

FEATURE

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BERLIN | MIGRATION | REFUGEES

“THIS IS A REVOLUTION IN THE MAKING”: THE FACES OF MIGRATION

Every year millions of people are forced to leave their homes behind and seek asylum in other countries. Berlin is one of the main destinations, but does it welcome migrants with open arms?



Refugees are forced to flee their countries for a multitude of reasons. Some have to flee for war, some because their identity is not accepted, some for being a critical voice on the government. They are leaving home and hearth behind for the purpose of living a safe and secure life. However, embarking on their journeys, refugees face many obstacles. Migrants are not a homogenous group demographically, and their journeys are also different. The treatment they receive differs significantly. Are they framed as ‘expats’, or do they cause a ‘refugee crisis’? Some are welcomed with open arms, while some face serious discrimination and violence. Migration has many faces. Here are two of them.

THE PRICE OF SAFETY

In the middle of Berlin, it was just another normal day for Mohamad. He was doing his usual Migrant Tour with a group of curious and young people. The connection between German and Syrian history proved itself to be significant and kept the public's attention for more than two hours. The typical German sky was filled with clouds almost as if it knew the journey we were about to embark on.

“It was not really a full plan to leave from the beginning.”

Mohamad was in his twenties, when the Syrian War got to its worst state. Cities were being bombed. Syrian civilians were being killed day by day. To Mohamad, and millions of others, their only hope was to leave the country. This was not an easy decision. And, like he said, “It was not really a full plan to leave from the beginning.”

It all started with a flight from Damascus to Egypt, where he stayed for two weeks. After that, the actual journey was about to start. The trajectory to Libya represented the biggest challenge Syrian refugees would have to overcome. According to Mohamad, to get to the final stage of this trip, he had to get smuggled on a pickup truck through the desert. That lasted for three days and four nights. During this period of time, food was non-existent and the water was rationed. Mohamad was lucky to be a healthy young man, but that was not the case for everyone. Next to him was a pregnant woman, accompanied by her husband.

To get alive out of this trip, you would need someone in Libya with the money to pay for it. Otherwise, you take the risk of getting robbed and left to die in the desert. Although, Mohamad's brother and father were there with cash in multiple currencies, the couple did not have anyone. To Mohamad, it became his mission to help them get safe to the next stop. He used the smuggler's phone to call his brother, whom he had not seen for a long time. His only words were “I need 2400 euros”. And in about 45 minutes, his brother would be there with the money to pay for three tickets.

Mohamad lived for about a year and a half in Libya with his family, until the end of August 2014. There was a civil war going on and the living conditions were not ideal. So the second part of the trip was about to begin.

He got into a fishing boat with other 360 people for two whole days, until they got rescued by an oil ship, which would become their shelter for two more days. After that, they finally landed in Sicily,

Italy. The travel in Europe started, until he got to Berlin: he passed through various places, from Milan to Munich.

While he was sharing this story, the clouds disappeared and the sun came out, as a sign of new possibilities. This, however, did not last long.

“I would say I am still quite isolated from the German community and I am more ‘integrated’ in the international community”

Although Mohamad did not find a sense of home here, he found a safe place to spend his life. Just like he said, Berlin has a very unique structure. Every neighborhood has its own character and you can find whatever you're into in any of them.

“I would say I am still quite isolated from the German community and I am more "integrated" in the international community”, as Mohamad declared. He misses his country, his younger self, the way he used to be oblivious to the world and its problems and, mostly, his family and friends.

Not only is the German language still a barrier for him, but also there's also a sense of superiority of German citizens towards the migrant community. When coming to Germany, most of these refugees, from the so called “third world countries” see themselves forced to work in less qualified and precarious jobs, even when they have obtained a higher education diploma before.

To Mohamad the point is not about the ability to help, but the willingness to do so. The government has all the tools to integrate migrants, without discrimination, but at the end of the day that is not the reality we live in. “It is not a capacity issue, it is a political decision.”, he highlighted.

ONE WAY TICKET

Coco is also very familiar with political issues. He has been living in Berlin for a few years now, but this was never his intention nor planned. Being a journalist in Togo, Coco was invited to speak at a conference in Berlin. However, due to his profession and articles critiquing the Togolese government, Coco could not go back to his home country. He saw himself forced to start a new life here, without his friends and family. The loneliness is a feeling well-known to him.

“One of my cousins was paid by the government of my country and he came to poison me”

While sharing his story, Coco got interrupted by the door bell. Later, he continued his life story, with an apparent calmness, which contrasted with its content. “One of my cousins was paid by the government of my country and he came to poison me”, Coco explained. When given the opportunity to visit his family in neighboring country Ghana, Coco did not know that the Togolese government bribed his cousin to make an attempt on his life. He still struggles with the fact that he almost died. Deciding to choose for his safety, he’s still living in Germany. Nevertheless, the willing to return to his home country persists: “I’m not living, I’m surviving”, he claimed.

