Obstacles to Accessing Integration Courses: Everyday experiences of female refugees with small children

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Obstacles to Accessing Integration Courses

Everyday experiences of female refugees with small children

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At a glance

- Female refugees with small children begin in an unfavourable position for access to integration courses (Tissot et al. 2019). An evaluation of 16 qualitative interviews has identified structural, individual and family-related obstacles.a
- Perhaps the most significant structural obstacle is the lack of regular childcare provision. There are also cases of individual, family-related obstacles whereby female refugees avoid certain institutions because of negative experiences. Kindergarten care for children over the age of three is well received by women, while other options are largely rejected.
- Course leaders believe that the Jobcenter, as an agency which can order participation in integration courses, encourages husbands to attend integration courses in the case of families with small children. The traditional division of roles is another individual-family obstacle that leads to a lack of equality between the spouses, thus making the identified structural obstacles a „women's problem".
- Yet another structural obstacle is the physical distance between the home and the integration course or childcare, which occurs more frequently in areas lacking infrastructure. One aggravating factor for the women who were interviewed is that some of them are unused to making the journey to the integration course without being accompanied by their husbands.
- The women and course leaders who were interviewed expressed wishes ranging from funding and expansion of the federal programme "Migrantinnen einfach stark im Alltag" ("Everyday strength for female migrants" or MiA courses) to improved preparation and support transitioning into the integration courses and the individual option of child supervision linked with integration courses.

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Female refugees represent a vulnerable group and are in particular need of protection (Liebig 2018). The number of women refugees in Germany has increased in recent years, after (young) male refugees had predominated in the years before, when the number of arrivals was higher: For example, women accounted for 26% of adult applicants in 2015; in 2018, they already made up 40.3% (Rich 2016, Heß 2019). Many of these women are mothers. In Germany, 70% of female refugees live in a household with children, with 34% of these cases involving at least one child under the age of four (de Paiva Lareiro 2021). It is apparent that the question of refugee mothers' living situations and integration is not a fringe phenomenon, especially when their integration is of such fundamental importance for their children (Liebig 2018). There has been a corresponding increase not only in general awareness of the characteristics of female refugees' social participation; more attention is also being paid to the role of refugee mothers. The current state of research increasingly indicates that their social participation involves significant obstacles, primarily in learning German (Tissot et al. 2019; Worbs/Baraulina 2017), job market integration (Brücker et al. 2020) and recreational activities and social contact (de Paiva Lareiro 2021; Siegert 2019). There is no doubt that the most important skill for successful integration is knowledge of the host country's language, as participation in the job market and further social activities only appear realistic with basic language skills.

Since its introduction in 2005, the integration course system has constituted a key integration measure of the Federal Government in the area of German language acquisition. The goal of the integration courses, consisting of a language course and an orientation course, is to convey German skills and knowledge of the legal system, culture and history of Germany.[1] It has now been sufficiently proved that attending an integration course has a positive impact on participants' German skills (de Paiva Lareiro et al. 2020; Tissot et al. 2019; Lochner et al. 2013). For the first time, the scientific findings also make clear the extent of sex-specific differences in the attendance of integration courses, characterised by female refugees being less likely to participate in integration courses if there are pre-school children living in the household who require care. Even when female refugees living in a household with small children do take part in an integration course, their learning progress is usually slower due to their special living circumstances and obligations (Tissot et al. 2019).

An integration course for women and parents is offered for this target group. The women's integration course is characterised by an increased number of hours, the discussion of topics specific to women and parents and the deployment of female teaching staff (BAMF 2015). Integration courses for women and parents are held rarely, however[2]: In 2019, only 3.4% of integration courses which began were integration courses for women and parents (BAMF 2020a). In principle, course providers can also have childcare[3] during the integration courses funded by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees on the basis of Sec. 4 a para. 2 Integrationskursverordnung [Integration Course Ordinance] (IntV), so that parents of small children can take part in the courses. Regarding this, it is already known that representatives of the course providers feel that the requirements for eligible child supervision are too high to meet and to provide an appropriate offer (Tissot et al. 2019: 47). As there are often not enough regular municipal childcare services available, the risk is that many migrant mothers, and particularly refugee mothers with small children, will be excluded from comprehensive social participation in the long term due to a lack of opportunities for learning German. An analysis of the underlying mechanisms and a more in-depth consideration of the effects of access to integration courses and, indirectly, learning German, is necessary in order to avoid this. This brief analysis will therefore investigate which obstacles the group made up of refugee women with small children face when accessing integration courses, which support options the respondents would like and what potential they see here.[4] The federal programme "Migrantinnen einfach stark im Alltag" serves as a site of research for this (Box 1). Methodologically, the question will be pursued in the following by means of a more in-depth analysis of qualitative interviews (Box 2).

