pressure-laden circumstances of their *Anhörung*. Being assisted by interpreters naturally poses issues to the reliability of the data as well.

Furthermore, since I decided to focus this research on women's experiences in order to offer an alternative narrative to female experiences of forced migration that have been comparatively neglected, this study does not encompass an analysis of the (gendered) agency of refugee men. Still, an analysis of gendered agency of the two sexes could potentially benefit from a comparative approach, an endeavour which will have to be undertaken in future research.

Lastly, and also with the intention of pre-heading the presentation of the research findings, due to the small number of interviews conducted and the quite varied backgrounds and flight experiences of the interview partners, it is important to note that these findings are by no means fit to draw generalisations as to the experiences of refugee women coming to Germany *per se*. Rather, they are intended to offer us a glimpse of individual women's motivations and decisions.

4. Empirical Chapters

4.1 Leaving the Country of Origin

Among the interview partners, the reasons for leaving their respective countries of origin were manifold, ranging from conflict, to living under oppressive regimes to precarious living situations due to family conflict or difficult economic situations. While the aim of this dissertation is not to give a detailed account of these hardships, it is crucial to acknowledge the importance of the said backgrounds in shaping the women's decision to leave their countries of origin (cf. Healey, 2010). In that sense, these circumstances are the very foundation on which individual decisions may be based and are dependent on the women's position at intersections of oppression and opportunity with regards to their standing in societal networks and access to resources.

Some examples[7] may serve to illustrate how the exertion of agency in leaving the country of origin may be best conceptualised on a scale, influenced by both fluid structures and arising opportunities. Sahar[8], for instance, chose to leave Iran due to an increasingly difficult family situation. As her personal movement was highly curtailed, she relied on her brother to organise her flight, using the same network of smugglers that had brought him to the UK. While she was able to sell her gold jewellery in order to finance her flight via plane from Turkey to France, she decided to remain in Germany rather than join her brother due to what she perceived as more favourable societal conditions for women. As such, hers is an example of utilising the surrounding structures to her advantage and shaping her plans along the way. Sahar's comparatively stable financial background allowed for both a relatively comfortable mode of flight and her level of education for a conscious choice of subverting gendered expectations of possibly locating herself again within family relations. Both her awareness and utilisation of comparatively favourable gendered opportunities and ambivalence towards family structures point to her exerting her agency in a more empowered way, opposing the structures that confined her prior to her flight (cf. Pessar, 2001).

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[7] All names have been changed for reasons of anonymity (cf. Powles, 2004), unless the interview partner explicitly expressed the wish to keep her own name.
[8] Interview 4; 22 June 2016

Amira[9] also seemed to deliberately plan the timing of her departure from Syria as she wanted to conclude her studies before joining her husband who was working in Germany and had applied for family reunification. As Gerard (2014:91) contends in her research on Somali women fleeing to Malta, 'decision making around exit is gendered and different for each woman and as such can be informed by strategic deliberations prior to exiting the country of origin'. However, this is very much dependent on the situation itself, as the example of Darya's[10] flight can illustrate. Also from Iran, she was raised in Germany as a child and used to go there for holidays as well. While on one such trip she and her family were notified that a CD containing precarious information about her husband's political activism had been forwarded to the Iranian government, leading them to decide to stay in Germany. Although Darya's flight was rather unusual, it serves to show how changing circumstances can also present individuals with a new set of choices that require a swift decision.

While not wanting to generalise their experiences, this notion of fluid opportunities for leaving their country of origin was a thread shared in many interviews conducted with Somalian and Eritrean refugee women. They, owing to their unstable family situation and/or financial circumstances and, in the case of the two Eritrean interview partners, worsening living conditions under the oppressive regime, attested to a mind-set that may have been more or less open to the possibility of flight[11]. Yet, arising opportunities for actually taking the step to leave their countries of origin led to a change in their surrounding structures and new ways of exerting their agency in changing their circumstances. Maryam [12], for instance, chose to flee from Eritrea more or less spontaneously, as she described it herself, when the opportunity presented itself during a two week medical leave from prescribed military service. Here, it is helpful to keep in mind that a dichotomy between the country of origin and the subsequent country/countries of reception according to threat and safety respectively is unhelpful and works to reproduce 'reductionist and over simplistic interpretations of [...] identities and cultures' (Yuval-Davis and Werbner, 1999:18; Kea and Roberts-Holmes, 2013).

