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Social Work ›With Refugees‹ as a Site of Gendered Everyday Bordering

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ABSTRACT: *Recently, gendered images of people categorized as ›refugees‹ became ubiquitous in German media and also awakened many researchers' interest. However, less attention has been paid to how gendered images of refugees are put into practice in daily life — also with regards to Social Work, notwithstanding its growing societal importance. Since 2015, many social organizations have become involved in the administration, accommodation and counselling of refugees. Often constituting their first point of contact with the German welfare system, they are both a target and an instrument for the implementation of (gendered) integration policies. As observed during ethnographic fieldwork (2020—2022), perceptions of gendered agency become increasingly important as markers of difference here. Against this background, I argue that Social Work with people categorized as ›refugees‹ can be considered an important site of gendered forms of ›everyday bordering‹. To support this argument, I present special programmes ›for refugee women*‹ as well as funding procedures as two examples of where ideas of gender (relations) and agency become intertwined in bordering processes.*

KEYWORDS: *Social Work, Social Anthropology, agency, gender, refugee reception*

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Introduction

In the course and aftermath of the »long summer of migration« (Hess et al. 2017, 6), gendered images of people categorized as ›refugees‹[1] featured extensively within the German media. Already in July 2015, the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, one of Germany's highest-circulating newspapers, asked why it was mainly young men*[2] who were fleeing (Schulte von Drach 2015; see also, Elle/Hess 2017, 9).[3] If women* were the topic of media coverage at all, the reports focused on their alleged vulnerability (Auer 2015).[4] Subsequently, the image of the female* refugee as the »exemplary« victim became more and more influential (Malkki 2015, 80 ff.; Ticktin 2011, 250; Elle/Hess 2017, 9).

The issue of gendered media representations has since been taken up in many scholarly works (Akdemir et al. 2023; Horz 2020; Messerschmidt 2016). However, less attention has been paid to the ways in which gendered images of people categorized as ›refugees‹ and ›the Other‹ are constructed and put into practice in daily life. One social sphere which has

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been neglected in this regard, also in the ethnographic research done by anthropologists, is the realm of Social Work targeting people categorized as ›refugees‹ (*Fluchtsozialarbeit*). Since 2015, this subfield of Social Work has taken on a new societal significance: a large number of social organizations, both state-funded social welfare agencies and non-governmental organizations, have become (often for the first time) involved in the administration, accommodation and counselling of people applying for asylum. Thus, together with engaged citizens (Braun 2019), Social Work provides an important point of contact for people categorized as ›refugees‹ with the German welfare system as well as a structuring element of their daily lives. At the same time, and maybe because of this particular position of Social Work, social workers increasingly become both a target of and instrument for the implementation of integration policies — and its gendered implications.[5]

Interactions between social workers[6] and women* categorized as ›refugees‹,[7] for example in the special programmes (*Angebote*) often offered in the context of ›communal reception centres‹,[8] can be considered as highly structured by an unequal distribution of power — between helpers and recipients of aid, between putative members and non-members of a community, and between women* who are assumed to fulfil certain societal ideals of emancipation and those who allegedly do not (Braun 2019, 295). Within my ethnographic fieldwork,[9] ideas of gendered agency became increasingly important. For example, the narrative that so-called refugee women are responsible for the integration of their children but incapable of appropriately fulfilling this task provided both a marker of difference as well as in some cases a legitimation for social workers' intervention. Against this background, I would like to argue that *Fluchtsozialarbeit* can be considered a significant but neglected site of gendered forms of ›everyday bordering‹ (Yuval-Davis et al. 2018) — namely, »the everyday construction« (ibid., 229) of social boundaries — towards people categorized as ›refugees‹. To support this argument, I draw on examples from my fieldwork in Bavaria from 2020 to 2022 in six communal reception centres. In particular, I focus on special programmes offered by social workers ›for refugee women*‹ as well as their funding efforts — which form central fields of action in Social Work regarding those categorized as ›refugees‹.

The article is structured as follows: beginning with a critical reflection on ›agency‹, I refer to feminist and postcolonial anthropologists' critiques of the concept as a theoretical frame. The next section is then dedicated to elaborating the argument that Social Work targeting people categorized as ›refugees‹ provides a neglected site of (gendered) everyday bordering: after a brief description of the living conditions — and, in particular, women's* experiences of precariousness in communal reception centres — it is shown how so-called refugee women become the object of a specific form of ›activation‹ by Social Work — which might be traced back to the latter's history and the establishment of the ›activating welfare state‹. Subsequently, I examine special programmes as well as funding procedures as two examples of where ideas of gender (relations) and agency become intertwined in processes of everyday bordering. To contextualize my observations, I refer to the ambiguous position of Social Work both aiming for the enhancement of their ›clients‹[10] and simultaneously being existentially dependent on their continuous neediness. The conclusion summarizes the findings and draws attention to colonial legacies of (gendered) everyday bordering in Social Work targeting refugees.

Agency: Reflections on the Concept within Anthropological Research and ›the Field‹

As a start, I would like to briefly address the concept of ›agency‹, which — in the sense of a »capacity to act« (Ahearn 2000, 12) or »the capacity to take the initiative, to make beginnings« (Sökefeld 1999, 424) — has become a very influential concept in Social and Cultural Anthropology since the 1970s. At that time, anthropologists increasingly turned their backs on structuralist explanatory models (Ortner 1996, 7–8; Ahearn 2000, 12). Subsequently, approaches such as ›interpretative anthropology‹ (Geertz 1973) and ›practice theory‹ (Bourdieu 1976; Giddens 1984) would become more influential instead.