1 For further information on integration courses, visit: https://www.bamf.de/EN/Themen/Integration/ZugewanderteTeilnehmende/Integrationskurse/integrationskurse-node.html;jsessionid=1060EA041F72A29F0C5378137BFA565B.internet541.

2 This may indicate an overall low demand, a lack of awareness of this service and/or decisions made by providers which, despite any demand, do not have enough participants to begin holding the courses due to financial considerations. More research is required on this subject, however.

3 The terms "childcare" and "child supervision" are used in the following way: the former refers exclusively to regular childcare services and the latter refers to course provider services (e.g. MiA and integration courses).

4 The focus here on potential obstacles to accessing courses does not set out to deny that there are many positive examples of migrant and refugee mothers who successfully take part in integration courses, despite all adversity.

Box 1: The Federal Programme "Migrantinnen einfach stark im Alltag" (MiA courses)

The range of integration courses on offer for foreign women (low-threshold women's courses) have been a tool of federal integration policy since the 1990s. As of 2020, these courses come under the same name. The federal programme "Migrantinnen einfach stark im Alltag" (MiA courses) targets both new arrivals and foreign women who have been living in Germany for a while and is characterised by a particularly low threshold. This includes proximity to home address, no particular language requirements, a female course leader and a flexible curriculum (BAMF 2020b). The MiA courses also have child supervision available on site in many cases.

MiA courses are there to appeal to women who have so far been difficult to reach via nationwide integration measures. The courses are also designed to function as a stepping stone to further integration offerings, such as integration courses, in order to make the next stage of the integration process easier for participants (BAMF 2020b). Participants are therefore able to attend three MiA courses of 34 hours each which do not necessarily require consecutive attendance and involve content which is tailored to the requirements of the respective participants.

Box 2: The Methodical Approach – Qualitative Interviews

By selecting a qualitative approach, the experiences, actions, perceptions, concerns and evaluations of female refugees caring for small children and not, not yet or no longer participating in an integration course are recorded especially and used to form productive explanatory approaches. The MiA courses themselves are not the actual research subject in this analysis, but do serve as a pragmatic means of research to reach this sub-group of female refugees with small children. It was therefore impossible to take into account female refugees or refugee mothers who do not participate in any course, or participate in integration measures other than the MiA courses, in the survey.

Between January and March 2020, 16 guided qualitative interviews were conducted during MiA courses in Hamburg and three different cities in Hessen and Lower Saxony. Eleven of these were problem-centred interviews with women (with the help of interpreters) belonging to the above sub-group and five were expert interviews with MiA course leaders, as the latter usually have wide, experience-based knowledge of the obstacles faced by women accessing integration measures such as the integration course.[1)]

The qualitative interviews addressed the daily lives of women and learning German with small children, their attitude to (third-party) childcare and, where possible, their experiences and aspirations regarding integration course participation. There are group interviews in three cases. In two cases, two women were interviewed simultaneously (Interview 9; Interview 10) and in one case the course leader was present at the request of the interviewee and heavily involved in the conversation (Interview 4). At the time of the interview, the women had been in Germany for between two and seven years. The women had either fled their home countries themselves or subsequently come to live with their refugee husbands via family reunification. Eight of eleven women came from Syria and the three other countries of origin were Iraq, Tunisia and Turkey. All interviewees enjoyed protection status at the time of the interview. They were between 27 and 45 years of age and had between two and six children. Five women had already attended an integration course and four of these had left prematurely. One interviewee successfully completed the course with B1, was unable to take part in an advanced language course despite a desire to do so and was therefore taking the MiA course. All of the women were caring for at least one or several small child(ren) under the age of four. The characteristics, categories and cases garnered from the qualitative interviews are examples of the individual experiences and subjective perceptions of refugee women and allow us to derive typing and make "moderatum generalisations" (Williams 2000) with regard to the group of course participants who were interviewed.

1) The references in the citations and other parts of the text contain the following abbreviations along with interview and paragraph numbers: **GF** stands for interviews with **female refugees** and **KL** stands for interviews with **course leaders**.

Access to integration courses – mechanisms and effects

Analysis of qualitative interview content reveals a variety of mechanisms and resulting effects which, depending on each individual case, more or less demonstrate significant obstacles for the women interviewed. As a result, women have not been able to attend an integration course and, in one case, not (yet) been able or willing to attend an advanced language course and have left prematurely. It has been possible to identify two main obstacle categories: structural and individual, family-related obstacles. These two categories are distinguished purely on an analytical basis, so the obstacles often occur in combination in real life.