This shows that some women's flight movements may be more dependent on relatively favourable conditions and structures than others, also owing to the individual's

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[9] Interview 8; 29 June 2016
[10] Interview 7; 28 June 2016
[11] Interviews 5 and 6; 26 June 2016
[12] Interview 5; 26 June 2016

societal and economic background. As such, both a planned departure from the country of origin, involving deliberate steps taken in the process, and a rather spontaneous flight based on an opportunity that presented itself are manifestations of women's agency. At the same time, this research also acknowledges that the individual agency or responsibility for exiting their countries of origin is interlinked with a gendered access to mobility, dependent on women's position within different identifying systems based on their social standing, economic resources or family background. In this regard, Massey sees '[some as] more in charge of [mobility] than others; some initiate flows and movements; others don't; some are more on the receiving end of it than others' (1993:26). Moreover, it seems inadequate to categorically conceptualise refugee women's agency when fleeing their country of origin as *either* within *or* against structures, as individual decision-making is influenced by factors that span both paradigms.

While all of the research partners had what may be defined as 'valid' reasons to flee in legal protection terms, this did not forestall them to make deliberate choices in leaving their countries of origin, rather than simply being 'pushed' out. As could be examined in the above mentioned cases, while circumstances naturally do shape the individual's choices of leaving her country of origin, equating refugee's movements 'with structural factors beyond the individual's control' (Hayden, 2006:474) is an out-dated notion that is further clarified when looking at the steps the women took during their flight and regarding their intermediate and final destinations.

4.2 The Transit to Germany

Following on from the steps taken to leave their countries of origin, it is important to see the flight on an individual basis as something fluid and akin to an adaptive process of development, rather than a static decision on a course of action followed by its implementation (cf. Bourdieu, 2000), an approach that was also mirrored in the research partners' narratives.

Semret's[13] flight from Eritrea, for instance, first led her to neighbouring Sudan where she lived for one year as an irregular worker. As she expressed during the interview, she originally had intended to stay close to her daughter who lived with her

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[13] Interview 6; 26 June 2016

grandmother in Eritrea, yet faced a precarious situation due to her 'illegal' status in Sudan, which often prevented her from leaving the house in fear of having her papers checked by regular police controls. She decided to move on to Libya and then Italy, telling me that she saw no future for herself in Sudan. As such, Semret adapted her flight step by step, for instance when further deciding to go to Germany based on the low standards of refugee homes and protection in Italy. After unintentionally taking a train to Switzerland and facing deportation back to Italy where she had been registered upon arrival in the EU and in line with the Dublin II Regulation14, she had to leave the Swiss refugee camp within five days and decided again to make her way to Germany. Upon arrival and after consulting other Eritrean refugees with whom she still maintains loose contact, she claimed asylum in a small German town. Semret thus exerted her agency in navigating different structures of asylum systems and networks of people, alternating between 'illegality' and regular status from Sudan until Germany, re-evaluating her situation during each stage and shaping her decisions accordingly. This interplay with different structures surrounding the agent has also been observed by Ghorashi (2005), albeit in the case of integration prospects of Iranian women in the Netherlands.

