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# 'They Only Focus on Violence and Nothing Else': Questioning the Idea of 'Refugee Women's' General Vulnerability to Violence

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**ABSTRACT**

In Germany, women categorised as refugees are often depicted homogenously, as potential victims of (sexual) violence. However, many of these women strongly criticise their collective representation as victims. Drawing on interviews, informal conversations, and observations from my fieldwork (2020-22), I will argue that vulnerability cannot be regarded as a 'characteristic' of so-called 'refugee women'; rather, its rhetorical utilisation in the German public should be carefully examined. Using the example of the local discourse on violence prevention in Munich and Bavaria after 2015, I will examine how the construction of 'refugee women' as being particularly at risk of violence can pose a challenge to social workers' efforts to prevent violence in municipal reception centres. Finally, I will argue that both the ascription of vulnerability to so-called 'refugee women', and their experiences of structural violence contradict established portrayals of German society as a social and geographical *safe haven* for people living through, and living after, the asylum process.

## Introduction

An overarching theme in the portrayal of Germany as a host country for refugees is its status as a 'safe haven' for those fleeing persecution; however, this promised safety has its limits. In Germany, only a small minority of those who ask for asylum are deemed 'deserving', e.g., on the grounds of their having fled from current war zones such as Ukraine, and are granted asylum or at least a temporary residence status. For those who are deemed 'undeserving', e.g., due to their national affiliation to so-called 'safe countries of origin' (*sichere Herkunftsländer*), their fate is either expulsion or existence in a long-lasting state of legal uncertainty: in many cases, such persons are issued a 'toleration' (the original German term 'Duldung' is a euphemism for

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*temporary suspension of deportation*, see § 60a of the German residence law). Furthermore, they are then obliged to live in separate accommodations, e.g., specialised communal reception centres 'for refugees' (see also Mountz 2011). These are often located at the outskirts of towns and cities.

The general distinction between deserving and undeserving 'refugees' is accompanied by many other intersecting differentiations that enmesh people into an increasingly stratified system of access and rejection (see also Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). Among these intersecting differentiations, gender plays an important role. For example, since 2015's 'long summer of migration' (Hess et al. 2017, 6), when more than one million people fleeing war and disaster arrived in Germany and other European countries, the putatively peculiar vulnerability to violence of women[1] classified as refugees[2] plays a major role in their media representation in Germany (cf. Neuhauser, Hess, and Schwenken 2017). In contrast, 'refugee men' are portrayed as a potential threat to public safety, and as therefore not being eligible for help and support (cf. Scheibelhofer and Schneider 2021). While media coverage focusing on so-called refugee women has declined since 2015, their (potential) vulnerability to violence has remained a widely prevalent subject in recent research targeting 'refugee women' (e.g., Rabe and Vigo 2022), as well as within local discourses on violence prevention in communal reception centres.[3]

This situation may be considered in light of recent discussions within geography and social anthropology on the changing 'nature' of borders. Here, an understanding of borders as fixed and clearly marked territorial boundaries has been replaced by the idea of *borderscapes* (Agier 2016; Brambilla and Jones 2020) that stretch through time and space, and which encompass different practices and layers of bordering, such as those directed towards persons categorised as refugees. From this perspective, bordering no longer takes place only at border checkpoints or through border practices exercised by state officials (such as passport controls, for example), but can also occur in everyday interaction. Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy described this as 'everyday bordering' and also pointed to the role of 'ordinary people' that take over governmental duties, such as passport control (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy 2019; see also Rumford 2012). When the concept of everyday bordering is expanded to include more subtle forms of 'doing difference' (Fenstermaker and West 2001, 2013), and, also, to such different contexts as communal reception centres, violence prevention discourses can be viewed as spheres where bordering by 'ordinary people' towards people addressed as refugees takes place.

In the following, I will argue that the attribution of a general vulnerability to violence to women who are addressed as refugees might serve as an example of this kind of 'everyday bordering'. I argue further, that the assumption that 'refugee women' per se are at risk of violence should be treated with caution.

Here, several justifications can be provided: firstly, the term 'refugee women' is not a self-evident (research) category. Secondly, it seems not always clearly defined what kind of 'violence' is being referred to when ascriptions of vulnerability are made and how violence and vulnerability are conceptualised. And, thirdly, another question arises: that of whether the recurring attribution of vulnerability itself can be seen as a form of violence.

After a short note on material and methods, I will consider each of these points with reference to ethnographic material that I collected in the course of my fieldwork in Munich, the capital of the German federal state of Bavaria, and its environs (2020–22). With regards to the last point, I will refer to the example of the local discourse on violence prevention by focussing on the 'Munich Action Alliance for Refugee Women': here, I will show that the construction of 'refugee women' as particularly vulnerable to violence can provide a challenge for social work organisations' activism in support of violence prevention in communal reception centres. Finally, I will argue that with regard to the actual situation of women addressed as refugees, it seems necessary to reconsider the idea of Germany as a 'safe haven' for refugees, especially female refugees.

