

**GENDER ON THE MOVE:  
GENDER AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS AMONG CHECHENS IN THE  
CZECH REFUGEE CAMP**

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

“Gender on the Move” is a fieldwork-based research project born out of my long-term interest in forced migration and its gendered character as well as out of my work experience in the Czech refugee camp. In carrying out this project, I brought together a larger conceptual framework based on the review of gender sensitive forced migration studies and more general theoretical texts about gender and processes of receiving and representing refugees in today’s societies. I focus on Chechen asylum seekers who are currently the most common group of the refugees coming to the Czech Republic. I analyze the dynamics of transformations of their gender relations within the family caused by migration and their life in the camp. The main finding of the research is that the Chechens’ experience of forced migration and the life in the refugee camp are substantially gendered. They produce different constraints and opportunities for men and women. In the perception of the Chechen refugees I worked with, traditional patriarchal norms which define women’s and men’s position in the family are not an immutable entities and can be negotiated in new conditions of exile. On the other hand, refugees are disassociated from the controlling mechanisms which helped to sustain these norms in Chechnya. Moreover, they are separated from the support of extended family networks. This situation often places refugee women in the camp in a position in which they are vulnerable to violence and abuse by their husbands who vent their frustration and inability to adjust in this way.

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## INTRODUCTION

Migration in general, and forced migration in particular, are amongst the most significant expressions of global connections and spatio-temporal transformations in today's world (e.g. Castles, 2003). According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the global refugee population – including internally displaced persons who have been forced to flee their homes, but who have not crossed an international border – grew from 14.7 million in 1990 to 19.8 million in 2002 (UNHCR, 2003). More than 60,000 asylum claims have been made by refugees coming to the Czech Republic in the same period of time (MVČR, 2003a). The Czech Republic used to be a country that “sent” refugees to other states up to the end of the 1980s, but after the fall of the communist regime and joining the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees in 1991, it became rather a refugee-receiving country. Out of 60 thousands asylum seekers, only about 2,000 have been granted refugee status and have been allowed to stay in the country up to 2002 (MVČR, 2003a).

The primary aim of the research presented in this thesis is to go beyond these general statements by presenting an account of how forced migration can be lived at the level of everyday life. To do so, I conducted fieldwork in one refugee camp situated in the Czech Republic and I focused on Chechen asylum seekers who are recently the most common refugees coming to the Czech Republic. Although it may vary according to the particular political, social and historical context, I argue that one of the keys to grasp the refugee experience is to acknowledge that forced migration leads to reconsidering of refugees' conceptions of self and necessitates an adjustment in their relationships with the family members (those who accompany them as well as those who stayed behind). Moreover, it forces migrants to renegotiate previous certainties about their gender relations, positions in the family and society, and it often leads to new arrangements between the genders (e.g. Al-Ali,

2002; Buijs, 1993b; Indra, 1999a; Kibria, 1990; Pessar, 1999). The idea of reconsideration and adjustment of gender relations inspired me to focus the research on how gender and family relations are challenged among Chechen refugees in the environment of the refugee camp. I attempt to reconstruct the context in which the family and inter-group relations, based upon highly limited opportunities and choices, exist and in which their self-identity is negotiated. For this reason, the actors' point of view is critical for my study as is the variety of situations that they encounter in their everyday "camp life".

I react on and attempt to overcome the following shortcomings that have been present in migration studies including forced migration studies. First, when individual migrants have been taken into account in migration studies, they have usually been conceived as genderless or male (Pessar, 1999; Weinberg, 1992). Second, when gender has been brought to the foreground in forced migration studies, it has often been equated only with women. Doreen Indra (1999c) argues that such research does not bring in-depth knowledge of both female and male forced migrants and therefore, it does not capture their experience in its complexity. Moreover, there is a danger that important differences among women, such as in their social class or ethnicity will be neglected by this approach (Indra, 1999c). Therefore, in my research, the experiences of both refugee men and women are examined and put in relations with each other.

Third, when families and households have been conceptualized as actors in the migration process, they have usually been inadequately perceived as units based solely on principles of reciprocity and consensus (Pessar, 1999). Feminist scholarship has inspired rethinking of these concepts since the 1970s (Indra, 1996; Weinberg, 1992). It has been recognized that relations of power which are organized along gender and generational lines produce and sustain family hierarchies and therefore affect decision-making and coping strategies in the migration process (Indra, 1999b; Pessar, 1999). Fourth, migration researchers

have often failed to recognize that individuals' access to social networks, which may precipitate and facilitate migration and later integration into the host country, is significantly informed by gender and kinship norms (Pessar, 1999; Weinberg, 1992). Thus, in my study, the family is conceptualized as a field of constant renegotiations that are influenced and shaped by external forces among which the ability to establish social networks in a host country plays a significant role.

Fifth, "gender sensitive" migration studies have been predominantly focused on migrants already settled in a host country (e.g. Abdulrahim, 1993; Al-Ali, 2002; Kibria, 1990; Matsuoka & Sorenson, 1999; McSpadden, 1999; Pessar, 1994; Shahidian, 1999; Summerfield, 1993). The experience of asylum seekers, whose legal status has not yet been determined, and specific effects of the refugee camp environment on their life have been overlooked. On the other hand, studies that examine the situation of refugees in the camps and conceptualize these power institutions in a wider sociopolitical context (e.g. Diken & Laustsen, 2003; Malkki, 1996, 2002; Rajaram & Grundy-Warr, 2004) do not pay attention to the gendered character of the power relations which operate in and through the refugee camp. Therefore, I focus on the situation of asylum seekers, who are placed in the refugee camp and wait for their asylum claim to be decided, with the aim to describe the gendered character of their "camp life" experience.

And finally, forced migration studies so far have been predominantly focused on migration to Western European countries and North America, as if these were the only refugee destinations. The Czech Republic and also other countries in Central Eastern Europe have been receiving growing numbers of refugees since the beginning of the 1990s (ECRE, 2002). However, this region remains under-researched in forced migration studies. Accordingly, my research attempts to situate the Czech Republic as a refugee-receiving country and depict its specificity in this context.

This thesis is based on fieldwork carried out in the refugee camp Zastávka u Brna. I had the chance to live in the camp for two weeks continuously. In the time of my presence in the camp, there were about thirty-five Chechens in the camp. I conducted participant observation and in-depth interviews with eight Chechen asylum seekers (five women and three men) and I participated in many more informal discussions with them. All the interviews as well as daily communication were held in Russian in which all of my adult informants were fluent. I also interviewed a camp psychologist, an Armenian man, who has been working there for four years and who had come to the Czech Republic as a refugee and was granted refugee status about ten years ago.

First, I will outline a theoretical framework of the research by defining the concepts of gender, family and household, home and a patriarchal bargain. Next, the study will be placed into the context of existing gender sensitive migration studies. Proceeding from there, I will discuss Malkki's and Agamben's critical view on current representations and "management" of the refugees. I will also point out the usefulness of Foucault's theory of power in understanding the mechanisms operating in and through the institution of the refugee camp. Further, I will also emphasize the gendered character of these mechanisms. In the second chapter, I will provide a context for the further analysis by describing the Czech reception system, the refugee camp where I conducted my fieldwork by presenting the situation in Chechnya as my informants explained it to me focusing on how they experienced and interpreted the war. In the third chapter I reflect on my position as a researcher in the refugee camp, I describe how I developed the relationships with the informants and discuss the ambiguity of the feminist project of making the researcher-researched relationship more equal and less exploitative. The fourth chapter is devoted to the main analysis of my empirical material. I will describe Chechens' gender relations "at home" as they were presented to me by me informants through references to Chechen traditions and family norms. I will examine

how these norms are interpreted from the position of my informants. Next, I will examine the refugees' notions of femininity and masculinity. I will describe to what extent were they influenced by the experiences of war in Chechnya. Finally, I will depict how the notions of masculinity and femininity were further affected by the life in the camp and how gender relations were challenged in the refugee families.

## **1. MIGRATION AS A CHALLENGE TO GENDER AND FAMILY RELATIONS**

It has become almost a convention to open studies dealing with gendered aspects of migration by stating that up to now, women and gender have been largely overlooked by migration researchers. I want to start on a more optimistic note; there has been a considerable increase in research on the situation of refugee women over the last decade. More recently, gender has become fully integrated (representing not only as a synonym for women) into forced migration studies by many researchers (e.g. Al-Ali, 2002; Boyd & Grieco, 2003; Castles, 2003; Chamberlain, 1997; Pessar, 1999). Drawing mainly on this literature, I will introduce the main concepts of my research in the three following subchapters. First, the use of the terms gender, family and home will be examined in the context of migration. Next, I will review how different migration studies depict the transformations and negotiations faced by migrants' gender roles and family relationships. Further, I will outline the critique of the use of the concept of the refugee and the refugee camp in the process of dehistoricizing and depoliticizing of refugees. Finally, I will explain the importance of acknowledging genderness of the refugees' experience in the refugee camp.

### **1.1. GENDER, FAMILY, AND HOME IN MIGRATION STUDIES**

Although gender has recently appeared in the titles of many migration studies, only few of these studies give an in-depth definition of the concept. Indra (Indra, 1996, 1999c) is one of the scholars who offer more an elaborate conception of gender in migration studies. She calls for an engendering of knowledge in forced migration studies in which gender would not be considered only as one topic or topical frame among others (Indra, 1999c, p. 1) but would be incorporated as

a key relational dimension of human activity and thought – activity and thought informed by cultural and individual notions of men and women – having consequences for their social or cultural positioning and the ways in which they experience and live their lives. (Indra, 1999c, p. 2)

Although I consider this definition to be useful, I think that due to its general character, it does not say much about the effects of gender in social and institutional relationships. Therefore, I will also use Scott's (1986) conception of gender which I find to be applicable not only as "a useful category of historical analysis," but also (among others) as a useful category for the study of forced migration.

Scott's definition of gender consists of two parts. It is first, "a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes," and second, "a primary way of signifying relationships of power" (p. 1067). Referring to the first part of the definition, according to Scott, gender involves four interrelated elements: culturally available symbols, normative concepts that offer interpretations of these symbols (usually expressed in religious, legal, scientific or political doctrines), a notion of politics, social institutions and organizations, and finally, the fourth element is a subjective identity (pp. 1067-1068). As regards the second part of the definition, she argues that although gender is not the only field within which, or by means of which, power is articulated, it seems to be a persistent way of facilitating the signification of power in Judeo-Christian as well as in Islamic tradition (p. 1069).

I think that this complex and, at the same time, precise definition is suitable also for the study of gendered character of forced migration. Especially the power dimension of the Scott's notion of gender can help to understand the dynamics of various transformations of gender relations during the process of forced migration. The way relationships of power are signified can change significantly due to the experiences of migration and life in exile. Moreover, the power dimensions of the different environments in which migrants find

themselves in exile are also crucial in order to grasp their experiences. Understanding gender as consisting of *culturally available symbols*, which obviously vary in different cultural contexts, may help to avoid ethnocentrism in the study of non-European migrants.

To grasp how gender is lived at the level of everyday life, the conceptualization of gender as an ongoing interactional accomplishment as introduced by Fenstermaker, West, and Zimmerman can be applied as a useful framework. They argue that gender is “accomplished” in interactions with others and “carried out in the virtual or real presence of others who are presumed to be oriented to its production” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 126). Individuals as well as institutions are constantly held “gender accountable” in the interactions and daily practices (Fenstermaker, West, & Zimmerman, 2002). It means that they are always managing situated conduct in relation to normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for a particular sex category (Fenstermaker et al., 2002, p. 29). Furthermore, this way of seeing gender as an interactional accomplishment highlights the point that a heterosexual context is not necessary for “doing gender,” and same-sex contexts also provide arenas for gender accomplishments (Fenstermaker et al., 2002, p. 37). Nonetheless, the aspect of power should not be overlooked in understanding gender as an accomplishment. For example, forced migrants who have an uncertain legal status in a host country and who live in the refugee camp will probably have very restricted and structured space for gender accomplishment.

Since many of the new circumstances induced by migration are lived most intensely within the context of the family and household, the study of family relations organized along gender lines offers important sites for understanding how migrants come to terms with their new situations (Matsuoka & Sorenson, 1999). In this research, I conceptualize family and household as an open system which is in constant interaction with and under constant influence of external social forces, it is a dynamic structure that is always “in progress”.