Here, parallels can be drawn to Zahra's15 and her family's flight from Syria. During our interview, she told me that she and her husband took the decision together to flee their hometown in Syria separately. They used different routes to Egypt, which they had as their final destination in mind due to its large Syrian diaspora and comparatively affordable living conditions. Although Zahra explicitly stated that, at this point, they had not planned to come to the EU, let alone to Germany, the family had to revise their plans after staying in Egypt for one year, as they could not find work. This would confirm the findings made by Roman's study on Somali and Sudanese refugees in Egypt that would have to continue their journey due to a 'lack of local integration prospects' (2006:7 in Düvell, 2012). After hearing about more favourable education and working conditions in Germany from their former neighbour and ten days after giving birth to a daughter, Zahra and her family took a boat to Italy and, after being intercepted by Italian coast guards, were brought to Sicily and then to a city in Northern Italy. Yet, again due to the difficult circumstances in Italian refugee camps, she told me they made the conscious decision of

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14 According to the Dublin II Regulation, the Member State via which the third country national (irregularly) entered EU territory in the first incident is responsible for processing her asylum claim (Council Regulation (EC) No 343/2003).
15 Interview 11; 30 June 2016

eluding registration by Italian officials and further made their way to Germany via France. While Zahra's account of her flight is inseparable from the fate of her husband and children, a point that will be discussed further below, she reflected on the decisions as taken after deliberating together with her husband and finding a common consensus. With regards to surrounding structures, Zahra also used informal (smuggling) networks and exerted her agency in consciously refusing to move within the regular channels and systems of refugee reception in the EU.

The said conscious and deliberate acceptance or refusal of navigating these official structures, however, is intrinsically linked with prior access to them, which is mirrored in both Zahra's and Reem's[16] flight. She, her husband Firas[17] and their two young daughters tried unsuccessfully to leave Aleppo together at first, but, due to the quickly deteriorating situation, decided together, as she told me, that Firas would try to reach Turkey first, for the border crossing was highly dangerous and difficult to manage as a family. After he completed this first leg of their flight, Reem and the children managed to come to Turkey as well, after some back and forth between Aleppo, Idlib and the border. Since they could not find work in Turkey, they again decided together that Firas would try to reach Germany via the Balkan Route in order to apply for family reunification and keep Reem and their daughters from having to make the arduous journey. As such, these migratory patterns also show awareness of possibilities of spreading risk between different members of the family (Monsutti, 2008). Their story serves to illustrate that the confining structures and border regimes before reaching Europe and within the EU as well take a considerable toll on individuals' and families' ability to exert their agency in shaping their transit from their country of origin in the first place. As Reem and Firas did not have access to 'legal' or regular channels of immigration to Germany in the first place, they had to split up as a family to open up the possibility of a regular and safer passage to Germany for at least the members of the family they perceived as more vulnerable (cf. Matsuoka and Sorenson, 1999). Both Reem and Firas' as well as Zahra and her husband's flight movements support for instance Kosmarskaya's (1999) research on Russian female migrants and the finding that it is joint decision-making rather than simply men's prerogative that shapes migrations.

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[16] Interview 9; 29 June 2016
[17] Interview 10; 29 June 2016

In general, refugee women deliberately shape their journey and adapt their agency facing different structures during their flight and in the transit countries they cross on the way to Germany. The flight itself and the considerations regarding different steps along the way are, however, not taken in isolation. For many of my research partners, family and relatives played a significant role in their motivations and choices before, during and after their flight, as is discussed in the next chapter.

4.3 Considerations of Family within Flight

While I explicitly did not pose any initial questions regarding family relatives such as children or spouses due to ethical reasons, this theme naturally emerged sooner or later during the course of an interview. All research partners gave accounts of including dependents or family members in their considerations before, during and after the flight, which 'illuminates the shifting nature of relational spaces, and of how they are fluid and multiple in nature' (Toni Wright, 2014:738). This theme owes to the reality that many decisions are taken in a context of considering their impact not just for the agent herself, but also for others that may be affected, which holds true for the (forced) migration movements of the women interviewed for this dissertation as well.

