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Political and Democratic Participation of Migrant Women in Germany

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I. Introduction

Despite the large proportion and increasing number of women with a migration background in Germany, their representation in decision-making bodies from municipal to federal level is marginal and their participation in political and democratic spaces is still limited. On the other hand, there is growing advocacy as well as initiatives by migrant women themselves to promote and advance their political and democratic participation.

In this paper, reviews of relevant surveys and related studies, as well as interviews with experts were carried out, to investigate the extent of migrant women's lack of representation in political and democratic spaces in German society, and to examine the barriers and factors that generate these conditions. Additionally, the various efforts and initiatives of migrant women to promote and advance their participation will also be analysed. Through the findings of this paper and drawing on our own experiences in a migrant women's organisation, we also aim to contribute to the urgent demand to address the inadequate representation and limited political and democratic participation of these groups in German society.

The expert interviewees come from various backgrounds to provide a broad perspective on this theme. The interviewees include an academic Dr. Megha Amrith, Lea Rakovsky from a non-governmental organisation "Ban Ying", and Wilfred Josue, a Co-Chair of the local advisory council for participation and integration in the district of Steglitz-Zehlendorf, Berlin.

II. Migration and Migrant Women in Germany

In 2021, 27.2% (22.4 million) people in German private households had a so-called migration background of whom 49.2% (11 million) were women (DESTASIS,¹ 2022). A person with a migration background is defined by DESTATIS (2022) as someone who has at least one parent who does not have German citizenship by birth. Of the 11 million women with a migration background, 3.2 million women are non-EU nationals. Overall, migrant women in Germany represent a heterogeneous group in terms of region of origin and residence permit (Lechner and Atanisev, 2023).

There are six basic categories that grant the right to stay to non-German nationals in Germany: a temporary residence permit, a settlement permit or permit for permanent residence, naturalisation, citizens of the European Union (right of free movement on the basis of EU treaties), a residence permit for protection for asylum seekers, and exceptional permission to remain for persons who are obliged to leave the country and who cannot be deported. Additionally, the concept of “irregular” residence is used to refer to persons who are in Germany without a regular right of residence. Both unauthorised entry and unauthorised residence are punishable by law and are generally punishable by a fine or imprisonment (Section 95 of the Residence Act) (BMI/BAMF, 2020).

Table 1 shows the six basic categories of the right of residency in Germany along with a short description (Adapted from Fachkommission Integrationsfähigkeit, p.188).

¹ DESTASIS - Statistisches Bundesamt or The Federal Statistical Office is a federal authority of Germany. It is the institution to contact first for official data on the society, the economy, the environment and the state.

A residence permit grants a temporary stay. In the vast majority of cases, it can be extended as long as the prerequisites for issuance continue to be met.
A settlement permit (or permit for permanent residence – EU) is a permanent title that can typically be applied for after five years of residence, provided that the legal requirements are met. Persons with a settlement permit are equal to German nationals in virtually every respect, but they do not have the right to vote.
Foreigners can acquire German nationality by way of naturalisation. They have a legally enforceable claim to this after eight years of legal residence, or even earlier in exceptional cases, provided they meet the requirements.
Citizens of the European Union with the nationality of another EU member state have a right of free movement on the basis of the European treaties. They are allowed to enter Germany and work here at any time without the need for a residence permit.
A residence permit for protection seekers confirms that a person may stay in Germany for the duration of the asylum procedure in order to apply for asylum. It is only replaced by a residence permit if the asylum application is granted and in the event of a refusal, the person concerned has to leave the country.
Exceptional permission to remain is granted to persons who are obliged to leave the country and who cannot be deported. The exceptional permission to remain does not change the fact that the stay is illegal. However, it can be replaced by a regular residence permit under certain conditions; there are various legal bases for this.

Table 1. The six basic categories of the right of residency in Germany and their short description.

The number of migrant women in Germany has continuously increased in the last five years (DESTATIS, 2022) (Fig. 1). This trend is similar to that of the total number of persons with a migration background.

Women who migrate to Germany are coming from different global regions. Fig. 2 shows the top countries where women with a migrant background in Germany come from, based on the DESTATIS survey (2022) as of 2021.

