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Liminal Solidarity: How Ukrainian Refugee Mothers Negotiate Situational Kinship in a Collective Reception Centre in Belgium

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Abstract
While solidarity practices among refugees have increasingly drawn scholars' interest, hardly any research has addressed the complex relationships between refugee women in the specific context of collective reception centres. At the same time, there has not been accounted for the way in which specific intersectional identities of refugee mothers shape mutual solidarity. Literature on refugee solidarity often analyses solidarity with an overdetermined political reading, which precludes the context in which solidarity emerges from being adequately researched. Based on my ethnographic research with Ukrainian refugee mothers in an emergency reception centre in Belgium, I propose a conceptualisation of solidarity that acknowledges that overlapping, intersectional identities do not automatically generate belonging. I argue for employing a situated intersectional lens (Yuval-Davis, 2015), and combining 'situational kinship' (Nelson, 2013) with 'resilient moves' (Groeninck et al., 2020) in order to grasp how the mothers' navigating of the specific liminal and intersectional context of the reception centre, produced everyday practices of solidarity.

Keywords
Ukrainian refugee mothers; solidarity; situated intersectionality; situational kinship; resilient moves

Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 has triggered the largest refugee movement in Europe since WWII, causing 6.5 million Ukrainians to flee their country, and another 3.7 million people to be displaced within Ukraine (Bathke, 2023; UNHCR, 2024b). Because martial law requires all Ukrainian men between 18 to 60 to be available for conscription into the army, the Ukrainian refugee population has a unique face: approximately 90 percent of the refugees are women and children (Lashchuk, 2023; UNHCR, 2024a). The unfolding humanitarian crisis in Ukraine has been met by an unprecedented solidarity in Europe, evident in the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive, which grants Ukrainian refugees a series of rights, including a residence permit, access to employment, social welfare, and suitable accommodation (EC, n.d.). Since the invasion, 77 645 Ukrainian refugees have received temporary protection in Belgium (Eurostat, 2024). The local governments provide crisis reception of Ukrainian refugees by repurposing existing building complexes, ranging from holiday parks to boarding schools and monasteries, in order to temporarily house refugees (Departement Omgeving, n.d.).

When I started the research this article is based on, looking into solidarity practices in the context of one of these makeshift reception centres for Ukrainian refugees, I was certain I had a fairly clear picture of how solidarity would take shape in this context. Not only had I worked for more than a year as a student worker at this specific centre before starting my research, the literature on solidarity with and between refugees in similar contexts has provided several answers to the specific workings of refugee solidarity. Activist literature looking into social relationships between and with refugees in refugee camps has established the political nature of solidarity, stressing refugee agency and citizenship (Rygiel, 2011; Sigona, 2015). At the same time, literature studying support practices between citizens and migrants, argues that solidarity can also imply more personal, intimate connections (Brun, 2016; Scheibelhofer, 2018; Vandevoordt, 2019).

The confluence of the specific context of the war, the urgency with which shelter was provided and the status granted to Ukrainian refugees through Temporary Protection, created the exceptional situation of collective reception centres almost exclusively accommodating Ukrainian mothers with children. As literature has pointed to conflict erupting among refugee camp residents 'along dividing lines rooted in identity' (Campesi, 2015, p. 10), I assumed that, contrarily, the shared intersectional identities of these women – as white, Ukrainian women, fleeing the war and living collectively in one reception centre – would foster a quasi-natural sense of mutual belonging among them. Overlapping social locations, as argued by Yuval-Davis, are one of the important levels 'on which belonging is constructed' (2006a, p. 199).

However, throughout my research I realised that the mutual support between the Ukrainian mothers was neither to be interpreted as being of a particular, political nature, nor based on intimate, social relations. On the contrary: it was much more limited, prosaic and pragmatic – though no less significant – in nature. In this article, I therefore seek to conceptualise solidarity through an intersectional lens, by invoking Yuval-Davis' situated approach to intersectionality (Yuval-Davis, 2015; Yuval-Davis et al., 2019).

