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## Formal activism of female migrants and refugees in Poland. A case study of Wandering Woman Foundation

Over the last few decades Gdańsk has been a destination for immigrants and a home to people from all around the world who chose it as a place to pursue their dreams and aspirations. However, in a migratory environment a sense of identity as a migrant or a refugee woman may become a guiding identity and even obscure other forms of identity; as such, it can lead to the development of activist strategies that are primarily based on foreignness. The existence of formal migrant organisations is one of the factors that show how advanced the process of migrant self-organisation is. The types of organisations, in turn, provide information on how immigrant communities organise themselves and what needs they respond to, also these which are gender based. The strength, coherence and field of activity of migrant organisations may substantially influence the level of integration of migrants, their sense of identification, as well as the degree of their participation in the host society. Therefore, it is important to consider the motives behind the creation of female migrant's self-organisations and the range of values and identities that their activities refer to. In this article, the research on the Wandering Women Foundation helps me to understand how and why migrant women's self-organisation emerge in Poland.

**Keywords:** migration, refugee, migrant organization, women, activity

Formalny aktywizm imigrantek i uchodźczyń w Polsce.  
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W ciągu ostatnich kilkudziesięciu lat Gdańsk stał się punktem docelowym dla ludzi z całego świata, którzy wybrali go jako miejsce realizacji swoich marzeń i aspiracji. Jednak status migrantki czy uchodźczynie może stać się tożsamością przewodnią, a nawet przesłaniać inne formy tożsamości i jako takie może prowadzić do rozwoju strategii aktywistycznych, które opierają się przede wszystkim na obcości. Istnienie formalnych organizacji imigranckich

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jest jednym z czynników, które pokazują, jak zaawansowany jest proces samoorganizacji migrantów, a rodzaje tworzonych organizacji dostarczają informacji na temat tego, jak organizują się społeczności imigranckie i jakie są ich potrzeby. Siła, spójność i pole działania organizacji imigranckich może mieć istotny wpływ na poziom integracji migrantów, ich poczucie identyfikacji, jak również na stopień ich uczestnictwa w społeczeństwie przyjmującym. Dlatego ważne jest, aby lepiej przyjrzeć się motywom stojącym za samoorganizacją migrantek oraz wartościom i tożsamościom, do których odnoszą się w swoich działaniach. Niniejsze studium Fundacji Kobiet Wędrownych pozwala nakreślić przyczyny powstawania formalnych kobiecych organizacji imigranckich w Polsce.

**Słowa kluczowe:** migracje, uchodźcy, organizacje imigranckie, kobiety, aktywność

## Introduction

Over the last few decades, the city of Gdańsk and, by extension, Poland as well, have both witnessed a relatively dynamic growth in the number of immigrants. “Gdańsk has always been a welcoming multicultural city. It has been a destination for immigrants and a home to people from all around the world who chose it as a place to pursue their dreams and aspirations. Gdańsk is a proof that cities need migrants to develop”, wrote the late Mayor of Gdańsk, Paweł Adamowicz in 2016 in the introduction to *The Immigrant Integration Model*. Nevertheless, it is difficult to estimate how many migrants and refugees live in Gdańsk today because the city authorities do not collect data of this kind. In the public space and on the labour market, Ukrainians are the most numerous, but Gdańsk is also home to refugees from Chechenia, Rwanda and Syria (Womack 2018). The Gdańsk Immigrant Advisory Council (Rada Imigrantów i Imigrantek) has up to 15 migrant representatives and keeps the municipal government abreast of refugee concerns.

For the last few years, one of the refugee women in the Council was Khedi Alieva, the founder and the president of the Wandering Woman Foundation. The Foundation is unique among other migrant organisations in Poland for at least two reasons. Firstly, because it is one of several self-organised migrant organisations oriented toward migrants and refugees, and secondly, it is a foundation with a feminist approach, which has been built mostly by migrant and refugee women for other women in difficult life situations: migrants, refugees but also other members of the host society in need. It brings together women of various nationalities (Chechens, Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Poles), legal and social statuses, religions and educational profiles. It is a group of people who carry on their shoulders a double burden of stereotypes and expectations – that of being a migrant or a refugee and being a woman at the same time.