Based on this most recent survey, the majority of the women who migrate to the country are from EU-countries (33%) led by Poland, Romania, Italy, Croatia and Greece. A significant number also come from non-EU countries such as Turkey, Russia and Kazakhstan. Other Asian countries where most migrant women come from include Syria, Afghanistan, China and Vietnam.

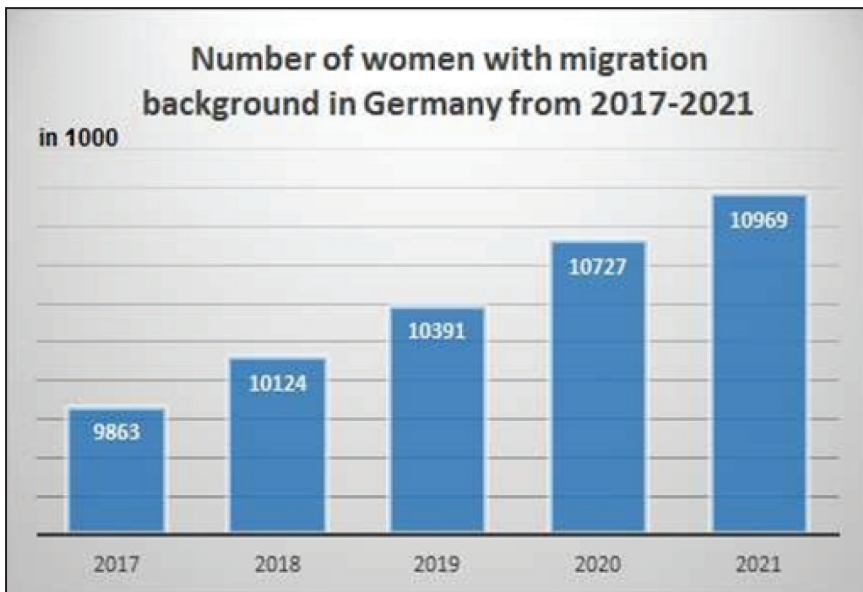


Fig. 1. The number of women with a migration background steadily increased from 2017 to 2021 (DESTATIS, 2022).

Interestingly, some countries are characterised by a disproportionately high share of females in the total number of immigrants such as Thailand (74.4 %), the Philippines (67.9%) and the Russian Federation (59.3%) (BMI/BAMF, 2020, p. 48). This disproportionate trend in two countries mentioned; Thailand and the Philippines is mainly caused by the high number of women migrating due to marriage (so-called marriage migrants) from these countries.

People who enter the country to claim asylum on the other hand face an entirely different political and bureaucratic process, subject to laws that differ from the general regulations for foreigners (Statista Research Department, 2023).

A particular procedure called the “cluster procedure” was used in 2015-2017 (Brücke et al., 2019 (a)). The procedure groups asylum seekers based on the potential complexity of their cases to speed up average processing times. Asylum seekers were grouped into Cluster A: countries of origin whose nationals have a high rate of having asylum applications approved, Cluster B: countries of origin with a low protection rate, Cluster C: complex cases, and Cluster D: (Dublin cases).² This

² The “Dublin” system serves to identify which European Union (EU) Member State is responsible for examining an asylum application filed in one of the Member States by a third-country national. It seeks to establish that only one Member State is responsible for examining an asylum application. This is to avoid asylum seekers from being sent from one country to another, and also to prevent the submission of several applications for asylum by one person (European Court of Human Rights, 2021).