In everyday language, agency is commonly associated with autonomy and intentional forms of action — a notion heavily indebted to the relatively young »idea of freedom and liberty as *the* political ideal« (Mahmood 2005, 14; italics in original) of modernity. While this understanding of agency was challenged by various schools of thought, the relationship between actor and structure provides a constant point of conflict in Social Science. For example, while some poststructuralists argued respectively for the death or the decentring of the independently acting subject (Spies/Tuider 2017, 5), practice theory eschewed this complete renouncement of agency (Ortner 1996, 6–9). In contrast to poststructuralist perspectives, representatives of practice theory sought to emphasize the interdependency of agency and structure (Giddens 1984, 22; Ortner 1996, 2): in their reading, a person can never act completely free, while at the same time structure does not entirely determine his or her actions (Ortner 2006, 133).

The study of agency also became a major concern of early feminist anthropologists, for example in the course of so-called re-studies — targeting either their own former research fields or earlier works by male* anthropologists (Goodale 1971; cited in Lewin 2006, 15). In critiquing the male bias and the neglect of women* in classical anthropological studies (Lewin/Silverstein 2016, 9), they highlighted the role and agency of their female* interlocutors. Moreover, feminist anthropology focusing on the Middle East simultaneously tackled the colonial undertones (Sehlikoglu 2018, 73) here and criticized marginalizing representations of especially ›Muslim women*‹ (ibid., 74). This re-focusing of the anthropologist's gaze signified an essential turn within the history of the discipline, especially with respect to the acknowledgement of women* as research partners and the challenging of the then common representation of gender relations in non-European societies as being defined by patriarchy and oppression (Mahmood 2006, 37).

However, while the critiques and insights offered by feminist ethnography have been and remain highly important, an attentive re-reading of some studies from early feminist anthropology as well as more recent works from the Anthropology of Gender (e.g. Ammann 2020) calls attention to a core problem in the studying of agency. Namely, the absence of reflection regarding the researchers' own presuppositions about which actions they consider expressions of agency and those they do not recognize as such (Mahmood 2006, 38). One step on the way here might be to relativize and contextualize personal perceptions of what ›agency‹ means, for instance by relating it to both the historical and contemporary discussion of the concept within Social Anthropology, and also within one's own field of research — as I will try to do in the following.

As a concept, ›agency‹ is intimately connected to ideas of autonomy.[11] With regards to the latter, feminist scholars criticize implicated »masculinist ideas of personhood« (Stoljar 2018).[12] However, some feminist and postcolonial anthropologists argue that agency should be critically examined also vis-à-vis the presupposition of a Eurocentric and modernist com-

prehension of the subject (Asad 2003, 70–71; Mahmood 2005, 14). This understanding, so they argue, might result in a reductive conceptualization of ›agency‹ as resistance against institutionalized or patriarchal power (Mahmood 2006, 38).

Given the difficulties and disagreements in defining the relationship between the individual's actions and her or his surroundings, Asad concludes that

> there is no point in anthropologists trying to solve the old philosophical problem of free-will when theorising about the notion of agency. They would be more usefully employed enquiring into the conditions in which »notions of freedom,« and of what counts as its absence, are used to assess behavior and assign consequences to that behavior in different traditions. (2000, 33)

Applying this line of thought to my own field of research, the question arises of how such »notions of freedom« (Asad 2000, 23) — as conveyed by both the denial and the attribution of agency — are deployed rhetorically, especially with regards to so-called refugee women. Consequently, my primary concern is not to assess who has how much agency, but rather to examine how the latter is used as a ›frame of reference‹ by different actors in the field. For example, in some cases social workers use the argument of ›refugee women's*‹ lack of agency as a legitimation for their intervention, thereby defining them as deficient Others. This interest in how agency is employed as a frame of reference is thus linked to the question of in what ways Social Work represents a site of everyday bordering towards people categorized as ›refugees‹. Here, ideas of gendered agency play an important role, as I outline in the following section.

Encountering Social Work as a Site of ›Everyday Bordering‹

Throughout and sometimes also after their asylum procedure, people categorized as ›refugees‹ are observed and managed by different representatives of Social Work such as the Asylum Seekers Social Service (*Asylsozialdienst*), family counselling centres, specialized departments of the Job Centre or school employees. Depending on their status as receivers of benefits under the Asylum Seekers Benefit Act,[13] they have to fulfil a ›duty to cooperate‹: this includes not only cooperation with regards to identity clarification (see § 15 AsylG) but also in some cases the obligation to take part in ›integration‹ courses or language classes (see § 44a AufenthaltG).[14] Furthermore, non-participation in events such as open counselling sessions regarding adequate childcare or special programmes in communal reception centres — which are often advertised as voluntary — can result in the greater attention of the welfare system's representatives, sometimes provoking the unforeseen and undesired consequence of becoming a case of Social Work.

