

Children and women in the procedure of family reunification from the point of view of a volunteer

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Since autumn 2015 the majority of the refugees in Greece are women and children. Unicefⁱ just reported that there are more than 22.000 children among 55.000 refugees in Greece, and around 2000 unaccompanied children. This fact is obviously related to the way, how politicians handled the issue of family reunification. As soon as the German government debated about suspending family reunification with the countries of origin, the more children and women arrived at our facilities in Greece – that's no coincidence. At least they made it to a European country like Greece where the Dublin procedure is still working. A lot of refugees had feared that they would not be able to follow and to join again the ones, who already had left their home country and arrived in Europe.

While last year in Germany still pictures of demanding and aggressive young men as the most incoming refugees were published fostering prejudices and doubts in the German public, here in contrast, in Idomeni and other facilities, mostly smiling and playing kids had been surrounding us. I always felt a vast fear for these kids the days when Idomeni used to be a transit camp, being always scared that they could lose their parents in the rush towards the border.

I remember a little girl, who arrived at Idomeni. She jumped swiftly from the incoming bus and was dragging a huge bag. I spontaneously wanted to help her, but she ignored me and directly ran to a small group of women and children where she placed her bag. Afterwards she ran away and left me behind with a feeling of fear that she could get lost in the big chaos in Idomeni.

And even later, when Idomeni became some kind of a keeping back camp, the many children reflected the atmosphere so uniquely. "Hey, I am a journalist, tell me your story", they approached people with an imaginary microphone in their hands. Obviously, they were pretending and making fun of the bunch of journalists thirsting for sensational pictures and stories. And I still remember the little boys who used a wheel chair for handicapped to rush other kids through the camp. They were laughing and loud screaming – out of joy or just handling their fear, I cannot tell.

**To sum up - before I will tell you more details out of our experiences
- I am blaming Europe because Europe sins against these children in
the refugee camps. For me it's a real European moral dept, for the
reason that these children don't have the chance to grow up like
they should, in a protected and safe environment. Will they ever
get the chance to handle their fears, their traumata? Will they ever
find a way in their life – without education and therapy? Will they
ever get over their own frustrations, disappointments and
desperation and those of their parents and their groups?**

Experts say that more than half of the refugee families in Greece have relatives in Germany. That's why they came to the North of Greece to Idomeni so fast. There are up to today no exact statistics and numbers about people with the right of family reunion, I could provide you with. But several of the big aid and charity organizations do confirm this impression – whether it's the Greek council for refugeesⁱⁱ or the Ecumenical refugee program EPR in Athens, which is a NGO of the Greek Orthodox Church. Both confirm this... being overwhelmed by the amount of requests.ⁱⁱⁱ Our organization, the Ecumenical workshop for refugees in Thessaloniki with the name of the Hebrew testament figure NAOMI^{iv}, being an organization with close ties to Germany, most of the members and volunteers having a German background, we are often approached when family reunifications shall take place or other questions come up – no matter if it's from Germany or Turkey or Greece. We are often asked for mediation and information.

And therefore we argue the following:

- 1) Many families have been separated from each other even for several months, some even for years until they have the chance to apply for family reunification. Usually the mothers are on the run with their children in order to unite with their family members in a European country.
- 2) One parent often shoulders the burden of fleeing alone with the kids. Mothers in general have more than one child, so a pregnant woman with six children we looked after is not an exception. I took a photo of a woman with 4 little kids who seemed to be not older than six years. Often now I think of them and ask myself, where they have landed in the meantime.
- 3) The number of pregnant women or women with babies is relatively big, e.g. only in Thessaloniki there are registered a

lot of births in the hospitals. Last week in Thessaloniki 24 births!

- 4) The families being stuck now in Greece are especially part of the poorer social groups. WE realize this also because of the lack of knowledge of a foreign language.
- 5) Many Families are separated through accidents or disaster, this means, they had actually planned their future a different way. Like the husband who sent away his wife and children, because his very own father was dying in Turkey. Or like the family, whose two children got lost during the crossing to Europe, because one boat capsized and was caught by the Turkish coast guard. You can check the last story also on the investigative German news show "Monitor"
- 6) There are families on their way with sick children or ill and disabled parents, like the paralyzed father who has to be carried to the far away toilette in the camp several times a day... Why the daughter, suffering from cancer in a Greek hospital, cannot be united with her parents in Germany? There are no Dublin special procedures for particular vulnerable cases. The ERP tried to manage several such cases through VISA with the German embassy in Athens, mostly difficult.
- 7) Families are connected through Internet with SKYPE and whatsapp/up usually. Sometimes, technology serves better to families than politics. Without this technology, the procedure and organization of fleeing and being in contact with the family members over long distances would not be possible.
- 8) **Applications for family reunification have no priority to the authorities. We even assume that instructions are given (from whom?) to give priority to the relocation applications.** Yesterday colleagues from Germany phoned me and they share the same suspicion.... meaning that family unions are not processed faster for the well being of the children. I don't

