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# Enterprising refugee women: Analyzing postfeminist governmentality in an organizational context

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## Abstract

This study examines a model project initiated by a German Federal Ministry in the middle of the vast increase in forced migration to Germany after 2015. The project aimed at facilitating the integration of female refugees into German society by way of ‘empowering’ them to become self-employed. A business counseling agency with a feminist orientation was commissioned to design and run the project. Interpellating refugee women as subjects of entrepreneurial self-actualization to enact gender equality, the project embodies a tangible example of postfeminist governmentality. Combining recent research on postfeminism with analytics of governmentality, the study directs its analytical gaze to the work of governing. This opens up a twofold perspective: it enables us to investigate the operation of governmental power in relation to its envisioned subjects, and how this power acts upon the subjects tasked with the work of governing in the contemporary organizational context. Drawing on qualitative interviews and documentary materials within an “ethnographic imaginary”, we examine, first, the assemblage of elements that made up the fabric of postfeminist governmentality in the governmental intervention at hand and what happened when the governmental attempts “hit the ground” met—and failed to meet—the diverse bodies of the envisioned participants. This perspective illustrates how the

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logic of postfeminist governmentality radically failed when it came to differences deriving from the structural positioning of the women, but also indicates moments of agency and resistance and the perspectives for those who were able and willing to access the offered subject position. Second, the analysis shows how this failure affected the women involved less than the female project manager who was to bear the consequences. In this respect, the analysis sheds light on the amount of practical and emotional work that the task of rendering the project nevertheless 'a success' required, the "hidden injuries" this work involved, and how this work ultimately led to a reaffirmation of the logic of postfeminist governmentality. The study contributes to understandings of the gendered operation of governmental power in and through contemporary organizations and in the organization of labor.

#### KEYWORDS

entrepreneurship, governmentality, postfeminism, project, refugee women

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In the past 10 years following the financial crisis in 2008, the European Union and its member states have increasingly invested in "reigniting the entrepreneurial spirit" which has been envisioned as a golden way to both economic growth and human prosperity (EC, 2013a; OECD, 2010). In this vision, entrepreneurship is advocated as an opportunity especially for disadvantaged groups, such as women, the unemployed and migrants, and, since the recent increase in forced migration after 2015, also for asylum seekers and refugees (OECD, 2019; cf. Dlaske, 2022). Tapping into this vision, in 2016 a German Federal Ministry initiated a model project aimed at facilitating the integration of female refugees by way of empowering them to become self-employed. A business counseling agency with a feminist orientation, Women\_Works,<sup>1</sup> was commissioned to design and run the project. The project took place over the course of 3 years, 2017–2019. This study focuses on the project to investigate the gendered operation of governmental power, and its consequences, in the contemporary European political and organizational context. For this aim, it combines recent feminist scholarship on postfeminism with analytics of governmentality.

Interpellating refugee women as subjects of empowerment and entrepreneurial self-actualization to enact gender equality, the project, Refugee\_Women\_Start\_up, embodies a tangible example of what in recent feminist research has been called 'postfeminist governmentality' (e.g., Lewis et al., 2017). Drawing on this research, we regard postfeminism as a discursive formation characterized by a double-entanglement (McRobbie, 2009, 13): Predicated, on the one hand, on the notion of feminism belonging to the past and women now being emancipated, it speaks, on the other hand, for issues of feminist concern, such as empowerment, independence and women's success. Instead of focusing on notions of social distribution, collective action or structural inequalities, postfeminism embraces an entrepreneurial attitude and self-transformation, which makes it decisively neoliberal at its core (cf. also Gill, 2007; Kauppinen, 2013; Lewis et al., 2017). Viewing postfeminism as a governmentality emphasizes the dimension of subjectification and

the operation of power through government, the 'conduct of conduct' of social actors under a particular rationality (Foucault, 1982; Rose, 1996). The 'rationality' of postfeminist governmentality consists precisely of the (controversial) idea of the pastness of feminism and the advocacy of an entrepreneurial attitude and self-transformation as means for empowerment and equality.

Despite the active stance that the idea of government as the 'conduct of conduct' suggests, in the analytics of governmentality the focus has traditionally been on the "schemas and pronouncements" of governmentalities evident in documentary material (Brady, 2016, 13–14; see e.g., Rose, 1996; Bröckling, 2015). Drawing on this perspective, feminist scholars in cultural and organizational studies have interrogated postfeminist governmentality particularly in terms of its modes of interpellation, that is, the ways in which women are invited to assume a postfeminist subjectivity and the inclusions and exclusions they involve (e.g., Gill & Scharff, 2011; Lewis, 2014 see Section 2 below). In recent years, scholars in governmentality studies and related fields have turned to ethnographic, or quasi-ethnographic approaches (e.g., Brady & Lippert, 2016; Del Percio & van Hoof, 2017; Dlaske, 2022) that enable empirical examination of the practices of government, the actors involved, and the manifold, unpredictable relations between power and its subjects, theorized by Foucault (1982) but neglected in the traditional analytics of governmentality. Moreover, an ethnographic orientation also directs the attention to the fact that 'those who govern' are not located outside of power relations, but rather are subjects themselves, also enmeshed in power relations and subject to the very logics through which they seek to govern (cf. Kurki & Brunila, 2014).