This turns particularly interesting when combined with reflections on processes of ›everyday bordering‹ — a term coined by Yuval-Davis et al. to refer to »the everyday construction of borders through ideology, cultural mediation, discourses, political institutions, attitudes and everyday forms of transnationalism« (2018, 229). While these authors focus particularly on the execution of internal border controls by employers and other ordinary people as an addition to the ones carried out at designated border checkpoints by immigration officials or police, it might be argued that everyday bordering could also be understood in a broader sense: namely, not only in reference to the control of documents but rather as a tool to investigate practices of constructing societal Otherness[15]. That is, the ›boundary

drawing‹ (Simonsen 2016) in daily life to which ›ordinary people‹ such as volunteers, teachers or social workers contribute. A similar argument is made by Rumford (2012, 898) in developing the concept of ›borderwork‹: namely, that the role of ordinary people is not investigated as much or as often as it needs to be in research on borders. Therefore, and in reference to the work of Anzaldúa (1999) and others, he advocates an understanding of »borderwork [which] centres on the ability of ordinary people to *make* borders, not the ability of people to opportunistically use borders to reinforce identity or seek material gain« (Rumford 2012, 898; italics added for emphasis). Following this line of thought, also the settings or activities organized by social workers especially for people categorized as ›refugees‹ — who are by this very action constructed as a societal Other — might be considered sites of everyday bordering (or the everyday making of borders, in Rumford's terminology).

This kind of perspectivization promises a more detailed insight into how Social Work as an important societal institution contributes to the Othering of those categorized as ›refugees‹. Furthermore, it seems noteworthy that gender images (for example regarding appropriate female* behaviour or occupation) play a major role in these processes of everyday bordering (Yeğenoğlu 2009). As I elaborate on in the following, this entanglement becomes particularly evident in the specific ways in which women* are activated by social workers in communal reception centres, where many of them have to live during and sometimes also after their asylum process.

Social Work in communal reception centres and the paradigm of ›activation‹

In Bavaria, as in the rest of Germany, people applying for asylum have to live in special accommodation where they are separated from the rest of society, for example either in *Ankerzentren*[16] or in the regular communal reception centres. As criticized by inhabitants themselves, social workers, medical staff (Elle/Fröhlich 2019, 314) as well as NGOs (for example BFR 2019),[17] the situation of women* in communal reception centres is in many ways precarious (see also, Pro Asyl et al. 2021).[18] Similarly, many of my interlocutors criticize the living conditions encountered, for example long distances between family rooms and sanitary facilities as well as absent security measures such as the lack of door locks. At the same time, they do not want to be reduced to being generally vulnerable but point to the structural inadequacies in communal reception centres (Interview with Hanna Douglas, 31 March 2020).[19]

Within these accommodation sites, daily life is often tenacious and determined by recurring tasks and administrative obstacles. Therefore, special programmes — mostly free events for residents organized by the Asylum Seekers Social Service or external service providers — play an essential role. In many cases, social workers employed in this field explained to me that they wanted to offer a distraction from the dreary daily routines.

However, their engagement reaches beyond simple occupation for the people forced to live in the communal reception centres — rather, they aim for their clients‹ ›activation‹. The particular significance of activation in Social Work is closely related to its genesis and the emergence of ›enhancing the clients' agency‹ as a professional paradigm: against the background of the so-called social question in the late nineteenth century, women* from a bourgeois background started to organize support for the poor and thereby laid the foundations for Social Work's emergence as a profession. Based on the later infamously politicized idea of the »*geistige Mütterlichkeit*« (›spiritual motherliness‹) (Speck 2019, 37; author's own translation) of women* in general, primarily female* members of the working class and

women* in the colonized areas became the (involuntary) target of their support (ibid., 39). While Social Work's predecessors attempted to establish socially acceptable job opportunities for women*, it has remained a predominantly female*-dominated field of work.

Over the course of the twentieth century, Social Work in Germany became more and more institutionalized in fulfilling state duties to support people identified as in need. This institutionalization was accelerated by the turn towards neoliberalism within German welfare policy in the early years of the new millennium. The most prominent example of this shift towards the ›activating welfare state‹ is probably provided by the Hartz IV process which resulted in the issuing of the second book of the Social Security Code (SGBII), the restructuring of the Federal Labour Office and the introduction of the paradigm of ›support and demand‹ (*Fördern und Fordern*) (Graßhoff 2015, 7–11). Here, some authors detect a new form of ›politics of agency‹ (Raithelhuber 2012, 145; author's own translation) in terms of how social policy has been redesigned to support the individual to act independently and entrepreneurially (see, for example, Raithelhuber 2012, 145–146).

The establishment of the activating welfare state had a major influence on the profession of Social Work, for example with regards to cuts in funding and the new focus on the improvement of the individual client (Buestrich et al. 2010, 1). While this re-orientation was highly criticized in the scholarly debate and by Social Work practitioners, it is still very influential today. This might be connected to the simultaneously increasing importance of Social Work in the course of the alteration of the welfare system: as Kessl (2019, 120) argues, the former provides a perfect supplement for the latter because activation and a focus on the individual form integral parts of Social Work's professional self-understanding.

This development resulted in a rise of practices of controlling and the stratification of clients. Within day-to-day Social Work, for example in asylum counselling, the client's individual development is constantly evaluated through monitoring practices such as recurring case reviews, consultation protocols and ›help plans‹ (*Hilfepläne*).[20] In case of divergence from the intended development or plan, appropriate response measures are discussed and decided upon in team meetings or in consultation with other Social Work practitioners involved in the same case (the latter often without informing the persons concerned). Apart from these rather individual-based practices of Social Work, there also exist a number of group-oriented endeavours — for example, special programmes addressing different target groups. As I show in the next section, women* categorized as ›refugees‹ are subjected to a particular form of such activation.

