



Families on hold

How the context of an asylum centre affects parenting experiences

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Floor

- Master Pedagogical Sciences: Special Needs Education
- PhD Pedagogical Sciences
- Research
 - Integration
 - Unaccompanied refugee minors
 - Families on the move
- Coordinator CESSMIR



Ine

- Master Social Work
- PhD Social Work
- Research
 - Migration governance
 - Return & reintegration
 - Internal displacement
 - Social work and borders
- Professorial fellow at UNU-CRIS / UGent (Department Social Work and Social Pedagogy and CESSMIR)

Centre for the Social Study of Migration and Refugees

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Societal impact

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Legal, psychological,
medical support

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Participation

Research topic

Research method

Societal impact

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CONTEXT

Pilot project psycho-education and parental support programme

- **Midscale collective asylum centre**
- **Diversity of backgrounds**



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METHODS

- **Observation all six sessions (3-10 participants)**
- **Interviews one week after sessions (9 participants) about parenting in context of collective asylum centre**



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OBSERVATION

- **Psycho-education focused on impact recent flight and arrival in host country on their parenting experiences (changes in partner relationship, changes in parent-child relationship, confrontation with different values of upbringing)**
- **Parents recognized this, but one thing extremely present: impact of living in the context of an asylum centre**



'THINGS CAN ONLY GET BETTER ONCE WE LEAVE THIS PLACE'

- most parents evaluated the context of a collective asylum centre extremely negatively
- overwhelming feelings of despondency, desperation, continuous stress, suicidal thoughts, frustration about their current living situation and tremendous hardship of chronic uncertainty and endless waiting



'THINGS CAN ONLY GET BETTER ONCE WE LEAVE THIS PLACE'

- **Parents wanted to**
 - **Protect their children**
 - **Take care of kids' physical, social en psychosocial well-being**
 - **Give advice and pass on important norms and values**
- **Impossible because of**
 - **Physical environment: location, space, built environment**
 - **Organisational environment: the way in which life is organised**
- **Families on hold**



ORGANISATIONAL ENVIRONMENT: organisational restrictions versus an emphasis on individual parental responsibility

- 1) Limited parental agency
- 2) Timetables, use of time and temporality
- 3) Strong emphasis on parental responsibility



LIMITED PARENTAL AGENCY

Parents need to ask permission for many things, including the care for their children

- *One father mentioned how he was refused permission to take his son to the doctor, even though he was worried about the boy's health after he hurt himself while playing in the centre*
- *One mother explained that in the hospital they advised her to give her newborn additional feeds with formula, as the mother was only producing milk in one breast. Yet after arrival in the centre, it took several days before she was given the formula. The first person she addressed this question to simply refused: "The medical assistant told me that formula costs money. I said my child is dying of hunger, yet she replied that it costs money!"*

→ Parents feel they are losing autonomy to decide what is in best interest of child, hampers ability to protect child



TIMETABLES, USE OF TIME, TEMPORALITY (1)

Rigorous rules related to timing for almost everything

- *“Would anybody from the government or those responsible [in the centre] be able to live here for one day? I don't think so. With everything scheduled on time: [when you are] five minutes too late, [you get] no food. And when your child is hungry in the evening, you can't give him food”*
- *“You always need to go to the restaurant, but my daughters do not like the food. They don't eat bread, they eat vegetables and cheese for example. They eat very little here. I am so worried. My daughter weighted 34 kilos when we left, and now she only weights 28 kilos.”*

→ parents feel it prevents them from responding adequately to their children's needs and from properly taking care of them



TIMETABLES, USE OF TIME, TEMPORALITY (2)

“Enough time” to eat, “sufficient time” to get to an appointment often determined by social workers instead of people themselves

- *Late for a session because of lunch vs. “enough time to eat”*
- *Leaving a session earlier to pick kids up vs. “still plenty of time”*



TIMETABLES, USE OF TIME, TEMPORALITY (3)

A lot of waiting

- For example for permission of social workers (who were short-handed)
- Adds to the general situation of protracted waiting, uncertainty, boredom

→ *Parenting*

- *chronic stress*
- *reduced ability to be patient with children*
- *feelings of powerlessness (questions children: when will we leave, what will happen in the future, ...)*

→ *Family life on hold vs. children do grow up and are influenced by environment of the centre → frustration and powerlessness*



STRONG EMPHASIS ON PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITY

- Paradox between emphasis on parental responsibility (content defined by staff) and experienced environment of loss of control and parental autonomy
 - *Stressing parental responsibility to collect children from school – 2h commute a day*
 - *Tip on how to handle stress: take a time-out from each other vs. take care of your children at all times*
- Structural forces make it very hard to fulfill 'parental duty'



PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT: a welcoming, safe environment versus danger all over the place?

- 1) Conditions of the building**
- 2) Allocation of space**
- 3) A dangerous community**



CONDITIONS OF THE BUILDING

- Dilapidated building, non-welcoming environment leaves insufficient opportunities to establish a safe and stable home
 - *'Also the toilets. Actually, they are dirty and the children don't want to go there, so that bothers me. I always clean the toilets before they use them. That is not so easy.'*
- Built environment influences how we see ourselves: so what is the message?

→ No option to establish a 'warm home'



ALLOCATION OF SPACE

- **One room per family**
 - More than just a place to sleep
 - Kids witness everything that happens in the room
 - No opportunity to keep separate spaces for men and women
 - BUT: only safe space
 - *'If you want to protect your child, you would have to keep him locked up in the room. So he can't move. He can't go anywhere. But he doesn't want to stay inside of course.'*

→ No option to establish a warm and safe home



A DANGEROUS COMMUNITY

- **Dangerous environment, powerless in protecting children**
 - **Other residents: insulting others, using swear words, reacting aggressively to others, fighting, ...**
 - **Sexual and physical violence: the children getting hit by other children or adults, receiving sexually charged comments, being sexually abused by other residents, etc.**

→ no option to establish a safe home



CONCLUSION - REFLECTIONS

- Only asylum seeker, not a parent?
 - *'If you do it again, I would like to participate.'*
- Individual responsibility emphasized, structural aspects not considered (see also broader developments in social welfare states in Western Europe) → individual behavior is targeted for change, rather than structural causes



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- Accomodating families in the institutional setting of a collective asylum centre should be avoided by all means



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- In collective asylum centres
 - Explicit attention to asylum applicants' role as parents
 - Facilitate parental agency by reconsidering physical and organizational environment of asylum centres
 - Create safe home for parents and children



RECOMMENDATIONS

- Accommodating families in the institutional setting of a collective asylum centre should be avoided by all means
- In collective asylum centres
 - Explicit attention to asylum applicants' role as parents
 - Facilitating parental agency by reconsidering physical and organizational environment of asylum centres
 - Creating safe home for parents and children
- Important because of many reasons, a.o. because role as parents can be an important moral resource for asylum applicants and their children, in a context in which everything is insecure and unfamiliar



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