This approach builds on the classic conceptualisation of intersectionality, as referring to the way individuals' social realities are determined by the intersection of different, mutually constitutive social divisions like gender, race, class… (Crenshaw, 1989; Yuval-Davis, 2006b). *Situated* intersectionality further nuances and contextualises both the workings of social divisions as well as individuals' relationship to them, and therefore hinges on two central notions. First, it emphasises the importance of the 'situ' in establishing that social divisions differently affect people's lives according to the different temporal and spatial locations they operate in. Secondly, it takes as its point of departure the situated gazes of differently positioned people experiencing these social divisions, who might consequently comprehend social reality, and their position in it, in different ways (Yuval-Davis, 2015, 2023).

In line with these two main elements, my analysis of the solidarity between the Ukrainian women through this situated intersectional lens serves a dual purpose. On the one hand, I want to highlight the vital but neglected role of the context in which solidarity emerges. Already in 2016, Oosterlynck et al. advocated for ethnographic research to 'generate a much more contextualized understanding of the specific conditions under which people engage in everyday practices of solidarity' (pp. 778 - 779). This appeal can be traced back to a more general tendency in refugee solidarity research to focus predominantly on the conceptual and philosophical underpinnings of solidarity, rather than on its contextual properties, causing research to hardly pay attention to how everyday solidarities are actually practiced by migrants (Bauder & Juffs, 2020, pp. 48, 61).

On the other hand, by centring on differently situated gazes vis-à-vis the seemingly shared social locations of the Ukrainian mothers, including the 'situated gaze of the researcher', I seek to critically analyse the actual basis from which the solidarity between the women emerges (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019). A focus on situated gaze crucially refutes the assumption that people in the same 'social category', even in the same time and place, necessarily make sense of their social realities in the same way. Conversely, it reaffirms how differently situated people, with different emotions, belongings, identifications and normative value systems, 'would view, understand, as well as assess the same social encounter differently' (Bauder & Juffs, 2020, p. 88; Yuval-Davis, 2015, p. 97). It is clear then that in order to properly analyse the workings of the solidarity between the Ukrainian women in the context of the reception centre, we need another aggregate level of analysis, beyond seemingly reified social locations.

In the following part, I will first review the literature that focuses on the particular solidarity that emerges in refugee camps. Because solidarity practices among refugees staying in reception centres have rarely been the subject of research, I draw on this literature to look at how scholars have analysed the role of the particular context of the camp in the formation of social relationships and solidarity. I then turn to the concept of Autonomy of Migration, and the connected body of literature that has sought to highlight the everyday, pragmatic support practices among migrants I seek to lay bare in my own research. Concluding that the overly political reading of solidarity in both of these respective literatures forecloses a sufficiently concrete analysis of the context in which solidarity emerges, I subsequently propose to combine Nelson's (2013) concept of 'situational kinship', with the framework of 'resilient moves', as applied by Groeninck et al. (2020) to address this gap. Following this, I detail the methodology and elaborate on the specific context of the centre, before discussing the findings of my research from a situated intersectional lens, structured following three different dynamics – conflict, independence and solidarity – emerging between the mothers.

Solidarity as political: the refugee camp and Autonomy of Migration

An important part of the literature constructs the refugee camp as a 'space of exception'. However, this Agambian reading of the camp as a depoliticised and exceptional space leaves no room for the acknowledgement of any form of refugee *agency*, let alone solidarity among refugees (Agamben, 1998; Rygiel, 2011, p. 3). On the other hand, literature that conceptualises the camp as a sociopolitical space, de-exceptionalises it in several ways (Sigona, 2015). Campesi (2015) argues, for example, that a reading of asylum seekers being reduced to 'bare life' underestimates the rebuilding of their own political agency in the refugee camp (p. 17). In Campesi's reading, this political agency takes the form of protest and struggle against those managing the centre, which leads him to conclude that these 'places of confinement' can be transformed into a stage to engage in political action and to claim rights (Campesi, 2015, p. 17). It is this literature that produces this political reading of social relations in the camp, that also often approaches solidarity as being an inherently political phenomenon, both among refugees and with them. Sigona (2015), for example, coins the term 'campzenship' to capture a particular type of 'political membership produced

in and by the camp' providing a specific support system (pp. 1, 12). However, except for Sigona, most political analyses of refugee camps stop short of also recognising them as 'spaces of everyday life' (2015, p. 12), and fail to further uncover the way in which social relationships and, indeed, solidarity actually play out between migrants.

