

December 2022

Berlin-Brandenburg, Germany



### CONFERENCE REPORT: **Borders Were Broken, Bridges Were Built!**

*The opening ceremony of the conference*

#### **Celebrating 20 years of solidarity: a report on Women in Exile’s 20th anniversary “Breaking Borders to build Bridges”**

The conference was held on 4th to 7th of August at the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, with an estimated 300 guests coming from across all borders internationally.

The conference had many organisations, friends and supporters of WiE coming together to make it a success. The BLA Collective ensured every person who attended understood each other by offering translation services. Accommodation was offered to those who needed it. Food was provided to everyone. There were

children caretakers who had volunteered to be with them during the sessions.

The Conference opened its doors with a word of welcome and songs from the women of Women in Exile. During the 4 days there were scheduled workshops, which were held by different people. These included a health workshop, a legal workshop and a women empowerment workshop among many others. Other activities were also held on different days. For instance, during our book launch and book reading we had a chance to hear about the chronology of Women in Exile and its motives for being set up. One major

*(continued on next page)*

#### **ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:**

**FROM WOMEN  
TO WOMEN**

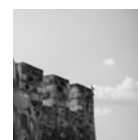
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theme throughout the conference was the abolishment of the Heims or “Lagers” as their living conditions in them is terrible.

So much learning and knowledge was shared. Different women caught people’s attention as they told of their life experiences in their countries. Asylum seeking women shared their heart-breaking stories of why and how they fled their home countries and the

fears they have faced at their countries of exile. We also heard of how Women in Exile has been of great assistance to women in asylum and children through their assistance.

The conference ended well as we joined other organisations at a demo against colonialism in front of the museum Humboldt Forum.

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# Heim Visit & “Womentoring”

Asylum accommodation visits are unfortunately still important! The situation of refugees in asylum accommodations is still seriously bad. We could see this again on our last visit at one of the accommodations.

The reason for our visit was also our new project “Womentoring - empowering female refugee voices”. With this initiative we want to encourage women to find their voice for social engagement - hopefully with this project we can contribute to improving women’s arrival in Germany and to shaping their life and environment in a meaningful way. To achieve this, we will form tandems, i.e. a team in which one woman with refugee experience who is already socially and politically engaged mentors another woman who has so far little or no social and political engagement. The more experienced woman accompanies the less experienced one on her path to finding her own voice. In addition, tandems will be given training on various engagement structures at workshops and will also be encouraged to network with other projects ran by Women in Exile and their partners.

The project will start by visiting asylum accommodation in Berlin and approaching local women to participate in the project. In October, we visited a home for refugees in Marzahn, where a family from Burundi we know has been living for some time. Luckily, we were able to meet them and also other women in the accommodation and talk to them about their current situation and problems.

The biggest problems in the asylum accommodations are the lack of support on arrival including on official matters. Communication for people who do not speak

German or English is extremely difficult. There are translators for the most common foreign languages such as Arabic, but hardly for other languages. Many refugee women, like this family, feel ignored by the shelter management and social workers. The women knock on the doors and windows of the social workers, who duck away and pretend they are not there. When social workers do respond, the women are often told to come back later. Letters are not sufficiently translated and explained and sometimes withheld and thus ignored.

**VON FRAUEN FÜR FRAUEN  
FROM WOMEN TO WOMEN**

Women living in shelters are often alienated and feel at the mercy of the conditions of the shelter and their staff. They often have the feeling that they are powerless in the face of the (new) structures they are facing in Germany and their local social workers are often unable to help due to overwork and themselves discontented.

We have invited the women to participate in our mentoring scheme. They are very interested in learning how they can work to improve their circumstances and also work for others. However, they see their language barrier as their biggest problem, which also prevents them (among other factors) from participating in social life. We hope to empower new peers with our project who will then also empower other women.



# Health Care for All ?!!!

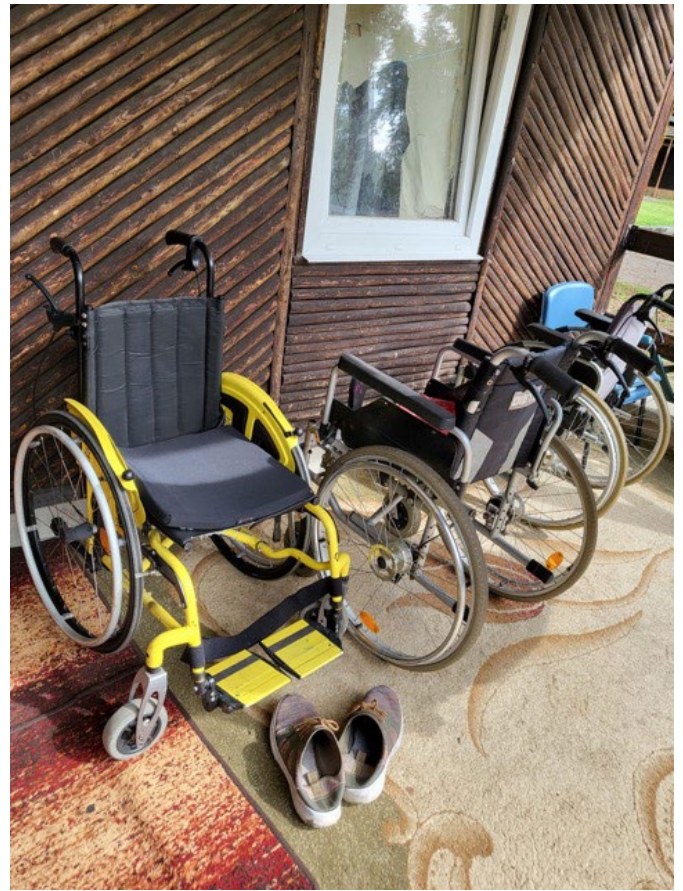
One of our long-running campaigns as W.i.E&F is “Health Care for All”. We believe that when it comes to health care, there shouldn’t be any boundaries or borders making it difficult for people - and in this case a marginalized community - to access it.