Aligning itself with this "ethnographic turn" in governmentality studies (Brady, 2016), the present study directs its analytical gaze to the *work of governing* and the subjects doing and struggling to do this work. This focus opens up a twofold perspective: it enables us to investigate, first, the operation of governmental power in relation to its envisioned subjects, and second, how this power acts upon the subjects tasked with the work of governing, a perspective particularly pertinent to the study of organizational contexts. To implement this approach, we view the project *Refugee\_Women\_Start\_Up* as a governmental assemblage, a heterogeneous, contingent, temporal, and situated collection of rationalities, discourses, strategies, techniques, and embodied subjects that were brought together in order to act upon a particular 'problem' (cf. *ibid.*, 14–17), namely, the social and economic integration of refugee women into German society. In this connection, *rationality* refers to the 'logics of action', "what makes it rational to think in this way, proceed in this manner" (Li, 2016, 83). *Discourses*, in turn, denote systems of knowledge (Foucault, 1988), and, more specifically, signification practices that signify a particular part of the world from a particular perspective (cf. Kauppinen, 2013). To attend to the work of governing, highlighted above, we draw inspiration from Tania Murray Li's notion of "practices of assemblage" that direct attention to "the hard work required to draw together heterogeneous elements and to forge connections between them in the face of tension" (Li, 2007, 264). To analyze these practices, we focus on the female entrepreneurship counselor from the counseling agency, *Women\_Works*, who was tasked with the work of designing and implementing the project.

From the twofold perspective that the focus on the work of governing opens up, we first analyze the assemblage of elements—rationalities, discourses, strategies and techniques—that made up the fabric of postfeminist governmentality in the governmental intervention at hand and examine what happened when the governmental attempts "hit the ground" (Li, 2016, 81) and met—and failed to meet—the diverse bodies of the envisioned participants. This perspective illustrates how the logic of postfeminist governmentality, despite the political faith put in it, radically failed when it came to differences deriving from the structural positioning of the women, ultimately leading the project to fail in its goals. Moreover, the examination sheds light on moments of agency and resistance that rose from the points of mismatch between the subjectivity inherent in the project design and the bodies of the (envisioned) project participants and discusses the perspectives for those few who were able and willing to access the offered subject position. Second, we analyze how the governmental logics drawn upon in the intervention acted upon the subject tasked with the work of governing in the contemporary context of projectified work. This angle shows how the women involved were less affected by the failure of the postfeminist governmental logic than the manager of the project who had to bear the consequences. In this connection, the examination sheds light on the amount and nature of practical, cognitive, and emotional work that the task of rendering the project nevertheless 'a success' required,

the “hidden injuries” (Gill, 2016)<sup>2</sup> it involved, and how this work ultimately led to a reaffirmation of the logic of post-feminist governmentality and the rationality of entrepreneurialism woven into it.

In the next section, we discuss some key rationalities and discourses that gave rise to and shaped the project *Refugee\_Women\_Start\_Up*, some of the elements that were pulled together to form the governmental assemblage, and we also discuss related, previous research. We then introduce the business counseling agency, *Women\_Works*, which carried out the project and discuss our positionings, the methodological approach, and the study data. After that, we analyze the practices of assemblage involved in the governmental intervention and conclude by discussing the findings in the light of recent research on postfeminism and the broader societal and organizational circumstances.

## 2 | CONSTITUTIVE ELEMENTS OF CONTEMPORARY GOVERNMENTALITY: ENTREPRENEURIALISM, POSTFEMINISM AND PROJECTIFICATION

Advocation of entrepreneurship has gained prominence in European labor market policies from the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards, especially in times of economic hardship (cf. Turunen, 2011). In the aftermath of the financial crisis in 2008, “unleashing Europe's entrepreneurial potential” was elevated as the key strategic measure “to bring back growth” (EC, 2013b). The guidelines for this endeavor are outlined in the *Entrepreneurship 2020 Action Plan* by the European Commission (EC, 2013a). These involve opening up “new horizons” by “reaching out to women, seniors, migrants, the unemployed [and] young people” (ibid., 22). “Europe”, the Action Plan urges, “has to open up for them paths into entrepreneurship to create for them jobs, empower them economically and socially and leverage their creative and innovative capacities” (ibid.). In other words, fostering entrepreneurship among (most diverse) marginalized groups is seen here as *the way to both Europe's economic growth and economic and social empowerment of the individuals concerned: A view that we call ‘rationality of entrepreneurialism’* (cf. Ahl & Marlow, 2021). While, in the context of the vast increase in forced migration to Germany after 2015, it was the rationality of entrepreneurialism that gave rise to the project, *Refugee\_Women\_Start\_Up*, in the project itself, as we will demonstrate in the analysis below, this rationality was woven into the logics of postfeminist governmentality.