Women* categorized as ›refugees‹ as subjects of Social Work's activation

Within communal reception centres, women* categorized as ›refugees‹ are subjected to a specific type (and intensity) of activation which differs from that of men*. Two observations support this claim: First, at the time of my research there existed relatively more activities ›for refugee women*‹ in communal reception centres than for men*. It has to be noted that not in all accommodation sites I visited during the four years of my professional involvement in Social Work as well as three years of field research were special programmes offered; but, if so, significant emphasis was placed therein on organizing them for women*. In comparison, only few activities targeted men*; these were more often advertised in a general way (for example, simply as football training) while activities for women* were especially highlighted as such. Thereby, the special nature of activities for women* categorized as

›refugees‹ is reinforced by the way in which they are advertised: namely, as extra-curricular and as explicitly designating the intended target group.

This might be regarded as an expression of the extraordinary position ascribed to ›refugee women*‹ as generally needing help. That further to the simultaneously prevailing idea women* »hold a key function within the integration process [...] of their families« (StMI 2022; author's own translation).[21] Thus, they have to be educated to this end — as the Bavarian Ministry of the Interior states with regards to its integration policy and support for organizations which offer, among other things, special programmes for women* in communal reception centres.

Here, strong parallels can be drawn to the above-mentioned approach of some of the first-wave feminists (Speck 2019, 39), recognized as the predecessors to today's professional social workers. While engaging in community service, their endeavours also implied a hierarchized relationship between bourgeois women as educators and women from less prosperous backgrounds — namely, working-class women* and women* in the previously colonized areas — as the receivers of that education. Notwithstanding its self-understanding as »a practice-based profession and an academic discipline which promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people« (International Definition of Social Work),[22] also today in Germany the profession has continued to uphold some parts of this inherited emphasis on education. For instance, Social Work is very much committed to supporting its clients to become proper social subjects (Emmerich/Scherr 2006, 170). This might be partly explained as a result of its entanglement with the German welfare state (Bommes/Scherr 2012; see also, Kessl 2019). However, it might be also argued that Social Work's aim to educate is directed not only at people regarded as citizens but equally — or maybe even more so — concerns those who are constructed as different, for instance people categorized as ›refugees‹. It seems striking that, with regards to the latter, notions of gender (roles) — for instance on the ›right‹ form of gender relations — become especially relevant (Torres 2004).

It might thus be argued that, similarly to the gendered Othering informing the efforts of Social Work's early pioneers, the homogenizing perception that women* categorized as ›refugees‹ — often those who have fled from former European colonies or mandate territories such as Syria (Schuhmann/Jud 2013) and/or those who are read as ›Muslim‹ — are not able to enhance their own situation serves as a legitimation for today's interventions. Furthermore, the intended type of education pursued in special programmes ›for refugee women*‹ is a very particular and contradictory one: as the following section demonstrates, these activities heavily draw on ideas of femininity which associate appropriate female* behaviour and occupation with the sphere of the household and childcare. Meanwhile, concurrently, they also refer to ›gender equality‹ as a marker of distinction between women categorized as ›refugees‹ and ›German‹ women.

Special programmes as spheres of gendered everyday bordering

When passing the noticeboard located next to the social workers' office in many communal reception centres, one might observe the colourful flyers and posters announcing events such as the weekly ›Café for Women‹, yoga lessons and beauty days, or creative activities such as painting, sewing and jewellery-making. Considering this range of topics, a connection is produced between good or appropriate occupations for (›refugee‹) women* and activities belonging to the sphere of the household or beauty and body care. The curricu-

lum also often includes self-defence classes and courses on women's* rights in Germany. This second focus mirrors images of ›refugee women*‹ as being caught in patriarchal family constellations and thus needing empowerment. Here, the idea of empowerment is reduced to the »systematic influencing of others« (Bröckling 2003, 324; author's own translation) — consequently, the activity foci are rarely decided on together with potential participants (Interview with Lydia Green, 8 April 2020).

However, not only the choice of topics but also the ways in which women* are addressed in the context of these activities take up and reproduce particular understandings of gender roles and relations in constructing ›refugees‹ as societal Others, as the following extract from a conversation with Luisa Hill exemplifies. Luisa is a social worker in her mid-30s, who organizes a weekly ›Café for Women‹ in the rooms of an accommodation site on the outskirts of the city. While explaining to me her work routines, Luisa states that is not at all easy to gather possible participants for the Café. She has the impression that most of the women* living in the communal reception centre spend too much time on their smartphones, instead of ›doing anything‹ and taking appropriate care of their children. Therefore, she tries to motivate them every week to take part in her Café. If they decline, she goes from door to door, knocking on each and explaining to them that they should take part. She does not consider the willingness of the potential clients to participate as a prerequisite for the event, as shown by the following statement:

> You have to really pay all your attention to them, and if they say ›no (I am not taking part)‹, you have to convince them: ›Hey, this is fun!‹ And in the end, they will have fun and even speak some German or at least *finally* do something. (Interview with Luisa Hill, 12 May 2020)

