

## Empowerment and the Protection of Female and LGBTI Refugees Against Violence – Survey Results

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### Contents

<b>Context of the Survey</b> .....	1
<b>Details on the Respondent Projects</b> .....	2
<b>Needs Assessment/Cooperation</b> .....	2
<b>Language and Interpreting</b> .....	3
<b>Dealing with Discrimination</b> .....	4
<b>Asylum Legislation as Obstacle to Empowerment and Protection against Violence</b> .....	4
<b>Concepts for the Protection against Violence</b> .....	5
<b>Further Needs for Action</b> .....	5
<b>The Role of “Culture” in Social Work</b> .....	6
<b>Suggested Solutions</b> .....	7
<b>Desirable Training</b> .....	7

### Context of the Survey

As part of the project "Exchange and Networking between Projects Aiming to Support Displaced Women" that began in 2016, the Association of Women's Shelters (FHK e.V.) has taken on the task of connecting and professionally supporting more than 100 projects throughout Germany that are funded by the Federal Government Commissioner for Migration, Refugees and Integration within the project "Empowering Refugee Women - Projects for Supporting Displaced Women and Other Particularly Vulnerable Groups".

As an expert centre for supporting women affected by violence, FHK has been increasingly requested for information on the topic of violence against refugee women over the last few years. Hence, in order to pool a variety of practical experiences and to utilize them for future work, FHK sent a questionnaire to all projects between June and August 2017.

33 of the questionnaires containing 22 questions each have been returned.

The survey was an attempt at providing an overview of the current protection status of the abovementioned groups of people.



The responses made by social workers employed in different institutions yield a multi-faceted portrayal of experiences and problem areas in this field of work. The results indicate possibilities and difficulties pertaining to the support system and the working conditions and attitudes of social workers. In what follows the key results will be reviewed. The survey conveys insights into the experiences made and problems encountered in the respondent projects, but it does not offer representative data.

### Details on the Respondent Projects

**33 projects** have completed the questionnaire, supplying the basis for the evaluation at hand. The projects are situated in different institutions that are run by welfare associations in twelve federal states and that offer social, immigration and women's counselling services as well as care work in residential groups and in shelters for female refugees. In addition to a primary concern with counselling services and care work with a **focus on empowerment** (31 projects) and **protection against violence** (22 projects) - 64% of the projects cover both fields - there also exist therapeutic and educational offers. Moreover, training courses for professional and voluntary supporters are an integral part of the work of 76% of the respondent projects. Key topics are women-specific forms of violence, flight and migration. While only offered by a few projects, training courses on legal issues are increasingly in demand (see chapter: Desirable Training).

The projects are carried out in the respective counselling rooms and meeting places run by the institutions – their services are complemented by 12 projects offering **mobile counselling** that takes place on the premises of reception centres, emergency departments and shared refugee accommodations. This provides recipients with **low-threshold access to support services**, because refugee accommodations are often located outside city centres, leading to isolation and acting as a barrier for inhabitants to call on services. When it comes to mobile counselling, it is crucial to consider the location of counselling facilities, because it is more difficult to maintain anonymity in the case of mobile counselling, so that a considerable boundary of shame can be involved. It stands out that only one project mentions mosques as project sites. As ritual sites, local mosques act, among other things, as social centres that offer meeting places for many communities in Germany. Through cooperation with migrant self-organisations, the inclusion of **mosque communities as social centres can be promoted**.

### Needs Assessment/Cooperation



8% of the projects state that they have conducted a needs analysis in order to assess their needs. 5% of them referred to minimum standards or recommendations issued by expert centres. The remaining projects state that they determine the particular needs for action in a project based on **social workers' experience in daily work with refugees**.

The survey brought to light that 62% of the projects **cooperate with refugees** in their work, even if such cooperation mostly only occurs with the aid of interpreters and very rarely results in an involvement of refugees in conceptual work (18%) or in their recruitment as team members (12%). The **cooperation with self-organised migrant or refugee organisations** plays a central role when it comes to performing work that is tailored to the target group. Instead of treating refugees as subjects of debate, such cooperation opens up a dialogue with them and this way makes it possible to work together on a support network.