## Materials and Methods

In the course of my ethnographic fieldwork (2020-22), I accompanied and repeatedly interviewed 10 women in their early twenties, who all shared the experience of being categorised as refugees, in the area of Munich and the surrounding region. While two of the women with whom I worked acquired German citizenship during the research period, others were still struggling with the uncertainty of a temporary residence status or a *temporary suspension of deportation* ('Duldung'). While, at the time of my research, only one of my interlocutors was still living in a communal reception centre after more than five years of living in Bavaria, the majority of people with whom I worked shared the experience of having lived in this type of accommodation long after the end of their official asylum process. In many cases, they were unable to find accommodation with their families immediately afterwards, which sometimes led to them being 'transferred' into the homeless system. In Germany, people who are still in the process of applying for asylum receive monetary support under the Asylum Seekers' Benefit Act (AsylbLG). After finishing their asylum process and (in some cases) being granted a (temporary) residence status (such as subsidiary protection), or being officially accepted as 'refugees' under the Geneva Convention, they fall under the responsibility of a different part of the welfare system. If, subsequently, they cannot find paid employment, they will be entitled to apply for benefits as unemployed persons (SGB II) and can also receive housing welfare.

Although my initial contacts with my interlocutors were made in 2019 while preparing my fieldwork, my research did not officially begin until early 2020. After only a few 'live' meetings with my interlocutors, our personal meetings were interrupted due to the strict and often changing COVID-19 restrictions that prevailed in Bavaria in early 2020. In the aftermath of the pandemic outbreak, we regularly communicated via messenger services and telephone calls, as well as through one-to-one meetings. Thus, despite the difficult circumstances we encountered, we did manage to stay in contact and meet repeatedly over the course of nearly three years. These meetings were accompanied by participant observation of meetings among the young women, and of activities organised *for* 'refugee women' by social workers, as well as social workers' conferences and team meetings. Depending on the situation, I used a recording device to record the interviews: these I later transcribed according to the transcription standards developed by Dresing and Pehl (2011). For interviews that were not recorded, I wrote detailed meeting minutes. While I was still conducting interviews, I started the analysis phase in August 2020. After rereading all of my transcripts and the associated field notes that I had collected up to that point, I began to write my first comments and memos regarding issues that seemed to me to be striking, recurrent or otherwise important, a protocol suggested by Breidenstein et al. (2020). Afterwards, I coded the transcripts and protocols line by line. In accordance with the suggestions of Strauss and Corbin (2010), I started with a phase of 'initial coding', during which I developed my first concepts and categories to describe my data. This phase was followed by a more selective phase of coding, where I attempted to identify categories that could encompass a selection of codes. Later in the process, I moved forward to a third phase of coding where I sought to identify the key overarching themes in my data (cf. Saldaña 2009).

As suggested by Breuer, Muckel, and Dieris (2019), who developed the approach of 'reflexive grounded theory', I paid particular attention to instances of 'irritation', both on my part as well as on the part of my interlocutors. For example, I started the analysis phase with the examination of the transcripts and protocols of my first interviews with young women categorised as refugees. During this phase of initial coding, I noticed that my interviewees, although they had different biographies and came from different countries (e.g., Afghanistan, Iran, Syria, Ethiopia and Iraq), spoke in similar ways about their experiences of being addressed as 'refugee women'. This included the recurring narration of how this kind of address would follow them for years, even long after their arrival in Germany, and that it would prevent them from building close relationships with German women their age.

Furthermore, they often referred to the importance of social workers within their everyday life, e.g., in their interactions with different parts of the German welfare system such as the asylum social services in communal reception centres, or the German employment agency, and also with independent

providers of social work and NGOs. Here, they highlighted their recurring experiences of *othering* (Fabian [1983] 2014) in interactions with social workers (e.g., the experience of being addressed as a target group of social work). Therefore, I decided to extend my research focus, and to speak, also, to social workers. In particular, I hoped to learn more about the role and organisation of social work in Germany and its influence on the everyday lives of young women addressed as refugees, as well as on their representation. In this context, I had the chance to interview 20 social workers from different organisational backgrounds, and I was thus able to relate their perspectives to the ongoing conversations and interviews I was having with young women addressed as refugees.

## Questioning the Image of 'Refugee Women' as Particularly Vulnerable to Violence

In both the public discourse on violence prevention and some recent research on migration in Germany, one issue plays an important role: that of the supposed vulnerability to violence that 'refugee women' are supposed to live under. This representation of 'refugee women' as peculiarly vulnerable to violence was not regarded as appropriate by many of the young women I spoke to in the course of my fieldwork. For instance, Mina,[4] 26, who came to Germany from Syria with her parents in 2014 and started studying social sciences, stated: 'They only focus [. . .] on violence and on nothing else. For example, they neglect that you have to live there [in the shelter] on your own, that you can have struggles with your residence permit, with your children and so on' (Interview with Mina 04.05.2021, author's translation).