In the Autonomy of Migration literature, the micro-level of the everyday is the primary site of action. In this approach, migration is not simply viewed as a response to social and economic malaise, but the very movement of migrants in itself constitutes an autonomous, social and political movement (De Genova, 2017; Papadopoulos et al., 2008, p. 202). In that sense, migration is understood as arising from a joint struggle for movement that always comes *before* any of the border regimes that seek to regulate or control it (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013). The emphasis lies with migrants' own capacity to 'render borders porous', and the transformative capacities of the seemingly insignificant everyday occurrences that allow them to do so (Papadopoulos et al., 2008; Scheel, 2013, p. 279). Operating on this scale of everyday life are the 'mobile commons': a shared body of knowledge, information, survival tricks, mutual care and solidarity between people on the move, facilitating and sustaining their movements. As the most crucial dimension of the mobile commons, the 'politics of care' is conceptualised as immediate relationships of support and care, friendships, favours that do not need to be returned or caring for others' children and relatives (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013, p. 192).

Even though this conceptualisation of care practices seems well suited to help unearth the specific basis of the solidarity between the Ukrainian mothers in the reception centre, it is also exactly this *political* and decontextualised reading of solidarity that makes it fall short of this end. Critics of the Autonomy of Migration have indeed pointed to the scholarship's problematic subsuming of the experiences of a diverse population of migrating people under the 'empty subject position of "the migrants"' (Scheel, 2013, p. 280). Its omission of the influence of different social divisions – like race, gender, class – in producing both unequal access to resources and differential treatment by border authorities leads Scheel (2013) to discern the need to better account for 'the diversity of migrants' subject positions' (p. 280). Scheel offers his own answer to these criticisms in the form of a situated analysis of migrants' embodied and diverse encounters with border regimes, underscoring the 'materiality and situatedness' of such encounters (pp. 279-280, 283). Much in line with his reasoning, in the next part I draft a conceptual framework that combines situational kinship (Nelson, 2013) and resilient moves (Groeninck et al., 2020).

Situational kinship and resilient moves

The framework I propose serves a two-pronged purpose. In trying to flesh out the specific workings of solidarity between the Ukrainian mothers staying at the reception centre, it seeks first to acknowledge the vital influence of this context in shaping the way the women relate to each other. Secondly, it aims to lay bare the diverse ways in which these differently situated women navigate the context of the centre, and how this in turn leads to the emergence of informal and practical solidarity between them. As such, in line with Oosterlynck et al. (2016), I conceptualise 'informal interactions and everyday encounters as a basis of solidarity' (p. 768). However, unlike these scholars, I do not contend that this practical, micro-level expression of solidarity necessarily specifies 'a distinctive basis for feelings of shared fate and group loyalty' (p. 766). I deviate deliberately from this conception of solidarity as necessarily stemming from a feeling of belonging, as a result of being confronted with my own misguided assumptions about how solidarity would take shape between the women over the course of my own research.

In that regard, Ruth Fincher's (2022) writing on the 'thrown' in 'throwntogetherness' can help tease out why my initial understanding of solidarity did not correspond with how the Ukrainian mothers in reality enacted this solidarity. In her epilogue for a special feature of *City* on Doreen Massey's (2005) 'throwntogetherness', Fincher (2022) suggests that literature on encounters may overemphasise 'togetherness', and pays too little

attention to the 'thrown' part of the concept. As she elaborates, 'throwntogetherness' is often employed as a way of celebrating diversity or understanding multiculturalism. According to Fincher, emphasising the meaning of 'thrown' in the case of refugees, however, might provide a more nuanced insight into the 'suddenness of their arrival', and rightfully begs the question of whether refugees actually *want* to be where they find themselves (p. 435). I find this reflection to be a good representation of the trajectory of my own understanding of the relationships between the Ukrainian mothers at the centre. I had naively assumed that, because of the mothers' shared experiences, similar identities, and collective living together at the centre, a natural sense of togetherness would emerge, and that they might support each other 'as a family', filling the gaps left by their families that stayed behind in Ukraine. As this article will further demonstrate, I missed the overarching and constant influence of the context the Ukrainian mothers were 'thrown' into.