Regarding postfeminist governmentality, scholars in cultural and media studies have particularly investigated, as noted above, the production of postfeminist subjectivities (e.g., Gill & Scharff, 2011; Kauppinen, 2013; McRobbie, 2009; Tasker & Negra, 2007). As this research suggests, the postfeminist subject is characterized by the belief that gender equality has been achieved—at least in terms of women now being emancipated—and an understanding of structural problems being as individual as their solutions, the latter including self-development, make-over<sup>3</sup> and entrepreneurial attitude. Besides (aspiring to belong to the) middle-class, the postfeminist subjectivity has figured in this research as saliently white and Western, leading scholars to raise the question whether postfeminism is “for white girls only” (Butler, 2013, 35) and to interrogate postfeminism in terms of ethnicity and race (also Dosekun, 2015; Lewis et al., 2017). In the field of organizational studies, this question has been recalibrated to explore how postfeminist governmentality may contribute, or fails to contribute, to gender equality, diversity, and inclusion in organizational settings (cf. Lewis et al., 2017, 216). In this connection, scholars have analyzed coaching websites for women (Swan, 2017), media texts on work-life balance (Sørensen, 2017), and women's lived experiences (Gill et al., 2017), highlighting the interconnection of feminist and neoliberal elements that influence organizational change. Relating more directly to the topic of entrepreneurship, Lewis (2014) has explored through a postfeminist reading of entrepreneurship literature, the hierarchical inclusion of different forms of entrepreneurial femininities, *individualized*, *maternal*, *relational*, and *excessive*, in the discursive realm of entrepreneurship. While arguing that the lens of postfeminism allows making visible subjectivities available for women within entrepreneurship, she also concedes that “access to any particular entrepreneurial femininity is influenced by the structural positions of individual women in terms of class, ethnicity, race, age, sexuality and other forms of social difference” (ibid., 1860). Similarly to the present study, Ahl and Marlow (2021) address the current political advocacy of entrepreneurship. They analyzed how postfeminist assumptions of emancipation, freedom, and empowerment have infiltrated

entrepreneurship policy discourse in Sweden and the UK, thereby suppressing criticism of entrepreneurship. Pointing at structural subordination of women in the field of entrepreneurship, the authors argue that entrepreneurship is a poor career choice for many women. We will come back to these findings in the analysis and the conclusions of the present study. Next, we wish to discuss one more element, an element that gave the governmental intervention its shape, namely 'the rationality of project'.

More than 30 years ago, Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) identified the "projective city" - understanding not only one's work but also other undertakings in life in terms of projects—as a key characteristic of the "new spirit of capitalism". More recently, Bröckling (2015, 172) has described the project as "a basic element of contemporary governmentality" that figures in the strategic field of government in a twofold way: in terms of governing projects and governing by projects. Including, in its basic, a goal and measures to achieve that goal, *project* augurs effectiveness, and achievement. Defined by a beginning and an end, it also introduces a cyclical course of time and fundamental contingency: "The centrality of biographical coherence for career purposes", states Bröckling, "is usurped by the syncopated life rhythm of project planning, execution, termination and the search for the next project" (ibid., 179). Whereas Bröckling analyzes the rationality of project as an articulation of the contemporary 'art of government', Kurki and Brunila (2014) and McRobbie (2016) have investigated actual implementations and social implications of this governmental regime. Viewing the project as "an ideological method of introducing a market orientation to welfare politics", Kurki and Brunila (2014, 283) have analyzed "the alliance of projectation and precarisation" in educational programmes targeted for "at risk" groups (ibid., 291). The alliance is based, and the authors conclude, "on a politics, which both produces and benefits from temporality and flexibility and puts people intentionally in positions where insecurity is inevitable" (ibid.). While Kurki and Brunila refer primarily to the participants of the projects, the present study shows how their insight is highly relevant also with regard to the project managers. Regarding these, McRobbie (2016) has drawn attention to the struggles of managers of EU-funded employment projects targeted at disadvantaged youth to navigate and negotiate between their social democratic aims and values and the neoliberalized frame conditions of the projectized work including "reduced budgets", "speeded-up temporality of project working", and expectation of "deliverables" and "'feelgood' happy stories as evidence of the success of the undertaking" (ibid., 173). We will come back to these features in the empirical part of the paper. Next, to further contextualize the forthcoming analysis, we present a brief outline of the genealogy of the organization Women\_Works that took on the work of designing and running the project Refugee\_Women\_Start\_Up. The description is based on an interview<sup>4</sup> with a long-standing staff member and the current chief executive officer (CEO) of the organization, whom we here call Elke.