Susan Olzak and Elizabeth West claim that “despite the apparent consensus on the importance of ethnic organisations no theory has satisfactorily explained what conditions encourage their founding or what factors support or inhibit their continued existence” (Olzak, West 1991: 459). Twenty nine years later, it seems that research on the matter has developed significantly; however, Olzak and West’s observation is still valid. Therefore, it is important to consider the motives behind the creation of female migrant’s self-organisations and the range of values and identities that their activities refer to. In this article, I observe the Wandering Women Foundation to understand how and why migrant women’s self-organisation emerge in Poland. Why do migrant women and female refugees create their own organisations? What kind of identities and values are the basis for the compatible activities of migrant and refugee women in their own organisations? These – and other questions – have been key to the research project presented here.

The qualitative data collected in order to answer these questions indicates the high efficiency of migrant self-help organizations in diagnosing problems of migrants, supporting them (empowerment, increasing their competences and social capital), and breaking down barriers between migrants and the receiving community. They perform these tasks much better than state and local authorities and institutions on the one hand and non-migrant-run organizations on the other. The reason for doing these tasks better are mostly own experiences of migrant women running the organization. First, it allows them to better understand the needs and problems of other women experiencing migration, second, to adjust organization’s activities to their needs, and third – through cultural and gender similarity – they are much more likely to gain trust and attract migrant women in need.

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## Research to-date

The topic of immigrant organisations has been addressed more and more often by migration scholars. Researchers have focused on such issues as the activity and involvement of immigrants as a dimension of public participation (Budyta-Burzyńska 2016), on the mobilisation of irregular migrants (Chimenti 2011), relations, emotions and space in migrant activism in transnational contentious spaces (Steinhilper 2018), the involvement of female migrant schools in the context of civil activism (Małek 2019), community activism of women (Hatzidimitriadou, Gülfem Çakır 2009), migrants’ civic engagement (Fox, Bada 2009), reasons for

the formation of immigrant organisations (Brünger, Vermeulen 2014; Schrover, Vermeulen 2005; Vermeulen 2006; Vermeulen et al. 2016) or the self-organisation of migrant women (Pojmann 2006, 2007, 2008). On the topic of self-help migrant organizations, the research of Sara de Jong (2018) and Sylvie van Dam and Peter Raeymaeckers (2016) are also noteworthy. De Jong touches upon the dual nature of work migrant self-help organizations which, on the one hand, exploit the experiences of migrants but, on the other hand, they tend to overlook migrants' previous professional qualifications and type of work in their place of origin. Van Dam and Raeymaeckers (2016) point out the lack of cooperation of self-help organizations with other organizations and institutions and the reasons for this lack.

In Polish academic research, the study of immigrants' public and social activity has not yet become a key topic in scientific reflection on migration. Admittedly, several studies devoted to migrants and refugees in Poland have been presented, offering various points of view and perspectives: cultural (e.g. Chrzanowska 2017; Klaus 2017), sociological (e.g. Nowicka 2011), ethnological and anthropological (e.g. Ząbek, Łodziński 2008) and others – observing, for example, the way the solidarity concept is practiced as a response to the so-called “refugee crisis” (Goździak, Main 2020). However, few researchers have addressed the topic of the self-organisation of migrants and refugees in Poland (Jaworska, Alieva 2018; Łady, Bottger 2016). The study by Jaworska and Alieva in Gdańsk is all the more remarkable because the authors are the co-founders of the Wandering Women Foundation. Consequently, their personal involvement in the creation of an immigrant organisation in Poland makes them familiar with the insiders' point of view, which is additionally strengthened by the fact that – as in the case of Khedi Alieva – the refugee experience in Poland is also her personal experience.