The networks among the particular projects spread out into various directions: offices for immigration and women's counselling, psychosocial care centres, self-organisations of refugees, foreigners' registration office, Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, youth welfare office and the respective operators of refugee accommodations. However, networking with self-organised migrants or with refugee groups - as experts on their reality of life - is apparently not something that can be taken for granted: Only 21% of the projects indicate their connections to self-organised migrant organisations.

### Language and Interpreting

The survey showed that between 2 and 20 languages are spoken within the teams. There is no indication as to whether this figure refers to languages spoken by permanent team members or by interpreters. The **permanent involvement of employees who have experienced displacement or employees of colour** can increase the linguistic diversity of the projects and thus low-threshold access as well. The survey also shows that **Romani languages** are not represented in any of the projects. This points to a deficiency in the support system that is related to the category of "safe countries of origin". Due to several tightenings of asylum policies, support structures for Sinti and Roma are increasingly difficult to establish or maintain. Many countries of the Western Balkan regions have been declared **so-called safe countries of origin**.

As a result, almost all asylum applications by refugees from the Western Balkan regions are rejected, so that these people live under **constant fear of deportation**. It is vital, especially in the field of protection against violence, to advise people who are affected by violence by speaking their **"emotional language"** - that is, in the language that best allows them to address sensitive issues. This kind of support should also be available to people from "safe countries of origin".



The survey likewise made clear that, in most cases, **unpaid volunteers take care of translation work** – followed by linguistic mediators and professional interpreters. In cases in which funding for such services is available, the expenses are most frequently covered by the federal state, yet many projects also cover them by means of donations. The **funding** of translation work is **neither regulated nor secured**, which has also been identified as a problem in working practice. The approaches to solutions found within projects vary. There is a **call for regulated and sufficient funding for professional translation work** (which is especially inevitable in counselling on sensitive issues), but also a call for more voluntary support and commitment on the side of refugees.

### Dealing with Discrimination

The survey also inquired into the employees' ways of **dealing with different forms of discrimination** (racism, sexism, heteronormativity and other forms). According to statements, 94% of the projects are concerned with racism and other forms of discrimination, while 97% of them are concerned with sexism. It seems that the concern with heteronormativity (67%) is more rare. The negotiation takes the form of consultations with external experts, training courses and the reading of texts. The most frequent form of negotiation is internal team discussions (94%) – it initiates the process of addressing an issue, but it cannot replace a more profound and sustained negotiation. To sum up, one can say that **forms of discrimination are increasingly addressed within institutions providing protection against violence**. This suggests that, in the context of social work with and for refugees, there is a recognition of the necessity for **sustained engagement** with the complex life situation of refugees (and with intersecting forms of discrimination), not least because their situation often stands in harsh contrast to the situation of social workers.

### Asylum Legislation as Obstacle to Empowerment and Protection against Violence

Difficulties in asylum procedures, uncertain residential perspectives, fear of deportation, lacking privacy in accommodations: The majority of projects considers the problems encountered in working with female refugees as rooted in **asylum-related legislation**. The restrictive asylum system complicates the practice of social work; the most severe problems that social workers have to face are **bureaucratic issues** (legal obstacles, overburdened authorities, long waiting times etc.), **deficient structures in emergency shelters and shared accommodations** as well as insufficient and therefore **violence-fostering standards that prevail in reception centres, emergency shelters and shared accommodations**.

## Concepts for the Protection against Violence

The part of the questionnaire concerned with local concepts of protection against violence shows that 39% of the projects make statements about existing concepts in the shared accommodations they cooperate with. Here the particular projects specify that not all of the cooperating accommodations have arranged for standardised procedures in cases of violence. 38% of the projects designate state-level and/or municipal-level concepts for the protection against violence. 36% of the projects gave no details on existing concepts for the protection against violence. This could indicate a lack of information regarding this issue, although many of the respondent projects explicitly work on protection against violence. **In the interest of protection against violence, it would be desirable if everyone, even those social workers who are not directly concerned with protection against violence, has a basic knowledge of locally existing concepts.** In the context of social work as a profession, violence against female refugees is located at the **intersection of women's and immigration counselling** or legally situated between **civil and foreigner law**. It is therefore important to ensure access, so that a female refugee in acute risk of violence is not forced to remain in an accommodation. Access is often impeded by constraints on residency and the residency obligation required by residential law and the Asylum Procedure Act. Pertinent regulations vary from one federal state to the other, just as the decision-making institutions (benefits and foreigners' offices).<sup>1</sup> The survey indicates that, due to entanglements between jurisdictions, the projects encounter divergent regulations concerning the absorption of costs for accommodating female refugees. Sometimes expenses are covered by the municipality which provided a particular woman with regular residence (15%); in other cases, when a woman affected by violence has still been residing in a reception centre, the municipality or state covers the expenses without further ado (12%). Two projects stated that, unless filing an official report with the police, expenses would not be covered at all. When assessing the section on cost absorption, it is again striking that more than half of the projects (64%) gave no details, which could also be indicative of a lack of information. **In the interest of protection against violence, it is urgent to establish transparent procedural rules and regulations concerning funding responsibilities and to ensure that social workers are familiar with these regulations.**