### 3 | WOMEN\_WORKS: BUSINESS COUNSELLING FOR WOMEN IN THE COURSE OF TIME

The organization Women\_Works is a non-profit association specialized in business counseling for women, initiated by two female sociologists in the mid-1980s. Throughout its presence, Women\_Works has reflected the current social, political, and economic conditions. "The interesting thing in our work", Elke remarks to us, "is that it mirrors what is going on out there." From its early days, Women\_Works has offered courses for women on founding a business. Elke describes these, however, rather as "a social project" whose ultimate aim was, in the feminist spirit of the time, to provide opportunities for women's self-actualization and self-determination, rather than establishing a business. In the 1990's, the emphasis shifted toward supporting women's economic independence. Facing increasing financial difficulties due to cutbacks in basic public funding and increasing dependence on short-term project funding, Women\_Works adopted a more entrepreneurial operation mode in the new millennium.

In 2014, a German federal ministry opened a funding call for an entrepreneurship project for migrant women. Women\_Works seized the opportunity and was awarded the project. Combining mentoring with workshops, teamwork, and individual coaching, the project offered support for migrant women from different countries to realize

their business ideas that ranged from different kinds of language work to arts, cosmetics, and ethnic gastronomy. The project was deemed to be a huge success: After the scheduled two years of running the project, 16 of the 22 participants had realised their dreams or were close to doing so. The Ministry was impressed by the results and inquired, in the middle of 'the refugee crisis', whether Women\_Works might not be able to offer something similar for refugee women as well. Depending on project funding, the organization took up the suggestion. What happened then will be examined below, after an overview of our methodological approach and the study data.

#### 4 | OUR POSITIONINGS, THE METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH AND THE STUDY DATA

Before going into the methodological choices, we would like to write ourselves into the story, since our own positionings shaped our approach to the project. We are both white female academics with an interest in contemporary governmentalities, gender, work, and migration. These interests lead us to the project *Refugee\_Women\_Start\_Up* via somewhat different routes, Kati as part of a broader project looking at entrepreneurship training schemes offered for refugees, and Katharina through her involvement in an academic project commissioned to monitor the progress of *Refugee\_Women\_Start\_Up* in a scientific manner. In our engagement with the project *Refugee\_Women\_Start\_Up* and the entrepreneurship counselor, Anna, who was appointed to the task of designing and managing the project, we experienced how she was struggling with these tasks from the very outset. Based on this insight, we wanted to shed light on her role in the governmental intervention and decided to focus on the work of governing, which we conceptualized, drawing on Li's (2007) theorization, as noted above, as "practices of assemblage" that draw attention to "the hard work required to draw heterogeneous elements together, forge connections between them and to sustain those connections in the face of tension" (Li, 2007, 264). Attending to the practices of assemblage invites "an analysis", as Li (ibid.) elaborates, "of how the elements of an assemblage might—or might not—be made to cohere". Talking with Anna soon suggested that the practices of assemblage could be accessed more fruitfully through interviews with her that provided reflexive accounts of her practices than through observation of the actual practices (cf. Forsey, 2010, 567). We therefore conducted three ca. 1.5 h long, semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews with Anna at different stages of the project (01/2018, 04/2018, 02/2020) and one of equal length with the CEO of Women\_Works (05/2018; already cited above). Another source of data that provided insight into the practices of assemblage, and in particular into their discursive materialization, was documentary materials relating to the project. These included internal documents to which we were granted access (i.e., parts of the project proposal, the final report, and the presentation at the closing conference) as well as public materials (the project's website and media reports). Although the focus was on the practices of assemblage, we wanted to learn about the trajectories and perspectives of the project participants as well, so we conducted interviews with the ones we could reach at Women\_Works. We conducted nine interviews with 7 participants in total, each interview lasting around 50 min. The languages used in the interviews were German and (in two cases) English. In most cases, the participants were able to communicate in one of these languages. In two interviews, one participant supported the other by translating into and from Arabic when needed.

Our approach may be best described as "ethnographic imaginary" (Forsey, 2010, 566; also Brady, 2016); an approach that although not primarily drawing on ethnographic observation, nevertheless "entails a sensitivity to concrete practices within a milieu" (Brady, 2016, 4). This sensitivity to the concrete practices and insight into the project as a whole was developed, besides the interviews outlined above, in different ways in the course of the 3 years that we followed *Refugee\_Women\_Start\_up*. Katharina's involvement in the project monitoring during the first half of the project gave deep and unique insight. Besides this, we conducted ethnographic observation as researchers of the present study in events where the project was presented to the public (i.e., the kick-off event, information events, and the closing conference). Moreover our respective research backgrounds, including engagement with other entrepreneurship schemes for refugees in Germany, contributed to the interpretative framework. Overall, the ethnographic insights, whose origin partly exceeded the boundaries of the present study, played a supportive role in the interpretation of the interview and documentary data (cf. Forsey, 2010).