Structural obstacles

A lack of regular childcare provision

Recently, recent empirical research has highlighted the importance of the preschool daycare center for the refugee group as well. Kindergarten attendance is pivotal in the integration of the children of refugees; it also makes integration easier for parents, and especially mothers (Gambaro et al. 2019). Ever since 1 August 2013, children from the age of one have been legally entitled to a childcare place in accordance with Sec. 24 para. 3 Sozialgesetzbuch [German Social Code] (SGB) VIII (Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth). This right applies without restriction to children from refugee families if their usual, legal residence is in Germany on the basis of a residence permit, a temporary residence permit or temporary suspension of deportation. This arrangement is nevertheless interpreted differently depending on region. In some federal states, refugee families only receive childcare vouchers if they have left the reception centre and been allocated to a municipality. In other regions, refugee families can receive childcare vouchers while they are still living in a reception centre (DIMR 2019). Empirical data therefore also shows that smaller children with a background of forced migration are less likely to attend a daycare compared with all two-year-old children. Only 24% of children of refugees under the age of two make use of the service, which means that it is only from the age of three that the children of refugees attend a daycare in any great number (Gambaro et al. 2019: 5, see also Stichs/ Rotermund 2017).

All of the women and course leaders who responded in the qualitative interviews drew attention to the fact that it was especially difficult to find childcare places. Despite the legal entitlement, all of the women were still waiting for a daycare place for one or more children at the time of the interview. In facilities that care for children under the age of three (e.g. kindergartens), care in some places also seems to be reserved for children of working women, which is why the hurdles for a childcare place there are very high for refugee women, who are usually not working (Interview 1, KL 1, para. 77). Most of the women interviewed were only given a childcare place for their older children who had already turned three, with some only receiving a childcare place up to a year after that. One interviewee with three children, two of whom she was caring for at home, had learned just one day before the interview that there was no available childcare place for her son, who would soon be turning three (Interview 14, GF 12, para. 197). All MiA course leaders and many of the women who were interviewed pointed to the lack of regular childcare as a great structural obstacle, maybe the greatest structural obstacle, to women accessing integration courses. One course leader present during the interview with a female refugee explained the latter's case in more detail:

> *She did have trouble. She couldn't find a daycare place; it took a long time. She was on various waiting lists and we are lucky in that we have a c here, primarily with refugee children, and we had an available place for her son at the time (Interview 5, GF 3, para. 153).*

Her son was accommodated by the course provider's child supervision service, which at least allowed the mother to attend the MiA course. This quote makes plain the general willingness of the course leaders interviewed to support the female refugees in searching and applying for a childcare space. By dealing directly with these (and other) difficulties, some of the providers developed their own initiatives to offer their female clients help. One provider emphasises the importance of childcare and child supervision for participation in integration courses:

> *And because I am in various networks here, we are always surveying the demand. What do female residents need? What challenges do they face? And it is within this context, especially in cooperation with the nursery, that we have seen that many of the women who take their children there cannot take part in regular integration courses because they have [more] small children [for whom they care at home] (Interview 13, KL 4_1, para. 12).*

They and some other providers which were interviewed offer MiA courses in cooperation with local kindergartens. These nursery places do not constitute

a regular childcare place for the children, however. Instead, they serve as a child supervision option for the hours in which their mothers attend a MiA course.

No obligation to take part in an integration course

Most of the women who were interviewed were receiving ALG II [unemployment benefits] at the time of the interview in accordance with SGB II and should therefore usually be compelled by the Jobcenters as providers of basic security benefits for job seekers to attend an integration course.[5] If there is no possibility of childcare, one of the two parents of young children is exempt from the obligation (Sec. 10 para. 1 no. 3 SGB II). The statements of the women and course leaders responding to the qualitative interviews correspond over the various interview locations in that they refer to an official practice whereby the mothers are under no obligation (see also Fachkommission Integrationsfähigkeit 2021: 146). One woman who was interviewed reported that she was allowed to be absent from the integration course: "I believe you are allowed to stay home [with your child] for three years" (Interview 2, GF 1, para. 130). Others confirm that mothers caring for children under the age of three are not compelled by the Jobcenter to participate in or continue integration courses (Interview 8, GF 5, para. 110; Interview 5, GF 3, para. 271; Interview 3, KL 2, para. 152-154). One course leader who was interviewed explained further, based on her experience:

> *If [the female refugee] finds a kindergarten place for [her] children, she also has to notify the Jobcenter. She must always notify them of changes. (...) If childcare is ensured for [her] children, then she will usually be compelled to attend (Interview 5, GF 3, para. 273–277).*