need to talk to you about the SKYPE procedure at this point. The lack of access to the Dublin procedure..... considerably delays the whole processing and outcome of the family reunification demand. Additionally, these deficiencies create a substantial internal backlog of pending Dublin cases. Asylum procedures even in the past needed several months or more than a year, so that families have been separated for a year or even longer. There is reason to fear that these waiting times will be extended in the future. The other day, H. a famous Syrian designer for clothes wept desperately because he now is separated from his little daughters and his wife for more than 8 months.....without any hope to see them soon.

- 9) The family reunification procedure and bureaucracy ignores the reality of these families. In fact, many refugees travel in big groups together with their uncles and aunts and grandfathers and related families or even with their neighbors. We met a family of 21 people in Nea kavala camp during the great rain in March, and I remember them well, because they invited us in their shelter tent for a cup of tea and told us their family story. They didn't want to be separated. ...So mothers, who we have taken care of, do not want to go to a hotel temporarily after the birth of a child, because they do not want to leave their relatives in the shelters behind. In case of a family reunification a mother is only allowed to travel with her children. Her father, her mother and other relatives have to go to different countries in different relocation programs. Worst is the regulation that children full of age are very often not taken into account in this case. A father is able to be unified with his under-aged children, but not with his children full of age unless he can prove that they depend on him. If the family wants to stay together, the grownups must find illegal ways with the smugglers and human traffickers. The whole family reunifications program is not fair to families, because it only cares about father, mother and their under-aged children.

10) A Syrian husband and father in Germany told us that he has panic attacks and needs to go to the hospital, because he fears to lose his wife and his three children. One child was born in a refugee camp and lives together with 10 other persons in a small tent. How can a father live in peace with his family far away in bad conditions? Being separated is an intolerable burden for everyone affected and involved.

The public opinion about the separated families: The separation of families, sending ahead a part of the family is a known accusation made by European public. I remember one case in Sweden where the Swedish authorities didn't want to approve a family reunification. The under-aged daughter made the journey to Sweden and the authorities did not allow her parents to follow. The authority's opinion: Parents, who send their child ahead and all alone to Sweden, are morally not suitable to raise a child.

I often read blogs where people are blaming refugees, who send their child ahead to Europe all alone – such comments especially after the show Monitor (12.5.2016) on German TV. And indeed especially these days in Greece a lot of children traveling alone arrived on the islands, because they cannot not be sent back after the EU-Turkey agreement in force. But we learned one thing from history: If politicians are not able to find solution, people will try to find – and they will find, I can tell you – more and dangerous solutions. And here is my answer to the politicians: As long as we support the regimes in the countries where the refugees are coming from with weapons, with lobbyism, they will try to come to us in order to find a safe harbor. They will come, because of the wars and famines and they will risk everything. I can tell you: Everything, even losing family members.

On the German TV show Monitor it was said, that only 211 persons arrived within the framework of the Dublin regulations until the 12th of Mai in 2016 in Germany. Within the framework of VISA procedures there were 7.500 Syrians.^{vi} It seems that not the real numbers are crucial when politicians talk about family reunification – it's their

personal political willingness. Paul Collier^{vii} analyzed this in detail in his Book “Exodus – *Why we need to review migration policies.*” I highly recommend this book to everyone who follows up with migration issue. It’s a must-read. Collier points out that political decisions on migration are especially influenced by pre existing moral values, whereas these decisions are stuck between worries of voters and economic models, between an open door policy and a closed doors policy. Otherwise the German minister for Interior would not have closed the doors with the words: “We cannot double or triple our tremendous numbers of refugees by family reunification. That’s the key issue.” Like Collier we can see that statistical evaluation and an economical and rational analysis have neither influenced our German minister nor have been taken under consideration in the organizing and managing family reunification in the Eu. All the official discussion is more or less about threat, danger and load limitbecause of the refugees.

Our duties:

1.) Elucidation- Aufklärung

Before demanding the reviewing of the process of family reunification on the side of the authorities, we must explain to our people: Why and how these families and their relatives have been separated from each other? What are the depressing consequences of the separation for the individuals and families affected? What numbers are we talking about? The number of people stuck in Greece is a ridiculous small number easily to be handled.