Although Li (2007) makes the case for attending to practices, her account is not an ethnographic description but a more meta-level examination of the types of practices and tensions involved in the work of assemblage. Drawing inspiration from this approach, we identified, based on the data introduced above, three clusters of practices that illuminate different aspects of the work of assemblage, drawing together heterogeneous elements and forging connections between them, in the course of the project. The identification was a process of carefully reading and rereading the research materials, identifying themes, and thereafter systematizing them into three clusters: (1) Designing the project: drawing together rationalities, discourses, and strategies (2) Running the project: matching together disparate elements and (3) Managing success: smoothing out contradictions and reinterpreting failures. These three clusters structure the analysis presented below. As discussed in the introduction, on the one hand the analysis (clusters 1 and 2) sheds light on the operation of postfeminist and neoliberal power in relation to the envisioned subjects of the project, and on the other it reveals how this power acts upon the subject, entrepreneurship counselor Anna, tasked with the work of governing in the contemporary context of projectified work (clusters 1 and 2, and especially cluster 3). In the concluding section, we summarize the findings and reflect on their implications both in the light of the research on postfeminism and in the contemporary societal and organizational context.

## 5 | REFUGEE\_WOMEN\_START\_UP: ANALYZING PRACTICES OF ASSEMBLAGE

### 5.1 | Designing the project: Bringing together rationalities, discourses, and strategies

The cluster of practices *designing the project* involves the socially situated work of bringing together rationalities, discourses, strategies, and techniques to form a seemingly coherent and well-motivated blueprint as the basis of the forthcoming actions. Thus, the work of designing the project was also the work to authorize particular kinds of knowledge, or discourses (cf. Li, 2007, 265). Counselors from Women\_Works and scholars from the management department of a university who were commissioned to monitor the project in a scientific manner<sup>5</sup> carried out this work. The results materialized in the project proposal and a website that presented the project to the public.

That the “will to improve” (Li, 2007, 264) the labor market position of refugee women took the shape of a project in the first place, was owing to the predominant rationality of the project discussed above. This imposed a number of aspects that affected both the design and the management of the assemblage. One of them was the “speeded up temporality of project-working” (McRobbie, 2016, 178) that forced a rather tight timeframe for setting up a new project and before that a project proposal: The preparation of Refugee\_Women\_Start\_Up started while the previous project targeted at migrant women still was running. The project itself began directly after the previous project ended. Owing largely to this tight timeframe, the design of Refugee\_Women\_Start\_Up came to be modeled on the preceding project; also, the website remained essentially the same. On the main page of the website, the (customized) greeting from the minister of the funding Federal Ministry describes the rationale of the project. It opens as follows:

Refugee women—one thinks of suffering and danger, of refuge, of humanity, and then also of the question of how women who have fled to Germany get by here, learn the language, and find a job. Starting up a business is not the first thing that comes to one’s mind. But the step towards self-employment opens up the possibility of countering disadvantages in the labor market, applying skills—including those that cannot be formally proven—and working in an independent, flexible, and family-friendly manner. Refugee women as entrepreneurs—actually, why not?

The opening section of the greeting introduces the rationality of entrepreneurialism: first depicting refugee women as confronted with a number of social challenges (learning German, finding a job) it then proposes entrepreneurship, or self-employment, as the solution to overcome the challenges. In so doing, the argument renders—in a postfeminist manner—societal disadvantages of refugee women a “technical problem” (Li, 2007, 265) that can be solved by the



women themselves through self-employment. Moreover, alluding to feminist concerns of compatibility of work and family, the argument depicts self-employment as an outright “magical solution” (Luckman, 2016, 91) and thus an opportunity for refugee women, too, who presumably have children, to ‘have it all’ (cf. *ibid.*, 94). The presupposed wish of refugee women to be able to work “in an independent and flexible” manner also attributes features to them characteristic of neoliberal and postfeminist subjectivity (cf. Gill, 2007; Lewis et al., 2017). While the reference to undocumented skills reflects both feminist concerns of unrecognized competences of stay-at-home mothers (re) entering the world of work (e.g., HeyMama, 2021) and refugee advocates’ concerns of the recognition of the undocumented skills of refugees (Knuth, 2016, 4), it also indicates a neoliberal discourse of human beings as accumulators of skills that can be utilized as human capital in the labor market (e.g., Ahl & Marlow, 2021; Allan, 2016).