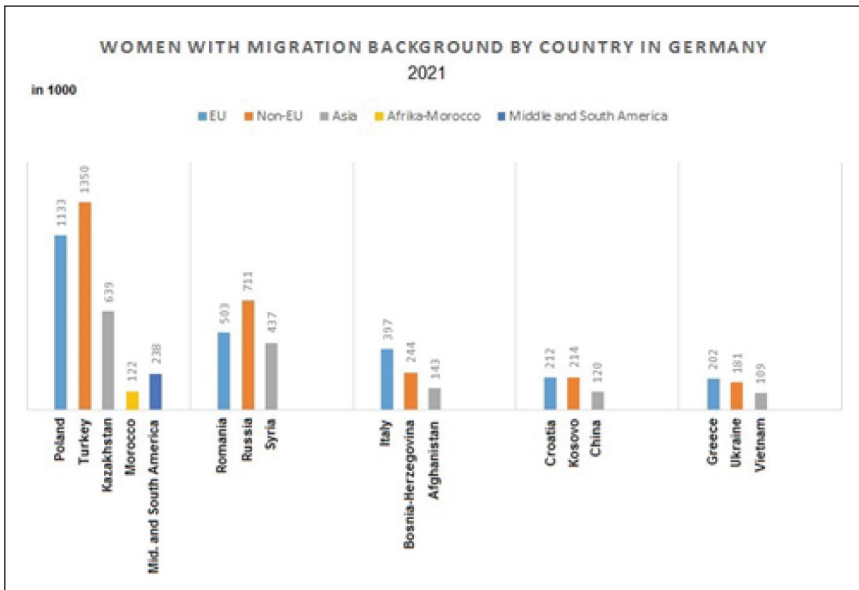


Fig. 2. The top countries from the five global regions where women with migrant backgrounds in Germany come from as of 2021. Data from the survey of DESTATIS (2022)

grouping procedure generally minimised the length of waiting times by processing the easy cases first, but it also led to more variation: asylum seekers from some clusters faced even longer procedures (Brücke et al., 2019 (a)).

Germany is currently the largest economy in Europe and home to a diverse international population. These conditions make the country an attractive destination and residence country for migrants. As of 2020, the top reasons given for staying in Germany recorded by the Foreign Office among non-EU citizens were for family reasons (15.9%), temporary residence (10.8%), employment (8.1%), "Duldung"³ or toleration (5.4%) and education (4.7%) (BMI/BAMF, 2020 p. 52).

In recent years, the country experienced an influx of refugees and asylum seekers. In 2015, official figures state that the arrivals or refugees peaked to a million, mostly coming from Syria and Afghanistan. In fact, it is in the period between 2015 to 2020 where a more pronounced change in the foreign population can be observed. During this period, the foreign population grew by 25.5% (BMI/BAMF, 2020, p. 175). This development is largely attributable to the migrations in 2015 and 2016,

³ A Duldung is not a legally valid residence permit. It certifies that you are obliged to leave the country but can currently not leave or be deported because there is an obstacle to deportation (§ 60a AufenthG). A Duldung can be granted for a few days or for a couple of months. Depending on the reason, immigration authorities are either obliged to grant you a Duldung or they have the discretion to do so.

which were characterised by high levels of arrival in the context of the refugee influx. Another wave of refugee arrivals happened last year as the war broke out in Ukraine. As of November 2022, over a million refugees from Ukraine arrived in Germany (Statista, 2023).

III. Barriers to Participation for migrant women in Germany

Each of the different categories to acquire the right to enter and stay in Germany provide specific requirements and sets of rules and regulations (see Table 1).

Germany's legal regulations on entry and residence are regarded as tortuous and complex, and have been a subject of public debate and criticism. Indeed, acquiring a residence permit is difficult and restrictive and poses limitations on people with a migration background in exercising their political rights and participating in democratic life. The experiences of Gabriela Germany, which works with marriage migrants from the Philippines, reveal that some women are forced to stay in a marriage, despite facing marital difficulties and are sometimes subjected to abuse, as their right to stay in the country is legally tied to the validity of the marriage for three years.

Indeed, different groups of migrants have different legal statuses that significantly influence their freedom and extent of participation. Lea Rakovsky, Project Coordinator of Ban Ying e.V. and one of the expert interviewees, said it is important to note that legally, migrants from EU countries do not have to worry about their residence permits. "There is still the prevalent power dynamics that is rooted from colonial history and affects the level of discrimination against women from non-EU countries", she added.

Additionally, women from EU-member state countries enjoy more freedom to move than women coming from so-called 'third' countries. Free or easier movement between countries within the EU single market, makes migration and integration less difficult for citizens of EU member states, Germany included, with a large list of choices on where to work and live at any time in life (Statista Research Department, 2023).