It is therefore important to recognise that the specific site of the collective reception centre brings with it specific challenges to those living in this context. Like refugee camps more broadly, reception centres are often characterised as 'liminal' spaces, embodying the fundamental insecurity and transience of refugee existence (O'Reilly, 2018). Additionally, however, because of its specific structural context and the pervasiveness of organisational control, scholars have suggested that refugee reception centres often resemble what Goffman (1961) has conceptualised as a 'total institution' (Lietaert et al., 2020). Recently, literature has increasingly paid attention to the way the combination of this institutionalised setting, together with fundamental liminality, presents refugee parents with specific challenges (Fournier et al., 2022; Lietaert et al., 2020; Parviainen et al., 2022). Refugee parents often indicate the need for additional parenting support in managing these challenges, especially when separated from key sources of support like family or community (El-Khani et al., 2018; Ní Raghallaigh et al., 2021).

I will further develop the solidarity practiced by the Ukrainian mothers in the context of the reception centre based on Nelson's (2013) 'situational kinship'. Nelson identifies situational kin as 'those kinship relations that occur when the blood or legal family is spatially or temporally absent' (p. 265). I apply situational kin in this article by combining the characteristics of two sub-categories that Nelson distinguishes: 'convenience kin' and 'institutional kin' (p. 268). Nelson defines convenience kin as relationships that emerge in precarious circumstances, where individuals who are separated from their 'real' kin, seek out other people who they can rely on for both emotional and material support (pp. 265-266, 268). Institutional kin, on the other hand, is the kinship that typically emerges within 'total institutions', mainly because sharing resources and knowledge helps individuals to adapt to life in this context (pp. 268, 270). The conceptual value of situational kinship as a way of studying solidarity, I argue, is therefore its important emphasis on context that a lot of research on refugee solidarity still lacks. On its own, however, I find situational kinship too static to capture the agency exhibited by the mothers in the 'stubborn everyday strategies' through which they manoeuvre and negotiate the particular conditions of the reception centre (Thorshaug & Brun, 2019, pp. 235–236).

I seek to reinstate this agency through employing Groeninck et al.'s (2020) elaboration of 'resilient moves'. Aranda et al. (2012) originally defined resilient moves as 'relationally embodied practices (i.e. things said, thought or done by people)' and 'local negotiations of possibilities' (p. 361). Especially relevant is the authors' emphasis on the fact that it is impossible to perceive of the environment as solely *external* to individuals, and their assertion that context thus forms more than 'a mere backdrop to action' (Aranda & Hart, 2015, p. 357). In their own research, Groeninck et al. (2020) prove how the interpretation of resilience as a negotiation on the micro-level, rather than mere 'adaptation in the face of adversity', makes resilient moves especially suitable for analysing the coping behaviour of refugee families living through liminality in collective reception centres (Groeninck et al., 2020, pp. 358). I will therefore analyse the different ways in which the Ukrainian mothers

relate to each other as a process of making different resilient moves to negotiate the specific liminal and intersectional context of the centre.

Methodology

This article is based on my own long-term involvement in the reception centre where I conducted my research, first as a student worker, and only later as a researcher in the context of my master's thesis. The building had been a convent before, but was turned into an emergency reception centre for Ukrainian refugees right after the Russian invasion, in the spring of 2022. The vast majority of the centre's residents were mothers living alone with their children, without their husbands or other extended family. I first started out doing weekly reception and night shifts as a student, and later also became a play facilitator in the Child Friendly Space of the centre. I had already worked at the centre for half a year when I started my ethnographic fieldwork. This meant that over time, a certain level of trust had already formed between me and the mothers who would become participants in my research since I weekly played with their children and was a familiar face at the centre.

During my formal research period of three months, I did participant observation during kitchen shifts for which I volunteered next to my usual shifts, helping with preparing and serving dinner. Since there was a mandatory kitchen shift rotation for all residents of the centre, this allowed me to build more genuine connections with some of the mothers. Serving food at dinner time also gave me the chance to observe the interactions between mothers in the dining room, as this was the only time of the day that everyone would sit down together. Building on my long-term ethnographic engagement at the centre, I then conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 Ukrainian mothers. I was joined by Marta, who was a Ukrainian student worker at the same centre, and who became my key informant and interpreter throughout the research (Heyl, 2001). I also organised two focus groups, supported by professional interpreters: one with mothers living at the centre and one at a playgroup for Ukrainian children outside of the centre with mothers who had already moved out of the centre.