Indicating the prominence of project rationality in the design of the intervention, both the website and the proposal highlight the goals that Refugee\_Women\_Start\_Up aspires to achieve and describes the means by which they will be reached. On the website, the goals are presented in colorful circles directly after the greeting by the minister. Also these suggest a feminist orientation by alluding to equality and inclusion, reading “gender equality”, “social and economic integration”, “equal opportunities for women in business”, “participation in the world of work through founding a business”, “promoting the entrepreneurial potential”, “sensitizing the public”, and “visibility as role models”. What connects these goals to postfeminist governmentality is that they are to be achieved essentially through the promotion of the entrepreneurship of individual women. More specifically this means, as a further goal highlights, a “successful conduct of 20 [mentorship] tandems”. While successful career women were instrumental as role models in the liberal feminist discourse of the second wave (e.g., Friedan, 1963), currently role models play a vital role in the individualist postfeminist discourse as well (e.g., Ahl & Marlow, 2021). The promotion of women’s potential is narrowed down here to entrepreneurial potential, which, in turn is presupposed to be an internal quality of (refugee) women (see *ibid.* for a similar presupposition in labor market political discourse). Further, more instrumental goals involve the “development of special methods” and “transfer of the insights” from the project.

While the website, targeted at stakeholders and potential participants, evokes a strong postfeminist appeal, the project proposal, written for the funding body, orients itself toward the requirement for concrete “deliverables” (McRobbie, 2016, 173). Thus the primary goal as stated in the proposal was to guide at least 15 refugee women through the process of establishing a business. Besides this, the proposal lists a number of additional goals that indicate a recognition of the need for lowering structural barriers, which in turn strengthens the feminist ethos of the intervention. These include raising awareness of policy makers and other gatekeepers of concerns of female refugee entrepreneurs; raising the visibility of female refugee entrepreneurs in the media; and facilitating their access to funding. Despite the abundance of goals set for the project, only one person, Anna, the entrepreneurship counselor mentioned above, was appointed to manage it. Even her contract was at times only part-time and she had other counseling work to do alongside it—a circumstance that reflects the ‘streamlining’ rationality of the “reduced budgets” of projectified work (*ibid.*). Anna was a long-standing counselor at Women\_Works and had acted as the manager of the previous project with migrant women.

Although the website and the proposal attributed a number of (entrepreneurial) qualities to the refugee women, a central argument in the proposal was that the designers of the project lacked any actual knowledge about the ‘target group’, since—to their understanding—barely any empirical research existed at that point. Nor had they any first-hand experience in working with refugee women. Their conception derived, as Anna explained to us in an interview, from the policy discourse of that time, where refugee women figured as persons who had arrived during the past couple of years over the Mediterranean with nothing but the clothes they were wearing. This notion finds expression directly in the opening sentence of the greeting from the Minister on the project’s website “Refugee women - one thinks of suffering and danger, of refuge, of humanity [...]”. After having made the case for refugee women to become entrepreneurs, as examined above, the reasoning goes further as follows: “However, the path to self-employment requires sensitive support in the start-up process for refugee women. [Refugee\_Women\_Start\_Up] provides such support. Through the 3 years model project [...] the women receive special attention.” Through the association with suffering, danger, and flight, refugee women are rendered here as vulnerable subjects in need of “sensitive support” and “special attention”. Lacking any other identity, vulnerability becomes a marker of their subjectivity and difference.

Besides drawing on current mediatized depictions of refugee women, this construction echoes a broader contemporary discourse, or, as Brunila and colleagues (2018, 113) call it, an “ethos of vulnerability” that in a neoliberal—and postfeminist—spirit directs attention to psychological traits of subjects, suppressing structural conditions.

Based on this view, benevolent and belittling at the same time, put forward also in the project proposal, the project was designed to run for 3 years. This relatively long timespan was one of the central differences from the previous project with migrant women in which two cohorts of participants were guided through, each within a year. In contrast to the previous project, for which the participants were selected based on their business ideas, Refugee\_Women\_Start\_Up was planned to start much earlier. As described on the website, the first year was set to “sensitize” the participants for “their own entrepreneurial potential”. The second year was reserved for developing a business plan and the third for putting this into practice, supported by the project. The envisioned strategy embodied the idea of postfeminist make-over (cf. Section 2, above). In this case, the make-over involved a transformation from a vulnerable, marginalized, and disadvantaged woman into a full member of society, a post-feminist hero having it all. Despite the difference in the timespan, the actual techniques for guiding the participants through this process were essentially the same as in the previous project. A central pillar was recruiting a mentor for each participant, who would offer individual assistance based on her/his own expertise and experience. Other envisioned techniques included success teams and co-working among the participants, supplemented by individual counseling. While mentoring has established itself in the Western management culture as a method to promote women's involvement in organizational structures (de Vries et al., 2006), success teams and co-working build on the power of peer support (cf. Business and Professional Women Europe, n. d.). Altogether, through their emphasis “on relational interaction, mutual empathy and mutual empowerment” these methods imply a postfeminist subjectivity that Lewis has called “a relational entrepreneurial femininity” (Lewis, 2014, 1857). To guarantee continuity, prospective participants were limited to those who had a prospect of being allowed to stay in Germany. To be able to implement the envisioned techniques, the required proficiency in German was set at level B2, described as an “independent language user” in the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, n. d.).

