

Sonia Narang McCloy Fellowship Final Report, 2016

Last year, more than one million refugees arrived in Germany, many of them from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq. Over the course of my three-week McCloy Fellowship in Germany and Denmark, I met with refugees, social workers, city leaders, non-profit organizations, and local volunteers as I reported on refugee resettlement.

I interviewed refugees from all walks of life – engineers from Aleppo, young children from Afghanistan, a family from Baghdad, and more – who had fled war in their countries. Through my reporting, I began to understand how refugees in Germany and Denmark are adapting to life in a new place far from home. Many face significant hurdles, including language barriers, bureaucratic challenges, a lack of housing, and increasingly stringent family reunification policies.

I also learned about the difficulties of taking in and providing services and accommodations for such large numbers of refugees and migrants. I saw first-hand how shelters are overwhelmed and struggling to cope with demand. During my first week in Germany, I spent time reporting in Tempelhof shelter, a former military airport and site of the Berlin Airlift of 1948–49. It's now a temporary home to more than 1,200 refugees, who spend their days and nights in giant airport hangars.

I was in Berlin during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, when many Muslims fast until sundown, so I decided to do a radio story about a refugee family observing their first Ramadan in Germany. Inside Tempelhof airport shelter, I met an Iraqi family who invited me to stay for their Iftar dinner that evening.

Rascha al-Dujaile, the 25-year old mother in the family, cooked an amazing feast of red rice, chicken, salad with yogurt, and pita using a portable stove on the floor of their small cubicle. Her Syrian neighbors in the cubicle across the hall joined and added a few of their own dishes too. Who could have imagined that a former military airport hangar would transform into a hub for makeshift Middle Eastern kitchens?

Rascha and her five young children arrived in Germany in January, just months after her husband made the long and dangerous trek here. She never thought she'd be living in these temporary conditions — sharing toilets and sleeping in cubicle-like spaces – for more than half a year.

When I met Rascha, she was six months pregnant and feared having to raise her baby in the hangars of Tempelhof airport. Even German social workers said newborns shouldn't be living in these conditions, but there are no other options. It's been challenging for Germany to move fast enough to accommodate so many refugees in long-term housing, leaving many in limbo.

"We are not living in a place where we can feel comfortable," Rascha said. "I feel like we're living in the Stone Age. For us, it is the same as sleeping outside. There is no roof, and no door to close."

Despite the conditions inside Tempelhof shelter, the family was still happy to be safe from the dangers back in Iraq. A year ago, when their house in Baghdad was hit by a rocket, they knew it was time to leave.

"When I used to go to work, I didn't know if I was going to see my wife or kids at the end of the day," said Rascha's husband Hassanin. "There was a bombing every two days. There was a car exploding every two days," he said.

Rascha told me about her boat crossing from Turkey to Greece, the beginning of her long journey to Germany:

"I huddled my kids around me the entire time. I carried the two youngest on my lap, and I kept the older three beside me, so I always had my eye on them. And whenever I sat down, I held all their hands together and hugged them."

My children and I crossed Greece, then Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Austria, and then we finally reached Germany. They walked beside me the entire way, and they were always crying. It was difficult, and I had to tell them to be quiet.

I thought I wasn't going to make it to Germany and I would never see my husband ever again. I also kept thinking that someone could take my kids or it could be dangerous because I'm alone as a woman.

On the way, we always crossed the borders at night, and spent the nights sitting in the street. My kids were only crying, and eventually I cried with them. It's so hard to believe that we are all finally together."

But, here in Germany, the family praised their kids' education. The two oldest children are in school, and Rascha said they love it.

"When they saw other kids going to school, they were sad and asked why can't we also go?" she said. "So, I told them to wait until their names were called. They were really happy when they were finally able to go to school."

In my reporting, I wanted to dig deeper into the situation for women refugees in Germany and Denmark. Female refugees in particular face dangerous conditions along the trail to Europe, and are often victims of gender-based violence. Even after making the arduous journey to European countries such as Germany and Denmark, women continue to face challenges.

After arriving in Germany, refugees are housed in crowded camps and hostels while they wait for their asylum claims to be processed. According to the Women's

Refugee Commission, these centers don't adequately address problems that harm women and girls.