As has already been mentioned above, under the impact of feminist analyses, the image of the family and household as a site of unity, consensus, harmonious interests and strategies has been reconsidered in migration studies (Indra, 1999c; Pessar, 1999). It has provided a useful corrective to a wide range of oversimplifications and a better way to understand the complexities and the gendered character of migrants' experiences. However, Matsuoka and Sorenson warn that it should not prevent us from perceiving the family and household also as an important sources of support and stability for migrants.

[i]n abandoning consensus for conflicting models of the household, there is a danger of substituting one stereotype for another and of overlooking the greater complexity and contradictions that exist in everyday family life. In the conflict model of the household, family relationships sometimes seem to resemble zones of hostility, dominance, and power relations, while mutual support and companionship disappear. (Matsuoka & Sorenson, 1999, pp. 237-238)

While I agree with this point, it should also be acknowledged that households and families are composed of individuals whose ability to benefit from such mutual support is strongly influenced by the structure and hierarchy of gendered relationships.

The third concept to be elaborated and clarified in this subchapter is the notion of home. In her study about Croatian diasporic communities in Sweden, Povrzanovič Frykman (2002) defines home as a complex of meanings which pertain to “material, territorial aspects of belonging, as well as different identity layers of customs, traditions, religiosity, local communities, family links and personal histories” (p. 132). Bhattacharjee (1997) states that while in Western context, “home” is commonly understood in terms of household, for people whose consciousness is shaped by migration, it represents rather multiple concepts (p. 308). It can also stand for an ethnic community distinct from other communities or more generally, for the country and the nation of origin (pp. 113-114).

Reflecting on the gendered character of home, Giles (1999) argues that gender relations in migrant households are influenced by traditional ideologies and by particular “remembering” of home (p. 85). Moreover, in both the spaces of flight and refuge, the definitions that prescribe women’s identity are based on how women have been historically defined in their homes and households. Giles describes that during the flight and the process of resettlement, previously complex definitions of femininity may become simplified and essentialized in the new definitions of women’s position in exile (Giles, 1999, p. 84). Also Bhattacharjee emphasizes the gendered character of home. By giving the example of immigrant women who became victims of domestic violence, she illustrates that women can be made invisible and thus vulnerable at different levels of home at the same time; she argues that, for example, they may be silenced in their household, and also rejected by their ethnic group or community which is dismissive towards the occurrence of violence (Bhattacharjee, 1997, p. 322).

To capture the dynamics of how gender and family relations are challenged within refugee families, I use Kandiyoti’s notion of “patriarchal bargain” in the family and household because both concepts highlight power dimensions as well as women’s and men’s agency in this process. This approach is also based on the idea of family and household as units of individuals with various and not always congruent interests. Kandiyoti (1988) defines the patriarchal bargain as processes in which women strategize within a set of concrete constraints; it takes place in any given society and may have various displays according to class, caste, and ethnicity (p. 275). She argues that these bargains “exert a powerful influence on the shaping of women’s gendered subjectivity and determine the nature of gender ideology in different contexts” (p. 275). Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that the survival of classic patriarchy is based on specific material conditions. Changes in these conditions can seriously weaken the patriarchal order (Kandiyoti, 1999, p. 229).

In my view, the concept of patriarchal bargain can be applied to understand how gender relations in the family are being re-negotiated in the process of forced migration. It connects the concepts presented in this subchapter into a meaningful analytical framework: *gender* is negotiated within the *family* or *household* in relation to gendered norms which regulated refugees' lives at *home* as well as in relation to new and reconstructed norms which rule their lives in exile. However, I argue that there is no reason to focus solely on how women's subjectivity and identity is being challenged in patriarchal bargains, though their position is often less advantageous. Also men are influenced in various ways and may play different roles in these bargains.

## **1.2. TRANSFORMATIONS OF GENDER ROLES AND FAMILY RELATIONS IN THE PROCESS OF MIGRATION**

By placing the concepts of gender, family, household and home in the context of migration studies, I have intended to prepare a theoretical ground for exploring how gender roles and family relations are challenged in the process of migration, forced migration in particular. It has been shown by many migration studies that the experience of migration affects gender relationships in migrant families (e.g. Abdulrahim, 1993; Al-Ali, 2002; Bhattacharjee, 1997; Buijs, 1993a; Franz, 2003; Indra, 1999a; Kibria, 1990; Pessar, 1994, 1999). These studies have been conducted in various countries and among different social and national groups of migrants. In my view, the experience of forced migration is always contextual and it is impossible to explain it without references to its particular historical and sociopolitical circumstances both in a "sending" and "receiving" country. In this chapter, I will review various gender-sensitive migration studies in order to make explicit some of the findings and commonalities that informed my research and helped me to develop my own interpretive framework.

When focusing on forced migration, the disruption of previous social status of family members, dislocation of power hierarchies within the family, geographical dispersal of supportive and controlling networks of kin and friends, loss of previously established economic resources, shifts in work patterns, differential access to new resources for male and female family members, exposure to strangers with different lifestyles, necessity to accommodate to new residence patterns and material conditions of life, and legal prohibitions against formerly accepted practices can be mentioned among the most important factors of change<sup>1</sup> (Colson, 1999, p. 25; Matsuoka & Sorenson, 1999, p. 238).

Some authors claim that refugee women appear to show greater resilience and adaptability than men because they have the responsibility for maintaining household routines, which provide them with an occupation during the stressful period of uncertainty in exile (Buijs, 1993; Franz, 2003). On the other hand, a study of Palestinian refugees in Germany reveals that the emphasis on ethnic or group identities, their reification and essentialization, which is used as a defense reaction to the process of assimilation, may result in labeling refugee women as the bearers of culture within their communities and kinship groups. It becomes their duty to determine and define exclusive boundaries of the community in relation to the host society (Abdulrahim, 1993, pp. 67-69). Anthias and Yuval-Davis argue that the ethnic culture is usually organized around rules regulating sexuality, marriage and hierarchy within the family. “True” member of the community is expected to perform his or her roles properly according to the rules (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992, p. 113). They point out that specific expectations addressed to women about honor, purity, or mothering of future patriots can serve as the markers of the ethnic community and as a kind of depository for its distinct identity (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992, pp. 113-114). While women are constructed as symbols for ethnized and racialized collectivities, men are often perceived as their

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<sup>1</sup> Some of these characteristics pertain also to migration in general.

representatives and agents. Such situation may legitimate existing gender oppression and suppress intra-group differences within the community (Lutz, Phoenix, & Yuval-Davis, 1995, p. 10). Kandiyoti aptly summarizes this process:

[T]he regulation of gender is central to the articulation of cultural identity and difference. The identification of women as privileged bearers of corporate identities and boundary markers of their communities has had a deleterious effect on their emergence as full-fledged citizens of modern nation-states. (Kandiyoti, 1998, p. 11)

Matsuoka and Sorenson (1999) show that the absence of additional kin from the extended family among Eritrean refugees in Canada, results in the situation when many couples found themselves the sole supporters and supervisors of their children and household. While in Eritrea a broader group of people would normally share such duties, provide assistance with other material tasks and would also have acted to resolve marital discord when necessary, exiled couples in Canada found themselves burdened with many new and unexpected responsibilities. The authors aptly call this situation “the greater intimacy-in-isolation” (Matsuoka & Sorenson, 1999, p. 225).

Migrant men are often described as being confronted with a variety of new, gendered demands which need to be accomplished in order to survive and to support their families. It is often mentioned in migration studies that the loss of the breadwinner role deteriorates men’s status within the family and community (Al-Ali, 2002; Kibria, 1990; Matsuoka & Sorenson, 1999; McSpadden, 1999). In contrast to what could be sometimes seen as expanded opportunities for women, forced migration often reduces men's space. Matsuoka and Sorenson (1999) illustrate that some Eritrean men in Canada did not accept the idea of modified masculinity in exile and attempted to strengthen traditional forms of hierarchy and dominance within the family which sometimes erupted into violence against women and children in the family (p. 235). On the other hand, there were also men who managed to adjust

and “were quite proud of their newly acquired domestic abilities and promoted more equitable relationships as desirable” (p. 229).

Matsuoka & Sorenson (1999) conclude that the maintenance or amplification of some of patriarchal patterns is only one of the possible outcomes of the social forces and ideological operations involved in the process of forced migration. Thus, the analysis of refugee families and households should not pathologize them, because they are as varied as any other population. Apart from many instances of using force and oppression, there is also cooperation, respect and mutual support to be found in these families (p. 238).

In overview, I attempted to present that migration studies sustain the claim that forced migration challenges traditional patriarchal arrangements in the worlds of migrant families and households. Simultaneously, I showed that these studies conclude that for many migrants, improvements in one domain of their life are often accompanied by losses and subordination in others.

### **1.3. REFUGEES IN THE REALM OF SILENCING POWER**

[I]t is this floating world without the gravities of history and politics that can ultimately become a deeply dehumanizing environment for refugees, even as it shelters (Malkki, 1995, p. 518).

Malkki (2002) criticizes the tendency to use the categories of “the refugee” and “the refugee camp” as ideal-typical figures which exist in a social void. She illustrates how refugees are often portrayed as an uprooted, alienated, suffering and, at the same time, nameless and silent mass of people (Malkki, 1996). Specific political and historical contexts of their situation are omitted from these images. For example, Malkki (1996) argues that the visual prominence of women and children as embodiments of “refugeeness” in media and in the publications of humanitarian organizations has to do not just with the fact that most world

refugees are women and children, but also with the particular institutionalized expectation of helplessness as a crucial refugee characteristic (p. 388).

Malkki states that being used in this way, “the term ‘refugee’ denotes an objectified, undifferentiated mass that is meaningful primarily as an aberration of categories and an object of ‘therapeutic interventions’” (Malkki, 1997, p. 65). Through deprivation of the wider social and historical context of their lives, refugees are reduced to the basic “raw” needs (Malkki, 1996, p. 378). Consequently, in the face of the national and international organizations whose objects of care and control they are, “refugees suffer from a peculiar kind of speechlessness” (Malkki, 1996, p. 386).

Agamben (1998) addresses similar issues as Malkki and in my view, his work can be also applied to understand the common position of refugees in today’s European societies. He introduces the term *homo sacer* to depict the form of human life which is deprived of the politicized aspect of life, most clearly represented by the notion of citizenship. He uses the term “bare life” to describe the vulnerability and tractability of such a form of life (Agamben, 1998). By his account, a “bare life” is a result of a separation of human and political rights.

[T]he very rights of man [sic!] that once made sense as the presupposition of the rights of the citizen are now progressively separated from and used outside the context of citizenship, for the sake of the supposed representation and protection of a bare life that is more and more driven to the margins of the nation-states (Agamben, 1998, pp. 132-133).

Agamben argues that this separation is supported mainly by humanitarian organizations which can only grasp human life in the figure of bare life (Agamben, 1998, p. 133). I think that his description aptly characterizes the situation of refugees in today’s European societies, especially those who live in the refugee camps.

Indeed, relating the depoliticizing mechanisms described by Malkki and Agamben to the institution of the refugee camp, it seems like a convenient environment where refugees

can be deprived of the political and social context to which they once belonged. I think that refugees living in the refugee camps find themselves in the precarious legal and social position, in which they can easily become subject to degrading treatment by camp officials who “manage” them as a form of a “bare life” that needs to be provided with certain services. Malkki (2002) defines refugee camps as disciplining (selectively enabling or preventing) devices of both care and control (p. 353). They “discipline space and the movement of people, all the while producing knowledge for specific administrative, therapeutic, and other ends (Malkki, 2002, p. 353).

In understanding the functioning of modern institutions which participate in the silencing of refugees, I find Foucault’s analysis of power relations to be very useful. He is concerned with power struggles and the strategies employed by the dominant bodies to maintain their supremacy over the groups concerned without using physical suppression. The refugee camps in European countries can serve as suitable cases to examine within the Foucauldian framework of power. Foucault states that the ability to exercise power is based on structuring the possible field of action for others (Foucault, 1982/1994, p. 343). He argues that especially the process of dividing some individuals from the others, which is implemented by many social institutions (refugee camps included), facilitates their objectification and makes the exercise of power more efficient (Foucault, 1988). Drawing on Foucault’s approach, I argue that European refugee camps which are closed and isolated institutions can be defined as systematized and codified “technologies of power,” which subject refugees to various techniques and processes of control and reduce them to recipients of a state or humanitarian aid.