Yuval-Davis considers the researcher's gaze as one of several situated gazes studied in a situated intersectionality framework (2023, p. 96). Hence, my dual role as both a remunerated student worker and researcher, combined with my specific positionality as a young, white, Western-European woman pursuing higher education, engendered a complex position and power dynamics that inevitably shaped my research. Apart from the fact that access to my research field was facilitated by the fact that I am a woman and was involved in care practices directly related to motherhood, my position as a student worker also directly associated me with the coordinators of the centre. This entailed a clear power imbalance that was sometimes palpable in the way mothers would answer my questions during interviews or focus groups. Furthermore, even with my familiarity with the context and mothers, it was ultimately my position as an outsider that informed my misguided assumptions about the mother's mutual solidarity.

With the consent of my research participants, I recorded the interviews and focus groups. I subsequently transcribed and coded them and my field notes using the software tool NVivo 12 in two phases: first I coded line-by-line, and then I filtered out the most significant codes from the first coding round through focused and axial coding. I then proceeded to search for relationships between the codes (Charmaz, 2014).

Context

A situated intersectional lens requires a detailed understanding of the specific, intersectional context of the Belgian collective reception centre this research was set in. Such an understanding is crucial given that the social positionings of the Ukrainian mothers are constructed along several intersecting axes of difference, which exert varying influences depending on the specific temporal and spatial context the women navigate (Yuval-Davis, 2006a, 2015, p. 200). The intersectionality literature points to important ways in which these

intersections can 'create both oppression and opportunity' (Shields, 2008, p. 302). As Shields (2008) argues, being on the receiving end of specific intersections can actually open up access to certain status and opportunities that remain inaccessible to other intersections, e.g. based on gender, race or social class.

In line with this, an intersectional approach also reveals what many have referred to as a 'double standard' in the privileges granted to Ukrainian refugees through Temporary Protection that are denied to other applicants of international protection. This differential treatment has been attributed to Ukraine's territorial proximity and their perceived (and ambiguously constructed)[1] belonging to 'racialised categories of Europeanness' (Bolzoni et al., 2023, p. 452). This is evident, for example, in the fact that Ukrainians are not required to follow an integration course in Belgium (Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering, 2023). An intersectional lens can thus also elucidate the way different groups are subjected to migration regimes in different ways.

When looking at the specific context of this research, in line with the literature discussed earlier, the collective reception centre can be identified as an institutionalised and fundamentally liminal space. The liminality of waiting for the end of the war, in parallel with the material space of the old convent embodying the centre's ever-lasting impromptu emergency-status, added to a general feeling of 'permanent temporariness' (Bailey et al., 2002, p. 139), as the centre's own existence was known to the mothers to be conditional and temporary. Additionally, it was clear that the group dynamics between the mothers were influenced by the fact that there was a constant coming and going of some residents, while others became increasingly dependent on the provided support, leading some residents to essentially become 'trapped' by the centre. Touching on these clashing temporalities, one of the mothers observed: 'this is a temporal centre, and when people live here for a long time, I think it's not good'.

Findings

Building on the idea that within particular contexts, some social positionings have more effect and saliency than others (Yuval-Davis, 2015, p. 94), it became increasingly clear throughout my research that for the Ukrainian mothers living in the liminal context of the collective reception centre, the intersectional axis of being a mother, and most often a *single* mother, was undoubtedly the most prominent one. It is therefore also mainly along this axis that the different dynamics between the mothers took shape. The value of 'resilient moves', as used by Groeninck et al. (2020), lies in the fact that it allows me to identify these different dynamics as resulting from Ukrainian mothers actively navigating the specific intersectional and liminal context of the centre. Taking as a point of departure the differently situated gazes of the women in this particular context lays bare the heterogeneity of their resilient moves and counters a reading of solidarity as arising from a natural sense of belonging and togetherness. The specific workings of the solidarity that *did* emerge between the mothers can ultimately be elucidated when they are interpreted as part of different dynamics existing at the same time, next to and through each other. To that end, I have grouped the different relationships between the mothers under the three mutually-constituting dynamics of 'conflict', 'independence' and 'solidarity'.