Due to the initial lack of contacts with any potential participants, the recruitment was planned to be carried out by reaching out to multipliers in Women\_Work's networks, holding public information events, advertising the project on the organizations website, and handing out leaflets whenever there was an opportunity—all strategies that derived from experience with the many projects Anna had managed in the past years. This first project phase was planned to be completed during the first year. How it turned out in practice, will be examined next.

## 5.2 | Running the project: Matching together disparate elements

The second cluster of practices *running the project* relates to the continuous work needed to match together what soon turned out to be “disparate elements” (Li, 2007, 265): The project design with its parameters, examined above, and the diverse bodies of the (potential) participants. This involved ongoing efforts of “devising compromises” and “making adjustments” to the project plan (cf. *ibid.*, 264). We will examine this cluster from two perspectives: assembling participants and conducting the training.

### 5.2.1 | Assembling participants

Although the planned recruitment strategies had proven profitable in previous projects, it soon became evident that they did not work with the target group at stake here. After over half a year of persistent work recruiting participants Anna frets in our interview: “all these channels that we have deployed [...] I have to say, the number that found their way to us, is tiny”. Pondering on the reasons for the difficulties, she takes up the reliance on multipliers from Women\_Works' established networks and voices her suspicion that their call might not have reached the target group at all because some of the envisioned multipliers might want to hold back the supposedly vulnerable refugee women from embarking on the path of self-employment. The vulnerability discourse surfaces here again, this time motivating an attempt of ‘saving’ the

refugee women *from* self-employment. Nevertheless, the patronizing attitude relegates refugee women into a position under guardianship, with no possibility of making decisions of their own. Another factor that Anna mentions relates to the languages and communication practices used in the recruitment. Reflecting, on the one hand, the orientation toward multipliers, and on the other, the expectation that the envisioned participants would have reached the level of “independent user” in German, both the leaflet and the project website were initially written in German only. While there were women among the target group who had reached a rather high proficiency in German, many others were not at this level, with others who were illiterate. Moreover, many of the target group were not familiar with the genre of leaflet. “I just learned in a recent event”, Anna recounts, “there is no such thing as a leaflet in their cultural circles. And they are wondering, what am I supposed to do with this? So this means, the way of addressing them is a totally different one. Mostly it goes through someone who knows someone else”. And so it did, but not only by word of mouth, but through a modern version of it, namely social media. So for instance Namra, who became a permanent participant in the project, told us in an interview how she had learned about it through a post that another participant Aleeza had placed in a Facebook group for refugee women living in the area. Social media was a channel that Anna had not come to think about at all when designing the recruitment strategies. In this sense, many of the potential participants were indeed more ‘postfeminist’, or at least more modern, than Anna, who was in her 50s and in whose life social media did not play a central role.

If unfamiliarity with the function of a leaflet reveals an assumption of a subject acquainted with and competent in ‘Western’ literacy practices, the expectation of the relatively high level of proficiency in German assumes a kind of aspirational subjectivity, but above all a subject free to invest in oneself (cf. Gill, 2007). Not all refugee women have this freedom, to participate in a language course for example, since they carry the majority of care responsibilities (Kosyakova et al., 2021, 9), and while that is symptomatic of patriarchal structures it also marks the women’s position as a refugee, since new refugee families often have difficulties in finding childcare (Salikutluk & Menke, 2021, 303; see also the case of Namra, below). The illiteracy of some of the members of the target group in turn points to the poverty of individual families and countries, but again also to patriarchal norms and practices that disadvantage women and girls in terms of education (World Bank, 2022).

Besides the difficulties in addressing the target group, Anna reflects on factors affecting the willingness and ability of the women to participate in the project. Essentially, these have to do with the subject position of a refugee woman in which trauma and vulnerability, highlighted in the design of the project, make up but one dimension. One of the crucial insights that Anna gained during the process was that the “target group” had “a multitude of things to tackle”—to find a place to stay, to take care of their children, handle the asylum procedure and process traumata—that, Anna had to concede, “had priority”. Besides, many attended a language course or an employment office scheme (i.e., job application training) that had been set as a condition for social benefits, so they could not attend another scheme at the same time. These multiple dimensions of structural restrictions reveal a paradox in the logic of the project, a paradox that derives from the logic of postfeminist governmentality: while the rationale of the project was to liberate refugee women through self-employment from social constraints hindering their integration, at the same time, the design of the project presupposed a subject already free from such constraints, and thus free to choose to join the project. At the same time, Anna, and some of the participants highlighted this in our interviews as well, discovered that many of the potential participants were in a rush to get on with their lives, an orientation not compatible with the long running time of the project designed for giving “sensitive support” and “special attention” to the seemingly vulnerable participants. While the idea of refugee women needing “special attention” was not entirely misguided in itself, it was misplaced since, as we will elaborate further below, the focus was not on the acute issues that the women were facing but on self-transformation and cultivation of their entrepreneurial potentials.