This is in stark contrast to the measures implemented for various migrant groups. For labour migrants, new laws have been implemented to ease their entry while for non-labour migrants, bureaucratic difficulties are maintained. On March 1, 2020, a new migrant labour law, the Skilled

Immigration Act, was enacted to facilitate the recruitment and immigration of qualified skilled workers in the country. It contains provisions that expand the opportunities for workers from non- EU countries to apply for work in Germany, while it maintains that the right to vote is only granted to people with German citizenship.

Refugees and asylum seekers also face various forms of challenges not only in securing their permit to stay and in being able to start a new life in Germany, but also maintaining a healthy psychological sense of well-being. Refugees often have had greater exposure to traumatic events than other migrants, caused by wars, violence, and persecution - both in their countries of origin and in transit countries (Brücker et al., 2019 (a)). The study of Brücker et al., 2019 (a) further revealed that the reported prevalence among refugees of mental health risks such as depression-related symptoms, post-traumatic stress disorder, and psychological disorders, are disproportionately high among females and individuals above the age of 40. All of these health issues are likely to hinder social participation.

Female refugees with children, particularly toddlers, have fewer opportunities to take part in integration support such as language classes. They also participate less in education and, eventually have substantially lower employment rates than their male counterparts (Brücker et al., 2019 (b)).

In an interview, Dr. Amrith, the lead researcher of the Max Planck Research Group “Ageing in a Time of Mobility”, pointed out that language can also be a barrier to participating in political life and to feeling a sense of inclusion and belonging in political spaces or in local arenas. “In the academic sector in which I work, it is harder for migrant women to find jobs, particularly long-term permanent positions or higher-ranking positions like professorships if they don’t speak fluent German – they are often perceived as being unable to contribute to administrative work because of the language limitation or to teach in German”, she added.

In Germany, the basic provision of political participation is through the right to vote and the ability to stand for election at national and local levels. In order to have these rights however, one has to have German citizenship - therefore voting rights.

Dr. Amrith also believes that discrimination is a barrier that limits the participation of migrant women. She pointed out that migrant women are without a doubt discriminated against more than other women, whether they are first, second, or third generation women in the country. They are often asked about their ‘migration background’, are often racialised and never truly seen as belonging even if they have lived in

the country for many years. She added that it could also depend on the city where one lives, if it on the whole embraces and encourages diversity and freedom of expression (e.g. Berlin), or if it is relatively more homogeneous and expecting migrant women to 'conform' more to German social norms.

Additionally, The German Citizenship Law had been quite restrictive for decades (Miera, 2009). It was only on January 1, 2000 that the thorough revision of German nationality law came into force with the amended Nationality Act (StAG). This supplemented the principle of descent, previously the sole possible way to acquire nationality or German citizenship. This means that children born in Germany to non-German parents are now able to acquire German nationality if certain conditions are met (Federal Foreign Office, 2022).

According to Rakovsky, the women they support are confronted by very severe and urgent [personal] issues and often there is not much space for political participation - for example one needs to quickly get out of a sexual trafficking situation, a difficult financial situation from a husband, or dealing with issues on a residence permit, before one can actually have the capacity to participate in political life.

The media also plays a role in either uplifting or limiting the participation of migrant women. In terms of media representation, studies found that women with a migration background are significantly less likely to be featured on various media programmes (e.g. Lünenborg, Fritsche and Bach, 2011) than men with a migration background. On a quantitative and qualitative basis, the authors claim that women with a migration background only appear in one third of all migration-specific media contributions. Aside from the migration and gender-specific discrimination against women in media representation, there is still a prevalent portrayal of migrant women as objects of desire, as 'exotic' or 'oriental'.

Based on the study of Lind and Meltzer (2020), in which they examined the visibility of gender in media coverage about migrants, they found that migrant women are distinctly under-represented. They argued that invisibility of women migrants may reduce the perceived importance of their needs to the audience. For women migrants, this might reduce their self-esteem and constrain them from taking powerful positions in society. It follows that the under-representation of migrant women in the media may pose severe consequences for them as a social group and for society as a whole.