Conflict

A significant part of the conflicts and tensions that arose between Ukrainian mothers can be traced back to the women having to recalibrate their new intersectional positions as single mothers in the new, collective context of the centre. The loss of family support meant mothers often had to take up a double parenting role and experienced an intensified feeling of

[1] It is important to acknowledge the ambiguous racialization of Eastern-Europeans in Europe, as on the one hand being constructed as 'European', but on the other as inferior to Western-Europeans (Bolzoni et al., 2023).

responsibility to keep their children safe – from the war, but also in this new context. At the same time, renegotiating this new 'maternal identity' (Haynes, 2013) did not happen in a vacuum but in the collective context of the centre, living together with numerous other people. This meant that while mothers were taking on new mothering roles individually, these roles were also simultaneously negotiated with other mothers. The discrepancy between different roles often resulted in the clashing of parenting approaches. A situated intersectional perspective reveals that, despite sharing the experience of single motherhood, the mothers' differing perspectives on child-rearing and what it means to be a 'good' mother regularly resulted in conflicts arising between them.

Something that came up most frequently in relation to these different approaches was the fact that some mothers would not supervise their children while they were roaming the centre or playing with other children. This was often perceived as the main reason why conflict arose between children. Liliya,[2] for example, considered it 'irresponsible' for mothers to not sufficiently watch their children, because they would 'get into conflicts, or offend each other, or not behave well'. Anna observed that 'it is like anything is allowed here', and asserted that there was not much she could do when she saw another child hurting her daughter: 'I can't discipline another kid and my kid is crying'. It is these kinds of conflict between children that frequently triggered conflict between their mothers. As Krystyna recounted, finding a solution to these conflicts was rarely easy: 'other parents they had other opinions, and it was difficult to find a compromise'. These examples reveal the different resilient moves mothers were making in trying to negotiate the tensions between them, while at the same time seeking to protect their children. Additionally, the overarching liminality that characterised the context of the reception centre – a context that is never 'external to individuals' (Aranda & Hart, 2015, p. 357) – further complicated these conflicts. As Liliya indicated:

> It makes us frustrated this uncertainty, we are always under stress, and that's why there's so many conflicts, we are all in conflicts, we don't want to understand another person's position, but only assert ourselves.

Independence

It might seem contradictory to identify independence as one of the dynamics between mothers. However, examining this dynamic through the lens of resilient moves reveals that the orientation towards independence emerges from various forms of negotiation—both among the mothers themselves and in their efforts to navigate the liminal context of the reception centre as mothers.

'Neutral' seemed to be the term that was most commonly used by mothers to define their relationships with other mothers living at the centre. They often described how, although they were friendly with each other, everyone generally kept to themselves. These neutral relationships were not automatically given but rather the result of the mothers navigating the specific context of the centre. In this collective, public space, time alone seemed to be a valuable resource to many mothers, and having to live together constantly encouraged them to value their own space and time more. The multilayered liminality inherent in the reception centre also had a decisive influence on the relationships that formed or did not form between women, as it became apparent over time to Galyna:

> In the beginning when I moved, I heard that some people at the centre said, that 'here, we're fending for ourselves', meaning that they just disconnect a bit from others, and just care for themselves. And, for me, when I first heard it, it was kind

[2] All of the names used are pseudonyms.

> of traumatic, because I used to get too connected to people. But then I thought, maybe indeed this approach is better, because you don't get too connected, you can take care of yourself better, and then when you leave, you have more freedom. So, for me, it's work on myself that I'm doing, and I learn new things, I learn to get less connected and be more independent on my own.

She asserted that not getting too close to the others made it easier to deal with their eventual departure. Clearly recognising the temporariness inherent in the context of the reception centre, this mother chose to deliberately disconnect herself more, and in this way performed 'relational resilient moves' by directly negotiating the liminality of the context she found herself in (Van Acker et al., 2022, p. 9).