Despite the relatively scarce attention Polish social scientists have paid to the topic of migrant and refugees' self-organisation, the subject is particularly interesting because the strength, coherence and field of activity of these organisations may substantially influence the level of integration of migrants, their sense of identification, as well as the degree of their participation in the host society. Moreover, extended research on migrant organisations would allow scholars to capture the dynamics of intra-group migration processes and the evolution of the migrant community. And for those who are in charge of assisting migrants in the host country, further research would help identify the expectations and needs of immigrants better (Budyta-Budzyńska 2016).

Besides the fact that these organisations are important for the immigrants themselves, they encourage their participation and integration into the host society and the study of these processes. Studying immigrant organisations provides us with an excellent opportunity to understand the complex and dynamic developments that take place within immigrant and refugee communities.

## Migrants and refugees in the aid and integration system

According to Polish Central Statistical Office (GUS), at the end of 2019, there were over 2 million foreigners living in Poland, the majority of whom were citizens of Ukraine (over 1.3 million). During the two spring months of the pandemic caused by the coronavirus (from 1 March to 30 April) the number decreased by 223 thousand (GUS 2020). At the same time, the official UNHCR's report about forced displacement (prepared at the end of 2019) presents the following figures: 12,673 refugees, 4,791 asylum seekers and 1,328 persons under UNHCR's "statelessness mandate" living in Poland.

For the last two decades, Chechens have been the biggest group of asylum seekers coming to Poland. Although in official statistics this group is qualified as Russian citizens, it is estimated that between 2003 and 2016 about 90 thousand asylum seekers of Chechen origin claimed asylum in Poland (Anacka 2015), but only 3–5% of them received any form of international protection (Alieva, Jaworska 2018). Other forced migrants (mainly from the Ukraine) who – for some legal reasons – cannot be subject of the asylum process in Poland, have emigrated for reasons that are often as dramatic as in the case of the Chechens.

During the asylum process most of those who applied for legal protection and the status of refugee in Poland are held in refugee centres. The centres are usually situated in rural areas; they offer few opportunities for asylum seekers to interact with the Polish society outside of the centre and equally few activities that could be considered forms of integration (Klaus 2016: 204–210; Ząbek, Łodziński 2008: 231–238). The system of refugee integration in Poland is still quite poorly developed and is lacking resources and instruments that are crucial for the integration of foreigners. If the refugees are lucky and receive one of the forms of internal protection, they are entitled to take part in the so called "Individualised Programme for Integration".

Within this one-year programme, some social work is offered to them, but usually, because of limited opportunities, the programme does not even manage to cover even the basic needs of its participants, and eventually it mostly just focuses on providing them with a small allowance. When the programme is over, refugees are left without any special support from the public agencies and almost entirely to their own devices (see Chrzanowska 2007; Frelak et al., eds., 2007). As a result, refugees depend economically on welfare assistance and have very little actual opportunities to integrate. Instead of treating refugees as capable individuals with potential to become Polish residents, authorities leave them in an indeterminate state – trapped in an unequal relationship in which they are dependent upon charitable groups, NGOs, and the black labour market to survive (Klaus 2017).

Many refugees do not speak Polish or their language proficiency is not sufficient enough for them to find a decent job, nor is their situation improved by the lack of affordable public housing which forces them to rent expensive and substandard flats on the open market (Klaus 2017). The failure of the system to meet even the most basic needs of refugees is even more pronounced when the migrants are women. Nevertheless, they usually try to manage somehow:

They do their best to care for their families and elaborate strategies of management of poverty that include: finding some jobs (even low-paid ones), collecting all available public allowances (including a strategy to obtain them), and seeking other support from all available sources (such as NGOs) (Klaus 2017: 92).