IV. Participation of Migrant Women in Political Life

In order to understand the lack of political participation of migrant women, it is important to first examine how women in general are represented in political spaces in the country. It is likewise important to state that this paper is aligned to the definition of political participation as efforts through which individuals seek to influence and/or direct local, state, or national policies through interaction with the executive authority. This participation can be in the form of voting in elections and public referendums or being eligible for election. It also includes the ability to actively participate in politics through individual and group actions and being informed about key issues and pending decisions by the executive authority.

The proportion of women who held positions in Germany's lower house of parliament, the Bundestag, was only 31% or 218 of the 709 elected parliamentarians after the 2017 federal elections. Although this proportion slightly increased to 34.7% after the elections on September 26, 2021, it is still far from equal gender representation (EAF Berlin, 2022). Fig. 3 presents the number of women in the 20th German Bundestag (national Parliament) as compared to the total number of seats that each of the major parties has (Statista, 2022).

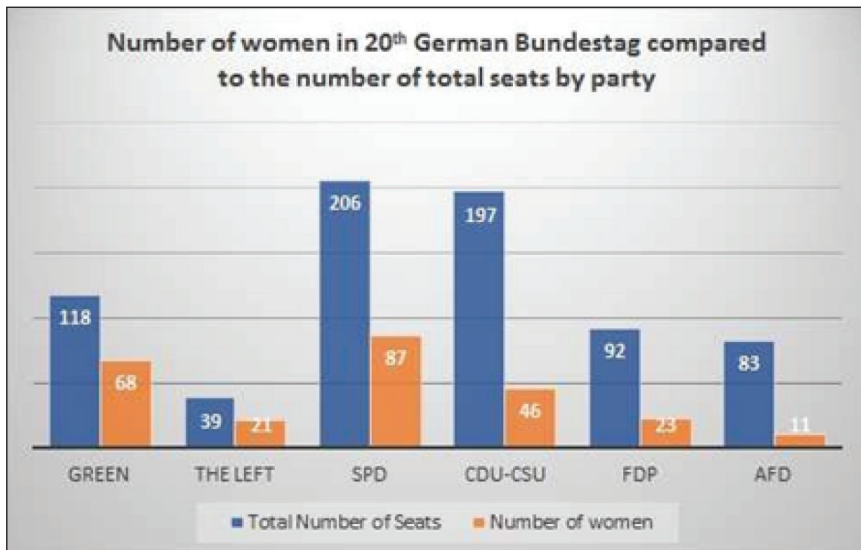


Fig. 3. The number of women in the 20th German Bundestag (national Parliament) as compared to the total number of seats per party (Statista, 2022).

In terms of running for positions, there is a relatively higher share of women candidates on the national lists as of September 2021 (Fig. 4) than those being elected.