Apart from the contextual conditions of the centre determining the relationships that formed between mothers, two other factors, beyond the structure of the centre itself, appeared to contribute to a tendency towards independence. Both mothers who maintained strong ties with their stayed-behind family in Ukraine, for example through video call, and single mothers who had been single for a longer time before the war started seemed to be more inclined to value independence. Interestingly, during interviews with the latter sub-group, mothers Maria and Kateryna both showed a clear pride in the fact that they were actually doing comparatively well – especially as they knew, or noticed during the interview, that my questions rather started from the assumptions that what they experienced would be difficult, or would require additional support. This led Kateryna to observe jokingly, halfway through the interview, 'wow, it seems like I'm the only one who has everything good'.

Maria also focused for a large part of the interview on her previous job, or her daughter's new hobbies in Belgium and her plans to stay here. After the interview, I wrote in my fieldnotes:

> I got the impression she actually was quite content with her new living situation, and she seemed confident and had a clear purpose and plan for the future: find a job, find an apartment etc. She also seemed proud of her achievements and connections in Ukraine, and her daughter's school in Ukraine, and liked to talk about this as if to say 'don't mistake me to be only a refugee in distress'.

Even though I never directly identified Maria as a refugee during the interview, it was clear that throughout, she negotiated and even contested this social category, assigned to her by implicit constructions in my interview questions. This uncovers the extent to which my situated gaze as a researcher differed from Maria's own situated understanding of her identity. Linn (2020) identifies this as a clash between 'refugee' as an ascriptive feature of identity, 'imposed by external others', and refugees' own 'subjective identity' (p. 31). This interaction during the interview also revealed once more the relevance of looking beyond overlapping social locations to focus instead on the differently situated gazes of the Ukrainian women in the context of the centre. Again, this adds a more layered perspective to a presumably shared experience of single motherhood and reveals the importance of situated intersectionality: whereas Kateryna and Maria seemed to be coping relatively well, other women who had left behind extensive support networks in Ukraine were struggling a lot more, having become single mothers overnight.

Liminal solidarity: situational kinship

By employing a situated intersectional approach to solidarity, I have sought to highlight the diverse ways in which mothers navigated their intersecting identities from their own situated perspectives in the specific context of the reception centre. As mentioned before, there is an inherent assumption of a supposed similarity in the intersectional identities of Ukrainian mothers, being housed together in those centres. Nevertheless, it is rather the 'thrown' in

Massey's 'throwntogetherness' that is embodied in mothers' accounts. For example, Nataliya explained that she did not feel very connected to other people living at the centre, as '[there] still is this understanding that all these people are kind of strangers, that it's accidental people that came to live together, came to happen together'. In a similar vein, Klara stressed that she perceived the centre as a space where you just 'have to coexist with other people. We don't argue, we don't have conflicts, we just happen to live together'.

However, approaching solidarity from the way mothers navigate the liminal context of the reception centre helps explain why neither this perceived 'throwntogetherness' nor dynamics of conflict and independence prevented the emergence of a subtle yet effective everyday solidarity network between the mothers. As in Vervliet et al.'s (2014) analysis of the intersectional identities of unaccompanied refugee mothers, there are social locations in mother's identities that have been imposed on them, emphasising how positionality is formed along different intersecting axes of power (Yuval-Davis, 2006a, p. 199). Specifically, the intersection between being a refugee and a single mother appeared to 'limit the discretionary space for the social category the mothers themselves prioritise: their motherhood' (p. 2035). As with the two dynamics of conflict and independence, it is on this joint axis of motherhood that we have to situate the origin of the solidarity between the Ukrainian mothers. The support network between the mothers provided, on a practical, everyday level, the support that mothers just needed *as mothers* to organise their lives as both refugees and single parents living in the context of the reception centre. The fact that the intersection of these identities could generate both conflict and support, can be explained by perceiving these different social locations not as static categories but rather as a 'dynamic process' requiring continued negotiation, at times engendering 'new opportunities and possibilities' – and situational solidarities (Shields, 2008, p. 302; Vervliet et al., 2014, p. 2035). Groeninck et al. (2020) observe that, for refugee families living in collective reception centres, 'resilience exists in a complicated relationship with vulnerability' (p. 359). I indeed find that articulating and recognising each other's vulnerability as a result of multiple intersecting social positionings is not opposed, but rather inherent, to the resilient moves enacted in mothers' practical solidarity.