After discussing negative aspects of refugees’ position in host societies, the question emerges what are the possibilities of avoiding the process of dehistoricization and depoliticization and reducing refugees to “bare life” figures. Malkki (1996) is convinced that

humanitarian intervention does not necessary has to dehistoricize or depoliticize refugees (p. 398). She proposes a way of improvement, which is to be found in a “radically historicizing humanism” that will, apart from human suffering, acknowledge also refugees’ “narrative authority, historical agency, and political memory” (p. 398). In my view, recognition of the fact that all these aspects of the refugees’ experience are informed and shaped by gender is an integral part of such an improvement. It is one of the aims of my thesis to provide evidence to support this assertion.

#### **1.4. THE IMPORTANCE OF GENDER IN THE REFUGEE CAMP**

Acker (1991) conceptualizes organizations as gendered processes. She argues that although they may seem so, they are not gender-neutral. On the contrary, gender is deeply embedded in their functioning.

To say that an organization, or any other analytic unit, is gendered means that advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine. (Acker, 1991, p. 167)

Drawing on Acker’s statement, I suggest that refugee camps are gendered organizations. I consider the gendered character of the power structures in the camp to be a fruitful and up to now under-researched object of study. Just to illustrate, neither Malkki nor Agamben have paid any attention to the role which gender plays in a complex web of power relations that operate in and through refugee camps. On the other hand, although recently there has been extensive research conducted showing how women and men experience forced migration differently (e.g. Al-Ali, 2002; Buijs, 1993b; Indra, 1999a), much less attention has been paid to analyze the gendered character of the refugees’ life in the camps (e.g. Giles, 1999; Hitchcox, 1993).

The 1951 Geneva Convention, which is the main document to define and guarantee the international protection of refugees, operates with a seemingly gender neutral discourse which is in fact androcentric, because its definition of a refugee is largely based on the notion of a single male (Bloch, Galvin, & Harrell-Bond, 2000). Consequently, refugee camps usually operate on a gender insensitive approach to refugees. In particular, they are designed and run without recognizing that refugee women may have special needs in terms of safety and spatial mobility. Women are often given less consideration by the camp staff and are constantly being classified either as the protected dependents of men or as encumbered by children (Giles, 1999, p. 91). Furthermore, the male-headed nuclear model of the family is often imposed on refugees by asylum policies and camp administrators (Hall, 1990).

Giles argues that although there is a great deal of variation in the history, organization, and culture of camps that only case studies can ultimately capture, there are certain patterns of how women are ideologized in refugee camps (Giles, 1999, p. 90). While some of the management “gaze” of the camp workers may incorporate some values of gender equality based on international standards, much of what actually happens in camps reinforces unequal gender relations (Giles, 1999, p. 91). This is either because management and controlling practice in the camp gives little significance to gendered violence and discrimination, or because what happens in the refugee households is considered to be determined by normative gender rules of the patriarchal home so that no inquiry or change is deemed possible (Giles, 1999, p. 91). Thus, refugee women in the camp become more vulnerable to abuse and violence, which become less visible and harder to address (Giles, 1999, p. 91). On the other hand, in contrast to men who can hardly fulfill their roles as family providers in the confines of the camp, women are not entirely prevented from fulfilling their familiar duties of home-making, cooking and child-rearing and thus they may experience less of the camp-life mental strain (Hitchcox, 1993, p. 158).

To sum up, in this chapter, I have introduced the main concepts of the research – gender, family and household, the notion of home and patriarchal bargain and showed how they can be employed in the context of migration. Drawing on Scott, Fenstermaker, West, and Zimmerman, I have defined gender as a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes which serves as a way of signifying relationships of power and which is, at the level of everyday life accomplished at the level of individuals as well as in the realm of institutions. Gender as an accomplishment is both an outcome and a rationale for gendered divisions of society. Next, I have delineated family and household as open systems always in progress. They are places of gendered struggles and negotiations based on power hierarchies but can also be sources of mutual support and companionship. Further, I have outlined the gendered character of the notion of home. Proceeding from there, drawing on gender sensitive migration studies, I have described various possibilities of how gender roles and family relationships can be challenged in the process of migration. I have concluded that migration challenges traditional patriarchal arrangements and constitutes of different constraints and opportunities for men and women. After this review, I have described the dehistoricizing and depoliticizing processes which transform refugees into the figures of “bare” and easily manageable life as they have been discussed by Malkki and Agamben. Employing Foucauldian notion of power, I have argued that refugee camps could be conceptualized as a systematized and codified technology of power. In the last part of the chapter, I have emphasized the genderedness of power relations operating in and through the refugee camps and the need to consider that refugees’ experience in the camp is significantly influenced by gender.

## **2. CHECHEN ASYLUM SEEKERS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC**

In this chapter, I will first briefly describe the reception system in the Czech Republic and, drawing on Malkki's and Agamben's criticism and Foucault's notion of a disciplining institution, I will depict the refugee camp where I conducted my fieldwork. I will also include an account of the gendered character of the camp. Next, I will present the situation in Chechnya as my informants explained it to me, focusing on how *they* experienced and interpreted the war. Both of these subchapters provide a necessary framework for my further analysis.

### **2.1. THE CZECH REFUGEE CAMP AS A FIELD OF SILENCING AND GENDERED POWER**

As I have already outlined, until the end of the 1980s, the Czech Republic was a country that "sent" refugees to other, mostly Western European, states. After the fall of the communist regime in 1989, the Czech Republic became also a refugee receiving country. However, since the number of asylums granted has been very low, and social benefits allocated for refugees and asylum seekers have been rather modest, the CR remains largely a transit country for refugees.

When a person enters the CR with the aim to ask for asylum, he or she is placed into a "quarantine reception center". Every asylum seeker has to spend about a month there. The asylum procedure is formally initiated and asylum seekers undergo basic medical examinations.<sup>2</sup> Later, they are transferred to a "residential center" where they wait for the asylum claim to be decided about. Since there is no given time limit for the length of the

asylum procedure in the asylum law, asylum seekers can spend up to several years there. If one is granted asylum, he or she can move into an “integration asylum center.”<sup>3</sup> Those who have not been recognized as refugees (usually about ninety-eight per cent of all applicants) have to leave the country in about fifteen days (“Zákon o azylu České republiky [The Asylum Act of the Czech Republic],” 1999/2002).<sup>4</sup>

It is forbidden for asylum seekers to work for the first year after they have asked for asylum.<sup>5</sup> The Refugee Facilities Administration (RFA), which has been established to run the camps in the Czech Republic, provides board, lodging and basic health care in the camps. Asylum seekers are given only minimal direct financial support – about 0.35 EUR per day. The RFA also provides other services such as social work, psychological counseling, and cooperates with NGOs who offer legal, psychological and social counseling and organize leisure-time activities for the asylum seekers in the camp. As regards asylum seekers’ children, they are educated in local schools together with Czech children (“Zákon o azylu České republiky [The Asylum Act of the Czech Republic],” 1999/2002). Quarantine and residential centers are relatively closed institutions “protected” by security guards.<sup>6</sup> As regards the spatial mobility, after leaving the quarantine, asylum seekers living in residential camps are free to leave them.<sup>7</sup>

In April 2004, I conducted two-week fieldwork in the refugee camp (“residential center”) in Zastávka u Brna. In Czech, the word “zastávka” means temporary stop. It is quite

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<sup>2</sup> Later, they are given the possibility to move to a private housing. This choice is available only to those asylum seekers who have enough resources to support themselves (asylum seekers living in a private accommodation are entitled to receive state financial support only for three months).

<sup>3</sup> Refugees can stay here until they receive the state’s offer of a flat or until they find accommodation on their own.

<sup>4</sup> For the schematic representation of the reception system in the Czech Republic see Appendix no.1.

<sup>5</sup> Although they are allowed to seek employment legally after this period, there are so many bureaucratic obstacles to be overcome both by asylum seekers and their potential employers that in the majority of cases they work either illegally or do not work at all.

<sup>6</sup> In order to enter the camp, permission is needed for every outsider (such as a researcher, journalist or NGO worker). It can be obtained after explaining the reason of the visit to the central camp administration in Prague.

symbolic because, as I have already mentioned, it is common that the Czech Republic is mostly a transit country for refugees on their way to Western European countries. For the majority of Chechen asylum seekers, the Zastávka camp literally serves as a temporary stop. Once they realize how scant their chances to be allowed to stay in the Czech Republic are, and when they hear from other people that Chechens in Austria or France are being granted asylums more often, the majority of them tries to cross the borders illegally and continue to travel to the West.

Zastávka consists of four buildings situated on the periphery of the town; three residential buildings and one administrative (see the photo of the residential building in Appendix no.2). The capacity of the camp is about 250 places. Asylum seekers live in rooms about six by five meters big; one family with up to six people usually lives in one room (see the photo of a camp room in Appendix no.3). When the camp is full, about forty people on each floor share two hot plates, male and female bathrooms and toilets. Full board is provided three times a day in the canteen. Because of hygienic regulations adopted by the camp administration in the last two years, all food has to be consumed in the canteen and cannot be taken into the asylum seekers' rooms.<sup>8</sup>

Recently, a new system of surveillance has been installed in the camp. Cameras are placed in each floor's corridor in the camp's residential buildings (see the photo of the corridor in Appendix no.4). When refugees leave the camp they have to give their identification cards to the guards. Every time they do so, they can see the screen which displays what is happening in all the surveilled corridors. Camp guards are supposed to observe this screen 24 hours a day. In this way, asylum seekers can never forget that they are being monitored; an atmosphere of constant control and surveillance is created. This has been

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<sup>7</sup> For less than 24 hours without any report and if they want to leave for a longer period, they have to give the exact time of their absence in the camp and the address where they can be reached.

described by Foucault as “hierarchical observation”, which is one of the crucial elements of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1975/1984, pp. 188-189).

Just before I started my fieldwork, a new rule was adopted in the Zastávka camp. The director of the camp decided to *forbid* asylum seekers to watch televisions in their rooms.<sup>9</sup> Almost every family has managed to save some money and buy a television (usually for very low price from the asylum seekers who decided to leave the camp). In order to secure adherence of the rule that has been perceived as unacceptable by the inhabitants of the camp, the director *confiscated* all televisions which were found in the asylum seekers’ rooms, placed them in the cellar of the administrative building, and promised that they will be returned when the asylum seekers leave the camp. Although there is a television room available in the camp (see the photo in Appendix no.5), I learnt from my informants that it is always occupied by a particular group of asylum seekers (usually single males) who decide which channel will be watched. Women and children almost never enter it. This absurd rule, which is in my view a violation of asylum seekers’ rights to property, was explained to asylum seekers as well as to me (when I asked the director about it personally) as a saving of expenses that is necessary due to reductions in camp’s budget.<sup>10</sup> By depriving asylum seekers from watching (their own) televisions, the majority of them are denied direct access to any kind of news. I interpret this rule as another step to make living in the camp sufficiently tough to deter people from coming and staying there and as further depriving refugees from the social aspects of their lives. Chechen asylum seekers who talked to me about this issue, expressed anger and helplessness, they did not see any possibility to resist such a treatment.

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<sup>8</sup> Despite this rule, camp inhabitants often attempt to sneak out with the food in order to consume it in their rooms.

<sup>9</sup> Although it has never been officially approved, camp officials have always tolerated asylum seeker’s use of private televisions since the establishment of the camp in 1991.

<sup>10</sup> This explanation makes the whole thing even more absurd because it is quite obvious (also to several camp employees with whom I talked about it) that savings gained in this way are minimal and cannot even compensate for evident lacks of thriftiness in other parts of the “camp mechanism.”

I think that this event and the above-described conditions in the camp illuminate the process in which refugees are gradually transformed into passive recipients of care. Liisa Malkki points out that, depending on specific social contexts and political conjunctures, refugee status may be experienced as a protection or as a constraint (Malkki, 2002, p. 358). In the case of the Zastávka camp, my informants perceived the institutional care as much more oppressive than supportive. Just to give another example, apart from fierce objections against the ban on televisions, the asylum seekers often complained about the meals produced by the canteen. The Czech “institutional” food offered to them was so different from what they have been used to eat at home that some Chechens completely refused to eat in the canteen. The majority of them, women in particular, would prefer to cook on their own. But that was not possible on 0.35 EUR per day, their “pocket money.”