As Mina's statement suggests, and as many similar assessments by other interlocutors indicate, it is necessary to scrutinise the general assumption within the German public that women addressed as refugees are particularly vulnerable to violence. Firstly, the self-evident character of the category 'refugee women' is questionable. Scholars from different disciplines have pointed to the common association of 'being a refugee' with 'being male', and its influence on the design of immigration law in European countries. Some have argued that 'the male refugee' is set as the standard, while female refugees are classified as exceptions, as are the gender-specific reasons for flight that particularly affect women (such as female genital mutilation) (Binder 2004; Wessels 2016). Furthermore, and, again, within the context of different fields of academic research, the self-evident nature of the category 'refugee' also appears dubious: it may very often be used as a fixed term, in a homogenising way, and, on occasion, without a clear definition. This seems surprising, as the unproblematic declaration of 'refugees' as a designated concept in anthropological and other forms of scientific inquiry had already been questioned in the 1990s (cf. Malkki 1995, 496). However,

more recent research in social anthropology, geography, and in other disciplines has also identified the dangers of unquestioningly adopting the refugee category. While some researchers have demonstrated the need to scrutinise processes of 'labelling' of 'refugees', especially as more and more such labels appear (Zetter 2007, 184), others have pointed to the usefulness of semiotics in investigating the refugee label, and in outlining its differing meanings in various contexts (Cole 2017).

Furthermore, when investigating the recurring identification of 'refugee women' as being particular vulnerable to violence, it seems necessary to carefully determine *what kind* of violence is implied in that identification. Here, it will be helpful to consider Galtung's classic differentiation of forms of violence. Galtung originally identified two forms of violence: direct (or physical) and indirect (or structural) violence, which he considered as opposites (Galtung 1969, 170–71). According to Galtung, structural violence is different from physical or direct violence, in that it requires no concrete actor: 'There may not be any person who directly harms another person in the structure. The violence is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances' (Galtung 1969, 171). Later, he also added cultural violence as a third form of violence that could be used to legitimise either one of the first two types of violence (Galtung 1990).

Within interdisciplinary literature on violence, there exists a vivid debate on what should be considered as an expression of violence, often referred to as an opposition between 'narrow' and 'wide' definitions of violence. Narrow definitions concentrate on direct or physical forms of violence and are thus criticised (cf. Brunner 2016, 41f.). Broader definitions of violence acknowledge and analyse more subtle forms of violence. These include, for example, some studies by social anthropologists interested in the social aspects of violence. Among others, they focus on 'social suffering' (Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1996, XI), 'the *violences* of everyday life' (Kleinman 2007, 228, emphasis in original) or the violence inherent in welfare states' support structures (e.g., Weiss 2020). In contrast to understandings of violence that regard these subtle forms of the phenomenon as the opposite of physical violence, most anthropological research on violence neither neglects the existence of physical violence, nor overlooks the likewise brutal effects of non-physical violence (see for example Bourdieu 2008, 339).

Geographers have also argued in favour of differentiating between various other forms of violence. Dempsey (2020), for instance, argues that '[v]iolence is not a monolithic concept' and suggests a need to distinguish between 'physical, verbal, psychological, sexual, and non-linear' forms of violence that might also be interconnected between different geographical spheres (cf. Dempsey 2020, introduction, 2nd paragraph). This assessment has affinities with work by anthropologists concerned with violence: Nancy Scheper-Hughes, for example, who states that violence occurs in many different parts

of everyday life (cf. Scheper-Hughes 2003), and who therefore pleads for an understanding of violence as a 'continuum' (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2008; Scheper-Hughes 2007):

> We argue that violence is a slippery concept – non-linear, productive, destructive, *and* reproductive. Violence is mimetic, like imitative magic or homeopathy. Like produces like, that much we know. Violence gives birth to itself. So we can rightly speak of chains, spirals, and mirrors of violence – or, as I prefer – a *continuum* of violence. (Scheper-Hughes 2007, 161, emphasis in original)

This understanding of violence also provides a useful point of reference when considering the experiences of my interviewees, to which I return at a later point. With regard to public discourse in Germany, however, 'refugee women' still seem to be mainly represented as potential victims of violence in the physical or verbal sense, e.g., sexual exploitation or harassment. For instance, some of my interlocutors from the world of social work, who were working in the context of health counselling, stated that most of the women they had worked with had experienced physical and/or sexual violence during their escape – and also after their arrival in Germany, e.g., in the context of communal reception centres.

Allegations that 'refugee women' were peculiarly vulnerable to physical and/or sexual violence also featured within Germany's national and local discourses on violence prevention. In Bavaria, this issue has sharply come into focus since 2015/16, when many people came as refugees to Germany in general – and to the federal state of Bavaria in particular – as a result of the war in Syria and other conflicts. As the state government lacked suitable accommodation with the necessary capacity for housing these people, they were placed in hastily erected emergency structures such as temporary inflatable shelters known as 'air domes'[5], and in often overcrowded shared accommodation (see also Hanewinkel 2015; Hartmann 2017) which might be likened to what Walters and Lüthi have called 'cramped spaces' (2016). While the accommodation situation was already bad in 2015, not much has changed since then: this is underlined by the ongoing debate in Germany about how best to host the people from Ukraine and other countries who have been coming since 2022 (see for example Balser 2023).

