

How Female Afghan Refugees in Germany Navigate Reproductive Health

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Unprecedented global displacement over the last two decades means that an increasing number of refugee women are accessing reproductive health in receiving countries, including high-income countries.

Between the years 2012 and 2016 more than half a million girls and women applied for asylum in Germany. The number of Afghan refugees in Germany has doubled since 2015 and rank second in number applying for asylum in Germany, following Syrian refugees.

Women refugees are confronted with barriers to accessing reproductive healthcare and therefore struggle with postnatal depression, loneliness, isolation, and communication. Providing maternity care for refugee women with a range of basic and unmet healthcare needs is challenging.

This study is applying qualitative/participatory research with female refugees in Munich, Germany. The purpose of this study is to investigate Afghan women refugees' challenges and experiences in accessing reproductive health care after arrival in Germany, additionally to develop their self-help competencies in negotiating the health system for reproductive health individually and within their communities.

After obtaining the ethical approval, 18 in-depth interviews (13 Afghan refugee women ageing from 20 to 40 years arrived in Germany since 2015 and 5 German volunteers from Helferkreis) were conducted in a suburb of Munich, Germany, as well as field notes and observations were collected while accompanying refugee families as a translator as they interfaced with health care providers and government authorities in 2019-2020. Participants have mentioned their experiences with the German health system and the difficulties they had to overcome, especially related to language barriers and medical/comorbidity issues (e.g. missing vaccinations, tuberculosis). The women refugees also expressed their coping strategies in which they managed the problems they faced on their own. The crucial role of volunteers is another theme that was emphasized by the participants, supporting women refugees to overcome the barriers they face in accessing health care and maternity care.

Eight of thirteen of these Afghan refugee women cooperated in photovoice and in four participatory meetings, where they could share their experiences and challenges during the pandemic Covid-19 and lockdown (March 2020 until October 2020). Sharing of experiences via participatory meetings was especially uplifting and could promote the women's self-confidence and empower others in their community.