Moreover, since the allowances for the refugees are so low and legal work is prohibited for one year from their asylum claim, there are only few ways in which refugees can earn money to support their families or to be able to travel further to Austria or another country. If they are not among the few who work in the camp (cleaning the toilets, working in the kitchen or library) and receive increased pocket money as a “salary,” they can gain money during their life in the camp by engaging in smuggling of other refugees. This practice had become very “popular” at the time of my fieldwork because the majority of Chechens (currently the biggest group of the refugees coming to the Czech Republic) did not want to stay in the country. On the contrary, they wanted to travel further to the West as soon as possible, being afraid that it would be more difficult to cross the borders once the Czech Republic joined the European Union on May 1. Thus Chechen refugees, both women and men, were put into situation that since there was no other possibility, they got involved into criminal activities they would never be engaged in before. Some of them felt strong guilt for

doing so, while the others, on the other hand, did not engage in smuggling and preferred to live only from allowances received in the camp.

Referring back to Malkki's and Agamben work, I think it is possible to conclude that the institution of the refugee camp, as I have described it, supports the process of reducing the refugees to their basic "raw" needs, and into objects of care and control. The case of the confiscation of their televisions shows that they are put into a position in which they can easily become subjected to degrading treatment by camp officials. They are, on the one hand, accepted by the state – they are provided with temporary refuge and their basic needs are taken care of – but on the other hand, they are at the same time totally excluded – by social isolation in the camp and minimal financial support. Moreover, there is also the constraint of self-criminalization in which many of the refugees are caught by engaging in smuggling of people through the borders. The exposure to danger and feelings of guilt seriously worsen some refugees' mental state. To conclude, I argue that Malkki's definition of the refugee camp fits well to characterize the Zastávka camp, it works as disciplining (selectively enabling or preventing) device of both care and control (Malkki, 2002, p. 353).

In the first chapter, I have argued that the refugee camps often operate on a gender insensitive basis, that they are run without recognizing that refugee women may have special needs in terms of safety and spatial mobility. This does not fully apply to the Zastávka camp. There is a special protected zone established for single childless refugee women. That is certainly an achievement. However, single women with children do not receive any special protection apart from increased attention from the social workers in the camp. Although they are also in a vulnerable position, they are accommodated in the residential building together with all other asylum seekers, including single males. Moreover, during my fieldwork I realized that neither camp officials nor the sophisticated controlling practice in the camp could effectively protect women from domestic violence in their camp rooms. As I will

demonstrate in the fourth chapter, refugee women in the camp become more vulnerable to abuse and violence.

## **2.2. FORCES OF DISPLACEMENT IN CHECHNYA**

You are interested in what happens with the Chechen family, good, but first of all, I would like to tell you my opinion on what is going on in Chechnya, how I see our tragedy, that is what you should learn as well, therefore, I would like to tell you something about it. [Ruslan, 34 years, male]

For Chechens in the camp, talking about home, family and their previous life in Chechnya was unimaginable without reference to their experience of war. Therefore, in this chapter, I will provide a brief description of the current situation in Chechnya and then “give the floor” to my informants to depict how the war in Chechnya was interpreted and experienced by them. I will also mention some specificities of the Czech Republic as a host country from the point of view of Chechen refugees.

Currently, the most common nationality of asylum seekers in the Czech Republic is considered by the authorities to be Russian – 44 per cent of all asylum claims in 2003 (MVČR, 2003b). Nevertheless, the majority of them do not regard themselves as Russians; they are refugees from Chechnya, the Russian republic situated in the Caucasus region that has been fighting with Russia since the beginning of the 1990s. There is a long history of Chechen people’s oppression in the former Soviet Union. To give just one example; in 1944, Stalin decided to forcibly deport all Chechens, Ingushs, Crimean Tatars, Germans, and other national or ethnic groups living in the Soviet union to Kazakhstan, where they all had to face extremely harsh living conditions. The Chechens were allowed to return to their country in 1957. It is estimated that only about 30 per cent of the former deportees lived through the exile conditions and returned back to the Caucasus (Pohl, 2002). When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Dzhokhar Dudayev, a first Chechen president, declared Chechnya’s

independence from Russia. This was followed by three years during which armed groups gained an increasing hold on Chechnya and Dudayev became more outspoken in his defiance of Moscow (BBC, 2003). In 1994, Russia sent its forces in a very poorly planned bid to bring the rebellious region back to obedience. Early promises of a quick victory were soon silent as the Chechens put up fierce resistance to the Russian army. Moscow withdrew its forces under a 1996 peace agreement which gave Chechnya substantial autonomy but no full independence (BBC, 2003).

By 1996, the country had been reduced to ruins by the war and Russia failed to invest in its reconstruction (Nichols, 2000). In 1999, there were several explosions in Russia in which hundreds of people died. The Russian authorities did not hesitate to blame the Chechens and the Russian army was sent back to Chechnya to subdue the republic by force in a second brutal campaign (Nichols, 2000). This phase of the war was officially terminated by a referendum in 2003 when a new Chechen constitution was approved, the republic's position within the Russian Federation was retained and the pro-Moscow administration of president Akhmad Kadyrov was established. However, Russian troops did not leave the country and the situation has remained insecure and instable. Moreover, Kadyrov's son Ramzan established a security force several thousand men strong operating in Chechnya which has been accused of many kidnappings, torture and murders by human-rights groups (BBC, 2004a). Just recently, in May 2004, Akhmad Kadyrov was assassinated in a bomb blast and as a response, more than 1,000 extra Russian troops will be sent to the Caucasus republic<sup>11</sup> (BBC, 2004b).

According to the reports of human-right groups, people in Chechnya (both men and women) are disappearing, being executed, tortured, etc. (International Helsinki Federation, 2003). However, the Czech Department of asylum and immigration policy does not recognize

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<sup>11</sup> Recent estimates suggest there are up to 80,000 Russian troops in Chechnya (BBC, 2004b).

Chechens as refugees with a well founded fear of persecution. Therefore, they are not, in general, granted refugee status currently.

My informants presented to me a quite unified interpretation of what is going on in Chechnya. They perceived it as an unequal and unjust operation whose main aim is not to prevent Chechnya from independence, but to exterminate Chechens as a nation and get unlimited access to Chechen resources of oil.

Russians could win this war very quickly, if that would be their aim, not to allow Chechnya to become independent. But that was certainly not their goal, I think that Russians needed this war so that they can kill Chechens, humiliate them and, of course, make a lot of money on it. You know, a lot of oil has been smuggled from Chechnya, and many weapons have been allegedly used in Chechnya but actually sold to some other country ... That is why the war was needed for Russians, they wanted to rake it in ... everyone is making money, from ordinary soldiers who steal whatever they can from the Chechen people and kidnap people, who torture them and then sell back to their relatives, up to the ones on the top who are trafficking in oil and weapons. [Ruslan, 34 years, male]

Or as Seda described her understanding of the war:

They want the land and oil. Zhirinovskij [Russian politician] once said in the television, a *good* Chechen it is a *dead* Chechen. Yes, he said so; can you understand it? He also said that the war will be over when there won't be a single Chechen in Chechnya. [Seda, 32 years, female]

Aslambek described his own experience with this “unfair” war:

This is not at all an even war. We are not even a million of people and how many are they? They could beat us with their hats if they would like to, but why are they killing women and children? When there was a first flow of refugees in 1999, I accompanied my uncle who fled to Ingushetia. There were thousands of people leaving Chechnya, it was a kind of procession. And they started to shell and bomb this procession. People had nowhere to escape, many of them died. [Aslambek, 26 years, male]

My informants also depicted how they experienced the everyday fear and sorrow of the war.

When you want to go to sleep at night, you think what if something happens at night and I won't be dressed properly. Therefore, you better don't take your clothes off at all; you have to be ready to run away. Just imagine, how is it to live like that for almost ten years.

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It is awful, I can hardly describe it by words, imagine that you lose your husband or brother and you don't know where he is. Where did they take him? Who took him away? You cry, scream and look for all money you can get to save him: where is my brother, where is my brother? Please tell me where is he ... people are going around and cry like that, they do not know where their beloved are. [Seda, 32 years, female]

Zulfia described to me how a Chechen wedding used to look like. Then she added:

Weddings used to be very nice and very rich but now it's wartime and women usually cry at weddings; they are very sad these weddings, nowadays. Women lost their husbands, sons and brothers, so many people died; that is why weddings are not happy events anymore. [Zulfia, 44 years, female]

I also got to know about the specificities which characterize the Czech Republic as a host country for Chechen refugees. One reason to come to the Czech Republic are former experiences with the country. For example, Shahrudin, a forty-three-year-old man, spent two years in the Czech Republic as a soldier in the Soviet army. He liked the country and therefore, after he and his wife Seda had decided to leave Chechnya, they went straight to the CR. Another specificity which I have identified in the Chechens' narratives was their fear that due to the communist past of the CR, former connections with Russian secret services still operate in the country. For this reason, they were worried that the information which they disclose during the interviews with immigration officers could be later used against them. Therefore, some of them did not give all the details about the persecution they experienced in Chechnya.<sup>12</sup>

To conclude, in this chapter, I have given the context for my further analysis. First, by describing the reception system of the CR and by depicting the refugee camp where I conducted fieldwork from the perspective of Malkki's, Agamben's and Foucault's theories. I have concluded that the institution of the refugee camp reduces the refugees to their basic "raw" needs, and into objects of care and control. Although some measures to protect single women have been established in the camp, I argue that the general atmosphere of powerlessness experienced by the refugees in the camp in fact creates an environment in which women are more vulnerable to abuse and violence. Next, the situation in Chechnya has been described, with the focus on how it was remembered and interpreted by my informants.

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<sup>12</sup> What obviously diminished their chance to be acknowledged as a refugee and to be granted asylum.

### **3. GETTING IN AND OUT OF THE CAMP: POSITIONING THE RESEARCHER AND THE RESEARCHED**

As I have mentioned above, this thesis is based on fieldwork carried out in the refugee camp Zastávka u Brna.<sup>13</sup> This environment was not completely new to me, because from 2000 to 2003 I worked there as an NGO social worker and organized leisure-time activities for asylum seekers living in the camp. During my fieldwork, I lived in the camp for two weeks permanently and I usually spent up to twelve hours a day with my informants. In the time of my research, there were about thirty-five Chechens in the camp.<sup>14</sup> I conducted participant observation and repeatedly interviewed eight Chechen asylum seekers (five women and three men). These unstructured and open interviews and recorded on a dictaphone. Moreover, I participated in many more informal discussions with my informants (for more detailed information about them see Appendix no.1).<sup>15</sup> To get more complex picture of the situation, I also interviewed a camp psychologist, an Armenian man, who has been working there for four years and who had come to the Czech Republic as a refugee and was granted refugee status about ten years ago.

My informants ranged in age from twenty to forty-four, they were mainly from the urban areas of Chechnya and completed at least elementary level of the formal education.<sup>16</sup> It has to be emphasized that Chechen refugees who arrive to the Czech Republic are usually from the well-situated families who have been able to save money to pay for the journey and

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<sup>13</sup> Zastávka is a small town about twenty kilometers from Brno, which is the second biggest town in the CR situated in the southeastern part of the country.

<sup>14</sup> There were about eighteen adults and seventeen children in the camp in the time of my fieldwork: three families with one parent and children, one childless couple, three men without family, and five complete families.

<sup>15</sup> During the two weeks of my presence in the camp, four families left the camp to cross the Czech-Austrian border illegally in order to seek for asylum in Austria or to travel to another Western European country.

<sup>16</sup> This means eight years of the formal education. It should be also acknowledged that although some of them were willing to continue in their studies, it was not possible for them because of the war. The majority of schools

illegal crossing of the state boundaries.<sup>17</sup> These characteristics of course influenced the narrations of my informants.

All the interviews as well as daily communication were held in Russian in which all of my adult informants were fluent. My choice of informants was based on their willingness to participate in the research. I did not seek for any kind of representative group of the Chechen refugees. I acknowledge that this fact influenced my data and therefore, I do not consider my findings to be valid for *all* Chechen refugees in the Czech Republic. My aim is rather to describe certain mechanisms in changes that are experienced by particular refugees.