The arrival of more than one million asylum seekers in Germany in 2015 and the subsequent expansion of communal reception centres has sparked vivid discussions on the issue of violence prevention in these centres at both the federal and local levels. This development has resulted in the publication of countless instructions, manuals and guidelines on the topic. One famous example is provided by the nationwide initiative entitled 'Minimum Standards for Women and Children in Refugee Accommodations'[6] which was started by the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) and UNICEF

in 2016. Subsequently, this initiative issued a brochure with the same name and established coordinators for violence prevention in 25 communal reception centres all over Germany. Between 2017 and 2018, they expanded, and were, ultimately, working with 100 communal reception centres. At the time of writing, the brochure has been reissued three times and is now named more generally as 'Minimum Standards for Refugees in Refugee Accommodations'.[7]

Where the particular issue of violence prevention is concerned, Bavaria provides a special example. The federal state of Bavaria, which has been governed for decades by the conservative Christian Social Union (CSU), has consistently been the first state in Germany to introduce restrictions on asylum seekers (and on people subjected to a temporary suspension of deportation) whenever public discussion happens to allow it. At the same time, however, it has also been quite committed to the issue of violence prevention in communal reception centres. For example, Bavaria was one of few federal states that continued to fund coordinators for violence prevention in some of their communal reception centres when the funding of the 'Minimum Standards' campaign ended in 2018 (see Bundesinitiative zum Schutz von geflüchteten Menschen in Flüchtlingsunterkünften 2024). Furthermore, in 2018, the Bavarian Ministry of the Interior issued its own Bavarian violence prevention concept for communal reception centres (Bayerisches Staatsministerium des Innern, für Sport und Integration 2018).

This observation has to be contextualised with regard to the gendered logics of Bavarian migration and asylum policy which have become more and more rigid since 2015; here, the issue of 'refugee women's' vulnerability to violence occupies a central position, e.g., within specialised funding policies targeted at the *integration*[8] of accepted asylum seekers, and also within federal state politics (as its repeated occurrence on the agenda of the Bavarian state parliament suggests).[9] This is, however, both a consequence and a corollary of the continuing construction of male (including former and future) asylum seekers as potential threat to public (and especially female) safety. While not always explicitly naming 'refugee men' as culprits, the ongoing focus on 'saving' so-called refugee women from violence in communal reception centres (and, especially sexual violence) reinforces the portrayal of 'refugee men' as (potential) perpetrators for all kinds of crimes. This, in turn, serves as argument to legitimise (demands for) rigorous changes of the asylum law in Bavaria and beyond. A recent example of this dynamic is provided by the ongoing local debate concerning the deportation of so-called 'dangerous persons' ('Gefährder'), a demand which has been raised again and again over the last couple of years by Joachim Herrmann, the Bavarian minister of the interior (see for example Reich 2021). Thus, through the simultaneous promotion of violence prevention courses for male asylum seekers and the construction of 'refugee men' as (potential) perpetrators, 'sexual violence [. . .] become[s] the

discourse of [internal and external] border control and the way borders are policed' (Ticktin 2016, 285).

While I do not want to downplay either the existential threats experienced within the reception centres, or the the absence of safety observed within them, it seems to me to be peculiar how 1) other inhabitants are not regarded as potentially threatened (as much) by sexual violence, and how 2) sexual violence is highlighted as the most important type of violence affecting women in communal reception centres – while other forms of violence, e.g., the structural violence of the accommodation as such, do not attract the same level of attention. Here, the spatial context of the communal reception centres, in which all people asking for asylum are obliged to live in during their asylum process (and sometimes beyond), moves to the fore.

In our conversations, many of my interlocutors who had experienced, or were experiencing, living in communal reception centres referred to uncomfortable experiences with resident men as well as male securities. They also reported on their feelings of insecurity when having to leave the room to use sanitary facilities as well as their experiences of stalking or sexual harassment. However, in the course of their narratives, they also strongly criticised the accommodation's structures as important preconditions for their experiences. This focus on structural criticism is exemplified by the following excerpts from a conversation with Marita that occurred in summer 2021. Marita, who was 22 at the time of our conversation, had come to Germany with her family in 2016. She had lived for most of her life in Pakistan, but was born in Afghanistan. In the beginning of her narration, Marita recounted the different stations of her life after arriving in Munich:

M: So, first we were in the big camp for a month. Then we were in an air dome for four months. There were many single men that lived there alone.

I: Were there other families as well?

M: Yes, we were six families in total. We got food, so we were not allowed to cook. And later, we were so happy that we could move out to somewhere, where we at least could close the door. Doesn't matter if you have to share the kitchen or the bathroom and so on. We were simply happy to have taken one step further.