Within this short sequence, Luisa constructs a hierarchy of capabilities between ›refugee women*‹ and (mostly female*) social workers: she conceptualizes her own role as that of a professional motivator who has to work hard to convince her potential clients — on the grounds that their participation is ›for their own good‹. In this way, she refers to understandings of the role of Social Work as enabling and ›activating‹ power. At the same time, the potential clients are considered to have not much say in the matter. Instead, they can be — and indeed should be — convinced to take part in the activity at all costs. Here, ›the female* refugee‹ is constructed as incapable to decide and judge what is best for her, for example with regards to appropriate leisure-time activities. Thus, she has to be guided and activated from an external source to ›finally do something‹. At the end of our conversation, Luisa would conclude: »Many of these women*, they might not even know that they do need help.«

Regarding notions of agency, Luisa's representation of her clients mirrors familiar imaginations of ›the Other woman*‹ as being inherently helpless, un-knowing and oppressed (Castro-Varela/Dhawan 2016, 15; Mohanty 1988). As Braun points out, these kinds of »implicit gender knowledge, presumptions and perceptual schemata« (2019, 296; author's own translation) are highly influential in voluntary engagement for women* categorized as ›refugees‹. This assessment can be extended to the context of professional Social Work targeting ›refugees‹, which similarly participates in the »reconstitution of the female bourgeois subject« (ibid., 297; author's own translation) — a subject who ›knows‹ how to behave and thus can claim the position of an educating authority.

The way Luisa talks about her clients implicitly touches upon ideas of a rather mysterious ›culture‹ which can be made responsible for their way of acting. This bears a striking resemblance to what Balibar describes as differential racism (1989, 374): here, imaginations

of ›cultural differences‹ (ibid., 373; see also, Sökefeld 2004) — for instance, based on the ascription of being ›Muslim‹ — in combination with ideas of gender provide the grounds for (and serve as legitimation of) differentiation and discrimination (Attia 2007; Dietze 2016; Messerschmidt 2016). As many of my interlocutors pointed out in more recent conversations, this issue becomes especially apparent with regards to the different treatment of women* fleeing from Ukraine. While the latter were publicly constructed as ›more similar‹ than women* who fled from Near and Middle Eastern countries and who are regarded as Muslims, they experienced a different kind of welcome. Furthermore, as the European Union enacted the ›Temporary Protection Directive‹ in March 2022[23] and also the German government enabled special reception rules for people fleeing from Ukraine, they had not to endure the asylum process and were also not obliged to live in communal reception centres. It might be argued that there appeared a kind of two-class system of reception,[24] one resulting in the construction of two ›groups‹ of women* when it comes to those categorized as ›refugees‹. Subsequently, many interlocutors who had fled from countries such as Afghanistan or Syria (and are sometimes still living in communal reception centres even years after arrival) stated that they feel treated in a discriminatory manner and reduced to sometimes very vague ideas of being of a ›different culture‹.

Second, the practicing of language (skills) — which is often casually associated with the promotion of one's own ›integration‹ and thus deemed desirability — is highlighted. Here, Luisa refers to the aforementioned idea that women* are the ›carriers of integration‹ and therefore have to exhibit exemplary behaviour (for example, speak fluent German) and ensure that their families — especially their children — follow suit. Assumptions about the clients' ›ignorance‹ about what is ›best for them‹ combine with their unfulfilled responsibilities as women*/mothers to ensure their family's integration. While it is expected that they shall work towards their family's integration on the basis of ascribed gender roles, this can (by definition) never be accomplished — the assumed ›cultural differences‹ prove an insurmountable obstacle (Sökefeld 2004, 10). Accordingly, ›women's* equality‹ is defined as overcoming the (›cultural‹) constraint to it and simultaneously established as the »imperative of integration« (Elle/Hess 2017, 12; author's own translation) — an equation embracing strong colonial continuities (ibid., 12—13).

While Luisa does not seem to be very critical of her treatment and addressing of potential clients, other social workers highly refute such marginalizing representations of ›refugee women*‹. However, to escape these dominant narrations ultimately proves to be a difficult task. This becomes especially apparent in the context of supposedly more independent non-governmental or activist Social Work.

The long shadow of ›refugee women's*‹ marginalizing representations

With regards to the position of social workers operating in the field of *Fluchtsozialarbeit*, it seems extremely difficult for them to overcome dominant representations of refugee women* as ›oppressed‹. This became particularly evident in a conversation with Tina Smith*, a young social worker employed by a small NGO in Upper Bavaria. In mid-April 2020, Tina would tell me about her plans to organize meetings between women* categorized as ›refugees‹ and ›German‹ women*. In the following statement, she explains the intention behind the upcoming activity:

> Many of the female refugees we work with are active volunteers — but this is not appreciated within German society. [We try to] get them out from this position that ›refugee women have to be helped‹. They are also active — humans, they also have interests — like someone else, who does not have to live in an accommodation — to be *active*, to support other women, to do something. (Interview with Tina Smith, 17 April 2021)

In this short quote, Tina hints at how ideas of (gendered) agency pervade Social Work's daily endeavours and serve to draw boundaries between practitioners and clients. Giving the example of her clients' (in)voluntary engagement, she implies that women* categorized as ›refugees‹ are not acknowledged as active members of society. Rather, they are usually considered ›in need of help‹ — a representation which she heavily criticizes. Here, she stresses her political ambition: the neglect of these women's* agency provides a point of reference for societal critique (›they are active, but their engagement is not seen‹) and a basis for possible solidarization. At the same time, she implicitly positions herself — or rather, her organization — as capable of changing the representation of women* categorized as ›refugees‹ (›get them out‹) — a presupposition which in turn implies they cannot reach this end by themselves alone. Thus, while attempting to render her clients' capacity to act visible and counter established stereotypes, she tacitly suggests a differentiation between social worker and client in terms of their levels of inherent capability here.