Before I started my fieldwork in the refugee camp, I “equipped” myself with readings from social and feminist anthropology (e.g. Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Stacey, 1988/1996; Wolf, 1996). I was eager to reflect upon the power differentials between my informants and me as a researcher, and to make our relationships less exploitative and more equal. Since one of the conditions of equality is reciprocity, feminist researchers have called for “repaying” of informants involved in the research. They have argued that the researcher-researched relationship could be made more reciprocal (Wolf, 1996).

After I spent few days in the camp, I realized that as a middle-class Czech student with 300 dollars received from my university to conduct this research, I had a multitude of possibilities to make the life of my informants at least a bit more bearable. I bought fruits and sweets for their children on a regular basis; I organized several meetings with coffee and cakes for Chechen women and we went together for a trip to Brno; I screened a videotape with documentary about Chechnya for Chechen men; and finally, I used my contacts with Czech NGOs and tried to help two women to achieve a discharge of their husband and brother from a custody. I was amazed how easy and relatively cheap it was to please my informants

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were closed during the war or it was very dangerous to go to school, because one was always at risk of being shot or harassed by Russian soldiers.

and make them feel grateful for all what I did (even though it was not my primary aim). Nevertheless, I had to be very careful and tactful in giving them gifts not to violate their sense of dignity. On the other hand, I realized later that this kind of “repaying” might also be a kind of exploitation. By making my informants feel grateful, I got more power over them and could manipulate them more easily. I was trying my best to avoid this manipulation, but I have to admit that it sometimes may have played the role when my informants answered my questions and they were “trying their best” to tell me what they thought was the right thing I wanted to hear.

I think that I got quite close to my informants. Just to illustrate, after several days of my life in the camp, I had to go for the half of the day to Brno and thus I did not appear the whole morning in any of my informants’ room. When I met Seda, a thirty-two-year-old woman who was a kind of my guide in the field because she helped me to establish contact with other Chechens in the camp, later in the afternoon, she looked worried and said: “I was afraid that they have kicked you out from here.” When I think about this sentence today, it seems to me that in that moment, I managed to cross the borderlines she drew between her and his family and “them” – the camp staff and other people from the outside. I was no more perceived as a part of “them.”

This sense of belonging was reinforced once more during my stay in the camp, this time by the camp guards. Although at the beginning of my two weeks in the camp I had been instructed that I could not invite refugees into my room, which was situated in the administrative building of the camp and I have never broken this rule, the camp guards felt the need to repeat it to me. It was towards the end of my fieldwork after they observed how much time I spent with my informants and how close I had gotten to them. I had a completely

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<sup>17</sup> For example, the family of Seda and Shahrudin paid 2,000 dollars to smugglers in order get to the Czech Republic.

different approach to asylum seekers than they and I think that they disliked it. I did not behave in a way the majority of Czechs coming to the camp behaved (keeping a distance).

Despite the fact that I established close and friendly relationships with my informants, I concur with Judith Stacey who argues that it is important to acknowledge that a researcher's presence in the field is always an intrusion and intervention into a certain system of relationships; "a system of relationships, that the researcher is far freer than the researched to leave" (Stacey, 1988/1996, p. 91). Therefore, I knew that the seeming equality I established through more reciprocal relationships with my informants was short-lived and in a way illusory because it operated in already given distribution of benefits which I could not challenge.

#### **4. GENDER AND FAMILY RELATIONS AMONG CHECHEN ASYLUM SEEKERS IN THE REFUGEE CAMP: CHALLENGES AND NEGOTIATIONS**

As noted above, according to Malkki refugee status may be perceived as a protection or as a constraint, depending on the social context (Malkki, 2002, p. 358). Drawing on my fieldwork in the camp, I claim that Chechen refugees indeed experience it as *both* protection and a constraint. At the very beginning of their stay in the camp, they were mostly satisfied because they have lived in a safe space, with no need to run away unexpectedly and to escape bombing or other dangers as in their home country. However, after two or three months, many of them started to be critical of the camp rules, the employees, the meals in the canteen, and the state of limbo in which they found themselves. Realizing that their chances to get asylum in the Czech Republic were minimal, the majority of them decided to move further to the West, some stayed in Austria, others moved further, mainly to France and Belgium. However, some of them did not have enough resources (money as well as energy and hope) to do so and they ended up in the Czech refugee camp Zastávka u Brna. During my fieldwork, I found the Chechen refugees' life in the camp to create different constraints and opportunities for men and women. It is my aim in this chapter to present an account of how the refugees' life in the camp and the way they experience forced migration are gendered. Moreover, I examine how these experiences have challenged gender relations in their families.

I will first describe Chechens' gender relations "at home" as they were presented to me by my informants. In their narratives, home has been constructed through references to Chechen traditions and family norms. They defined men's and women's positions in the family and society and the different amount of power available to them. I will examine how these norms are interpreted from the position of my informants living in the camp. This subchapter functions as a point of departure in understanding how gender relations are

changed in the process of Chechens' forced migration. Next, I will examine refugees' notions of femininity and masculinity as my informants in the camp articulated them. I will describe to what extent they were influenced by the experiences of war in Chechnya. Finally, I will depict how the notions of masculinity and femininity were further affected by the life in the camp and how gender relations were challenged in the refugee families.

#### **4.1. GENDER RELATIONS AT HOME: CHECHEN TRADITIONS AND NORMS THROUGH THE EYES OF THE REFUGEES**

In the process of forced migration, the definitions that prescribe women's and men's position in the family are based on how they have been traditionally defined in their families and households in the country of origin (Giles, 1999). When Chechen asylum seekers in the camp talked about home, they usually began by describing their extended families in Chechnya and, what was even more common, by depicting and explaining what they called "our traditions" or "our laws". Their interpretations of Chechen traditions and laws served to clarify and justify their life stories and provided a framework for the decisions they made, both according to and against these rules.<sup>18</sup> The majority of the references to traditions at home had a clearly gendered character, they described women's role in the family or society differently from men's role.

For example, describing the significance of religion in her life, one of my female informants said:

Religion ... that differs in different families; some go to mosque regularly, and some don't, though they also believe in God, and some don't believe at all. It is the same *in our place*, some wear big scarves and long skirts, but I believe in God and I don't wear a big scarf. My husband allows me to wear a short

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<sup>18</sup> Obviously, I take into account that these traditions were brought up so often also because my informants perceived me, a Czech young woman, as a total outsider in relation to their culture. They felt the need to educate me about their culture because they assumed that I am ignorant of it.

skirt, a T-shirt without sleeves, to have flowing hair ... right now, for example, I have my trousers on, flowing hair, but I still believe in God. It varies *in our place*.

...

We have these mosques there, *in our place*, but neither my father nor my husband were ever going there regularly, only when there was a holy day, then maybe. [Seda, 32 years, female, my italics]<sup>19</sup>

These quotes illustrate that a seemingly gender-neutral issue as the place of religion in one's life is significantly gendered. Religion is perceived as something displayed in women's dress and men's going to mosque.

My informants also made references to other kinds of laws and norms which have been recently "imported" to Chechnya by Islamist fighters mainly from the Middle East. Chechens described them as alien, wild or uncivilized traditions. Especially women fiercely disavowed practices such as veiling,<sup>20</sup> women's total seclusion at home and restrictions to talk to men outside the family. Seda was most vocal about it:

We don't have these wild traditions that men can't talk to women. In our place, women normally talk to men. Only some... you know, they brought it to Chechnya from Palestine, but it was not like that before. For example, my grandma, she never veiled herself, she always talked to grandpa's friends and drank tea with them. Why should I do that if my grandma didn't? Why should I listen to strange men? I will listen only to my husband. [Seda, 32 years, female]

This quote illustrates that Chechens' notion of traditions is much more based on the idea of intergenerational continuity than on practices labeled as Islamic.

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<sup>19</sup> In the interviews as well as in casual communication and chatting, my informants frequently used the expression "u nas". It is difficult to translate into English because its meaning varies according to the context in which it is used. Literarily, it could be translated as "at us" or also "in our place" and the notions of "us" or a "place" could have several different meanings. It could be one's family, house, city, country, national or ethnic identity, culture and it could also be a synonym for home. Moreover, by saying "u nas", the speaker draws a distinction between his or her notion of "we" in opposition to "they" – the outsiders who do not belong to "us" and "our place."

<sup>20</sup> By veiling I mean covering of woman's face under a headscarf and most of her body by loose and long dress. Nonetheless, at other times, my female informants admitted that they sometimes put a little headscarf on, but it is only symbolically, as they said. In the camp, only one out of my seven female informants covered her head with a headscarf regularly.

Honor, dignity, hospitality, respect for one's elders and personal freedom were mentioned among the main characteristics of Chechen culture. The home which emerged from the refugees' narratives was put together of the credos, practices, and norms that have also regulated the lives of their grandparents and other family elders. In this way, norms have proved to be meaningful and more or less acceptable, also for the younger generation. Women understood that the laws imposed on them by Islamist groups operating in Chechnya would significantly restrict their freedom. Therefore, they made a clear distinction between these "wild" laws and the "truly" Chechen traditions which they praised frequently.

By refugees' account, the most important of these traditions were the rules regulating the family life.<sup>21</sup> The Chechen family, as it was described to me, appeared to be a typical patriarchal arrangement (as depicted for instance by Kandiyoti, 1988), which gives the senior men authority over everyone else in the family and which places young women at the very bottom of the family hierarchy (p. 278). According to Chechen family norms, young women move into households headed by their husband's father after their marriage. They become subordinated not only to all the men, but also to older women, especially their mother-in-law and sisters-in-law. As in the cases of classical patriarchy (Kandiyoti, 1988), also in a Chechen family the husband's kin appropriates his wife's labor. A couple usually stays in the parental house until another son in the family gets married and the young woman can be replaced by a new bride. If a woman marries the youngest son, she has to stay and take care of his parents until they die, because it is the youngest son's duty to stay with the parents.

Seda, who spent a year in her husband's house, described her feelings when she was replaced by the young bride of her brother-in-law and could finally live with her husband on her own:

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<sup>21</sup> It has to be taken into account, that most of my informants came from urban areas and had already partially abandoned rigidly patriarchal gender relations in the family. When both women and men were explaining

When we started to live separately, everything seemed suddenly so easy to me. I was very happy; my husband said the same, that it's better like that. There [in his parental home], I had to do the washing for all his brothers; I cooked for them and washed the dishes after them, I did everything. But then, when I was alone, I did only my work, and I did it with pleasure. You know, if there are so many people living in one place and you have to take care of them all, you get really tired and you don't have time for anything. So when we have moved away, I could also find time for myself. [Seda, 32 years, female]

Another strongly patriarchal practice I encountered in the women's narratives was bride kidnapping and forcing young girls into marriage. Towards the end of my fieldwork, when I established closer relationships with the Chechen refugees in the camp, I got to know that three of my female informants had been kidnapped and forced to marriages. Two had agreed to stay, married their kidnapers and have never said a bad word about them during our interviews. The third, a twenty-year-old woman Maleyka, who was kidnapped when she was fifteen by an eighteen-year-old man, said that only because the kidnapper's mother was not satisfied with her as a future wife of her son, she left him after five months. Later, she remarried. She criticized the practice and expressed hatred towards her kidnapper. One of the two "successfully" kidnapped women, Malkan a thirty-year-old lawyer with a degree from a Russian university, who later lost her husband and son in the war and remained alone with her daughter, admitted that she would never allow her daughter to be kidnapped and forced into marriage. She said:

It is like a lottery, you never know whom you will get. I myself was lucky, I had a good husband, but as I said, you never know whom you will get. I certainly want to know the future husband of my daughter; otherwise, I will not give her to him. [Malkan, 30 years, female]

Although in general Chechen women in the camp did not complain about being kidnapped or about the hardships they experienced as young brides in their husbands' house,

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Chechen family norms to me, they could always come with a number of examples of someone who did not

some later admitted that it was “not an easy time”. Towards the end of my fieldwork, I went to Brno with Malkan; we strolled around the town and she was comparing the situation of Chechen and Czech women:

Actually, Czech women are much better off than the Chechen. I have to tell you about this famous Chechen generous hospitality, you know what it means? You are setting and cleaning the table all day long because guests can come anytime, so you have to be always ready to entertain them. It's so tiring...[Malkan, 30 years, female]

As I have already outlined, after marriage women move to their husbands' homes. It can lead to a dissociation from their own kin and put them under the total control of their husband and his family. However, according to Chechen traditions, a woman's brother remains her recourse in case of severe ill-treatment in the family. The brother figure was very much present in women's narratives.