(Interview with Marita on 25.09.2021, author's translation)

In our conversation, Marita emphasised the different structural conditions in the various shelters where she had lived in ('big camp', air dome, and

communal reception centre), and how these had made living there problematic for her. With regard to the first two, she referred to the unequal proportion between families and single men living there, the absence of privacy, and the impossibility of cooking independently. Compared to the living situations in either the 'big camp' or in the air dome, she thought that life in the community reception centre was better. However, later in the same conversation, she sharply criticised the living situation in the shared accommodation and referred to the impediments facing any attempts at 'integration':

> But this idea of building an accommodation like this and putting all the refugees in there at once – you shouldn't expect them to integrate, because living in a reception centre and integrating is not possible. Exactly, you have no privacy there, you can't decide when to cook and when to eat. (Interview with Marita on 25.09.2021, author's translation)

The living conditions in reception centres also affected Ella, 24, a young woman who had lived in Lebanon and Egypt before coming to Germany in 2016. Ella has been living in various types of accommodations for more than five years, and had also moved from a shelter for people in the asylum process to a homeless shelter. She repeatedly criticised the practice of bi-weekly room controls by the housing administration in the reception centre. Furthermore, she addressed the bad conditions of her families' rooms and the difficulties of living together with so many people:

> It was not private. The house – or the size of the room – is not as big as the one we lived in before. It is not enough for us. And people move in and out, and every time there come good and bad people. (Interview with Ella 26.07.2021, author's translation)

Ella described her feeling uncomfortable in the small room her family was forced to live in. Later in our conversation, she also criticised the lack of privacy, and the 'thoughtless' behaviour of some of the other inhabitants (Interview with Ella 26.07.2021). Both Ella and Marita strongly criticised the obligation placed on them to live in shared accommodations in general and pointed out the structural problems of this type of accommodation for people addressed as refugees. Their statements stress a very important point: They urge us to conceptualise 'vulnerability to violence' not simply as a 'characteristic' of so-called refugee women, but rather as a result of the particular living circumstances that prevail in communal reception centres.

As researchers in geography have argued, the recent shift to a securitisation of European borders has facilitated the use of violence towards people on the move and also after their arrival in 'refugee camps' (Dempsey 2020). In this context, however, violence does not only appear in an 'obvious' way, such as in the form of physical violence, but also in more indirect forms. This encompasses instances of structural violence where a concrete 'actor' who commits a violent act is not necessarily identifiable (see also Galtung 1969). Following

Galtung's definition (1969) mentioned above, anthropologist Paul Farmer accordingly defines structural violence as follows:

> Structural violence is violence exerted systematically – that is, indirectly – by everyone who belongs to a certain social order [. . .]. We will therefore need to examine, as well, the roles played by the erasure of historical memory and other forms of desocialization as enabling conditions of structures that are both 'sinful' and ostensibly 'nobody's fault'. (Farmer 2004, 307)

Following this definition, the compulsion for asylum seekers to live in communal reception centres in Germany can also be considered as a form of 'structural violence', albeit in a double sense: Firstly, although no concrete person can be held responsible, the inhabitants of communal reception centres are exposed to difficult living conditions and find that their choices regarding how to organise their daily life are severely restricted. Secondly, while originally only meant as short-term and temporary accommodation for people during the asylum process, many people are forced to stay in communal reception centres even after the end of their processing as asylum seekers.

During the asylum process as well as if granted a *temporary exception of deportation* ('Duldung', see § 60a of the German residence law) instead of a proper residence status, many inhabitants of communal reception centres in Germany find themselves living in a seemingly endless state of *liminality* (Turner 2003), leaving them uncertain as to if and when they will be legally accepted. With reference to authors such as Cwerner (2001), Khosravi (2018) and Weiss (2020) who have focussed on the importance of time in the context of refugee reception, the obligation placed on people to live in communal reception centres during and sometimes after the asylum process can itself be considered as a form of 'slow violence' (Nixon 2011). Additionally, these centres can be regarded as a local manifestation of 'protracted displacement', which Hyndman assesses as 'an expression of geopolitical containment' (Hyndman 2019, 13).

Furthermore, the communal reception centres carry out their work, especially, through the slowing-down and taking possession of personal time: while the residents have to wait for the further progression of their asylum process, they are also subjected to all sorts of 'small' forms of waiting, e.g., waiting for a time slot to use the kitchen, or the sanitary facilities, or an appointment with the asylum social services. Furthermore, many people who have finished the asylum procedure continue to wait; even if someone gains a legal status, it is often impossible to find a private accommodation due to unaffordable housing prices and a lack of appropriate offers – a situation that prolongs people's existence in a 'state of exception' (Agamben 2005) indefinitely. As Hyndman (2019) puts it, '[t]he "waiting" people do while enduring precarious displaced

status is the norm and not the exception' (Hyndman 2019, 12; see also Hyndman and Giles 2011).