## Further Needs for Action

Further aspects that are mentioned when it comes to **deficiencies in the support system**:

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<sup>1</sup> See Heike Rabe (2015): Effektiver Schutz vor geschlechtsspezifischer Gewalt – auch in Flüchtlingsunterkünften. Deutsches Institut für Menschenrechte. Policy Paper Nr. 32. Berlin: Institut für Menschenrechte.



- a lack of funding allocated to human resources,
- a lack of capacities in day care, schools and professional training,
- insufficient access to the job market,
- shortage in German course places,
- shortage in affordable housing in urban areas,
- the need to raise awareness among staff employed at authorities,
- a lack of therapeutic (trauma-specific) assistance,
- a lack of accessible housing for handicapped people,
- reaching people affected by violence is considered difficult,
- the need for more work with perpetrators,
- the need for more low-threshold offers,
- the necessity that all involved parties are informed about (existing) standard procedures in the case of violence,
- more Muslim chaplaincy,
- support for overburdened volunteers and staff.

### The Role of “Culture” in Social Work

Some of the respondents attribute problems to supposed “cultural differences”. “Unpunctuality”, “unreliability” and “an unwillingness to cooperate” are mentioned. Also, the sexism among male refugees is problematised. This runs the risk of linking the fight against sexism with racist assumptions and of opening the door for racist arguments. In the context of cultural arguments, it is important to note that there is a danger of citing culture as an explanation for problems with other causes (e.g. psychic strain due to flight, lacking predictability of asylum procedures, etc.). **Cultures are not static entities** that only generate distinctions, isolation and conflict, and they do not exclusively determine the actions of individuals, who have, irrespective of their country of origin, completely different character traits, values and attributes. Different cultures cannot be neatly separated, and, just as individuals, they are always marked by differences and shared attributes. One such commonality is the patriarchal system due to which sexism cannot be located only within “other” cultures but, unfortunately, everywhere. **For professional social work that acts in the interest of its target group, it is crucial to fight every form of discrimination and to approach people on equal footing. This is not possible when simplistic and overgeneralising arguments are used to explain behaviour, instead of acknowledging and taking seriously the specific life situation of an individual.**



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## Suggested Solutions

In order to ensure an anti-discriminatory practice that is tailored to the people concerned, it is proposed that all involved parties dedicate themselves to this effort. There is not only the appeal to policy makers to pursue a shift in asylum policy towards a compliance with the Geneva Convention on Refugees, but also the imperative to provide **steady funding** so as to ensure predictability and continuity and to minimise the risk of disruption in work relations. Moreover, the following issues were mentioned: More suitable, secure, clean and well-equipped accommodations for refugees; expansion of standard services by special representatives responsible for protection against violence; more official offers for German courses (combined with child care) that are not linked to interested parties' country of origin; shorter and more flexible processing periods and possibilities on the side of authorities for sheltering people affected by violence. An increase in efforts at raising awareness within authorities, but also within individual projects, was mentioned as well. Staffing ratios tailored to target groups, more time for individual counselling and care work, and more capacity for public relations are likewise desirable.

## Desirable Training

The most frequently mentioned demand for professional training is related to legal, trauma-related and culture-specific courses (particularly on pregnancy, childbirth and sex education). Such a demand also coincides with the fields of practical problems mentioned by the projects. It is remarkable that apps, Twitter, Facebook and other digital forms of public relations are rarely mentioned in the context of available practical resources or when it comes to reaching out to a target group. With regard to providing low-threshold access, promoting participation and networking practices, the use of social media also becomes increasingly significant in social work. Further training courses within this framework could be conducive to making use of new forms of communication in a reflected and targeted manner.

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