I interviewed Claudia Bollwinkel, program manager for the German women's fund Filia die Frauenstiftung. (The word "Filia" means "Daughter" in Latin.) This group focuses on solutions to help women refugees living in camps and shelters around Germany.

"Within the camps, there is no privacy for women or families," Bollwinkel said. "The women have special needs that are not taken into account properly. For example, there are no locks on the showers or on the toilets, so they fall victim to sexual harassment very easily. In many cases, guards in the camps have no sensitivity for the challenges that women face, because they are usually male," she continued.

One of the initiatives Filia supports is the EmpowerVan, a mobile advice unit driven to asylum-seeker shelters in the Hamburg area. The van is used as a safe space to assist women – with everything from medical appointments to finding new accommodation if an asylum seeker has experienced abuse. It also provides an area for women to meet, interact and share experiences.

I asked Bollwinkel how this idea came about, and she said:

"All the Hamburg feminist organizations got together and tried to decide what best to do. They needed something mobile to go directly to where the women are, and that's how the idea came about to buy a van.

With the van, the team can go from camp to camp and meet women directly. They can invite women into the van and do consultations right there, and they can also set up a tent to allow more women to get together in a safe space.

Within a very short time, they got financing for two years for the vehicle, for the fuel and one social worker. The local government seized the opportunity to support them because they saw this is something that would really work."

There's another strong women's group supporting the rights of women refugees in Germany. They call themselves "Women in Exile," and Bollwinkel said it's one of the few groups in Germany that's run by refugee women themselves. She said it's important for them to speak with their own voice because they are experts of what it's like to be a woman refugee.

According to Bollwinkel, this group was "started by women who came to Germany asking for political refuge from several African countries. They had lived in camps themselves so they knew first-hand what challenges women were experiencing there. They visited women in the camps and advised them how they can change the situation." The group has also lobbied for political change.

Additionally, I learned about the situation of children refugees in Germany through interviews with UNICEF Deutschland and Save the Children Deutschland. More than 300,000 refugee and migrant children arrived in Germany last year, and these children face many challenges, despite emergency assistance from aid organizations and civil society. UNICEF Deutschland's spokesperson Katharina Kesper said:

"Many children and their families have to stay in reception centers for many months. Standards for protection, psychosocial support and education vary from shelter to shelter, from town to town, from country to country.

In some newly established shelters for families who may have little chance to stay in Germany, the situation of children is even worse. There, they have no access to schooling or other structured education activities, despite the fact that families may stay there for six months or longer."

During my fellowship, UNICEF and Germany's Federal Ministry for Family Affairs co-launched a pilot program to protect women and children in 25 refugee shelters across the country. Under this new initiative, trained social workers will look for signs of violence and abuse inside refugee shelters, and offer heightened counseling and support to refugees. In addition, these accommodations will also provide separate rooms with private bathrooms and locks for families with women and children.

I visited a Red Cross shelter in central Berlin where this new initiative is being implemented. I attended the program's launch event, where I saw Germany's Federal Minister of Family Affairs Manuela Schwesig present a keynote speech to the press about improving conditions for women and children. "Children who have come here as refugees have to be treated as well as other children," Schwesig said. "I want this to be a standard in all of Germany."

Schwesig said that unaccompanied children and youth who arrived in Germany often don't get accounted for, and no one knows what happens to them. Protecting them is a basic human right, she added.

At this shelter, I interviewed the German Red Cross regional head and the shelter manager to find out about the provisions and services they're implementing. In addition to ensuring greater psycho-social counseling, they also make sure to provide child-friendly spaces inside the shelter. In these spaces, "[kids] can be just children, they are protected, they can play and learn," the Red Cross shelter manager Iris Rehberg said. "Even under the most difficult circumstances, it is possible to create a safe haven for children," she said.

I also interviewed a Syrian-Palestinian family living in this shelter, and the twin 14-year-old daughters told me of their new life in Berlin, where they're now eighth-graders at the Nelson Mandela School. They love their school, and have adapted well

to academic life in Germany. However, living in this cramped, noisy shelter makes it hard for them to study.