But why is it so difficult, as Tina's story suggests, to escape these familiar representations of ›refugee women*‹? It might be argued that the significance of Social Work targeting ›refugees‹ as a site of (gendered) everyday bordering is closely linked to the profession's ambiguous position towards its clients more generally: practitioners advocate for their clients' interests and are at the same time dependent on their continued neediness. As I explore in the next section, the existential nature of this dependency becomes especially apparent in the context of funding efforts.

Existential dependency: Representing ›refugee women*‹ in funding efforts

In the course of the above-mentioned restructuring of the German welfare system towards the activating welfare state, state funding was reduced. Thus, many of the organizations which offer activities ›for refugee women*‹ in communal reception centres find themselves constantly underfunded and work from project to project (Elle/Hess 2023). As a result, they must seek additional funding, often in competition with the same NGOs or social agencies (*soziale Träger*) with which they normally collaborate in their day-to-day work.

However, while reproducing marginalizing representations would be an easy way to generate funding, many social workers struggle to reconcile this kind of established (and, funding-wise, promising) form of representation of their clients with their personal and professional concerns. This challenge became particularly apparent during a conversation with Marietta Jones* in spring 2020. At that time, Marietta managed a small social organization working closely with a communal reception centre located nearby. Marietta told me about her counselling of a young woman* who needed financial assistance. While several bodies were offering financial aid, it was not an easy task to pick the ›right‹ organization here, as Marietta explains:

> So, [as a team] we were thinking about this last week a lot. We need a one-time donation for a young woman [...]. Who are we going to ask for it, because we know

> roughly, who [which organization] is expecting what, you know? Also, with regards to the pictures — because every organization which provides funding also wants to put this on their website in return.

The choice of the right donor would in this case be closely linked to Marietta's and the team's assessment of what they were expected and willing to offer as a possible reward for receiving funding (for example, pictures of the beneficiary). Throughout the interview, Marietta repeatedly referred to the difficulty of negotiating between her hopes of adequately representing the women* she works with and simultaneously securing the necessary funding:

> The question is: Where do I go along with this ascription [of neediness], because it can help me to reach things [funding] faster? And where do I oppose it, because I know the consequences it will have? (Interview with Marietta Jones, 18 April 2020)

There seems to exist quite a large gap between the expectations of funding bodies (to hear heart-breaking stories and see appealing images of ›refugee women*‹ in need) and the way Marietta would like to represent the women* she works with. She is well-aware of the kind of representation and pictures she is expected to submit in the funding applications, hence struggling with the perceived necessity to meet these expectations. Marietta's case shows how the daily practices of social workers remain deeply embedded in the broader discourse on ›the female* refugee‹ and her missing agency. To act ›in the best interest‹ of their clients, social workers have to constantly navigate between the expectations of donors and their own and their clients' perceptions of appropriate representation.

This example bears a striking resemblance to the ambiguous situation of feminist activists supporting immigrant women*, as described by Miriam Ticktin. According to her: »[these activists] found themselves in the uncomfortable position of searching for evidence of gendered forms of violence, like rape or forced marriage, as these became the most significant factors by which one could prove one's ›humanity‹, worthy of humanitarian exception« (Ticktin 2011, 2—3). Similarly, Marietta described feeling pushed to emphasize her clients' exceptional need to potential donors, for example with reference to their particular situation as women* living in communal reception centres.

As Marietta's case shows, some social workers very critically reflect upon their way of representing their clients and attempt to avoid reproducing stereotypical images thereof — however, they still have to adapt their strategies in light of established narratives vis-à-vis women* categorized as ›refugees‹. This also has to be contextualized with regards to the paradoxical situation which social workers find themselves in. On the one hand, they aim for the improvement of their clients' position based on the attribution of deficiency. On the other, they are simultaneously dependent on their continuous neediness. The existential dimension of this ambiguity becomes particularly evident in the context of funding efforts where social workers like Marietta (have to) refer to established images of ›refugee women*‹ as victims in need to ensure the acquisition of funding and other forms of support. Thus, social workers in the field of *Fluchtsozialarbeit* — mostly women* working under precarious conditions — find themselves in the undesirable position of having to participate in the (re)construction of ›refugee women*‹ as a deficient Other through the ways in which they address, treat and represent them as clients. It might thus also be argued that these acts of gendered everyday bordering suddenly appear closely connected to the ambiguous positionality and precarious working conditions of the social workers themselves.