It has already been shown that reception centres can be seen as a space in which violence can easily take place (see also Dempsey 2020). Resident women – and other residents – are rendered vulnerable to physical and other forms of violence due to their immediate living environment, e.g., the lack of door locks, the lack of privacy, or the position of the power enjoyed by security guards. This type of accommodation can thus be considered as an expression of structural violence; furthermore, it is characterised by its inhabitants' long-lasting status of liminality. The way asylum seekers, and, also, in some cases, people that have finished their asylum process, are made to wait should be considered as form of 'slow violence'. This distinction between different forms of violence that come into play in the everyday experience of my interlocutors has to be kept in mind when further scrutinising the assumption that women who share the experience of being addressed as refugees are particularly vulnerable to violence. At the same time, however, the situation of my interviewees is also consistent with an understanding of violence as a continuum that can take on various forms, and also touches on different aspects of everyday life (see e.g., Scheper-Hughes 2007). After this brief approach to the concept of violence, it is now possible to question the kind of 'vulnerability' that is being referred to when vulnerability is attributed to young women who are addressed as refugees.

## Approaching the Concept of Vulnerability

Vulnerability can be considered as a very politicised (and politicisable) concept – not only nowadays, but throughout its genesis. The concept of vulnerability was developed in the context of geographical and interdisciplinary research on environmental catastrophes, and its purpose was to highlight the point that disasters are not mere 'natural' events but have a profoundly social dimension (cf. Lorenz 2018, 64). By now, however, vulnerability has become less a diagnostic tool to identify social inequalities in the face of disaster, but is instead used more often as a homogenising ascription – especially in describing the situation of 'refugees' (cf. Lorenz 2018, 66).

Furthermore, feminist philosophers have shown that the concept of vulnerability is one with a 'vexing nature' (Gilson 2016, 71): while it has long been associated with weakness, it is simultaneously often used to describe the situation of women – Gilson, therefore, considers it a 'feminized concept' (Gilson 2016, 71). Vulnerability, however, can be understood in various ways – as within feminist theory where the concept is widely discussed. While it was long understood as the opposite of 'autonomy', more recent approaches conceptualise vulnerability as a kind of shared human condition (cf.

Fineman 2010, 161). While many authors have agreed to conceptualise 'vulnerability as a fundamental ontological condition' (Gilson 2016, 72), some offer the criticism that this perspective still upholds a differentiation between autonomy and vulnerability, and argue in favour of an alternative, relational, understanding of the former to overcome this opposition (c.f. Mackenzie 2014).

Notwithstanding this argumentation, the assumed dichotomy between 'vulnerability' and 'autonomy' is still prevalent within public discourse in Germany, where especially women categorised as refugees are regarded as potential victims of violence; before and during their flight, but also after their arrival. With reference to Hyndman and Giles (2011), it can be stated that there exists a 'feminisation' of people fleeing from war and disaster who are stuck in large refugee communal reception centres in the Global South as they are regarded 'as genuine, immobile, depoliticized' (Hyndman and Giles 2011, 363), while people who are on the way to, or arrive at 'Northern' (i.e. European) countries are conceptualised as a potential 'threat' to security (cf. Hyndman and Giles 2011, 363). This observation can, however, be further differentiated – at least in the German context – as people categorised as refugees are not all regarded as a potential threat. Rather, it can be argued that there occurs (again) a gendered distribution of vulnerability as opposed to menace. Therefore, 'refugee women' become the carriers of vulnerability; at the same time, they do not themselves stand at the centre of attention, but are rather represented through omission – while 'male refugees' are presented as potential threats both to them and the German society. In some cases, this kind of construction even unites the projects of 'feminists' and 'nationalists' (see also Farris 2017) – as has happened in Germany in the aftermath of the 2015/16 New Year's Eve incident in Cologne, which saw both conservative feminists and right-wing parties uniting in their outcry against immigration (see also Wyss and Fischer 2022). The way 'refugee women' are categorised should remind us, in other words, of well-established representations of 'the other woman' as being oppressed, a victim of circumstances, and in need of help within 'Western' imagination (cf. Said [1978] 2003; see also Abu-Lughod 2002; Mohanty 1988) – in Germany, especially, post-war imaginaries of 'the female (Turkish) guestworker' can be seen as historical precursors of this kind of portrayal (cf. Castro Varela and Dhawan 2004, 207).

This representation is rarely questioned, in a way similar to the perception of 'refugees' as generally vulnerable (cf. Lorenz 2018, 61). Furthermore, it forms an essential part of the violence prevention discourse led by German politicians, independent providers of social work, and NGOs – with striking parallels to the development of French immigration policy (see, e.g., Ticktin 2011) or the global activities of NGOs such as Médecins Sans Frontières (Malkki 2015). The 'interventions', legitimised through a gendered distribution of vulnerability and menace between so-called refugee women and

refugee men, might be read as another example of what Spivak described as 'saving brown women from brown men' (Spivak 1994, 92). As women categorised as refugees are not regarded as being in a position to improve their own situation, the responsibility to intervene is attributed to either the (local) state and/or social work providers – which are responsible for extending 'organised help' to people categorised as 'refugees' in Germany (see also Bommes and Scherr 2012, 152).