A brother has to be respected a lot, older as well as younger, because he always has to take care of his sister; he has to protect her and help her if she needs it. Even after she's married, that remains his duty. He is like sister's talisman. She can go to him in case of troubles. He can also help to solve her problems in the family, if her husband does not behave well. Therefore, she has to respect him. [Kheda, 26 years, female]

In the majority of cases, forced migration separates adult brothers and sisters as well as parents from their grown-up children. As I will show in the following subchapter, this can have serious consequences for women's position and security in the family. For example, Maleyka, a twenty-year-old mother who lived in the camp with her husband and two small children, missed her mother's assistance with childcare very much. She said that in the camp she realized that she was not prepared to take care of her two children on her own.<sup>22</sup>

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strictly follow them or at least modified them in her/his life.

<sup>22</sup> Although her husband helped her with the children, she often looked exhausted and desperate.

As I have pointed out in the first chapter, migration often results in a decrease of men's power in the family. While at home, the family and household were often a principal focus of their concerns and control, in exile and in the refugee camp in particular, they are left with minimal power to take control over their living environment. The story told by Zulfia, a forty-four-year-old woman who lived in the camp alone with her four daughters and waited for a family reunion with her husband, who has been granted refugee status in Austria, supports this observation. She told me about a Chechen man who left Chechnya with his family and migrated to Germany. They have been granted refugee status and their daughters started to attend schools there. Once, one of the daughters went to a disco without asking her father for permission. When she returned home, he beat her up. The next day, she went to the police and reported everything. After this incident, her father decided to return with the whole family to Chechnya. When they finally crossed the borders, the father beat the daughter again and then he said: "Now, I am at home." Zulfia was telling this story with clear sympathies for the father. She finished her story by saying: "What could he do? Chechen girls have to be modest."

In my view, the decrease of men's power is also reflected in refugees' perception of the possibility to establish a new home outside of Chechnya. My female informants were more optimistic about the chance to "reconstruct" their home if the return to Chechnya is impossible.

Now, there is no other possibility, either we'll die in Chechnya or we will live somewhere else. So, since I have come here...I have children and *their* home will be where they will be accepted. And if it is a home for my children, it will also be *my* home. [Seda, 32 years, female]

Her husband, Shahrudin, had a different opinion.

It is difficult to talk about a new home. I think that I can't find any other home at my age. It will remain the country where I was born. We were forced to give it up. But at my age, I will not find a new home.

My country has grown on me and my roots are there, but I decided to leave because of my children.  
[Shahrudin, 43 years, male]

While for Seda, and also for other Chechen women in the camp, home was where her children are safe, for Shahrudin, home seemed to be “unrenewable” outside of Chechnya.

In the narrations of my female informants, home was on the one hand described as a source of support, protection and power which provided them with respect and stability, but, on the other hand, it was sometimes depicted as confinement. Thus I conclude that traditions and family norms that formed refugees’ idea of home represented a complex and contradictory phenomenon in Chechens’ narratives. Again and again, both men and women brought up the painful deprivation of relationships with parents, siblings or other family members caused by migration. For Chechen men, forced migration often results in a decrease in their power and control over the family. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that this shift in power explains the differences in men’s and women’s attitudes towards the possible reconstruction of home outside Chechnya. Thus, women seemed to be more flexible about this issue than men whose power has been more tightly intertwined with the patriarchal norms at home.

#### **4.2. CHECHENS’ NOTIONS OF FEMININITY AND MASCULINITY**

In this subchapter, I will depict how notions of femininity and masculinity have been represented in the narratives of my informants. I will first describe how they responded to the question about their associations with the terms masculinity and femininity,<sup>23</sup> and point out that some of the seemingly neutral virtues are significantly gendered. Then, I will illustrate how Chechens reflected on the changes of women’s and men’s positions in the context of the

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<sup>23</sup> According to the answers, I assume that interviewees’ understanding of my question was actually: what does it mean to be a good man and a good woman?

war. Finally, I will discuss whether Chechen women in the camp became signifiers or resorts of Chechens' ethnic identity as it has been described in the literature (e.g. Abdulrahim, 1993; Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992; Giles, 1999; Kandiyoti, 1998; Lutz et al., 1995).

In connection with femininity, the first words mentioned by my informants (both men and women) were: mother and wife.

In order to be a good woman, she has to be a good housewife, so that her family and everything is in its place, to be a mother as well as a friend for her children and to be a good wife for her husband, not to cause any scandals. [Zulfia, 44 years, female]

For me it certainly means a woman who takes care of her children and who keeps the warmth of the family hearth. [Shahrudin, 43 years, male]

It is not only to feed her husband, greet him when he comes home, that's clear, but if you also want to sit and talk to someone who will understand. If there is no woman then man loses half of his life. [Ruslan, 34 years, male]

A woman should be kind, able to talk to other people, you know, in a feminine way. Woman, it is also something soft, tender ... she is weaker than a man. [Aslambek, 26 years, male]

Apart from placing "proper womanhood" solely into the realm of the domestic sphere, some of my informants also came up with more general or diverse ideas about femininity.

However, the main thing for a woman is to have an untainted soul and to have people's respect. [Zulfia, 44 years, female]

For me, femininity is to be a good mother for your children and a good wife for your husband, if a woman keeps her house clean. But certainly, it can also be a woman who can manage both, to be employed and to take care of her children. That can also be a good woman. [Seda, 32 years, female]

As regards masculinity, it was primarily associated with the man's honesty and protection of his family.

Masculinity, it means that a man should protect a woman from everything she is not supposed to do. If a man says: I will decide about everything on my own and you have to listen to me, because I am your husband; that is not a proper man in my eyes. I think it is on the contrary; a man should have understanding and should be patient. He has to control himself. [Seda, 32 years, female]

I think it is when a man manages to protect his wife and children, when he sustains them. I have never thought that masculinity should be shown through fists and arms. [Shahrudin, 43 years, male]

I think it should be a good person. He does not have to be strong and fight, he should be trustworthy, help other people in need, have good relations in his neighborhood. [Aslambek, 26 years, male]

First of all it means to be dignified. People die not to lose their dignity; these are men for me. Masculinity...it also means to tell the truth and to be honest; always and independently of the circumstances. [Ruslan 34, years, male]

These are the ideal notions of masculinity and femininity as my informants proclaimed them. While the majority perceived femininity as inextricably associated with the family, masculinity stood primarily for man's providing for the family needs and for more general "human" virtues such as honesty, trustworthiness, dignity, etc. Both female and male informants tended to disassociate masculinity from the physical strength and man's dominance over his wife.

Honor and dignity were praised among Chechens as the most important attributes of one's identity. However, the use of these seemingly neutral terms was significantly gendered in my informants' narratives. Although they referred to men's and women's honor by using the same word, it was obvious that in relation to women, honor was perceived in terms of chastity, whereas "men's honor" had more general implications. After Ruslan described what

it means to be an honest man, I asked him: “And what about woman’s honor?” He laughed knowingly (looking at me as if I was totally ignorant of these issues):

Come on, that’s clear what it means!

Then he added:

Oh yes and of course, a woman should also keep her husband clean; a woman whose husband walks in dirty clothes has definitely no honesty. [Ruslan, 34 years, male]

In references to life in Chechnya, the refugees pointed out that the roles of men and women were significantly challenged by life in the war conditions.

If you live for almost ten years under bombings, if your relatives are being killed or taken who knows where to, if you can’t do anything about it, if they are humiliating you with arms in their hands, what can our men do? When they are so powerless in front of those who do it all to us, they become aggressive and excitable, that’s because of this war, I think. [Seda, 32 years, female]

It is still very dangerous for men to go outside their homes because they could be caught by Russian soldiers, tortured or killed and then sold to their relatives (International Helsinki Federation, 2003). Therefore, Chechen women often have to work and earn money to provide for the family needs (Procházková, 2003). Seda described this change:

You know, before, many women used to just look after their children and stay at home. Now, many men sit at home. Every woman prefers to see her husband at home, because for him it is more dangerous to go outside than it is for her. Therefore, women do everything, they spend hours and hours in the market place selling whatever they have, they pick dirty aluminum, and they are willing to do anything not to let their men go outside. [Seda, 32 years, female]

Zulfia also reflected on how women’s perception of men had changed because of the current “shortage” of men in Chechnya caused by the war and emigration:

Some men who used to drink before and did not care much about their family changed a lot during the war. However, whether he drinks or not, women don't care about it anymore, because there are almost *no men* in Chechnya right now. The entire burden is now on women. [Zulfia, 44 years, female]

Thus women's position becomes precarious. On the one hand, they have to struggle hard to provide for their families; on the other hand, they have to tolerate basically any kind of behavior even though men are no more the main breadwinners in the household. However, marriage still represents a "compulsory" institution without which women can easily lose their honesty and respect in the community.

While listening to Chechens' narrations about femininity and about Chechen nation, I focused on the question whether Chechen women have become bearers and signifiers of Chechen identity in exile. In particular, I asked whether they have been constructed as symbols of ethnic collectivity while men have become its agents (Lutz et al., 1995, p. 10). During our interviews, no specific remarks were made in terms of women's role in marking the ethnic boundaries. On the contrary, for example, some of my male informants encouraged their wives to wear what they considered to be western clothes: jeans instead of long skirts and no headscarves. Aslambek once commented on it:

In our place, there is the father or the uncle and in front of them, it's not possible to walk just like that. They [women] have to put something on their heads. But the elders are not here right now and when she [his wife Maleyka] puts on a long skirt like in Chechnya, we'll become different and they [Czech people] will look at us like in ZOO. [Aslambek, 26 years, male]

I think that the Chechens in the camp could not establish a strong sense of community. In my view, any kind of community would be an impossible goal to achieve in the omnipresent atmosphere of mistrust and anxiety and in the constant flow of people in which "new" refugees are coming from the quarantine and the "old" are leaving to Austria or to other countries. When I asked Seda about her contacts with other Chechens in camp, she answered:

You know, we don't really become friends with them, they are coming and leaving, today they are here and tomorrow they are not. But we are staying, and, you know, people vary, some of them are good but there are bad people as well. They do all kinds of things to get further from here, and we are staying, that's why it's very difficult sometimes. [Seda, 32 years, female]

Chechens' status in the Czech Republic remains unsure and the majority of them expect that they are not going to be allowed to stay in the country. Therefore, I think that the need to delineate ethnic boundaries is not urgent for them. Although norms of proper behavior of a Chechen woman and a man still operate in the camp, and the refugees are certainly not deprived from their ethnic identity, they are, to a large extent, freed from the direct exertion of social control by their neighbors and kin through rumor, gossip, and innuendo as they experienced it in Chechnya. Thus, more space is given to their individual decisions and negotiations within the family.

To sum up, while the authority of women is related closely to the private sphere and to the well-being of home and family in Chechen narratives, masculinity has been described as man's sustaining the family and also in terms of more general "human" virtues such as honesty, dignity, etc. I have pointed out that seemingly neutral virtue such as honor was significantly gendered in Chechens' narratives. As regards the influence of the war on gender roles, I have concluded that many women have proved that they are strong enough to "keep several balls in the air," be mothers, wives and at the same time, also the providers for family needs. However, these changes in women's lives have not significantly influenced the refugees' ideals of femininity as associated exclusively with the domestic sphere. During the war as well as in the refugee camp, it was extremely difficult for men to sustain their families which had serious effects on their self-perception. They felt powerless and in a way useless for their families. Nevertheless, since masculinity was defined in more general and "human" terms than femininity, it seemed to be less bound up to a particular context and therefore more open to adjustments. For example, none of my informants defined masculinity by the ability

to fight for the liberation of the country. In the following subchapter, I will show how these changes in masculine and feminine roles, which were further reinforced by living in the refugee camp, influenced gender relations within the refugee families.