We see that all people in real contact with refugees and their stories, with their hope and desperation, support the demand of quick family reunion. So in our churches we must bring people close to the experiences of refugees, of their needs and hopes. We observe here in Greece that there is also a new ecumenical acting together around the demands and challenges of the refugee`s issues. Different Churches and NGOs, which never before were in contact, now act together...cooperate and fight for the welfare of people. So Sofia, our friend from the Christian meeting point nearby, is together with us

today..... also with other members of the protestant Greek church (EEE). Welcome!

I am sure that our German protestant minister for Interior has enough advisors who can inform and clarify all these issues, but he does not seem to know or to feel the refugee`s stories, their narratives or he consciously ignores them. Therefore, because of the lack of contact with the reality of refugees, the political willingness and the moral attitude within the European elites are mostly the following one: to spread fear, exclusion and defense.

Therefore it`s the task of the civil society, of the churches, to oppose this attitude: By standing to our values, by defending bodily integrity as the inviolability of the physical body, by fighting for the inalienable rights of the children and family according to the UN convention on the Rights of the child in the public debate. Our good experiences, our vivid impressions from wonderful creative and hopeful people coming to us must find a way in the public debate. The muddle of fear, blame reactions and nationalism have to give away for a rational, enlightened discourse about flight and families in general and also in the specific procedure of family reunification.

2.)Demand for faster and wider procedures

We need to work on how families can be brought together faster and more efficiently. A political culture being committed to Human and children`s rights has to do everything possible to protect families.

Separated families must be united quickly in fast-track procedures.

- 1.) Our request to establish a department for VISA issues with faster procedures in Thessaloniki at the German General Consulate stands in the room^{viii}. The possibility for Visa for Germany is only given in the Embassy in Athens. The Pope showed the world, how easy it can be to take 12 refugees with Visa to Italy; within a week they solved the problem...because there was a political will. I just was informed yesterday from a colleague of the protestant church of Katerini: The woman with little children, they host now for several weeks, she asked for

Visa for Germany to join her husband who is there with a legal status. Now after having organized the asked papers from Beirut embassy, the German embassy in Athens gave them a date for appointmentI think you will be upset like me....on the 20th of December 2016. And there is no way to intervene.

- 2.) Greek asylum offices must be reinforced with **Greek** staff. The austerity obligations through the Troika must be lifted in favor of a better and more effective refugee management and more staff in the asylum offices. To bring staff from other EU countries to Greece will create a big legal and intercultural and social chaos. Often in interviews I was asked by journalists in a blaming manner: And what is doing the Greek government? What can they do in the frame of a deadly austerity system? The paternalistic way of EU behaving towards Greece must stop!
- 3.) We pose the demand to keep families together and not to separate great families or even grown up family members from father and mother and brothers and sisters. For what reason this big family I met in Nea Kavala must be separated in 5 groups in different countries?

We are not talking about any great numbers here. We are not talking about statements like „we cannot take them all“. We are talking about a manageable number of mostly women and children..... The churches have an advocacy task and need to inform the international community on its obligation to protect families and children. I often miss a loud and strong voice of the European churches united in demanding protection for families.

Conclusion

There are many photos from children on our NAOMI website, photos full of creative and vivid and singing children. But I will always remember one photo, which cheers up my heart: Two little children, around two or three years old, at the railway platform of Idomeni, playing together peacefully with little toy cars as if the world around

them was in full Peace. It is a picture full of childlike serenity, power and spiritual strength. May the two as well as all other children on flight have this kind of personal power.....Because They cannot expect much support from outside, from the EU policy or to say it with the words of the UN rapporteur:

"... there is a lack of vision at the EU level, there's no long term human rights based migration policy. We need a generational strategy of where we'd like to be in 10 or 20 years," the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants Francois Crepeau said on May 16, 2016 and after visiting Greece. "The (EU) needs to respond to the crisis with prepared tools and not try to invent them every time a crisis happens."^{ix}

i http://www.euractiv.de/section/eu-aussenpolitik/news/unicef-will-sich-staerker-um-fluechtlingskinder-in-griechenland-kuemmern/?nl_ref=14012616

ii <http://www.gcr.gr/index.php/en/>

iii <https://www.proasyl.de/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/2016-05-24-Vulnerable-lives-on-Hold-final.pdf> page 13

iv www.naomi-thessaloniki.net

v <http://www1.wdr.de/daserste/monitor/sendungen/fluechtlingsdramen-100.html>

vi

vii Paul Collier Exodus, 2013 Allen Lane, London, dt, Ausgabe Siedler Verlag Münschen, page 20

viii http://www.attac.de/uploads/media/Aufruf_Visa_fuer_Deutschland_21_April_2016.pdf

ix <https://www.proasyl.de/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/2016-05-24-Vulnerable-lives-on-Hold-final.pdf> page 2

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