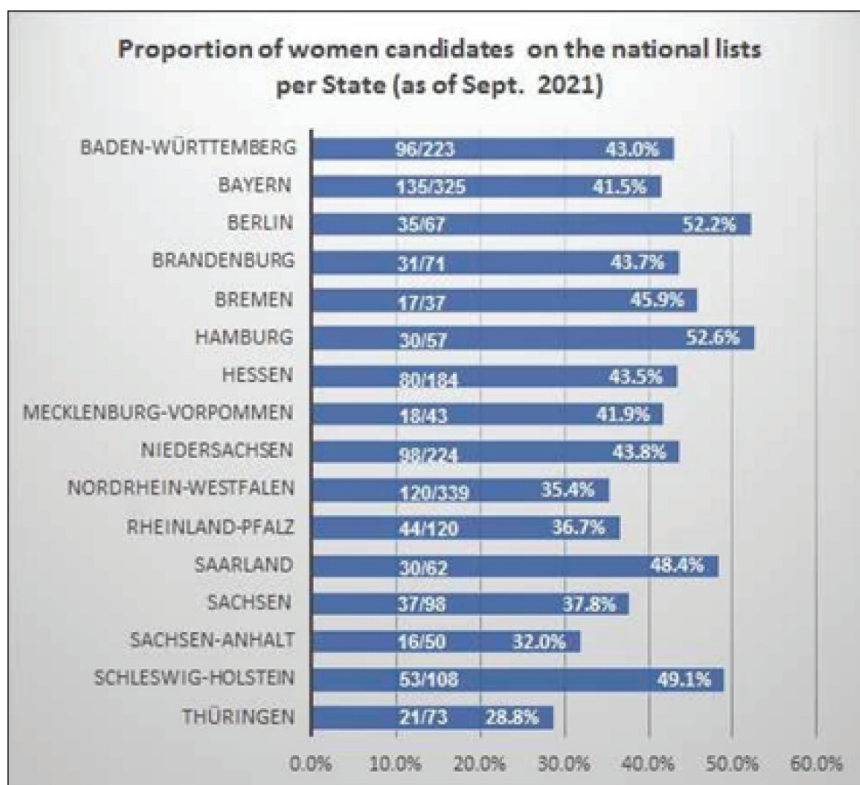


Fig. 4. The proportion of women candidates on the national lists per state as of September 2021 (EAF Berlin, 2021)

Based on the data available, women in general are still highly underrepresented in decision-making bodies from municipal to national levels. People with migrant backgrounds who engage in politics are still relatively few in number, and the political careers of migrants are constrained by stereotyping and opposition within political parties and in the way they are represented by the media. In fact, those few who are successful are still perceived as being something 'other', 'exotic' – or their 'normality' appears arduous (Miera, 2009).

The representation of women with migration backgrounds was marginal in the last two federal elections – 2017 and 2021. Although there is a slight increase in the total number of Members of Parliament (MPs) with a migration background, as well as the number of women with a

migration background, the figures are still less representative considering that the total number of people with migration backgrounds in Germany is 22.4 million (27.2%).

Party	Federal Elections 2021			Federal Elections 2017		
	MP (Total)	MP with migration background (Total)	MP with migration background (Women)	MP (Total)	MP with migration background (Total)	MP with migration background (Women)
SPD	206	35	14	153	15	7
CDU/CSU	196	8	4	246	7	2
Green	118	17	11	67	10	6
FDP	92	5	1	80	5	1
AfD	83	6	1	93	8	1
The Left	39	11	6	69	13	7
SSW	1	1				
Independent				1	0	
Total	735	83	37	709	58	24

Table 2. The total number of Members of Parliament (MPs) compared to the number of MPs with a migration background and the corresponding number of women MPs with a migration background following the 2017 and 2021 Federal Elections (Mediendienst Integration, 2021).

According to Sauer (2016), empirical research findings show that migrants' political participation in terms of electoral processes has improved over time, but it is still lower than that of native citizens in all areas. She added that there are general conditions of direct political participation that exclude foreigners, caused by the lack of perception of political institutions as stakeholders and different socio demographic structures. Even in the report of the Federal Government Commissioner for Migration, Refugees and Integration (2020) on Integration Potential, the focus is more on the civic and social engagement of immigrants than on participation in elections and political parties.

Dr. Amrith said that the participation of migrant women is a spectrum that ranges from not participating at all to participating only on issues concerning migration. She added that it partially depends on how long

one has lived in Germany. Wilfred Dominic Josue observed that women of colour and those with migration backgrounds are primarily active at local level.

Rakovsky added that based on some interviews that they conducted to investigate political participation, some of the women said they do not feel entitled to participate at a l l . Rather they said that they would feel grateful to receive anything (for example a residence permit), and that they are also afraid that if they are politically active, they will get into trouble. Moreover, they are also not very familiar with German politics.

Roth (2017) argues that legal equality alone is not enough. Rather, it is necessary to remove migration-specific barriers for example by providing appropriate language skills and basic knowledge of the political system of the host country, as well as access to political parties and other associations in order to achieve fair political representation of migrants' interests.

V. Participation of Women in Democratic Life

In general, the participation of women with a migration background in democratic life is more limited than those with no migration background (Miera, 2009). Moreover, different factors such as country of origin, reason for migration and whether one is a first or second generation migrant also influences the degree of participation.