### **4.3. CHALLENGES TO GENDER AND FAMILY RELATIONS IN THE CAMP**

When Chechens get to the Czech refugee camp, their lives are not threatened by the war anymore. However, many limitations to their social as well as physical mobility, though of a different sort, remain in place. As I have described above, asylum seekers cannot work legally in the first year after they make a claim for asylum, they usually don't speak Czech and do not have the social networks to help them to seek employment (both legal and illegal). Some of the refugees (both men and women) struggle to make their living in the camp more bearable or to save money for their further journey to the West. The only way to earn some money, as they perceive it, is to engage in activities that range from illegal construction work to the smuggling of other refugees through the borders.<sup>24</sup> If the refugees are not involved in illegal activities, nor have relatives who have already established their living in some western country and can support them financially, they will find themselves in a situation of immobility and isolation. Their contacts with the Czech population and with "the world outside the camp" are minimal. As an Armenian psychologist, who has been working in the camp for four years and who has himself been granted refugee status about ten years ago, told me:

The mentality of this camp as an institution is totally different then if they [refugees] would live somewhere outside the camp, rent a flat and find a job ... The conditions here create some kind of microclimate, which is so *different* from what they experienced at home, as well as what they could experience here if they would live in private housing. And this atmosphere, I can say it openly, does not

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<sup>24</sup> Remember that refugees receive 0.35 EUR allowance per day.

have a good influence on their mental state. Thus, a person who will stay here for the whole year will *certainly* have a lot of mental problems. It is also because the absence of responsibility is so destructive for one's mental state. [Camp psychologist, male]

Moreover, as I have already emphasized, life in the camp creates different constraints and opportunities for men and women.

In this subchapter, I will show how gender relations in Chechen families have been challenged by their life in the refugee camp and by the experience of forced migration in general. I will start with the description of how men and women spend their time in the camp and how housework, paid work, and parenting are shared and negotiated within the family. I will depict the changes in the family relations as I have observed them during my fieldwork and as they have been perceived and interpreted by my informants. I will focus on the issue of domestic violence in the camp that, in my view, helps to understand the process of transformation of gender roles in the family.

During my fieldwork, I observed that Chechen women and men spent the time in the camp differently. Women who had children were taking care of them and that kept them busy most of the day. Although it was sometimes difficult for them (for young mothers especially) because they lacked supportive family networks, they more or less complied with what was considered to be the essence of Chechen idea of femininity – taking care of the children and the husband. In addition, it was easier to find a job in the camp for a woman than for a man (such as cleaning the toilets or working in the kitchen),<sup>25</sup> because the camp staff offers these jobs exclusively to women. Men have a chance to work in the camp library or if there is some reconstruction work going on in the camp. On the one hand, this “employment policy” reproduces stereotypes about men's and women's work, on the other hand, due to women's

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<sup>25</sup> It is the only legal paid work asylum seekers can get during the first year from their asylum claim. They receive extra pocket money as a “salary”. For example, instead of 12 euro per month, they may receive up to 24

paid work, gender roles in the family become in some cases partially reversed. Women may be the only one in the family who can earn some extra money to sustain the family. That was the case with Seda, who cleaned corridors in the three-floor residential building every morning and received triple pocket money as a “salary”. She was very proud of her work; she has never been the sole earner in the family. Seda described her day in the camp in a following way:

During the first days in the camp, I was crying a lot and I was thinking all the time ... but now, I am working! For example, I clean the corridors up to 11 in the morning, then I tidy up our room, and during the weekends, I clean also the common kitchen because a cleaning woman is not here and it becomes really a mess there. I also have to clean after my children and I actually don't have much free time. When I find some, then I also want to look nice and do something for myself, well and if there is still some time left, I can have a look at some book or a journal. [Seda, 32 years, female]

Then I asked her husband Shahrudin.

Well, what can I do ... I am trying to learn Czech and I work in the library twice a week, there's not much to do for me here. [Shahrudin, 43 years, male]

And Seda added:

My husband, for example, wants to bring us food from the canteen. He says: I do nothing here; I will go there. You know, I think that it's more difficult for him, because women always find something to do. [Seda, 32 years, female]

It was not easy for Seda to persuade her husband that she should accept the work in the camp.<sup>26</sup> However, in the situation when there was no other possibility, Shahrudin consented to her work, although he thought that she has been working too much. When he

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euro, if they work in the camp. Nonetheless, this paid work is accessible only to few people in the camp (maximum five to six people).

talked about their life in Chechnya, he emphasized that it was always him who earned money for the family.

Sometimes, we had such talks, when we didn't have enough money, she [Seda] said: I will also go to work. But I told her: the fact that you are looking after the children is enough for me, until I am able, I will earn that money, you better sit at home, what you're doing at home, that is sufficient for me. [Shahrudin, 43 years, male]

The new environment in the camp changed Shahrudin's view on his wife's work and also on his share of domestic work. Seda often praised him for helping her with her "woman's" work (bringing food from the canteen, mending children's clothes, etc.).

However, they could also give examples of other families in the camp where Chechen men were not so cooperative.

They [Chechen men] don't care about their children; their wives have to bring them food from the canteen, because they refuse to go there. They just loaf around, go to a bar, smoke and drink alcohol, you see Chechens do so as well! They wouldn't let their wives to go to Brno with you as my husband does. [Seda, 32 years, female]

My observation supports Seda's account. Indeed, in some families, it was very difficult or even impossible to attract women to participate in some leisure-time activities or to go outside the camp. However, during the time of my fieldwork, the majority of Chechen fathers in the camp agreed to take on additional domestic duties, mainly related to childcare when women wanted to leave the camp for a couple of hours or when they wanted to participate in the leisure-time activities I organized for them.

As regards changes in the family relations, the typical answer to my question about changes in the family was that the experiences of war and the flight have "pulled" the families

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<sup>26</sup> So-called quartermasters, who are mostly female, usually make these offers. If they see that there is some "trustworthy woman", they can offer her a cleaning job.

together; that the family members see themselves more as a unit now; and that they appreciate more the chance to be together. Indeed, for example some of my male informants appreciated that in the camp, they could spend more time with their wives and children.

Yes, we are closer to each other, we are in this one room anyway, we see each other all the time and we talk more. At home, we could not have seen each other for several months; I had to run away all the time. [Aslambek, 26 years, male]

Another time, Aslambek explained to me that he also valued the chance to be more with his two small children.

In Chechnya, I couldn't, for example, cradle or kiss my baby in front of my father, uncle, or any other family elder. It is a kind of shame, you know, according to our laws. But here, we are alone and I feel that I have to help her [his wife Maleyka] with the kids. And I am ok with it; I feel I'm closer to them than before. [Aslambek, 26 years, male]

I think that the example of Shahrudin and Aslambek show that it would be misleading to argue that Chechen men are all embedded in patriarchal ideologies. Some of them managed to reconsider their position in the family and even benefit from the constraints imposed on them in the camp conditions. However, rejecting this stereotype does not have to lead to overlooking of the cases of subordination of women or to deny that strongly patriarchal attitudes remain influential among the Chechen refugees.

Towards the end of my fieldwork, after getting closer to my informants, I heard more often about the families where the relations deteriorated and resulted in conflicts. I got to know about a case of domestic violence in one Chechen family that left to Austria shortly before my arrival at the camp. The husband spent money on alcohol and started to date with other (non-Chechen) woman in the camp. This caused conflicts in the family which resulted

in severe physical violence towards his wife.<sup>27</sup> Other Chechens in the camp knew about it, they often heard the woman's screams during the night. They disagreed with such behavior and tried to talk to the violent man. Maklan described to me how she attempted to stop the violence.

I tried to talk to him so that he would understand that he's not doing the right thing. I told him: we are not in our country; it's not nice that other people can see this. We are like visitors here and therefore we should behave well. We should not take our rifts out of our rooms so that these Czechs can see it, they can judge us by such behavior. That is what I put emphasis on when I talked to him. And I also told him that he should be ashamed in front of other families. [Malkan, 30 years, female]

Also Chechen men expressed fierce disagreement with such violent behavior. For example, Ruslan said:

That's a shame if a man beats a woman. It happened here once, that's really a shame to beat your own wife. The man who had done it lost all his dignity, but I put the word man between quotation marks, because he does not deserve this title; he beat his wife and for that I feel strong pain in my heart. [Ruslan, 34 years, male]

Nevertheless, they did not manage to stop the violence and help the victim. None of them reported the case to the camp officials. Seda once told me that she wanted to do it, because she could not stand the situation anymore and she was afraid that the man would kill the woman, who was her good friend. But her husband Shahrudin stopped her; he said that it would not help to engage the staff into the problem. My informants emphasized several times, that such a case of violence would not happen at home because the family of the wife would intervene and attempt to stop the violence. Later, the camp psychologist told me that cases of domestic violence in the camp were quite frequent among Chechens as well as among other groups of asylum seekers.

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<sup>27</sup> She had to be hospitalized several times.

Most of the migration studies explain the rise of domestic violence in migrant families by the loss of men's status in the family and consequential frustration, which is vented by violent behavior towards women and children (e.g. Abdulrahim, 1993; Colson, 1999; Hitchcox, 1993; Matsuoka & Sorenson, 1999). This explanation is indeed valid, especially in the refugee camp where men's feeling of powerlessness is even enforced. They are put into a situation in which they cannot exert the power they used to have back home. For example, in cases of emergency, men cannot protect their families because they cannot speak Czech to call for help; they have to rely on the assistance of the camp staff.

However, I argue that another side of the problem should also be acknowledged.<sup>28</sup> Not only men but also women change in exile. They often keep doing the same things they used to do at home: take care of their children and husband, do the housework and sometimes even manage to earn some extra money to support the family. Thus, they are more or less fulfilling what is considered to be their feminine role. On the other hand, their husbands are often in the position that they cannot sustain and protect the family as they did at home. Moreover, some of them are not willing to accommodate to the new conditions and accept new roles and new duties in the family, such as spending more time with children and housework. When women see that the men are not willing to change and moreover, they are looking for any kind of entertainment at the family's expenses, they disagree and do not want to accept this unequal share of burden. Therefore, the rise of domestic violence in migrant families could also be explained by an increase in women's agency and power in the family which is difficult to accept for men whose identity and self-confidence is at stake more than it is in case of migrant women who can still maintain their main feminine attributes as mothers and wives in exile.

Another important factors that makes women more vulnerable to abuse in the refugee camp is their isolation from the support system of relatives, friends, and neighbors who could

have assisted them at home. They experience not only the physical isolation from these networks but also the isolation from the traditional family norms which denounce the violence in the family. I think that it is the absence of social sanctions that, in a way, allows man to act from the position of physical strength and to be violent. In the environments of the refugee camp, traditional values are often collapsing. In a situation of total isolation from the host-country population, these norms are often replaced only by an “outsider control” of the camp staff which is usually perceived by refugees as more oppressive than supportive. As was shown in the case of domestic violence, it was not reported to the camp officials although the Chechens realized that they couldn’t stop it. They talked to the violent men and stopped the violence for a while, but when they left the room, he started to beat his wife again. In my view, mistrust and distance towards a “Czech outsider” plays an important role here.

I have shown that Chechen men and women spent their time in the camp differently. Be fulfilling their “typical” domestic duties, women were kept busy most of the day. Some of them even managed to engage in paid work offered by the camp and support the family. The share of housework and parenting changed within some of the families. Men started to be more involved in domestic work and spent more time with children than they would do in Chechnya. Therefore, I argued that although refugee men faced serious difficulties in managing changes in their position in the family caused by migration, some of them find ways to more or less accommodate to the new conditions. Thus, it would be a simplification to claim that they are all rigidly embedded in patriarchal ideologies. In these cases family members could benefit from the changes caused by migration and actually enjoy the situation of “the greater intimacy-in-isolation” as described by Matsuoka and Sorenson (see the first chapter). On the other hand, for the other families the life in the camp was accompanied by strain and conflicts inside the family. The occurrence of domestic violence is obviously not a

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<sup>28</sup> My acknowledgement goes to the camp psychologist for having an inspiring discussion about this issue with

rare exception in the camp. I have analyzed the case which was described to me by my informants, and I have concluded that not only the losses in men's position cause the rise of violence in the marital relationships. Also the increase in women's power and agency, which is often followed by their expression of disagreement with men's irresponsible behavior, leads to a situation in which men start to abuse their physical strength against women and children. In this way, I attempted to demonstrate that in the refugee families improvements and positive changes in some domains of their life were accompanied by losses and deterioration in others. I argue that the social isolation, the atmosphere of mistrust, powerlessness, and the feeling of being under oppressive control in the camp have intensified (if not to say created) the conflicts in the refugee families.

## CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this thesis was to bring an in-depth and gendered account of how the experience of forced migration is lived at the level of everyday life in the refugee camp. I focused on Chechen asylum seekers who are currently the most common group of refugees in the Czech Republic. I examined how both women and men experienced the changes in gender relations within their families during the life in the camp. I put my analysis into a larger conceptual framework drawing on various migration studies as well as on more theoretical texts such as Scott's conception of gender, Malkki's and Agamben's criticism towards the processes which lead to depoliticizing and silencing of refugees, and Foucault's notion of power relations in disciplining institutions.

The analysis showed that the refugee camp I depicted can be understood as a field of silencing power which reduces refugees to their basic needs or, as Agamben puts it, to a form of "bare life." Moreover, it creates different constraints and opportunities for men and women which led me to conclude that the power operating in the camp has a gendered character. The account of the situation in Chechnya was a necessary step to fully understand what do refugees refer to when they talk about home. Their narrations of home were embedded in their experiences of everyday fear, sorrow and helplessness in Chechnya.

In attempt to grasp the dynamics of transformations of gender and family relationships in Chechen families, I have described how they were framed by the depiction of Chechen traditions and laws. These were represented as a complex and contradictory phenomenon in Chechens' narratives. The sphere of patriarchal family was, on the one hand, described as a source of support, protection and power which provides them with respect and stability. On the other hand, Chechen women also admitted that they sometimes experienced it as confinement. However, the patriarchal order was not perceived as immutable and some of my

informants challenged its prescriptions, for example in terms of men's relations to children, women's dress and the share of paid as well as domestic work.

In analyzing the ideas of femininity and masculinity as they were expressed by my informants, I found out that these ideal notions were not significantly influenced by changing roles of Chechen women who often supported their families during the war. Femininity remained associated with the role of mother and wife. Definitions of masculinity based on generally human virtues seemed to be more flexible, they were not framed by ideas about men's honor based on his fight for national liberation. However, my analysis concurred with other migration studies that in the refugee camp, men experienced a great loss in the sense of self-confidence and self-worth. I have described that in some cases they vented their frustration by violent behavior to women. However, I have emphasized that the rise of women's agency in the family also plays a role in understanding the roots of domestic violence in the refugee families.

The environment of the refugee camp appeared to be more oppressive than supportive in refugees' accounts. Nevertheless, the possibility to get legal paid work was appreciated by the refugees (especially by women who had better access to it). The camp provided a possibility for a partial shift in gender roles within the family when a woman became the sole family supporter. On the other hand, it did not sufficiently protect women from abusive behavior of their husbands in the camp.

Drawing on other forced migration studies as well as on my own findings, I conclude that it is essential not to perceive the family only as a field of consent and as a homogeneous unity. It is indeed a field of struggles and negotiations. However, the supportive role of the family should not be overlooked. The majority of my informants managed in the new situation created by their forced migration quite well. As far as they told me and as could observe myself, they did not experience serious conflicts and disruptions within their families.

Although their gender relations were challenged, they interpreted their family in an essentially positive manner.

I acknowledge that this optimistic conclusion refers to particular people I met in the camp in relatively short time of my fieldwork. I cannot claim that they were the representative group for all Chechen refugees in the Czech Republic. Therefore, it is not meant to be a general conclusion. I also realized that the time spent with my informants significantly influenced our interviews. Towards the end of my fieldwork, I got to know about more personal experiences and also about some discontents in relation to Chechen traditions and to behavior of other families in the camp. I acknowledge that a limited time that I spent in the camp is certainly one of the shortcomings of this study. If I would live there for a longer time, I would probably get more complex picture of the refugees' situation and their experiences in the camp.

Furthermore, this research was aimed to bring the Czech Republic as a host country for refugees into the context of forced migration studies. I pointed out some specificities of the Czech reception system does not, in general, acknowledge Chechens as refugees and therefore the majority of them perceive the Czech Republic as a transition country and attempt to travel further to the West. I have also presented a critical view on the particular case of the administration of the Czech refugee camp Zastávka u Brna.

## APPENDICES

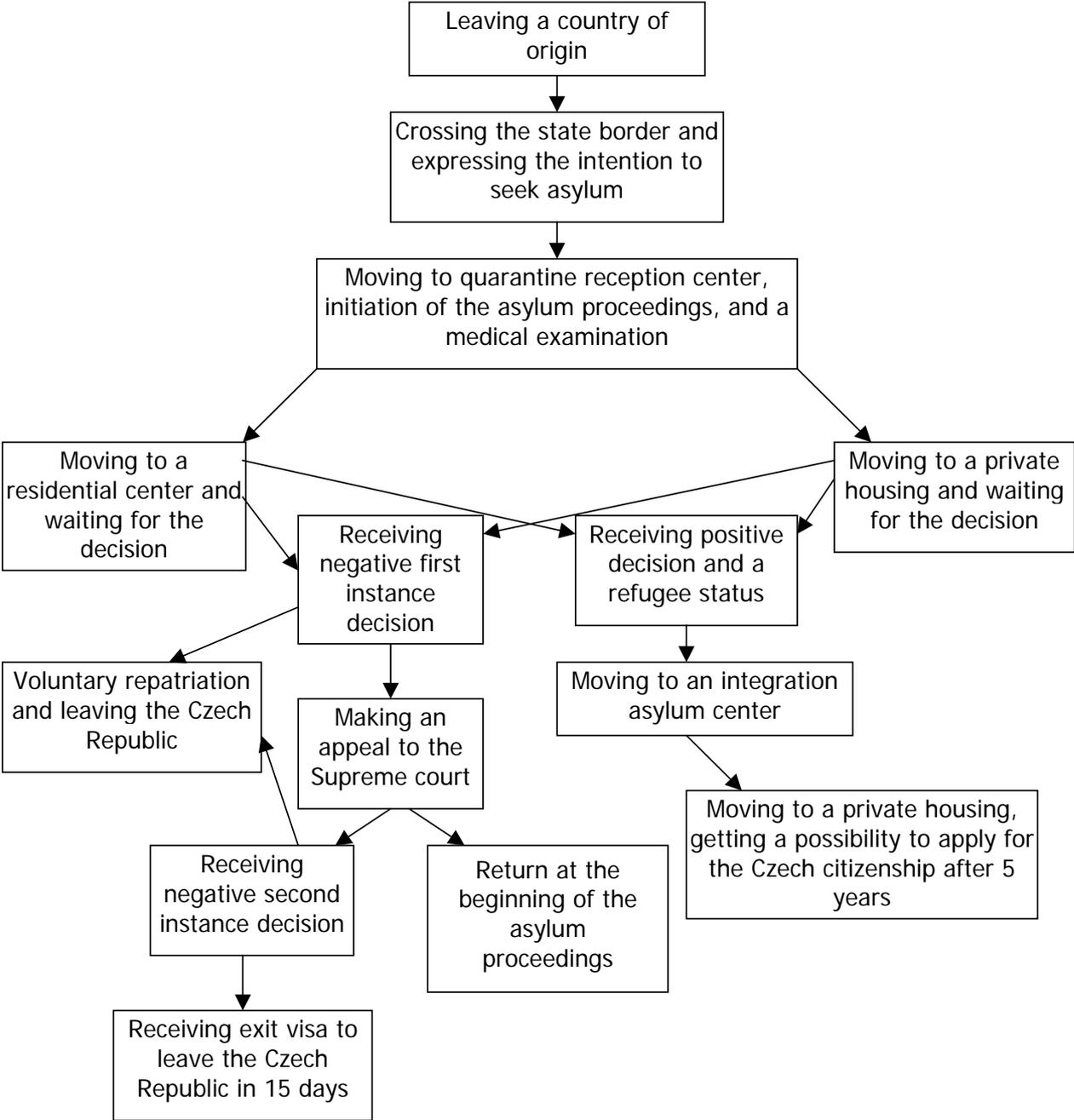
### APPENDIX 1: INFORMATION ABOUT THE CHECHEN INFORMANTS <sup>29</sup>

Name	Characteristics of the family	Gender	Age	Children	Education	Specific information
<i>Seda</i>	Both Seda and Shahrudin decided not to move to any other country as the majority of the Chechen refugees do. Although they are very pessimistic about their chances to get asylum, they want to wait until their claim is decided.	Female	32	3 – two girls and a boy in the age from thee to nine years	8 years of elementary education and six moths of vocational training in sewing	She got a paid job in the camp and cleaned the corridors and toilets in the residential building every day.
<i>Shahrudin</i>		Male	43		He studied at a Russian university and became an mechanical engineer	Due to Seda’s contacts with the camp staff, he also got a job in the camp; he worked in the camp library two days a week. He served as a soldier of the Russian army in the Czech Republic from 1978 to 1980. Because of this experience he and his family fled to the CR.
<i>Maleyka</i>	Maleyka and Aslambek have appreciated very much that they could live together without a threat that Aslambek will be taken away and beaten by Russian soldiers. They were not sure whether they will stay in the CR.	Female	20	2 – a boy and a girl in the age from two to four years	8 years of elementary education	She seemed to be overloaded with childcare; she said that at home, she did not have to look after her children that much because she had a lot of support from her mother.
<i>Aslambek</i>		Male	26		8 years of elementary education	In Chechnya, he had to escape from the persecution of Russian soldiers, several times; he was severely beaten by them.
<i>Ruslan</i>	His wife together with their little daughter left to Austria and because they did not have enough money to travel together Ruslan stayed behind.	Male	34	1 – girl about five years old	8 years of elementary education and several years of university studies which he had not finished	He suffered very much from the conditions in the camp and after my departure from the camp, I got to know that he returned to Chechnya with the plan to join his wife in Austria in case that she will be granted asylum there.

<sup>29</sup> All the names of Chechen refugees used in this thesis are pseudonyms.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Characteristics of the family</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Children</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Specific information</b>
<i>Zulfia</i>	Her husband left Chechnya before her and they lost contact. She stayed because she had to take care of his parents. After a year, the situation at home became dangerous also for Zulfia and she decided to flee and look for her husband. In the Czech Republic, she found out that he is in Austria and that he has already been granted asylum. In the time of my fieldwork, she was waiting for visa to join him in Austria.	Female	44	4 – girls from four to twelve years old	8 years of elementary education and vocational training in cooking	She also worked in the camp; she washed the dishes in the canteen. She sometimes complained about the burden of the responsibility that she had without her husband. Towards the end of my fieldwork, she decided not to wait for her visa anymore and she crossed to border to Austria with her four daughters illegally in order to get to her husband (whom she did not see for a year) as soon as possible.
<i>Malkan</i>	She lost her husband in 1999 in the second Chechen war. She came to the Czech Republic together with her brother, his wife Kheda. In the camp, they lived all together in one room.	Female	30	1 – a ten-year-old girl	She graduated in law at a Russian university	Both Malkan and Kheda have feared for their brother and husband very much. They were willing to do everything to get him out of detention. Moreover, they told me that as lone women without man's protection, they some troubles with male refugees in the camp.
<i>Kheda</i>	She came with her husband who was not present in camp during my fieldwork. He has been accused of causing a car accident and detained in custody.	Female	26	1 – a two-year-old girl	She studied law as well but it was not clear to me whether she completed her studies	

**APPENDIX 2: RECEPTION SYSTEM IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC**



Source: The author according to "Zákon o azylu České republiky [The Asylum Act of the Czech Republic]," 1999/2002

**APPENDIX 3: ONE OF THE THREE RESIDENTIAL BUILDINGS IN THE ZASTÁVKA  
CAMP**



Photo by the author, April 2004

**APPENDIX 4: A ROOM FOR FIVE PEOPLE IN THE ZASTÁVKA CAMP**



Photo by the author, April 2004

**APPENDIX 5: A CORRIDOR IN THE ZASTÁVKA CAMP**



Photo by the author, April 2004

**APPENDIX 6: A TELEVISION ROOM IN THE ZASTÁVKA CAMP**



Photo by the author, April 2004

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