Since the governmental system failed to deal adequately with the arrival of immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees, most of the burden of helping these groups has been largely assumed by the volunteers sector. Organisations such as NGOs and the Catholic Caritas help migrants find information about their legal status and initiate the process of integration. In such organisations, the voice of direct beneficiaries, i.e. migrants and refugees, is usually taken into account; nevertheless, strategic decisions on the type and direction of aid and support for migrants are taken by people who are not migrants or refugees themselves. This tension has been reflected in some research as a distinction between beneficiary and conscience constituents (McCarthy, Zald 1976). The first category (“beneficiary constituents”) refers to persons acting in their own interest and directly benefiting from the results of their activities; their activity affects their well-being. The second category (“conscience constituents”) refers to people who do not stand to benefit from the movement’s successes directly, but nonetheless contribute resources to a social movement out of a feeling of social and/or moral obligation, solidarity, personal convictions, values and the like. The fact that their engagement in a cause is not tied to their own well-being results in that they are not always reliable source of resources, as they may decide to withdraw their support any time (Klandermans et al. 2015: 155–156).

The empirical studies conducted by Wendy Pojmann, who analysed the relationship between home-state organisations in Italy and the migrants who these organisations want to offer assistance (the “conscience constituents” and “beneficiary constituents” respectively), clearly show the paternalistic approach of institutions toward migrants. The latter are often perceived as those from impoverished and culturally underdeveloped countries. This bias is further strengthened in relation to migrant women. According to Pojmann, such an approach toward migrants and refugees has contributed to the formation of increasing numbers of self-organised immigrant groups in Italy (Pojmann 2006). “Even when attempting to help

immigrants, Italian-run immigrant organisations have often constructed an image of ‘immigrants as political minors’ or a gendered ‘image of migrant women, not as subjects of rights, but as fragile and culturally disempowered individuals in need of differential help’; Però claims (2002: 96, 142; after Pojmann 2006: 27).

According to Floris Vermeulen and Marlou Schrover (2005), the existence of formal migrant organisations is one of the factors that show how advanced the process of migrant self-organisation is. The types of organisations, in turn, provide information on how immigrant communities organise themselves and what needs they respond to. The migrants’ organising process itself also requires analysis. In the case of newly arrived foreigners, the most popular are informal groups and self-help groups. Along with the extended period of residence in the host country the organisations gradually formalise, reaching a greater maturity in the process of creating a coherent representation of the group in the wider social environment (Łady, Böttger 2016; Vermeulen, Schrover 2005).

Another important issue when studying migrants’ activities and self-organisations is gender. Migrants are often treated as a uniform group and therefore gender-based problems tend to be ignored or minimised by official migration policies or even by the very organisations providing assistance to migrants. However, extensive research in gender and migration proves that immigrants are not gender-neutral and likewise migration is a gendered process where people migrate from and enter into “gendered and stratified societies” (Piper 2008: 1). The perception of migration processes as gendered has gradually emerged and has been followed by a number of studies on the matter (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, 1999, 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo, Avila 1997; Kofman et al. 2000; Kraler et al. 2011; Morokvasic 2007; Muszel 2013; Parrenas 2009; Pessar, Mahler 2003; Piper 2008; Timmerman et al. 2018; White 2011). The general conclusion of these studies is that gender should be treated as a central theme of migration studies for an obvious reason – the likelihood of women and men experiencing migration differently (Pessar, Mahler 2003). As Wendy Pojmann notices, the status of migrant woman overshadows the significance of other identities.

The migrant woman who is differentiated in terms of nationality or ethnic identity often tends to be judged on how closely she resembles the ideal of the Italian or western European woman. When other differences, such as religion or race, have been noted in the immigrant population, especially but not exclusively in the media, these tend to overshadow gender or to explain it in simplified terms. The male migrant can stand alone, but the female migrant is treated in terms of her relationships to men and children (Pojmann 2006: 38).

Regardless of the many identities that one possesses, in a migratory environment a sense of identity as a migrant or a refugee woman may become a guiding

identity and even obscure other forms of identity; as such, it can lead to the development of activist strategies that are primarily based on foreignness (Gabbaccia, Iacovetta 2002).