However, the relationship between social work and the assumption that 'refugee women' are generally vulnerable is not without its challenges. As I would like to show in reference to an alliance of social organisations working with women addressed as refugees, social workers find themselves in an ambivalent situation: while they must, and seek to, act in the best interest of their clients, they risk reproducing established images of 'refugee women' as being endangered by sexual (male) violence. Consequently, these organisations, who are engaged in activism in favour of violence prevention in shelters (which refers to established images of women refugees affected by violence), must face the question of the contribution made by their political activism to the patronising external representation of those women; and they must face, also, the related question of to what extent this can also be seen as an expression of (discursive) violence.

## The 'Action Alliance for Refugee Women'

In the city of Munich and its surroundings, the issue of violence prevention in reception centres is most prominently represented by the 'Action Alliance for Refugee Women Munich'[10] – a loose alliance of (by now, in 2025) around 20 organisations and individuals working with women categorised as refugees in different subfields of social work. Following the testimony of two women of their experience of sexual harassment in communal reception centres in a meeting in 2015,[11] 17 organisations that work with women categorised as refugees in Munich formed an alliance in order to campaign for safer living conditions for women in communal reception centres (see Münchner Aktionsbündnis für Flüchtlingsfrauen 2016). Since then, the alliance has grown and issued several press statements and open letters to political representatives, with the goal of raising awareness of the issue of violence prevention in communal reception centres in Munich and wider Bavaria. Subsequently, they established an accommodation centre especially designated for women, and they continue to intermittently organise demonstrations.

With regard to the alliance's political engagement – which is taken here as an example for a variety of similar activities by other NGOs across Germany that focus on the potential vulnerability of 'refugee women' – the issue of refugee women's vulnerability to sexual violence seems predominant. For example, in 2019, the alliance conducted a survey regarding the current state

of violence prevention in Bavarian communal reception centres: they sent out questionnaires to social workers and other staff members in different communal reception centres. The results of this survey were later presented in an open letter to several politicians on the local and state level (see Münchner Aktionsbündnis für geflüchtete Frauen 2020). In the introduction to the open letter, the alliance issues the following statement: 'Violence prevention in accommodations is extremely important for refugee women: they are often affected by gender-based violence before, during, and after their flight!'.[12]

Here, the issue of women's vulnerability to violence is referred to in a very particular way; namely, in the sense of sexual violence or sexual harassment, which mirrors 'narrow' definitions of violence (see also Brunner 2016). At the same time, however, the conditions of living in communal reception centres are not so much criticised on the grounds of their general ways in which they constrain residents' freedom of choice where to live, when to cook, receive guests, or, in general, be *present* and available for control and rapport. Instead, they are primarily criticised with regard to the spatial limitations that promote instances of sexual violence, such as (for example) the long distances between personal rooms and sanitary facilities, and the absenceof door locks.

These conditions concern all inhabitants of the communal reception centres; however, in the alliance's campaigning, women are especially presented as possible victims of (sexual) violence in the context of the communal reception centre. Thereby, the alliance's important critique of communal reception centres' structures as preconditions of experiences of violence risks being diverted into a repetition of common, and very often essentialising imaginaries of 'the refugee woman' as the 'exemplary victim' (Malkki 1996, 384; see also Malkki 2015), who passively is in need of help. Furthermore, the social workers who hope to improve the situation of their clients' risk to participate in marginalising representations of 'refugee women', are thereby unwittingly contributing to a form of discursive violence. This observation again points to the importance of questioning the way images of 'the refugee women' are used in the German public sphere – and not just in the context of media coverage (see e.g., Neuhauser, Hess, and Schwenken 2017), but also in social workers' everyday work and political campaigning.

## Finishing Thoughts

Against this background, the proposition that vulnerability to violence, and especially sexual violence, can be simple regarded as an essential characteristic of 'refugee women' can now be called into question; rather, in this context vulnerability to violence should be considered as a result of living conditions and legal restrictions to which women are subjugated during their asylum process, and sometimes beyond it. Therefore, it seems necessary to broaden our focus, and to also consider the structural violence which becomes effective

through the spatial design of the reception centres (e.g., the missing locks, the lack of privacy) and through the legal categorisation of women addressed as refugees. Furthermore, also, their recurring ascription as being vulnerable to violence could itself be considered as a form of discursive violence. Against this background, an understanding of violence as a 'continuum' (Scheper-Hughes 2007) could help us to question the image of 'refugee women' as being generally vulnerable to violence by focusing the attention to the conditions that put them in a vulnerable position within the German society in the first place.

Moreover, my interlocutors' assessments challenge us to think about how attributions of vulnerability are embedded in processes of constructing 'selves' and 'others'. Drawing on feminist and postcolonial literature, it might be argued that strong links exists between the representation of 'the other woman' as victim and 'Western' self-imaginings as the centre of enlightenment and civility (see for example Castro Varela and Dhawan 2004; Mohanty 1988) – imaginative exercises which, as we have seen, sometimes even serve as legitimisations for geopolitical interventions in the Global South (see also Abu-Lughod 2002; see also Fluri 2009). In turn, following this line of thought, what do the ways in which vulnerability to violence is projected as 'someone else's problem' tell us about how a particular idea of 'German society' is constructed? Here, it might be argued, notions of gender play a central role. The representation of 'refugee women' as potential victims of violence might be considered an essential prerequisite for the current construction of German society as 'modern', and a 'defender of gender equality', to which these women's representation serves as a 'negative foil' (Messerschmidt 2016, 163). It serves, in that manner, in a double sense: as women, they are deemed to be less more vulnerable, and thus less 'emancipated' than 'German' women (who are presupposed to be representatives of modern femininity who are living an ideal of emancipation), and therefore in need of support. As so-called 'refugees', they are represented as being bound to a somehow different 'culture' that denies them the kind of gender equality that German society has, purportedly, already achieved.