“We were shocked because they told us even if you’re in a shelter, you would only have to live there two or three months,” said 14-year old Toulin Alasadi. She spoke in perfect English since she and her family lived in Dubai, where she attended an international school. But, her family’s residency permit for the United Arab Emirates was not renewed, leaving them with no other option but to re-settle in Europe.

“We thought things were going to get better, and we thought we would get our house in a short time,” she said. “We are very tired now because the process is very slow,” she added. Though she said the shelter is safe for women in children, she pointed out the food makes them sick and security guards are insensitive.

“The security guards treat us in a mean and rude way,” she said. “They won’t give us any help, and if you ask a question, they pretend they didn’t hear you. Everyday, someone has a problem with the security guards. They shout a lot at the kids,” she said.

Her family also invited me to join them for a Ramadan dinner that evening, where they sat around in a circle on the floor dining on rice and Palestinian-style molokhia, a green vegetable dish. I was delighted by their warm hospitality and openness, and saw how refugee families made the most of what little they have.

Back at Tempelhof airport, I also saw ways that non-profit organizations are working to create safe havens for children. The international NGO Save the Children runs child-friendly spaces inside the cavernous hangars of Tempelhof, and they took me to see one. These spaces give parents and children a place to get away from the stresses of life in a crowded refugee shelter.

Save the Children’s Vicky Germain said, “children have specific needs that in crisis situations tend to lose priority focus and fall to the wayside.” She told me:

“The need for protection, food and shelter may overshadow the need for respect, psycho-social support and resiliency building, which are only a few needs directly addressed by child-friendly spaces. Structure, security, play, a place to belong, even for a short while, are just a few others. As conditions are extremely basic and standards very low in emergency accommodations, we hope to set an example for how, even in the most basic of conditions, [refugee] reception centers can still place the needs of children as a priority for the betterment of living conditions for every child on the move here in Germany.”

Bastian Strauch of Save the Children Deutschland also noted that the conditions inside the Tempelhof airport shelter made it difficult to care for the needs of children. That’s in part because of what he described as “an overload of the whole system due to the large numbers of refugees.”

Here's what he said about the situation inside Tempelhof:

“Save the Children Germany identified a severe danger for children’s safety in refugee camps and accommodations. Refugee accommodations lack sufficient legal standards in Germany for children’s safety. The operators of the accommodations lack experience in the sector of child protection and child safety.

Using the former airport Tempelhof as a refugee camp, the biggest in Germany, raised further specific dangers for children’s safety, due to the fact it’s very large and hard to supervise. The camp’s operator is a private provider of social services. They are new to the sector of refugee accommodation and child protection and safety, which potentially increased the danger for children.”

While reporting about city-led efforts to support refugees, I interviewed Berlin politician Barbara Loth. She’s leading the way with innovative programs to expand opportunities for female refugees.

As the Secretary for Labor, Integration and Women’s issues in Berlin’s Senate, Loth has earned a reputation as a champion of the rights of women and minorities. A big part of her job is to focus on the needs of female refugees, helping them settle in the city and making sure there are systems in place to protect them from domestic violence.

She could not be doing the job at a more challenging time and place. Many displaced people traveled first to Berlin, where they officially registered as asylum seekers. Loth and her colleagues found themselves dealing with drastically larger numbers of refugees, more than they had ever seen before, while still trying to maintain programs to help women and other minorities already living in Berlin. Even before Europe’s refugee crisis began, the city was growing at the rate of 40,000 people per year, Loth said.

Her initiatives include women-only German language classes with attached childcare, and a new “Integration Buddy” program, which pairs female mentors with refugee women to offer them support in their own language. She looks for guidance from immigrants who settled in Berlin years ago, and uses their experience and knowledge to reach out to recently arrived refugees.

I asked Loth about how the city is encouraging more refugee women to learn the German language, and here’s what she said:

“There are not enough refugee women enrolled in German-language courses. So, we have created special classes just for women, and we provide someone to look after their children. We’re seeing that more and more women come to these classes now.