## Methodology

This article is of analytical and empirical nature. Besides the analysis of existing research, a major element of my research methodology which became the empirical basis for this article, was oral history. Seven biographical interviews were conducted in Gdańsk in April–July 2020 with two leaders (Khedi Alieva and Dorota Jaworska) and five most actively involved female activists of the Wandering Woman Foundation. However, the dominant voice in the analysis is given to Khedi Alieva and Dorota Jaworska, due to their extensive knowledge relevant to the scope of this article. The interviewees varied in terms of nationality, the length of their stay in Poland, their professional status and places of origin. Structured and semi-structured interviews were conducted; all interviewees were asked the same or similar questions.

Most of my interviewing was done in Polish. One interview was conducted in Russian with some interjections in Polish, as it was the only language that both I and my interlocutor knew at a level that allows us to communicate fairly freely. All interviews were recorded. An important part of the research was also participant observation. I observed the Wandering Women's activities directly in order to achieve a more complete image of the functioning of the foundation and the relations between individuals involved in the organisation. As in the case of the participant observation, the interviews were conducted mostly in the classroom in the school where – during the pandemic lockdown in the spring 2020 in Poland – Wandering Women voluntarily sewed protective masks and protective suits for hospitals, social welfare homes and others institutions and individuals in need.

## The Wandering Women Foundation

The statute of the Wandering Women Foundation states that the goal of the organisation is to help, support and improve the living conditions of migrant women and their families and to combat discrimination against migrant women and refugees (related to gender, ethnic and national origin, religion, or skin colour) and the systemic lack or limited access to various areas of social, economic and cultural life in Poland. The activities of the foundation also focus on supporting dialogue and cultural exchange between migrant women and the Polish



community. Although the foundation has formally existed since 16 October 2018, for four preceding years it effectively focused the activities of an informal group of migrant women and members of the local community of Gdańsk in terms of the education and integration of immigrants and refugees. The most visible manifestation of these activities was the Intercultural House in Gdańsk, a grassroots self-help and integration initiative of refugees that worked in 2016–2018. Since 2018, the Wandering Women have managed to organise numerous meetings and training sessions for various social and professional groups: the youth, teachers, social workers, church communities and senior citizens. There have been many initiatives, integration projects, culinary and other cultural meetings – all organised with their own resources and voluntary work, small municipal grants and the support of social organisations and municipal institutions. The Wandering Women Foundation has dealt with a full range of issues connected to the situation of women, migrants and refugees. As one of their founders says:

We came with my children from Chechnya to Poland 6 years ago as refugees. I've been fighting for the last 10 years in my country of origin to find my husband who got lost during the war. The discovery of the truth about his death became the cause of my escape from the country. I saved our lives, but in Europe we felt treated like 'others' because of fears about refugees and Muslims. I decided that I am the same human being as everyone and I want them to accept me as I am. I started by showing our culture and tradition (Khedi Alieva).<sup>2</sup>

The conviction that women are generally much more likely than men to be victims of violence, discrimination and exploitation is a common belief of all women engaged in the Foundation. This is usually the result of female refugees and asylum seekers' personal experiences, which in most cases have been reinforced by their experience of the war. At the same time, it is also a source of motivation to help migrants and refugee women in particular. Alieva continues:

When I had gained experience, I established an organisation – the Wandering Women Foundation for the protection of migrant and refugee women's rights against various types of violence and discrimination. I want to give migrant women knowledge and faith that they are protected by the law and help them reach institutions that protect women's rights. We conduct legal education, we sew, cook and dance together with Polish women. A decent life is a decent job and economic independence. I want to support female entrepreneurship.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Khedi Alieva about herself and the Wandering Women Foundation at the European Civic Forum, <https://www.facebook.com/EuropeanCivicForum/posts/we-came-with-my-children-from-chechnya-to-poland-6-years-ago-as-refugees-ive-bee/2011506368943816/> (dostęp: 27.09.2020).