Conclusion

In this article I have sought to substantiate the argument that Social Work with people who are categorized as ›refugees‹ should be considered an important social domain wherein ›everyday bordering‹ (Yuval-Davis et al. 2018) takes place. As demonstrated with regards to the special programmes as well as funding practices in circulation, ideas of gendered agency — which serve as markers of difference, for example concerning ›the female* refugee‹ in need of social workers' activation or of assistance as a victim of circumstance more generally — play a major role in determining the nature of these activities. As exemplified by the vivid theoretical discussion in Anthropology and neighbouring disciplines, ›agency‹ is an extremely fraught concept. On the part of feminist and postcolonial scholars, ›agency‹ has been criticized for its proximity to modernist and masculinist understandings of ›the subject‹, its Eurocentrism and for its frequent conflation with resistance (Asad 2000; Mahmood 2005; Stoljar 2018).[25]

As such, the researcher's presuppositions about what agency ›truly means‹ have to be (self-)critically evaluated with regards to its similarities to existing discourses hereon — with reference to the ideal of the liberal subject, for instance. While this is no easy task, it might be helpful to investigate more fully how perceptions of agency are used and interpreted in the context of ethnographic fieldwork — by researchers and interlocutors alike. Furthermore, a closer look at how and why ideas of gendered agency are utilized in the field — such as to legitimize social workers' professional interventions — can help shed light on how perceptions of those categorized as ›refugees‹ and societal ›Others‹ become (re)produced and productive within the day-to-day-business of Social Work, as an increasingly important societal institution.

The activation of clients forms a central part of social workers' everyday practice; its paradigmatic status can be traced back to the profession's genesis. Social Work originated from the attempts of bourgeois women* to support working-class women* and women* in the colonized areas while at the same time generating socially accepted job opportunities for women*. With the establishment of the activating welfare state, Social Work became more and more institutionalized and integrated into welfare policies. Subsequently, the aim to oversee the enhancement of clients, among them many people categorized as ›refugees‹, developed into a professional paradigm.

Communal reception centres form an important contact zone wherein social workers and women* categorized as ›refugees‹ interact on a daily basis. Here, especially women* experience the living conditions as precarious and unsafe. At the same time, they are subjected to a specific type of activation which differs from that of their male* counterparts, who are the recipients of less attention and fewer targeted activities. In the course of my research, I had the impression that there existed relatively more activities ›for refugee women*‹ than for ›refugee men*‹. This emphasis could be explained by the prevailing imagination of women* categorized as ›refugees‹ being the main bearers of integration, a notion reproduced within state funding programmes. This results in the contradictory situation whereby special programmes for women* in communal reception centres are often limited to activities either referring to the sphere of housework or beauty/body care while simultaneously proclaiming the need for women's* (external) empowerment. Accordingly, the notion of ›gender equality‹ is instrumentalized as a sign of integration (Elle/Hess 2017). This might be read as yet another expression of ›differential racism‹ (Balibar 1989, 374), which becomes effective through the establishment of a particular idea of gender relations as a marker of ›cultural difference‹.

Considering the examples of Luisa, Tina and Marietta, it can be concluded that in their working with women* categorized as ›refugees‹, social workers are inevitably entangled in dominant narrations of the gendered Other. While organizing and carrying out special programmes ›for refugee women*‹ and applying for funding, they position them as a target group and as being vulnerable and in need. Although many of them are very much aware of their own participation in reproducing these images, they describe only limited opportunities to circumvent this process. In that way, social workers contribute, albeit reluctantly, to a kind of gendered everyday bordering towards people categorized as ›refugees‹. This assessment might be considered ›troublesome‹ — following the conference theme ›Troubling Gender‹ which inspired this special issue — as it challenges the common perception of Social Work as a neutral supporter of the ›needy‹ — a moral stance often also claimed by representatives of a »new humanitarianism« (Ticktin 2011, 16), which has likewise been criticized.

Social Work targeting ›refugee women*‹ thus both refers and contributes (sometimes unwillingly, yet still effectively) to their ongoing (re)construction as a particularly indigent Other while concurrently establishing insurmountable ›cultural differences‹ based on assumptions of gender inequality. This kind of representation bears striking similarities to colonial imaginations of the Other woman* (Mohanty 1988), ones which continue to resonate in attempts to legitimate educational interventions regarding those categorized as ›refugees‹ — as not limited to, then, but also supported by Social Work's daily practices.

Notes

1 ›Refugees‹ do not provide a self-evident topic for anthropological research, but a legal and social category (Malkki 1995, 496). To emphasize the constructive nature of this description, I use ›refugees‹ in quotation marks when referring to people categorized as such.

2 The asterisk indicates that categories such as ›men‹ and ›women‹ are socially constructed. It is meant to open the category up to all who refer to it or share the experience of being addressed that way, see: Frauen*beauftragte ASH Berlin (2019): Hinweise und Empfehlungen für geschlechtergerechte Sprache an der ASH Berlin. Available online at: https://www.ash-berlin.eu/fileadmin/Daten/Einrichtungen/Frauenbeauftragte/Geschlechtergerechte_Sprache_Hinweise_und_Empfehlungen_an_der_ASH_Berlin_April_2019.pdf (last accessed 24 July 2023).

3 Schulte von Drach, Markus (2015): Flüchtlinge in Europa: Warum vor allem Männer Asyl suchen. See: https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/fluechtlinge-in-europa-warum-vor-allem-maenner-asyl-suchen-1.2584201 (last accessed 20 July 2023).