The way mothers described solidarity in interviews suggests that it manifested itself mainly on a practical and material level. Only Nataliya and Liliya referred to each other as best friends with a strong, emotional bond. Talking of her relationship with the other mothers, however, Nataliya stressed that she felt supported in a sense of 'material help', while 'psychologically or mentally, it doesn't really change much'. The support was also highly 'situational' as it was the specific liminal and intersectional context of the centre that motivated or even, at times, required it. The following vignette from one of my kitchen shifts nicely exhibits this situational kinship:

> When it's almost time to wrap up dinner at the dining room – most of the people have finished eating at this point – I see a grandmother, who lives at the centre with her daughter and granddaughter, pick out two oranges. She's talking to another, older woman, who's sitting behind the oranges and the chocolate mousse, and who is in charge of crossing off names on a list, indicating whether people have come to pick up their fruit and dessert as part of her kitchen shift. I hear the grandmother say 'Galyna' and 'Symon' while pointing at the list, seemingly indicating she can cross off the names of the mother and her little son. A little bit later, while we're cleaning up, I see the other older woman putting some ham and cheese between two slices of bread, then carefully wrapping up the sandwich in aluminium foil. I ask her if it's for Galyna and Symon, and she nods in agreement, and points to some other things that she has put aside. While I'm drying the dishes, I see how the two grandmothers are assembling a tray with food, and I recognise the two oranges, the wrapped

> sandwich, and also a few yoghurts, a coffee cup filled with cornflakes and a plate of left-over dinner, covered in aluminium foil, to take to Galyna and Symon, who apparently haven't made it to dinner.

Helping with or during dinner was a recurring way in which mothers supported each other. When, for example, Lina moved into the centre, alone with her three young children, there seemed to emerge a very self-evident, practical network of other mothers supporting her in small but helpful ways. During dinner, for example, when Lina had to go and take care of the baby, one mother made sure her oldest boy ate his dinner. I saw her carefully cut it for him, and then collect the family's dessert, fruit, and bread for breakfast the next morning, another mother offering her a bag to store everything. Kateryna described how, because of her former job, she could make clothes and help with reparations. Maria noted how, because 'Galyna with Symon, she's alone with a small baby', she could help by buying something in the shop or offer 'medication when the baby is sick'. These accounts illustrate the particular material help to which situational kinship often translates (Nelson, 2013).

It also became clear that the way in which mothers supported each other was often a way to simultaneously navigate the organisational and physical aspects of the institutional context of the centre. Mothers would take turns babysitting for one another, allowing fellow mothers to eat within the limited timeframe during which dinner was served. Similarly, Elena recounted how her friend would look after her baby while she would take a shower or prepare food. This support was again a negotiation of the particular context of the reception centre, as bathrooms and kitchens were public spaces, which made it difficult for Elena's friend to take her baby with her. In yet another way, Nataliya told me she could sometimes borrow a car from someone when she needed it, in this way manoeuvring the isolated location of the centre through support.

Conclusion

Based on my research with Ukrainian refugee mothers living at a collective reception centre in Belgium, I have argued for a nuanced conceptualisation of solidarity, informed by the realisation that my initial image of this solidarity between the mothers was based on the misguided assumption that overlapping intersectional identities would engender a natural feeling of belonging. I employed a situated intersectional lens to re-shift the focus to the way women themselves experienced and navigated the liminal context of the reception centre and their intersectional identities. As literature on refugee solidarity often analyses solidarity as being political in nature and does not account for the importance of the context in which solidarity emerges, I proposed to combine 'situational kinship' (Nelson, 2013) and 'resilient moves' (Groeninck et al., 2020) to flesh out the particular workings of solidarity as one of multiple intersecting dynamics between Ukrainian refugee mothers. Next to dynamics of conflict and independence, solidarity took the form of everyday, small-scale, practical support. I asserted that it does not emerge from a feeling of togetherness or belonging, but rather from the mutual recognition of the vulnerability brought on by intersecting social categories and the support women *needed* as single refugee mothers living at the reception centre. Future research might explore how other intersectional axes of difference produce specific micro-level solidarity practices.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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