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem.

Recalling her own experience, Khedi Alieva explains how the stereotypical perception of refugees and their needs shapes the aid programmes in Poland and, as a result, how it leads to the neglect of the multidimensional potential that refugees can offer.

We have experienced many times that as refugees we were positioned as weak and helpless people, often burdensome, and our needs were mostly defined by people and institutions from outside. The consequence of that are imposed aid programmes, which lead to the potential of refugees being wasted, and the role of them as passive recipients being assigned to them. After several years of stay in Poland I knew well the position and needs of asylum seekers and refugees (Alieva, Jaworska 2018: 446).

Additionally, apart from the criticism of this stereotypical and paternalistic approach of the “conscious constituents” toward migrants (McCarthy, Zald 1977), Alieva and Jaworska contest the whole self-preoccupied supporting system: “If there is a sudden shortage of refugees, then a substantial part of officials could just deal with themselves without even noticing for what purpose they were employed” (Ząbek, Łodziński 2008: 105). They go even further and claim that this approach concerns also non-governmental organisations of a humanitarian character, “which in some degree compensate for the shortcomings of the system, have become its essential component and they are keen to maintain the status quo, which guarantees jobs to humanitarians” (Alieva, Jaworska 2018: 444).

Although institutions and organisations seek migrants and refugees’ participation, their programmes and policies are usually created with little or even no contribution of those to whom they are addressed. The voices and needs of refugees and migrants appear to be marginalised; there seems to be no proper forum in which refugees and asylum seekers in Poland could find their representation (Alieva, Jaworska 2018), could express their needs and act in their own interests in a way they perceive it as appropriate, needed and functional. The Wandering Women Foundation aims to create and maintain such a forum for migrants and refugees. As an organisation created by immigrants for immigrants, it diagnoses the needs of the environment to which the activities of Wandering Women are directed in a more conscious manner; the leaders of the foundation are more accurate in recognising problems, if only by taking into account their own similar experiences. As it was said about the leader of the Foundation, who is a refugee herself: “She knows the needs of these people really, not that it seems to her, she knows what these girls need” (Dorota Jaworska).

As a “beneficiary constituent”, Khedi Alieva seems to know the needs of the women to whom she addresses the foundation’s activities, but also knows how to draw their attention and encourage the involvement of both migrant women

and women from the local community. The inspiration for the first workshop was the tailor shop of Khedi's sister, Amina, which she ran while still living in Chechnia. The place was a meeting point for women who not only ordered tailor-made clothes but also had the opportunity to talk about their lives and share their experiences. Every woman came there with her own story, just as every woman now comes to the foundation. This is how Khedi describes the foundation's activities:

Here, I think, every woman has her own story, too. And since I am from a country where you cannot feel safe, I thought: "We are going to make such posts in which we could sew, dance (...), but this is such an excuse to help such women who experience violence. So that they would come to us. Everywhere. In Warsaw and in Gdańsk. We help when women are in refugee centres, we cooperate with the Ombudsman and cooperate with various organisations which deal with women's rights. And most importantly, I want them to contact us. These girls are still a little afraid to go to the Women's Rights Centre."<sup>4</sup>

As Khedi observed, migrant women – especially those with unstable legal situation – often treat aid institutions, which are managed and run by representatives of the host community, with fear and suspicion. Additionally, they are afraid they will not be treated there with complete understanding. Sometimes, from their perspective, there is even no point in explaining certain things because, anyway, those who have not experienced certain things (e.g. war) will not understand what it is like. In this situation, Khedi Alieva wins the trust of migrant women. After all, she has also experienced a lot of trauma – like the most of the women she works with – that has brought her to an unprivileged position of a refugee in Poland. In addition, she is often perceived stereotypically because of her national background, her religion or because of her hijab.