Dr. Amrith believes that when migrant women are involved in decision-making, this can have a lasting impact at a local level for the next generation of women. This is because the priorities of migrant women are likely to be different from the status quo and require greater sensitivity in terms of the inclusion of intersectional identities.

Currently there are a significant number of migrant women-led initiatives, organisations and networks in Germany that aim to promote and improve their democratic participation and representation. Most of the existing organisations represent a particular group (e.g. country of origin, migration status, or LGBTQ). While there are some organisations that are officially registered or have an e.V. (*eingetragene Verein*) status, there are others that do not but are quite visible in political and democratic spaces.

Table 3 presents some self-led national and local (Brandenburg-Berlin) migrant women's organisations.

Organisation (registered, e.V.)	Short Description
DaMigra (Dachverband der Migran- tinnen Organisationen)	Has been operating as a nationwide, origin-independent and women-specific umbrella for migrant women's organisations since 2014.
Women in Exile	A group of refugee women working for their rights in Berlin-Brandenburg area.
International Women Space	Founded in December 2012 during the Refugee Movement's occupation of the former Gerhart-Hauptmann School in Berlin-Kreuzberg and was registered in 2017. Describe themselves as a political organisation to fight against attacks on women and the issues they confront: as refugee women, as migrant women and as non-migrant women
Bundesverband der Migran- tinnen in Deutschland	An independent, non-partisan and democratic association of immigrant women in Germany from Turkey. Founded in March 2005, aims to promote the integration of Turkish and Kurdish immigrant women in all areas of German life

Table 3 - Some self-led national migrant women's organisations

VI. Measures to Promote and Improve the Participation of Migrant Women

Understanding the broader sense of political and democratic participation of women with a migration background is a good step towards promoting their participation. There are already some proposals (e.g. Miera, 2009; Roth, 2017) for a broader understanding of the political participation of migrants in Germany. This includes the involvement in institutionalised round tables, consultation and participation in civil society rather than just voting and standing for elections. An example of participatory projects are the Migrants Advisory Councils (e.g. Leipzig).⁴ Furthermore, this broader understanding overcomes the restrictions imposed by not having citizenship rights and takes into account the significant number of immigrants without German citizenship, including those considered as irregular migrants.

Dr. Amrith stated that improving the participation of migrant women means providing an open and welcoming atmosphere to women of different backgrounds and a broader understanding of what it means to live in contemporary German society, one that is constituted by people holding a range of intersectional identities.

According to Rakovsky, improvement should really start from granting residence status and that there should be more opportunities to migrate, live and work here so that migrants can have the opportunity to become politically active. “Better access to work and becoming independent and self-sufficient are also essential enabling factors” she added.

For Josue, reducing bureaucracy or paperwork in acquiring funding for the empowerment of migrant women would encourage more organisations to apply for funding and thus enable them to have resources to support their initiatives.

Gabriela Germany have seen how migrant women’s own organisations were especially helpful during the pandemic. Many migrant women, especially BIPOCs (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour), suffer from isolation, anxiety, and loss of perspective due to their conditions. How-

⁴ Migrant Advisory Council Leipzig. <https://english.leipzig.de/youth-family-and-community/foreign-nationals-and-migrants/migrants-integration-and-intercultural-activities-in-leipzig/the-city-of-leipzig-migrants-council/the-members-of-the-migrants-advisory-council-leipzig>

ever, there is a need for a special support programme to help women to get back on their feet and to participate in political and democratic life. In terms of media representation, Dr. Amrith believes that the prevalence of social media and the ability of migrant women to represent themselves in many of these channels should be maximised so that they can portray a more positive image of themselves to that in traditional media channels.

“People can participate in a political sense in the organisations or institutions in which they work, in raising awareness about challenges facing migrant women, faith-based spaces, and in their residential areas, even if not in formal political channels” she added.

Indeed, there are many ways of promoting and raising migrant women’s participation, including the reduction of bureaucratic hurdles in securing the right to stay, enabling them to move around and vote, better media representation, increasing the number of women in decision making positions, combating the discrimination against them, and supporting them to self-organise, not only to support each other, but to collectively empower themselves and fight for their rights.

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