At the same time, it complicates the notion of the interplay between (in)dependency and agency and poses some serious questions as to the aforementioned critique of the binary division between autonomous and independent male refugees and passive and dependent female refugees as part of a family unit. Yet, it would be wrong to suggest that family-orientation and caring for her children's and husband's interests within the flight to Germany would equal a low degree of agency per se. As such, this links back to the previously discussed notions of agency as rebellion against structures and capacity for action (cf. Mahmood, 2001), the very divide of which may even be questioned further in the following.

The case of Ayse[18], a Romani woman from Macedonia who now lives with three of her children and husband in Germany, may illustrate these considerations. Having lived in Germany as a child, her level of German and thus ability to navigate the administrative systems of refugee reception is considerable. Due to this, and her husband's inability to

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[18] Interview 2; 15 June 2016

speak the language, it was up to Ayse to file the family's asylum claims, both in a first unsuccessful instance and during the current proceedings. This instance of, indeed, tangible agency based on her different role within the family context renders her, in a literal sense, responsible for the future legal status of her husband and her children (cf. El-Bushra, 2000). Motivated, as she told me, by her ambitions to provide better opportunities for her children and protect them from discrimination against Roma in Macedonia on the one hand and to take advantage herself of employment opportunities in Germany on the other hand, Ayse finds herself in the difficult position of navigating gender divides. Stating '[…] because I have to be like a man as well at home. Not like a woman'[19], she faces tensions due to her numerous engagements outside the home, which she actively interweaves with her unique position as main claimant in the asylum procedure. Regarding one incident at home, she told me the following, recounting an exchange with her husband:

> *If you do this again, never mind if I have a chance to stay in Germany, I will give them my signature voluntarily[20], and then we all go back to Macedonia. He knows that I will do this, he knows. If I say I do that, it won't change my mind. I will do that. And he says, ok, it's all fine. But I have to! I have to act like this, otherwise I cannot go on.[21]*

This is not only an example of how Ayse is located in intersecting systems of expectations based on her female gender and how she navigates both the official channels of the asylum system and family hierarchies; it is also interesting to reflect on her perception of finding herself in a position that coerces her to use her agency in such a way, leaving her with no choice. Moreover, her agency is rather difficult to pinpoint clearly. On the one hand, statements such as the above would likely count as emancipatory against patriarchal structures (cf. McNay, 2002), while, on the other hand, she also offered her support of traditional family values and subscribes to basic gendered divides between husband and

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[19] Interview 2; German original: '[…] weil ich muss auch wie ein Mann zu Hause sein. Nicht wie eine Frau.'

[20] Here, Ayse was referring to assisted return, a voluntary option open to asylum seekers at any stage in their procedure and especially salient in the case of a failed claim, where assisted return may be sought as an alternative to forced return (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, 2016). She chose this option at the end of her first failed asylum claim.

[21] Ibid; German original: 'Noch einmal, wenn du so machst, egal ob ich eine Chance habe, dass ich in Deutschland bleiben kann, aber ich mache meine Unterschrift dann freiwillig, dann gehen wir alle nach Mazedonien. Er weiß, dass ich das mache, er weiß es. Wenn ich sage, ich mache das, dann kann sich nicht noch was ändern. Das mache ich. Und er sagt, ok, ist schon gut alles. Aber ich muss! Ich muss das machen, sonst kann ich nicht weiterkommen.'

wife as shown in the first quote. This example shows, in any case, how some refugee women may 'develop their empowered agency within the boundary of family, not outside it' (Kim, 2014:554).

While this may be an exceptional example of the interplay between family and agency, it is nevertheless to a certain extent echoed in the accounts of the other research partners as well. All of the women interviewed who are mothers stated that a prime motivation for their flight to Europe was a chance of providing a better life for their children, a sentiment that was echoed by both women who fled with their spouses or families and women who fled on their own[22]. While one should be cautious to draw conclusions based on a sample of such limited size, it seems to hold true in this research that 'families [are] a main source of motivation and [of] their struggle to improve socioeconomically' (Franz, 2003:97). Here, it is interesting to note that the said support was conceptualised both with regards to family members already in Germany and to relatives still living in the country of origin or other locations after their initial flight. A number of women also felt very strongly about bringing their relatives in general and their children in particular to live with them in Germany[23]. Sabina[24], for instance, recounted the story of her flight from Pakistan in strong relation to her agency in wishing to unite her family and bringing her two children who still live in Pakistan to Germany. While she had been very active in asking various officials and informal channels for their support, she stated that she sometimes felt overwhelmed by the structural obstacles faced by her family:

> *There is no... they do not have the money. They cannot afford the journey. They have no one, me for example, I cannot send an invitation. Because I don't earn enough, I have to provide the embassy with a thousand documents, I don't have all this. I can't do it. I can't do anything for my family.[25]*

This statement may be interpreted with a focus on different concepts: first, it may be an instance during which Sabina was, in providing assistance to her family, questioning her

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[22] Interview 2, 3, 6, 9, 11, 12
[23] Interview 2, 3, 5, 6, 12
[24] Interview 12; 1 July 2016
[25] German original: 'Es gibt kein... sie haben das Geld nicht. Sie können sich die Reise nicht leisten. Sie haben niemand, zum Beispiel ich, ich kann keine Einladung schicken. Weil ich verdiene nicht so viel, ich muss tausende Papiere vorlegen für die Botschaft, das habe ich nicht alles. Ich kann nicht. Ich kann für meine Familie gar nichts tun.'

own agency and capability that, being aware of her background, was considerable; second, it also serves to show the structural obstacles refugees in general face due to their complicated relation to their country of origin on the one hand and their difficult social, economic and political situation in the country of reception on the other hand (cf. Omata, 2013).

Generally, the findings of this research support the assumption that as conscious agents navigating different (ir)regular channels and structures prior, during and after their flight, family and relatives are a considerable factor in the research partners' decision making. As such, this serves to show that decisions do not tend to be taken in isolation, but rather are connected to a deliberate thought process as to their impact on others close to the agent herself.

4.4 Arriving in Germany

A considerable number of the research partners stated their plans for their future in Germany, ranging from learning the language to starting or commencing their education to finding employment. Sahar [26] , for instance, clearly expressed the comparatively low degree of autonomy she would have had in, as she put it, starting a new life with a husband and a family back in Iran. Now in Germany, she presented me with her plans of first learning German, then studying at university and finally finding employment where she could put to use the Business English skills she had already acquired. Similarly, Leyla[27], who now stays in Germany on her own after having fled Iraq with her uncle's family, wants to start a university course in engineering, motivated by the experience she got working in the automobile industry in Iraq. Ayse[28] told me that she was intent on becoming a nurse for the elderly and has thus completed various internships and training courses.

Finding a job in order to support their families and especially their children was a significant motivation for a number of women. Darya[29], for instance, contended that she would likely adapt her professional experience of being a flight attendant and retrain to

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[26] Interview 4; 22 June 2016
[27] Interview 15, written response
[28] Interview 2; 15 June 2016
[29] Interview 7; 28 June 2016

be part of the ground personal in order to be closer to her children. While not all research partners specified particular preferences in terms of employment prospects, all of them conceptualised the possibility of finding a job within the wider framework of building a life in Germany. Clearly, these narratives correspond with McPherson's study on how refugee women conceptualise education, and her statement that 'these women saw education as a tool to be *used* by themselves and others for self-development' (2014:88). As such, the way the participants of this study conceptualised education and employment can be seen as a way in which they exerted their agency in a first instance and an opportunity of expanding their future scope of action in a second instance.

While the level of prior education and family responsibilities seems to be of significance in voicing such plans and being able to thus shape their lives (Olssen, 2005; McPherson, 2014), it does serve to show that, again, refugee women's experiences and agency should not be generalised, as has unfortunately been done by a number of studies. For instance, Franz's observation that '[refugee women] were relatively non-selective and willing to take any available job' (2003:92), while crediting their agency in adapting more so than men, should not be considered as universally acceptable with regards to this research.