We didn't want them to think that we were dividing the men and women. But we saw that female refugees weren't coming to co-ed classes, and they learn better in women-only classes.

The most important thing was that someone is looking after the children. So, in these classes, there is one room for learning and another room for the children. It's like coming into an apartment. There's a teacher for the women and a teacher for the children.

In many cultures, women don't have the permission to go out and be in a class with men. We've seen, in these women-only classes, they are brave. They talk. They learn better when they see there are only other women."

Loth is also a vocal advocate of giving refugee women the resources they need to pursue their entrepreneurial dreams, and connecting women to small business grant opportunities and special training courses. Here's what she said:

"In Berlin, we have many projects to help women get jobs. We also assist them in self-employment opportunities.

We have a very good program for people interested in self-employment or starting a small business. We ask women refugees what they did in their home country and analyze their educational background to help them decide what they want to do in Germany. We inform them about their options and steer them towards special schools based on their interest. We call this mobile educational counseling, and we offer it to women directly at the refugee shelters and in the German-language classes.

Of course, you have to help with many steps along the way. The first thing is they have to learn German very fast; the second thing is that they can apply for grant money from the state if they want to start a small business."

As part of my fellowship, I also traveled to Denmark to report on the situation of refugees resettling in Germany's Scandinavian neighbor to the north. In this much smaller country that received 20,000 asylum-seekers last year, I wanted to find out how refugees are settling in and adapting to life, especially in smaller towns and villages outside of Copenhagen.

In Denmark, I interviewed refugees who arrived within the past few weeks as well as those who have been living in the country for a few years. I visited an asylum-seeker hostel in the Danish countryside, a Red Cross-sponsored weekend retreat for resettled refugee families, and a local volunteer event where refugees gather for job-search assistance and other advice. I also visited a Danish Refugee Council language-training course for refugees working in the IT sector, where I saw for myself how hard it is to learn (and pronounce) Danish words! I also visited the small town of Allerød, where I interviewed the Mayor about efforts to provide housing and jobs for the refugees that have resettled there.

Since Denmark recently tightened family reunification policies, many new refugees will have to wait years to bring their families. But, those who arrived a few years ago, such as the Syrian family I met at the Red Cross retreat, said they are happily starting a new life in the rural Danish countryside. I spent the day interviewing them and saw them experience a traditional Danish bonfire with other refugee families, where they learned how to bake bread on sticks.

Mohamad Sheikh Ali, the father in this family, used to work as a high-level supervisor in a large electric company in Aleppo, Syria. He had to flee when the situation became too dangerous for him and his family. He arrived in Denmark, and was able to bring his wife and children several months later.

“I was counting the days for them to come here,” he said. “I kept telling myself that I have to be patient. We kept telling each other to be patient so we motivated each other. We didn’t have another choice.”

He said this new life would provide a safe future for his children, away from the devastating war in Syria:

“I kept saying, thank god they got here safely and nothing happened to them. They started school, and it’s a nice step for them. It’s comfortable and safe to find a house in Denmark compared to other places that we heard stories about from friends.”

Though his children are now in school, he said there’s a severe shortage of work opportunities for refugees in his area. Jobs are few and difficult to get, especially without mastery of the Danish language. He worked at a tool shop in his small town more than an hour away from Copenhagen, but the position ended after his six-month training period ended. Now, he continues to apply for positions and hopes he can get a job to support his family.

Some Danes like Hanne Olsen have stepped up to help refugees find jobs. Olsen, a Danish retiree and former IT professional, has dedicated her retirement to helping refugees in her small Danish farming town of Hvalsø. She’s become like a mother to many refugees and helped some of them get jobs through her connections.

Olsen told me:

“It’s important for refugees to have jobs because it’s in the job they learn to speak Danish. No doubt about that. You can learn something in the school, of course, but you must be together with Danes, and that’s what you are doing when you’re working.

Secondly, because they can earn their own money. In their countries, some of them were academic people, some of them were dentists, carpenters, painters and they want to work. They don’t care, they will do everything. The season for strawberries has just ended now, and some of them have helped picking strawberries and it’s really hard work.