This example shows perfectly well not only why migrant self-organisations can diagnose and answer current problems of migrants better than others, but it also suggests that these organisations have also a chance to help people who, for various reasons, would not ask for assistance elsewhere. Khedi seems to understand their concerns and fears very well. Recalling her own story, she tries to encourage (or provoke) women to ask for help and, first of all, to hope that their situation will improve and, secondly, to take active steps towards that aim: "If you bring together a small group of women, I give them my example and I always say that there is hope. If I could, it would mean that others might as well. I am so old and I want the young would think that: 'If she could, then so could I'".

Women who are active in the Wandering Women Foundation can feel empowered because, even if their activity does not involve paid work, they still feel

<sup>4</sup> Women's Rights Centre is a foundation which works for equal status of women and men in public and private life, <https://cpk.org.pl/> (accessed: 27.09.2020).

needed, and realise that they do something important and necessary and eventually that their lives make sense again. They do not feel “migrant women only” or “refugees only” anymore, but have a chance to use their personal skills and contribute to the change of both their individual living space and conditions and the wider social reality in which they live, such as the stereotypical perception of migrants and refugees. Empowerment is understood here also as a kind of transformation of one’s social status into a position that allows to define and enforce her rights. In this way “these women not only gain greater opportunities to decide about their own lives, but also gain a position and voice in the community” (Kowalska, Hajdarowicz 2017: 218).

The Wandering Women are convinced that actions supporting the integration of migrants and refugees are very important for the aforementioned process of empowerment. The foundation tries to facilitate the integration of immigrant and refugee women in Gdańsk and the neighbouring area – and, more recently, trying to extend its scope to the whole of Poland. The Intercultural House, the initiative of Khedi Alieva that was carried out in Gdańsk until 2018, had similar objectives. The type of integration that is promoted by the Wandering Women has a bidirectional character: it assumes that integration will be more effective and satisfying if it goes hand in hand with education from both sides, migrants and host community members alike learning about each another’s cultures and the fight against harmful stereotypes.

In Gdańsk, the Immigrant Integration Model has proven to be particularly important for this kind of integration. It was established in May 2015 in order to assess the available resources and capabilities to support the immigrants in Gdańsk, and to identify their key needs and problems. It concentrated efforts in various areas of policy making and social services, including education, healthcare, social security, public security, labour market, housing, culture, and sports. Assistance that has been offered to immigrants under the Immigrant Integration Model has helped them to gain some courage, as well as to feel valued and empowered. It has also allowed them to initiate and develop social networks and contacts, and thus it seems to have paid off with further joint initiatives. As Dorota Jaworska noticed:

This is an integration process. They know that they cannot go back to their countries now, they must be here anyway, so they have chosen the path of integration. I think that this is Gdańsk, and this is the specific character of the city, and that they have passed this training in the Immigrant Integration Model. They have tasted it and have built social networks and the whole process of building this model of integration. After all, it has been a year of meetings in various groups, and they have also been invited to do so, with participant rights. So it cannot be any different, all the projects we come up with we always do this together, I mean women with migration experiences and women from the Polish community. We sew, dance, learn and do various things together. Our goal is to build bonds. And this is very important.

The success of these integration and educational efforts can be seen, for example, in how the perception of refugees of Teresa (a Polish woman) has changed since she met the Wandering Women and became involved in their activities:

Chechens... we have been told that they are bandits, that they are simply terrible. That is not true at all. (...) I have learnt about the lives of these people, about their religion, about the principles in their families. I have found out that we can act together, we can be of different nationalities, we can have different beliefs, we can have different religions, everyone has different experiences, and we can work together to build, not to destroy, to be together (Teresa).

