

# International Women's Day (#IWD2017) Book Review: Living in Refugee Camps in Berlin: Women's Perspectives and Experiences edited by Hansjörg Dilger and Kristina Dohrn in collaboration with International Women's Space

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**Living in Refugee Camps in Berlin: Women's Perspectives and Experiences**, a collection edited by Hansjörg Dilger and Kristina Dohrn and written in collaboration with a Berlin-based organisation, **International Women's Space**, seeks to focus in on the specific experiences of women living in different forms of asylum accommodation across the German capital. Jennifer Philippa Eggert welcomes this collaborative project as a vast and accessible resource that raises awareness of the experiences of refugee women.

This review is published to mark **International Women's Day**: a global day celebrating the economic, political and social achievements of women.

**Living in Refugee Camps in Berlin: Women's Perspectives and Experiences**. Hansjörg Dilger and Kristina Dohrn (eds) in collaboration with International Women's Space. Weißensee Verlag. 2016.

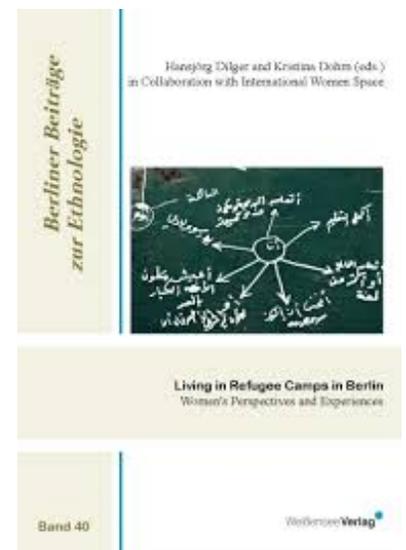
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Forced migration has been part of human history since it has first been recorded, and it continues to shape the lives of millions worldwide. According to [UNHCR figures](#), as of late 2015, 65.3 million people were forcibly displaced from home. Of these, 39 per cent were hosted in the Middle East, 29 per cent in Africa and only six per cent in Europe. Despite the comparatively low numbers of individuals seeking refuge in Europe, the unprecedented rise in [refugee arrivals in the summer and autumn of 2015](#), combined with the [unpreparedness of local authorities](#), have led political analysts in the West to speak of a 'refugee crisis'.

The pictures of thousands of men, women and children making their way over the Mediterranean and through South Eastern Europe to the west of the continent led to unprecedented interest in the stories of people who had left their homes in Syria and Iraq, but also Afghanistan, Iran, Eritrea and [other Middle Eastern and African countries](#), in order to seek refuge in Western Europe. The media quickly caught up and reported about the 'crisis' daily.

However, many of these reports overlook the [specific experiences and needs of women and girls](#) seeking refuge in Europe. This is problematic from an analytical point of view, as it is impossible to fully understand refugees' lives and experiences without taking into account the perspectives of refugees [from all walks of lives](#). Treating them as one monolithic group also poses problems as far as work with refugees is concerned, as it brings with it the risk of overlooking the specific needs that a particular group of refugees might have.

Unlike many publications on refugee experiences, *Living in Refugee Camps in Berlin: Women's Perspectives and Experiences* focuses on the lives of refugee women. The book is based on a collaborative research project organised by two university lecturers, Hansjörg Dilger and Kristina Dohrn, from the Institute of Social and Cultural



Anthropology of the Freie Universität Berlin, their undergraduate students and a Berlin-based activist organisation working on women's and refugees' rights, [International Women's Space](#). Prior to and during the fieldwork phase of the project, a research seminar was organised as part of the BA in Social and Cultural Anthropology programme in the winter semester of 2015/16. The project was self-organised, yet faculty-mentored. As part of the fieldwork, student researchers also conducted interviews and participant observation in five different types of refugee accommodation, including a former factory building, a gym, camps in wealthy and less affluent areas of Berlin as well as in centrally located and less central spaces.



**Image Credit: (Susanne Nilsson CC BY SA 2.0)**

The book consists of five empirical chapters, each looking at the situation in one of the refugee camps covered in the book. The preface provides a theoretical framework to the study, critically engaging with dominant discourses on migration and refugees and making a case for new collaborations between teaching and research and the involvement of student researchers. In the introduction, an overview of the research design, methodology and the research process are provided, together with an outline of the six themes which guided data collection and analysis: namely, health and care; administration and registration; personal and cultural background; social interactions and support; safety and privacy; living conditions; and daily life.

The biggest strength of *Living in Refugee Camps in Berlin* is that it provides a grassroots perspective on the lives and experiences of recently arrived refugee women in Berlin. In total, the research team conducted interviews with more than 40 women. Moreover, over 80 informal conversations with women in the camps were conducted. The data was collected in five different sites, covering different forms of refugee camp accommodation in different locations and highlighting the appalling conditions in which most of the refugee women interviewed are living. The amount and diversity of this data is impressive and, indeed, unprecedented. At a time when refugee issues are often discussed [in general and abstract terms](#), the approach of this book is refreshing in providing insight into the factors shaping the everyday lives of recent refugees, their worries, concerns and hopes and how their daily experiences during the first weeks and months after their arrival could be improved.

In this regard, the last chapter of the book, which contains recommendations to improve the living conditions of women in refugee camps in Berlin, is particularly helpful, including for practitioners working with refugees in other parts of Europe too. It emphasises that the 'type of accommodation and its general layout had a significant impact on the living conditions of the residents' (285). While some of the issues raised, such as access to health care or the

situation of uncertainty in waiting for a decision on their asylum case, affected both men and women, others specifically concerned the latter: for example, many of the women quoted deplored the lack of privacy in the camps. The lack of women-only spaces made many feel unsafe and restricted their mobility in the camp considerably.

While the amount of data presented in the book is impressive, whether the co-editors' decision to organise and present the data by research groups rather than themes was the best choice is debatable. The main body of the book consists of the reports of the five research groups after each had visited one refugee camp. As a consequence, at times the data seems a bit 'raw', and the chapters more descriptive and less analytical than if they had been organised by theme. Another potential area for improvement is that in parts of the book, the wording seems slightly odd. For example, some social phenomena are described in (very) lay terms, even when established social science ones would have been available, such as when the authors describe one of the resident's sceptical attitude towards marriage (86). It is not clear whether this is due to the fact that the book has been translated from German or that the authors are undergraduate students. In any case, with more careful editing, this problem could have been avoided.

Despite these minor criticisms, *Living in Refugee Camps in Berlin* still constitutes a vast resource for students, researchers, journalists, social workers and politicians with an interest in refugee studies in general and emergency refugee accommodation as well as the experiences of newly arrived refugees in particular. The book is written in a relatively accessible style, so it could also be of interest to a general audience. Hopefully, as a result, the book can help achieve one of the authors' aims in raising awareness of the often dire living conditions of refugee women in emergency accommodation.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*

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