We recently came across a case where the social workers of a Heim (asylum accommodation) in Marzahn, Berlin, proved to be a hindrance to Rachel receiving the crucial health care she needed.

Late last year, we got introduced to a family living in a Heim in Marzahn. We were contacted by the then Heim’s social workers because there was a language barrier as the family only spoke and understood Swahili and Kiburundi. We could be of assistance in terms of language translation but as it turns out that was not the only problem they faced.

When we met the family, they were so joyous with smiles always ready on their faces but through the different types of discrimination and racism they have encountered, the smiles have slowly faded.

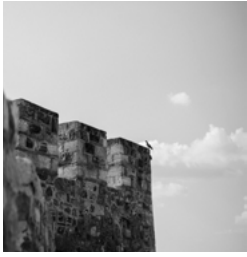
Recently, Rachel, who is both deaf and mute, told us through her sister Esperanza of an incident that she had with the social workers in the Heim. She had been complaining of pain in her back for the longest time and had also gone to see the social workers and let them know of her desire to visit a hospital. This was however not met with the reception of a helpful ear. All she got for an answer was to go back to her room and the social workers would come to them. This however was a lie as they did not take the necessary measures for Rachel to be able to visit a hospital. Instead, they locked both doors and closed the windows of their office so that when Esperanza went to ask again (in case they had forgotten) they created the illusion that no one was in the office although that was not the case. Later that night



the pain became so unbearable for Rachel that the security personnel had to be notified. Luckily, they took appropriate action and called an ambulance immediately.

This situation is just one of many where the family has asked for assistance from the social workers and the response has been for them to go back so that the social workers could then pretend that they were not there. Their mother has also complained of body problems and her wish to see the doctor had also been ignored. The blatant discrimination and racism would have ended up fatal if the security personnel had not reacted immediately. This situation clearly depicts just how fatal the lack of action due to discrimination and racism is.

# Fortress Europe



Time and time again, we have seen, read and heard of the atrocities Europe has committed against Human Rights to keep Refugees and Immigrants out of Fortress Europe. We met with one strong, brave and courageous woman who has been illegally arrested and jailed in Lithuania. She agreed to give us an interview and tell us about her experiences. Here is her story. The interview was edited for clarity.

I am Djukep Mbianda Ingrid Ornélie. I am 26 years old and I come from Cameroon. I left Cameroon after my father died as life had become very difficult after his death.

I started my journey to Europe in 2020. It took me 2 years to reach Germany. I flew from Cameroon to Belarus by plane and spent there 7-8 months. Because I had no stability in Belarus, I decided to go to Lithuania, and upon entering I was stopped and locked up for 14 months in a prison because I had entered the country illegally. When Lukashenko opened Belarus' borders, I had crossed the border on foot with other people, through the forests. We had organized this trip ourselves.

Life in Lithuania was Hell! We were treated worse than other people. There was a lot of racism. In the first 6 months, I was in a large mixed-gender space like a big military camp. Men and women were sleeping in the same place and sharing the same toilets. After 6 months I was transferred twice and lived with other women, sharing my room with 2 other women.

We were deprived of our liberty. We could not leave the camps. The border agents came to do control checks in our cells every morning, lunchtime and night. We didn't have the right to a phone, and sometimes the food they served us was expired. We didn't have access to clean water. It was red. The sanitary pads were also expired. If I wanted to have a lawyer or wanted to eat better, I would have had to pay but I did not have any money. In the 14 months I was in Lithuania, the authorities only gave me 8 euros and 20 cents.

I was also beaten. Once, with other migrants, we organised a demonstration against our living conditions. After that, I was beaten, tasered and handcuffed. I lost consciousness, I bled and an ambulance had to be called. The other migrants were sent away so that they would not see the blood. Doctors Without Borders also came.

Other than for emergencies, the authorities did not give me access to proper healthcare. When I asked for a doctor, the authorities would usually only give me paracetamol. Once I became so ill that I had to be sent to the hospital again but I could not go to any follow-up appointments because there was no one to escort me there again. I never received any medical treatment for this until I came here to Germany.

Eventually, in the third camp, I was given the freedom to move out of the camp. This is when I was able to access a phone again and contact people. After about a week, I decided to leave Lithuania to come to Germany where my mother lives. Here, I hope I can work for the elderly.

*Photo from Djordje Petrovic of pexels.com*



## KEEP IN TOUCH

Website: [women-in-exile.net](http://women-in-exile.net)  
Facebook: "Women in Exile & Friends"  
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## DONATIONS

Women in Exile e.V.  
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*We thank the following foundations and organisations for their continued support of our work:*