The openness and diverse efforts made by migrant women and refugees in the host country to make their lives more bearable, do not mean for them an end of discrimination and persecution, which they suffer also in a place which, by definition, should guarantee them safety (Kowalska, Hajdarowicz 2017). The common experience of many forced migrants and refugee women – including the Wandering Women – who have “wandered” to Poland is discrimination not only on the basis of their ethnic origin or religion, but also complicated and often impossible procedures related to the legalisation of their stay. This, in turn, leads to the exclusion or hindrance even in the most basic areas of life, such as access to healthcare, education or the possibility of legal work.

In view of the difficulties expressed above, another bond that allows women as diverse as the Women Wandering to work together is a sense of community with other migrants, with women who have problems with adaptation, with documents, with work or with language. They are connected by a desire to help those who are doing less well, to share their knowledge, skills, experiences, and to build a community that is conscious and committed to their well-being. As Dorota Jaworska pointed out:

They are migrants, that is what unites them. They are strangers here, and that creates bonds between them. They are also people who want to find themselves, so knowledge about Poland is important for them, but it has to be presented from their perspective. They share this knowledge.

Another element that brings women together in the Wandering Women Foundation are their similar experiences and beliefs regarding motherhood and the gender of women. This translates, to a large extent, into the nature of the foundation's activities, which consist primarily in assistance, care and educational activities, and are therefore in line with their common image of the mother-care giver and the femininity in general.

This strong association of femininity with a desire to help and with maternal care was expressed by one of the interviewees, a Ukrainian migrant, a mother of eight children:

The woman understands what she should do. As a mother. She should take care of everyone, give something to someone, help someone. This is the role of women. (...) Just as a mother takes care of everyone, so does all femininity. There is this mother in all of us, who should take care of everything, help everyone. That is how I understand it (Marianna).

The women who are engaged in the organisation of Wandering Women also share some observations and beliefs about the general attitude of women, which predisposes them to cooperation rather than competition. In their opinion, women are often more responsible than men because of their family roles; they seem mentally stronger, more “social” and less conflicting than men and they adapt more easily. As Khedi Alieva said:

Women can get along, can understand, can sympathise. Women think about the future, every woman thinks about her children and what will happen next. And I think that any women would like to argue about any religion or nationality.

With all the above in mind, it seems that the Wandering Women Foundation places significant focus on integration but also seeks to retain and even reinforce what they perceive to be the positive characteristics of their group’s and individual identity.

## Conclusions

By addressing the topic of the self-organisation of migrants and privileging the voices of female migrants and refugees, this paper offers a contribution to the growing body of research on social activities and self-organisation of migrants and refugees. As Wendy Pojmann noticed (2006), migrant self-organisations are a direct reaction to what is often insufficient response to the needs of migrants by receiving country institutions and social structures.

Through their activities in self-organisation, migrants and refugees struggle for a place in the new society, for a mutual respect and also for the recognition of their cultural and social potential as a group and as individuals, which will not be limited solely to their refugee status. Khedi Alieva expressed her point of view in this way:

It turned out that the escape from the country of origin was an end to one battle, but also the onset of the next one – the struggle for place in the new society. All the

experiences contributed to our development as a group and as individual people. (...) We want to build together the culture of recognition and mutual respect. I was not born a “woman-refugee” and I do not want to be one till the end of my life (Alieva, Jaworska 2018: 454).

It seems that the migrant or refugee identity often overshadows other identities, such as those based on, for example, religion, ethnicity, class or other factors, which further mark and scar their status in the host country. In this context, the status of a migrant woman or a refugee woman is even more fraught with harmful stereotypes and stigmatisation. Therefore, migrants’ efforts to organise and represent themselves do not seem surprising at all (Pojmann 2006).

Additionally, the process of self-organisation builds the social capital of migrants and can thus play a key role in the process of their integration into the host society. It supports the democratic system by bringing together a group, developing its competences to cooperate externally and internally as well as by creating the possibility of representing the group and its interests (Putnam 1995). Moreover, it may be mentioned that migrant organisations can be also an alternative form of political and social participation when other forms of involvement (e.g. electoral rights, possibility to form political parties) are not available (Lesińska 2013).

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