His work as a journalist was put to the side. Since he only had German in school, when younger, Coco could not write articles fluently. Like he referred, “To work as a journalist here, you need to master the language. At this point the language is a barrier.” With a certain discomfort, Coco kept showing his sadness about not being able to work anymore in his field. For a while, he was able to be a freelancer, doing some articles in blogs about migration, but it is difficult to have contracts.

Coco is very conscious about this topic and, even when he was not doing journalist content, he would go to refugee camps with a friend, who runs an NGO. There, he would see the living conditions, while taking pictures and making videos to create awareness: “People are suffering in the camps, they are not well treated”.

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It doesn’t honor us.”**

This is the connection between Coco’s purpose and the role of journalism in this crisis. As mentioned, “I think the role of a journalist is to bring good information, do investigations and straight out what really is the situation.”. To him, the most important thing is to the migration’s policies. To tell what is going well and what is not. It’s crucial to have courage to say it. “I think our country learders have a lot to do to stop this. People are dying in the ocean, in the desert, and it doesn’t honor the African continent. It doesn’t honor us.”

TWO SIDES OF THE SAME STORY

The stories of Mohamad and Coco are similar in the sense that they both lack the feeling of home here in Berlin. Coco expresses sentiments of unsafety and loneliness: “There is racism going on in here, in Germany, and specially here in Berlin. I was a victim of racism many times. I don’t feel at home. I’m not safe.” He mentioned a saying in his native language - ‘sweet like home’ - the feeling of wherever you go, you always eventually come home. For him, home is in Togo, but he can not go back.

“There is racism going on in here, in Germany, and specially here in Berlin. I was a victim of racism many times. I don’t feel at home. I’m not safe.”

Mohamad shares a similar sentiment. He feels at home when he is around friends and family, which are also the biggest things he misses in his current situation. Both Mohamad and Coco share the appreciation for Berlin’s multicultural character. Mohamad feels integrated in Berlin’s international community.

Another common point for both stories is that Mohamad and Coco did everything alone. They traveled solo and had to learn how to restart their lives, did the asylum process on their own, and perfected their German by teaching themselves.

A GLIMPSE OF HOPE

It is a fact that most refugees have to go through the process on their own. However, there are organizations that can help refugees on this kind of issues. Niki works for one of those organizations - Frauenkreise.

Niki tells us that being a migrant puts you in a vulnerable position. Some characteristics however subject migrants to discrimination and violence. Being a so-called ‘migrant’ can be labeled or framed in certain ways. This influences the treatment you receive. For instance, Ukrainians are more or less welcomed. They also face discrimination, but are relatively privileged. Migrants from other countries face a lot more discrimination, violence, institutional racism, and the like. But also gender plays a role here. Both men and women face different stereotypes, such as the ‘violent male migrant’, but also women facing the risk of sexual violence and being taken advantage of.

“German society is not that accepting at all yet”

This cross section is where the organization of Frauenkreise puts in valuable work. This organization is aimed at helping refugees through an intersectional feminist lens. Niki notices a great discrepancy in the way which different ‘types’ of immigrants are treated. People coming from first world countries are welcomed, and those coming from other countries are less welcome, and some even die at the hand of the European border regime. Even when finally in Europe, some refugees are fighting two wars at once. The first being accepted as an immigrant, and the second being accepted as for instance a member of the queer community or as a woman wanting to wear a hijab. She reiterates, “German society is not that accepting at all yet”.

Niki feels strongly that the border and nation system will change. The status quo of recent years has been under attack for a while now. We have learned that the way things are framed shape public opinion so significantly. For instance the ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015 is smaller in absolute numbers of refugees than the recent influx of Ukrainian refugees. She tells us that refugees have been parts of society for a long time. This will not change. She just hopes to see more acceptance.

Coco and Mohamad see the future a little less bright. Coco wishes he could go home to his family, escape from the racism he faces here. Mohamad feels similarly, he feels integrated into the international community in Berlin, but not so much in the German community.

**“This is a revolution in the making and we only
have seen the very beginning of it.”**

There are however many possibilities for the future. For instance, Mohamad is currently obtaining a masters degree. Another possibility is in the broader population critiquing the border and immigration policies. The people have the power to change the status quo. There is also the need for societal change. Society has to become more accepting. Here lies an opportunity for the journalistic community. As Coco states “the role of a journalist is to bring good information, do investigations and to straighten out what really is the situation”. There is a lot of misinformation and framing concerning the topic of migration and the societal debate is extremely polarized. This further highlights the need for a change. As Niki mentioned, “This is a revolution in the making and we only have seen the very beginning of it.”