Also, the Danish government has decided to cut the stipend refugees receive. They get such little money that they can only pay their rent, food, transport and nothing else. It's not so nice to be a refugee anymore if you don't earn your own money. It's so difficult.

Since I have a lot of friends, I'm asking everywhere for jobs. I ask them if they have the possibility to take in a refugee for an apprenticeship. Maybe I have found 10 jobs, but we have 300 refugees. I'm a member on several groups on Facebook and I look there for jobs too and see if anybody needs people for work."

I spent an evening at the community center in Hvalsø where Olsen volunteers. The room filled with laughter and friendly chitchat as refugees from the area gathered. Olsen and the other volunteers helped them with everything from translating rent and utility bills to filling out job applications online. For many refugees, Olsen has become a mother figure – someone they can depend on for help navigating life in Denmark.

"You can see, it's a little bit like a family," she said. "We get new refugees here all the time, and we always invite them to come here in the beginning to help solve their problems. Then, we get to know them and visit them where they live." The town of Hvalsø converted unused former kindergarten buildings into shared houses for refugees. Olsen often drops by to see how everyone is doing there.

Olsen helped a young Syrian refugee Abdullah Touma find a job doing scaffolding work on construction sites. The French Literature major picked up new skills fast and is now working on hotel buildings around Copenhagen.

"I had never done scaffolding before in my country," Touma said. "At the beginning, I thought it would be very hard. But, I figured it out and I thought it was good work. They pay you very good money here, especially in Denmark." But, he said his co-workers don't interact with him, and he feels isolated and treated like an outsider.

Touma is from Aleppo, where airstrikes have continued to bombard the area, leaving the city in despair. As I interviewed him walking through the bustling streets of Copenhagen with another refugee friend a few days later, he said he feels hopeless and sad about the situation in his hometown. Though he's far from the war now, he can never stop thinking about the suffering of his fellows Syrians.

Back in Germany, I also visited a "Welcome Class" for refugee children at a primary school in the small town of Kleinmachnow south of Berlin. Earlier this year, when the school suddenly received its first batch of 16 refugee children, the principal drafted a young German who never taught before, but has a sincere love of music and teaching children. She teaches the kids German language through fun songs and games, which I recorded for a radio story.

“At the beginning, I wasn’t really sure if this was the right job for me,” said the teacher, Carolin Discher, continuing, “I was really afraid. But then I thought this was a really good way to show them our life here.”

Her young students come from Afghanistan, Syria, and Chechnya, and she helps them feel more confident in speaking German. Her goal is to help the students integrate well into their new culture and society.

“We show them everything, and how it works here. Later on, they can go to their other classes so they can make friends.” She says it’s important for the children to begin integrating with German students at a young age so they can be part of German society as they grow older.

In the shelter, she says, the refugee children only get to interact with other refugees. “Here they get to know friends, their German friends, and that’s really important,” Discher said. “It’s important that they get a normal social life and not only the life over there in the shelter.”

The school principal, Karen Korge, said, “these children have experienced war and faced very bad experiences while fleeing, and because of that they are partially traumatized. They need a teacher who doesn’t just teach them German, but who can inspire trust.”

I saw that the “Welcome” classroom was decorated with bright watercolor paintings that the children created themselves. On white sheets of paper, they had painted houses, trees, yards, smiling children, the orange sun, and in one, a large rainbow in the colors of German flag. Through their artwork, I could tell these kids see Germany as their new home.

Carolin Discher, the teacher, said:

“In their home countries, most of them have seen really bad things like war, or other children drowning. But my work here in school isn’t to talk with them about this. My job here is to show them how beautiful the world can be, that they are safe here, and that’s really important for the children. I really want to fight for them, to show them everything here, so that they really can make it in life.”

During my three weeks on the McCloy Fellowship in Journalism, I learned so much through interactions with people of many backgrounds. I felt honored to share these stories with a wide American and international audience through my articles, photographs, and radio stories for PRI’s The World, News Deeply, and other outlets. Thanks to the American Council on Germany for giving me this opportunity to take on an in-depth project at such a crucial time. I hope to follow-up on my reporting in the years ahead, and see how refugees continue to settle into their new lives in Germany and Denmark.