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RESILIENCE IN REFUGEE FAMILIES: THE CASE OF
AFGHAN, IRAQI AND SYRIAN REFUGEE FAMILIES IN BELGIUM

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Refugee families face various challenges for their functioning and cohesion, possibly causing cracks in the 'capacity of the family system to withstand and rebound from adversity' (Walsh 2003). Not only do families regularly split up prior to flight, and can it take years before reunification happens, once arrived they spend extended times in large reception centres where their privacy and safety are threatened. In such centres, where household and child rearing practices are in part collectively organized, parenting roles and child development are under continuous pressure.

In our interdisciplinary research on refugee family functioning and resilience after arrival in Belgium, we focus on challenges to parenting roles and child development as well as what it means to be resilient as a family. We questioned 17 families from an Iraqi, Afghan and Syrian background. In each case, we interviewed the parents, the children, and several aid workers from their own direct network.

Using case material, we highlight recurring observations concerning child development and parenting roles. For instance, we show how parent's position as mediators to the social world and as primary providers of safety are threatened as children often learn the language quicker and have easier access to social networks. Further, we illustrate reconfigurations of family's understanding of resilience (as well as its alleged opposite – 'vulnerability'). We are attentive to aid workers' capability to transcend the dichotomous understanding of resilient/vulnerable, victim/suspect, helpless/self-dependent, and their capacity to navigate the intersections in their daily interactions with these families.

Keywords:

family resilience, asylum seeking and refugee families, Flanders

About the author

Mieke Groeninck is Dr. in Anthropology and researcher at the higher institute of family studies.