4 Auer, Katja (2015): Übergriffe in Asylunterkünften. Frauen in Bedrängnis. See: https://www.sueddeutsche.de/bayern/uebergriffe-in-asylunterkuenften-frauen-in-bedraengnis-1.2574277 (last accessed 23 July 2023).

5 See, for example, the integration policy line ›Integration of Women‹ issued by the Bavarian Ministry of the Interior, which provides funding for organizations offering special programmes ›for refugee women*‹. Bavarian Ministry of the Interior (2022): Integration von Frauen. See: https://www.stmi.bayern.de/mui/integrationspolitik/integration_frauen/index.php (last accessed 22 July 2023).

6 Such differentiations between social workers and women* categorized as ›refugees‹ should not be taken for granted, as one category might blur into another. For example, two of my interlocutors who came to Germany via family reunification and as so-called quota refugees later became social workers themselves.

7 In the following, I am referring to a particular »community of experience« (Weißköppel 2007, 186) among women* categorized as ›refugees‹, namely those who came to Germany mostly between 2014 and 2019. Although my interlocutors have very different biographies and came from different countries (including Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria), they have one thing in common: their experience is much different from that of women* who have fled from the Russian war on Ukraine since 2022, especially with regards to their social reception as well as legal categorization.

8 In the following, I use ›communal reception centres‹ as an umbrella term to refer to different types of

accommodation for people categorized as ›refugees‹, including state and communal *Gemeinschaftsunterkünfte* (collective accommodations) and *Flexi-Heime* (smaller houses with only four or five families, often located on the outskirts of the city).

9 During my fieldwork (2020 – 2022), I accompanied and interviewed nine young women* categorized as ›refugees‹. Furthermore, I had the chance to conduct interviews with around 20 social workers working in organizations providing activities ›for female* refugees‹ in the city of Munich, its surrounding district and some smaller towns in Upper Bavaria. While not all of them had studied Social Work, they nevertheless occupied the positions of social workers within their organizations. The fieldwork was conducted as part of my PhD studies within the DFG-funded research project ›Processes of Subjectivation and Self-formation of Young Women* Categorized as Refugees in Germany‹ at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich.

10 In my interlocutors' terminology, ›client‹ is used to refer to the counterpart or addressee of Social Work.

11 For a summary of feminist critique regarding the concept of autonomy, see: Stoljar, Natalie (2018), ›Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy‹. In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edward Zalta (ed.). Available online at: https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/feminism-autonomy/ (last accessed 24 July 2023).

12 Stoljar (2018) (see endnote 11): abstract.

13 My interlocutors are in different legal situations: while some of them are officially entitled to asylum, others hold a temporary suspension of deportation.

14 Similar to people who receive unemployment benefits (§31a SGB II), beneficiaries living under the Asylum Seekers‹ Benefits Act (§1a AsylbLG) can be sanctioned for failing to fulfil their ›duty to cooperate‹, which leads to a reduction in their awarded income.

15 See also, Fabian 1983.

16 The *Ankerzentrum* is the first place of stay for people applying for asylum. In theory, applicants should pass through all parts of their asylum process during their stay, see: Bayerischer Flüchtlingsrat (BFR) (2019): Positionspapier Ankerzentren. Available online at: https://www.fluechtlingsrat-bayern.de/hintergrund/positionspapier-anker-zentren/, 1 – 2 (last accessed 25 July 2023).

17 Bayerischer Flüchtlingsrat/BFR (2019): Positionspapier Gewaltschutz. See: https://www.fluechtlingsrat-bayern.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Positionspapier_Gewaltschutz.pdf (last accessed 25 July 2023).

18 Pro Asyl et al. (eds) (2021): Zur Umsetzung der Istanbul-Konvention in Bezug auf Geflüchtete Frauen und Mädchen in Deutschland. See: https://www.proasyl.de/material/zur-umsetzung-der-istanbul-konventionen-in-bezug-auf-gefluechtete-frauen-und-maedchen-in-deutschland/ (last accessed 8 July 2023).

19 All names used in the text are pseudonyms.

20 Help plans are mainly employed in the context of youth welfare. For a more detailed investigation of the function of help plans in Social Work, see: Freigang (2009).

21 See: Bavarian Ministry of the Interior/StMi (2022): Integration von Frauen. Available online at: https://www.stmi.bayern.de/mui/integrationspolitik/integration_frauen/index.php (last accessed 25 July 2023).

22 See: International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) (2014): Global Definition of Social Work. Available online at: https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/ (last accessed 27 July 2023).

23 See: Kleist, Olaf (2022), Rückkehr zur Flüchtlingspolitik des Kalten Krieges: Vom universalen Schutz zur Re-Politisierung? Available online at: https://fluchtforschung.net/blogbeitraege/rueckkehr-zur-fluchtlingspolitik-des-kalten-krieges-vom-universalen-schutz-zur-re-politisierung/ (last accessed 27 July 2023).

24 See the statement by PRO ASYL regarding the differential treatment of people fleeing from Ukraine with regards to their passports. PRO ASYL (2022): Keine zwei Klassen von Flüchtlingen! Schutz für internationale Studierende aus der Ukraine. Available online at: https://www.proasyl.de/pressemitteilung/keine-zwei-klassen-von-fluechtlingen-schutz-fuer-internationale-studierende-aus-der-ukraine/ (last accessed 25 July 2023).

25 Stoljar (2018) (see endnote 11).

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