It is clear that a mother's obligation to attend an integration course depends heavily on having a childcare place for her small child(ren) in the cases described here. Another course leader draws attention to the fact that the regional Jobcenter shifts its focus back to these women after three years (with legal entitlement to a nursery place):

> *There is more pressure [from the Jobcenter] (...) [after being] completely ignored for three years, and then you suddenly have to attend the integration course again at a moment's notice (Interview 3, KL 2, para. 264).*

In the experience of this course leader, the approach is met with incomprehension and stokes fear amongst the women concerned (ibid.; para. 257). In general, the course leaders interviewed over the four different locations have the impression that some Jobcenters favour the refugee husbands in terms of integration course attendance and "automatically" compel them to attend, unlike the women. One course leader, who also works in her provider's social counselling service, points to the following:

> *I always [see] men. It's always men who come directly with the voucher [to attend the integration course], and then you know, okay, he really has to get going and do it (Interview 3, KL 2, para. 152).*

The perceived priority given to husbands by some Jobcenters regarding integration course attendance may be a result of "there being more men who [arrived], so (...) the men were [given] priority" (Interview 5, KL 3, para. 201). This was "not malicious, but rather for reasons of pragmatism which ultimately became counter-productive" (ibid.). The women who subsequently came to Germany were often unable to take part in integration courses after their arrival and "that is why they ended up with us [on the MiA courses]" (ibid., para. 173). On the other hand, the qualitative interviews also indicate that this "automatic" habit resulting in husbands being favoured feeds on unchallenged, classic role expectations which, assumes one course leader, are perpetuated via the official practices of some Jobcenters:

> *Because the men don't necessarily have to take care of the children, see? Then they apparently have more time and are more able to take up a profession or find a job, and then the woman stays at home and the men go to the language courses (Interview 16, KL 5, para. 18).*

The classic division of roles and resulting unequal conditions between the sexes can be found in many areas of society and in no way only affect individual migrant groups. There is no doubt that this phenomenon can be found in society overall. It is especially evident where unseen and unpaid childcare work is concerned, largely performed by mothers even when both partners work (Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth 2016).

5 Other agencies which can order attendance at an integration course, such as the immigration authorities, played no role in the experiences of the women interviewed.

Geographical distance between home address and integration courses

Another structural obstacle is posed by the geographical distance between home address, daycare and integration course location. A long journey creates further obstacles to participation in integration courses:

> *This long journey to school is difficult for us. If it [were] closer (...), because it's so difficult for us to go to school with the children or with the pram and because we live less than 3 km [away], we don't get a ticket. (...) It is difficult (Interview 7, GF 4, para. 207).*

This obstacle affects many of the women interviewed in the same rural location. As with the other women, this interviewee attended and prematurely left an integration course. The closest course location is 2.8 km away from her home address. Attendees of integration courses can apply for a travel costs grant in accordance with Sec. 4 a para. 1 Integrationskursverordnung (IntV) for distances of 3 km of more. As the individuals concerned deem the tickets too expensive, they have to make the journey on foot. The geographical distance poses an obstacle not only due to the long journey; a compounding factor is that some of the women interviewed will not set out on their own:

> *I couldn't [go] on my own. My husband accompanied me. (...) It is difficult where I come from. And I, or we [women], are not used to being so independent (Interview 9, GF 6, para. 339-364).*

These low levels of mobility and flexibility evidently become more complex as it appears that participating in courses further away is dependent on husbands accompanying their wives as per the guiding traditions of their countries of origin.

Individual, family-related obstacles

Attitudes to (third-party) childcare and child supervision

Individual, family obstacles to participation in integration courses play a fundamental role alongside structural obstacles. One important component of this is the attitudes of the women interviewed to strangers caring for their children. They feed on various factors regarding the children's age, the mothers' willingness to be separated from their children, distance between the childcare institution and the integration course and phobia of male nursery staff. Overall, it is clear that all of the women interviewed knew how to register their child(ren) with the municipal nurseries. Parents consider the possibility of third-party care for their children to be good only under certain conditions. It is also accompanied by some concerns.

For many of the women interviewed, it is only acceptable for their children to enter a childcare institution from the age of three:

> *It is okay [for me] when the child is three years old, because then the child has got to know its mother properly and knows what its mother is like. And [I] know how the child is. And they have to learn some of their mother tongue (Interview 4, GF 2, para. 192).*

This means that kindergarten is at the forefront for female refugees as a childcare institution. The women are sceptical and do not usually make use of childcare settings for the under-threes. Allowing their children to attend childcare from the age of three is also easier for the women interviewed because they usually know this kind of childcare setting from their countries of origin (e.g. Syria), even though kindergarten starts from the age of four there (Interview 2, GF 1, para. 142).