At the same time, these plans for the (immediate) future were also connected for a number of the research partners to potential plans for a return to their countries of origin. In parallel, for those that had not yet received a definite response to their asylum claims at the time of our interview, receiving refugee status and thus being allowed to remain in Germany was of utmost importance. This mirrors the insecurity felt by a number of the research partners regarding future plans that are based on both the developments in their countries of origin and chances of establishing themselves in Germany (cf. Omata, 2013). For a few of the research partners, these deliberations were very unnerving, mirroring the often stressful and insecurity-inducing asylum procedure in general (cf. Fiddian, 2006).

Despite structures that would not necessarily make it easy to do so, the refugee women that participated in this study displayed a considerable amount of deliberation as to their next steps in Germany and actively shaped the processes that would enable them to build a life for themselves and their families.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed at offering an alternative portrayal of refugee women's flight movements to Germany in order to counteract the often generalising, over-simplified and ultimately inadequate representations of refugee women both in parts of the academic discourse and the media landscape in Germany. This dissertation has served to explore the complex and individual life stories of the research partners interviewed and challenged the assumption of refugee women as passive, helpless and victimised.

In the main part of this dissertation, I analysed the accounts of the research partners according to the four overarching themes of exiting their country of origin, moving to Germany, considerations of family and relatives within their flights, and aspirations for their lives in Germany. In touching on the research questions posed in the beginning of this dissertation, namely how refugee women exert their agency within the context of their flight and how they negotiate different structures in doing so, the following overarching findings can be summarised:

First, it became clear that the research partners' agency regarding the four different topics of analysis expressed itself in an exceedingly individual manner, a finding that reflects the earlier premise that agency can be exerted both as a capacity for action and against structures. The research partners consciously exerted their agency within structures that shaped their choices at different stages of their flight, from leaving their country of origin, to transiting via intermediate destinations, and arriving in Germany. At the same time, this mirrors the intersectional approach of this dissertation and shows how particular political, cultural, economic and social structures surrounding the agent and permeating her identity will influence the manner in which she may exert her agency. Frequently, rapidly changing circumstances can lead to a reassessment of opportune choices, or, as Zaman (2016:111-112) phrases it, 'although refugees have been forcibly displaced, there is a measure of volition in how they adapt to changing circumstances'. As such, this dissertation joins the work of scholars calling for an appreciation of the diversity and heterogeneity behind what has been too frequently summarised as "the refugee experience".

Second, this dissertation established a conceptualisation of agency not as a rigid and static framework, but more as a very fluid construct, both in its ontological performance and in how it has been narrated by the research partners. As for the latter,

further research may be needed to offer a better insight as to the potential difficulties arising out of the subjectivity (both the researcher's and the research participants') in assessing the degree of choice of navigating the structures of a flight and the criteria of assessment themselves, possibly linking back to different cultural backgrounds. Regarding the former, the assumption of agency of refugee women on a scale, rather than within a black and white dichotomy of 'possessing' or 'lacking' agency may be useful in distancing ourselves from unhelpful, if not harmful and victimising, discourses. As described above, the research partners' agency can hardly be categorised according to a one-dimensional assumption of emancipating themselves within the traditionally feminist sense of the word; nor should this reversely lead to them being characterised as victims of patriarchal traditions and to discourses against the background of uncritically assumed Western standpoints on supposedly liberal and illiberal values. Rather, the refugee women interviewed within the remits of this study consciously negotiated their agency in different, changing circumstances and in relation to considerations of family members or other enabling or inhibiting structures.

By giving more space in public discourse to the narratives of refugees in general and refugee women in particular, we can learn not only about thought-provoking stories that hopefully make us question our own involvement in the politics of increasingly closed borders; also, we should critique our own, both academic and day to day, ways of presenting narratives and portraying refugee women. Female refugees are much more than an appendage to their male relatives and their individual stories should not be excluded from public portrayals. Rather than relying on oversimplified narratives, we should appreciate individual narratives of agency that far transcend 'the refugee experience'.

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