This kind of (self-)construction of the German society through reference to 'refugee women' as a 'negative foil' can be contradicted on the basis of (at least) two observations: first, it neglects the actual state of 'gender equality' in Germany, e.g., with regard to unsolved issues as the gender pay gap, or unequal distribution of care-taking responsibilities between men and women (see for example Klenner 2002). Second, it ignores the striking difference that exists between what is deemed as an 'appropriate' treatment of women categorised as refugees and women considered as 'German'. This point is strengthened by the recent GREVIO report that criticised Germany's shortcomings with regard to its duty to implement the 'Istanbul convention' which was adopted by the European Council in 2014. The Istanbul convention commits all signing

countries to act against gender-based violence towards women and other 'vulnerable' groups in the population (Auswärtiges Amt 2021). GREVIO especially highlighted the failure of the German welfare state to ensure the structural protection of women living in shared accommodations (see GREVIO 2022): '(. . .) *the accommodation offered to many women and girl asylum seekers is not conducive to their developing a sense of safety*' (GREVIO 2022, 94).

With respect to my interlocutors' perspectives, and also to the GREVIO statement, the large discrepancy between the common claim that so-called 'refugee women' would find safety in Germany and the practical treatment of women categorised as refugees now becomes apparent. In addition, it reveals the hypocrisy of a 'public commitment' by the German government that purports to ensure safe living conditions for *all* women in Germany. Thus, with regard to the actual situation of women categorised as refugees during and after their asylum process it can be stated that the idea that Germany provides a 'safe haven', and just living circumstances for all its members (also regarding gender equality) remains utopian.

## Notes

1. There is a vivid debate on how to refer to one's interlocutors with regard to gender denominations. For example, some authors recommend the usage of the asterisk to indicate the constructive character of categories such as 'women' or 'men' (see for example Hübscher 2022). As this might impair the readability of this text, I will use the more common 'women' (or 'men') to refer to all persons who share the experience of being categorised as such – which, of course, may differ from how they see themselves.
2. As the German word for 'refugee' ('Flüchtling') has a diminutive character (see also Stefanowitsch 2012) and many of my research partners do not refer to themselves in this way, I will use the designation *categorised as refugees* or *so-called refugee women* in the following.
3. In the following, I use the term 'communal reception centres' instead of 'refugee shelter' or 'refugee accommodation' (which are often used in the German public) for two reasons: firstly, this form of accommodation is by no means solely used to accommodate people legally accepted as 'refugees' in the sense of the Geneva convention, but also people at very different stages of their asylum process and also afterwards. Secondly, the term 'refugee' seems to me to be a problematic one, given that it is often used in a diminutive and homogenising manner.
4. All names used in the text are pseudonyms.
5. In 2015/16, the German administration was not able to provide accommodation in standard buildings for all people who arrived in the country as refugees. Therefore, they erected 'Leichtbauhallen', or 'air domes' to provide at least some kind of shelter for refugees. Usually, the air domes consisted of a big hall subdivided by thin walls into up to a hundred small compartments. For reasons of 'fire protection', these compartments did not have any roofs, and a fireman/woman was supposed to sit somewhere on a large chair or staircase, so as to be able to watch all compartments from above, and warn in case of a sudden eruption of fire. Although the air domes were only meant to be an intermediary solution, they continued to be used for several months, inspiring strong

criticisms regarding their lack of security, hygiene, and privacy: see for instance Mühlfenzl (2016).

6. German title: 'Mindeststandards für Frauen und Kinder in Flüchtlingsunterkünften', author's translation.

7. Author's translation of the German title 'Mindeststandards für geflüchtete Menschen in Flüchtlingsunterkünften' (see, also, Bundesinitiative zum Schutz von geflüchteten Menschen in Flüchtlingsunterkünften 2024).

8. For a critical consideration of the term 'integration' see Sökefeld (2004).

9. A recent example is provided by a public hearing concerning the state of violence prevention in communal reception centres in Bavaria on the 24th of November 2022 (see Landtag 2022).

10. German title: 'Aktionsbündnis für geflüchtete Frauen München'.

11. Interview with Romina, a leading figure in one of the participating organisations, on 11.03.2020.

12. German original 'Gewaltschutz in Unterkünften hat für geflüchtete Frauen eine große Bedeutung: Sie sind oft vor, während und nach der Flucht von geschlechtsspezifischer Gewalt betroffen!' (Münchner Aktionsbündnis für geflüchtete Frauen 2020).

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