The women are often unfamiliar with other childcare options, such as a childminder, which is why the MiA course leaders enlighten them in this respect:

> *Yes, you were able to [talk] about various (...) institutions. But we do not get through to the women [with] nursery alone. "That's how it was in my country". And I spoke to women in particular: "Would you have sent [the children somewhere else]?" They say: "No, only to nursery" (Interview 1, KL 1, para. 75).*

Unfamiliar options such as childminders are not often taken up by female refugees. When asked about the reasons, secondary factors are mentioned (one interviewee pointed out that she has no driving licence), as well as the decision of their husbands: "I have spoken to my husband. He said: No, no, no. (...) I don't know, but my husband doesn't want it" (Interview 8, GF 6, para. 289). The general impression is that this option would be categorically rejected by parents:

> *They have the information [regarding childcare options and the school system]. (...) Primary school is not a problem. [Nor] is kindergarten. Childminders are a problem, yes? (Interview 1, KL 1, para. 149).*

Another factor influencing the attitude to third-party childcare is the willingness to separate mother and child. Many of the women interviewed wish to spend more time with their children before handing them over to an external childcare provider. Premature separation from the child can be stressful for mothers: "If [the child] is younger than the age of three and being cared for elsewhere, (...) it is also psychologically difficult (Interview 12, GF 10 & 11, para. 101) because "I worry that later my child will wonder why they were handed over to someone else so early on" (Interview 9, GF 6, para. 306). Some women must also gradually get used to the new situation during the settling-in phase as this "is sometimes more difficult for [the parents] than the children" (Interview 3, KL 2, para. 202).

Childcare or child supervision for children under three with a view to participation in integration courses would only be acceptable for the women if it were very "local" and ideally directly adjacent to the integration course.

> *I [wouldn't] really like it if [my son] went to daycare before he was three years old. But if there were a language course with [child supervision], I would [do] it (Interview 11 GF 10&11, para. 72).*

The fact that the mother "can quickly go to [the child] if it needs something" is pivotal here (Interview 6, GF 4, para. 199). There is a downside to an arrangement such as this, however, as one course leader made clear in the interview:

> *If there [were] more focus on introducing child [supervision] to the integration course (...), the problem [would] also be that the women or participants in general would be isolated in their integration course again (Interview 3, KL 2, para. 232).*

This would apply both to the mothers in the integration course, who are often only in contact with other migrants, and to the children, who would be cared for exclusively together with other children of integration course participants and thus would not be able to find any social connection to other children of the society in general. Child supervision linked to integration courses could also reinforce the isolation of participants to such an extent that they would have less contact with Germans than if their children were cared for in a regular childcare setting with other children without a migrant background.

There are also other reasons which play a part with regard to childcare in a nursery setting. One interviewee, for example, is displeased with the way in which Muslim religious duties are dealt with at her son's nursery:

> *During Ramadan, for example. My son was fasting, but his teacher said: "You have to sit at the table for lunch" and that is [a problem] (Interview 12, GF 10 & 11, para. 204).*

Other women do not want to send their children to a particular institution due to negative experiences:

> *My niece goes to that daycare and [my sister-in-law] is not happy there because it's too full and [she] is not treated very nicely (...); [the nursery teacher] is not very nice to the parents. [And] the room is quite full, no ventilation, it doesn't smell very pleasant (Interview 8, GF 5, para. 284).*

As this nursery is the only one near to the interviewee's home address, she currently has no other regular childcare option. Unfamiliar processes may also constitute a source of insecurity for the women. One course leader reports that female refugees do not feel comfortable with unfamiliar men looking after their children:

> *They are also scared because they say: "A male stranger is changing my daughter's nappy. I don't know what might happen then". And then we say: "There are regulations here; there are rules. That's how it is. If you should have any doubts, you can tell me at any time, OK?" And many [women] always think, because it's like that in their countries, there are certain things you do not talk about. And they are scared to express themselves (Interview 3, KL 2, para. 220).*

Deviation from classic attitudes to roles in professional fields which are traditionally dominated by women triggers feelings of discomfort amongst some of the refugee mothers. This specifically concerns men assuming the task of external childcare. Coupled with possible experiences of structural oppression in some countries of origin, this may lead to the women not considering themselves capable of reporting any misconduct on the part of male caregivers, which causes fear.

Classic division of roles and a lack of equality

The women interviewed are generally solely responsible for the domestic and care-giving duties in their families. Along with the possible explanation above, that men tend to arrive in Germany earlier and are therefore more likely than women be compelled to attend integration courses by some Jobcenters, there

is the classic division of roles which means that all of the husbands of the women interviewed had already attended an integration course or were already working. Meanwhile, the women are waiting for a place at a municipal nursery because, as one course leader describes, it is the view of their husbands that "women should [look after the children], but the children can go [to daycare] if possible" (Interview 3, KL 2, para. 244). In contrast, the husbands "do the educational stuff, [can] develop, integrate" (ibid. para. 92). It appears as if the women do not call this division of roles, which can lead to inequality, into question. But it may also be that they are unable to speak out against it. One course leader describes her experience thus:

> *For example, the Jobcenter says: "Integration, integration, integration. You must arrive, you must work, you must do a German course". And on the other hand there is the general domestic situation and family who says: "Don't forget, you still come from that country. We still have our culture": And this is the parallel society in which [the women] are in a quandary, isn't it? And if there's no support at home, [they] are stuck. But then they don't revise. Then they lose courage, self-confidence and are frustrated (Interview 3, KL 2, para. 226-228).*

This is precisely the point that MiA courses address: enabling the women to participate in the course by frequently providing child supervision and conveying German language skills, but also giving the women courage and promoting empowerment. One interviewee nevertheless describes the wait before it is her turn to take part in an integration course as "lost time" with regard to learning German (Interview 7, GF 4, para. 148). Some women feel left behind and are dependent: "My husband has to do everything by himself because he can speak better. You feel as if you're treated like you can't doing anything yourself" (Interview 9, GF 6, para. 401). The lack of equality and the greater authority of husbands in refugee families can, in some cases, lead to the women being oppressed. This can range from not being allowed to talk to neighbours (Interview 3, KL 2, para. 160), to being banned from attending a MiA course as, in the experience of one course leader, "the [women on the course] will ruin them" (Interview 3, KL 2, para. 162), right up to a complete ban on leaving the house (Interview 3, KL 2, para. 160). The latter case means that the women are not allowed to take their own children to daycare or school. One course leader remembers a man whom the MiA staff were able to convince to bring his wife on one occasion when he was taking his daughter to daycare, in this case linked with a MiA course:

> *She wasn't allowed to do anything. One day, she brought her daughter [to be supervised] and cried, and we asked her why she was crying and she said: "My husband is tired, he doesn't want to take my son to school". Their [son] was at primary school, in the first year, and "I don't know where his school is so I can't take him. Can you call the school and say that he's not coming in?" And we said: "Yes, but what school does he go to?" And she didn't know what school he went to (Interview 3, KL 2, para. 162).*

In this situation, the woman was incapacitated because she lacked basic information about her child's school attendance. It appears that it is not only the woman's participation in society which depends on her husband's attitude, but also her son's school attendance and therefore integration. This kind of dependence can affect the participation of refugee mothers in MiA courses, as mentioned in the example above, but also participation in integration courses, as explained by one course leader:

> *Some men don't [want] that, do they? That the women come to the language course. I had a woman in the MiA course who has been in Germany for 28 years and could not speak [any German because she did not attend an integration course] (Interview 16, KL 5, para. 20).*

Female refugees, and especially those with small children, may not even learn German in individual cases, or then only to a minimal degree; in most cases, there is a delay. If it is the "turn" of the women, they can often only progress slowly because of their domestic duties. "I can hardly revise at home because I have a lot of housework to do and have to take care of my children" (Interview 4, GF 2, para. 155). The women usually only have a little time compared with their husbands to complete their homework after lessons, with their husbands appearing to do very little in the way of housework and childcare, or compared with women with older children requiring less concentrated care.

Mental instability and experiences of discrimination

Some refugees suffer from psychological stress resulting from experiences of war, forced migration and arrival in Germany. To varying degrees, this can have a destructive impact on the process of participation and also on learning German (Baier et al. 2020; Tissot et al. 2019; Brücker et al. 2019). There are indications in the interviews to suggest that the women interviewed

suffer from this to varying degrees. One woman speaks about it in clear terms:

> *We came here from Syria with a great burden on our shoulders. And it is not easy (...) [to] learn everything so perfectly (...) with psychological or physical stress (Interview 12, GF 10&11, line 125).*

This kind of pressure also applies to women from other countries of origin. It stems from the fact that some women have lost relatives (Interview 12, GF 10&11, para. 125) or have been victims of torture (Interview 3, KL 2, para. 110). Others experience violence in their families from their husbands, meaning that the children also suffer and are affected too. Experiences such as these make it difficult to learn German and reduce the overall willingness to participate and remain in integration measures such as integration courses. Not all female refugees are affected in the same way by such experiences, of course, but when there is trauma involved:

> *(...), it is often untreated. The women carry it with them and when you say: "Come on, let's see if you can get some professional help", they then freeze up and say: "No, I don't have any time for that. I have to learn German and take care of my child as well and [I have to] take care of my husband" (Interview 3, KL 2, para. 226).*

Language barriers may also complicate treatment. One woman who was interviewed, having already attended and prematurely left an integration course, complained additionally about the high performance expectations:

> *The teachers put so much pressure on you. They say: "You are here, you must learn!" (...). But when you are not mentally prepared or you are under pressure or treated differently, you cannot learn (Interview 12, GF 10&11, para. 175).*

The interviewee cannot endure the pressure as a result of her mental state. It is clear from the qualitative interviews that many women experience discrimination in their day-to-day lives (for their headscarves, among other things), which they also find stressful. Along with incidents at a driving school (Interview 9, GF 6, para. 90), this can also affect integration course attendance:

> *[My integration course teacher] had a go at me in the beginning for dressing in a certain way, for wearing a long coat. (...) She was always criticising me. (...) I didn't know any German to defend myself (Interview 10, GF 7, para. 79).*

The perceived discrimination from the teacher and the interaction of various other factors caused the interviewee to leave the integration course prematurely and evoked a huge fear in her of the integration course. The course leaders also observe that many of their course participants develop a huge fear of integration courses. For example, they are scared of communicating in German (Interview 1, KL 1, para. 219), of the pressure to perform (Interview 13, LK 4, part II, para. 63) or they are scared of failure (Interview 3, KL 2, para. 172).

Support opportunities from the point of view of the women and course leaders interviewed

Analysis of the qualitative interviews has revealed a variety of factors which have a negative impact on access to integration courses and learning German for female refugees with small children, thereby making it difficult for them to participate in society. Identifying the corresponding obstacles assists in a scientific investigation of the causes and the gathering of ideas and formulation of thought-provoking approaches in the question as to which measures can be taken to improve access to integration courses and learning German in this target group. The female refugees and course leaders interviewed also made statements on this topic in the qualitative interviews.

When asked about what they would like to see, some women stated that they would like to attend integration courses which include the option of on-site child supervision. This would make it easier for them to participate in an integration course and simultaneously offer the security of being able to go to their child if necessary (Interview 5, GF 3, para. 365; Interview 7, GF 4, para. 199; Interview 9, GF 6, para. 467), especially if the child is still under three years of age. A reduction in long journeys would also save time: "It takes so long to get the children to daycare and pick them up again [if] I have to do the course [elsewhere]" (Interview 5, GF 3, para. 379). In spite of the argument cited above, that regular childcare would prevent participants and their children from becoming isolated, therefore making child supervision in combination with integration courses preferable, we suggest continuing to examine how child supervision within the scope of the integration course system can be expanded and whether and to which extent a decrease in the requirements made of fundable and supportable child supervision is possible, so that integration course providers see themselves as more capable of providing a child supervision service. Supervision of children within the scope of the integration courses should be prioritised over the lack of regular

childcare because this at least allows mothers to participate in a course.

Other suggestions made by the women and course leaders focus on the MiA course, which provides a major stepping stone, according to those interviewed, to smoothing the path to further integration measures and in particular integration courses. The women develop more self-confidence during the MiA course: "I am very happy that I did the MiA course (...) which is why I feel better prepared to do [the] integration course now" (Interview 5, GF 3, para. 311-315). The course leaders are more or less of the opinion "that [it] is easier for the women later on in the integration course. They have some vocabulary. They know the letters" (Interview 1, KL 1, para. 33). They are also often supported in the form of a personal introduction and accompaniment in their transition from the MiA course to the integration course, so the time spent waiting for a nursery place can be used productively in the MiA course.

> *If [the women] are relatively competent linguistically and the children are in a childcare setting, then we look for an integration course [together] with them. (...) We talk to the Jobcenter (...) We accompany them for the rest of the process (Interview 3, KL 2, para. 165-166).*

Thanks to their flexible concept, the MiA courses can be used as an introduction to the integration course (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees 2020b). Nevertheless, course leaders deem the course scope of 3 x 34 hours insufficient, or divided into units which are too short, to prepare participants linguistically (Interview 3, KL 2, para. 78; Interview 12, KL 4_2, para. 28; Interview 1, KL 1, para. 31) and support transition to the integration course more closely:

> *And maybe we can manage to increase these [three] 34-hour sections a bit, the [individual] woman can have a longer participation period granted, so that there can perhaps be a more [concentrated] transition to the integration course (Interview 3, KL 2, para. 270).*

This is why, beyond the bridging function embedded in the course concept, the course leaders frequently perform additional, voluntary work, further personally supporting the women in their transition to the integration course, as:

> *Not every MiA course leader has the time to sit down individually with the participant and say: "Come on, let's look for an integration course for you" (Interview 3, KL 2, para. 272).*

The MiA course's bridging function is already embedded in the flexible course concept. Beyond this, the course leaders would consider it a sensible addition to embed into the design of the courses concerted support in the transition to integration courses. This support could involve having an exchange about integration course organisation and procedure, including an explanation of the various course types, rights and obligations, presenting the personal benefits of attending an integration course and finding the right integration course together.

When they do subsequently take part in an integration course, female refugees with small children have less time to revise and do homework because of their family duties. One interviewee would like this to be taken into account when integration course exams are marked:

> *As a housewife it is hard to revise, for instance if you are taking an exam; you have to consider how much time I can spend on it and how much work compared with someone who has nothing to do and only goes to school (Interview 11, GF 89, para. 225).*

In order to remedy this, limiting the necessary learning time to lessons or the locations of the integration course providers would appear to be a relevant factor: "Yes, we would like to [learn more], but at school and not at home, please, because there's no point at home" (Interview 11, GF 8&9, para. 219). Further measures could be taken here to promote the above women's or parent's integration courses and their benefits for women with extended family duties more. The option of homework supervision over various course types at the site of the integration course provider would also help participants to practice what they have learned during the course without disruption.

Summary and conclusion

Refugee women with small children are at a disadvantage when it comes to accessing integration courses and learning German (Tissot et al. 2019). This (sub-)group therefore runs the risk of being comprehensively excluded from participation in society. With this in mind, this brief analysis explores the mechanisms and effects in accessing integration courses and, indirectly, the effects on German language acquisition. Evaluating the qualitative interviews has allowed us to identify a variety of obstacles which can be divided into structural obstacles on the one hand and individual, family-related obstacles on the other. The opinions of the women and course leaders interviewed

on potential, wishes and suggestions for possible improvement were subsequently addressed, including various elements which they already consider helpful and could therefore potentially be built upon.

A lack of regular childcare in the municipalities and rural districts clearly constitutes the most difficult structural obstacle for the female refugees who were interviewed.

Accordingly, nursery is especially relevant to refugee parents. That action is required in the provision of regular childcare places subject to local conditions is not up for discussion. There are also cases of individual, family-related obstacles whereby female refugees avoid certain nurseries. Childcare is made into a "woman's problem" in that a classic division of roles which sees women solely responsible for housework and childcare is maintained. Their husbands usually attend the integration courses or pursue gainful employment.

Another step in dismantling the obstacles could be to discuss various role division models and ideally give impetus to a more equal understanding of these roles. The statements made by the course leaders interviewed over all four interview locations indicate that there is an "automatic" nature to the way in which some Jobcenters compel refugees to attend integration courses, which means that male refugees are prioritised and unequal conditions for participation are perpetuated between the sexes. If this should be confirmed by further research, changes in the practice of compelling integration course attendance would be desirable. Simultaneously compelling both parents to attend an integration course is not advisable due to a lack of childcare. Refugee families could nevertheless benefit from concerted education and discussion, sensitive to the different needs of the women and men, regarding the various integration course attendance options (such as optimised participation of female refugees in parents' and women's integration courses, part-time integration courses or integration courses which include child supervision) offered by the Jobcenter or other bodies (see also Fachkommission Integrationsfähigkeit 2021: 146).

If waiting times are unavoidable or attending an integration course is not realistic at that point in time, it would make sense to expand the referral advice regarding MiA courses and other suitable integration measures. Comprehensive education for refugees regarding women's rights and the principles of equality also seems sensible. In this case, it would appear very important to pursue a family-based approach and include the husbands. Outreach and low-threshold services have a special role to play here. A further structural obstacle is the distance between the women's home addresses and course locations, or childcare, which can lead to more problems in rural areas or areas lacking infrastructure. So as not to lose (potential) participants because of these structural obstacles, developing solutions for individual cases, tailored to the local conditions, would seem expedient.

All of the women interviewed pointed to the importance of the MiA courses in progressing their day-to-day integration and with regard to their transition to the integration course. In this respect, the MiA courses are already a valuable service particularly for women who cannot (yet) take part in integration courses due to family commitments. It would therefore seem a good idea to expand the bridging function embedded in the design of the MiA courses and develop it in a more binding manner, where necessary.

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