In order to get and keep the project going, Anna needed to make adjustments in her recruiting strategies on an ongoing basis. Though lacking financial means from the project budget, she managed to find ways to translate key parts of the website into English, French, Arabic, Persian and Tigrinya, and she started reaching out to local networks for refugee and migrant women to establish collaboration. Gradually, she also needed to loosen the criteria for participation defined in the project plan, and especially regarding the level of proficiency in German. Although this work bore some fruit, due to the inability or reluctance of the participants to commit themselves to the project, there was

a constant flux of participants coming into the project and leaving it, with the consequence that Anna had to keep recruiting new participants throughout the project, contrary to the initial project plan.

## 5.2.2 | Conducting the training

It was not only the assembling of participants that required constant work of pulling and matching together divergent elements, but also the daily business of conducting the actual training. Not only was Anna unable to follow the three phases into which the project initially was divided (activation of potentials, working out a business plan, realizing the plan) but most of the modes of working that she had planned to use did not really work either. “What now is the case”, Anna describes at the beginning of the second year, “is that the project is running in a very fluid manner, not in such a structured way as we had planned, I need to improvise all the time and that totally irritates me”.

A central challenge, Anna kept telling us in the interviews, was the heterogeneity of the women involved. At the beginning of the second year, a phase when the recruitment according to the initial plan was to be completed, Anna talked to us about the participants she regarded as the permanent ones—they were four. Additionally, there were a few more interested to see what the project could offer. One of the four was Aleeza, a young woman in her late twenties. In an interview with us, she told that back in her home country her parents had owned a restaurant where she had managed the kitchen. She also talked about the situation of many refugee women, how integration is harder for women than for men, since the women need to take care of the children. But “all women want to work”, she emphasized, “they don't only want to sit at home”. Based on these experiences, her business idea was to establish a restaurant that would provide refugee women with an opportunity to work. Through her project, she also wished to act as an inspiring role model for others. Although she was somewhat concerned about the obstacles on the way, such as finding funding for her project, she had the feeling, she said, that she could make it. While describing the participants to us, Anna emphasized the advantages of Aleeza's situation: “She doesn't have any children, doesn't need to take care of anything, she can concentrate on what is important for her and she also receives really good support from her husband”.

Besides Aleeza, there was Namra. She had an international degree in interior design and a decade of work experience in a managerial position in a company serving high-end clients in her country of origin. Hoping to be able to use her skills in Germany, her plan was to establish a digital-based business for refurbishing old furniture. When we first met her, she had just had her second meeting with Anna, but she was already working on her business plan and had a selection of decoration samples with her. Namra also talked about support from her husband, who like her had worked in the creative industry before they had fled to Germany, but this was not only moral support. They had two small children and in Namra's words:

We are always thinking and fear the risk and failure, you know, if you are not in your country, you don't have your home [...] so, we always should be thinking, that he should work in a work, that you can take the money like monthly for the rent, for the kids [...] and maybe I can be the adventurer for this.

To be able to find employment, her husband had to complete the language course first and since they were not able to find place in a kindergarten for their children, and unlike in their own country they had no relatives to help out, so Namra had to stay at home and take care of the children. She managed to visit Anna once a month to talk about her business idea. Besides talking about the difficulty of trying to work at home with small children, Namra described the challenge of “starting below zero”, as she put it, as a refugee in the new country, with no networks, no knowledge of the potential clients, of the suppliers, or even of the language. Her small advantage was that through her educational background she was able to communicate in English. Despite the challenges, when talking to us she was optimistic and visibly enthusiastic about her project.

A third, more short-term, participant was Dana. She was in her late thirties and had worked in Germany as a financial analyst until her contract ended and the war started in her home country, forcing her to apply for asylum in Germany. Her wish was, she explained to us, “to do something commercial, lucrative, that generates money but at the

same time has a social aspect". Her idea was to establish a social project related to cooking that would provide a safe space for other refugee women to come together. Due to her educational and occupational trajectory, however, she was not in the need of the "sensitive support" Refugee\_Women\_Start\_Up sought to provide. "So far", she explained to us with a slight frustration, "I found lots of listening and understanding but [...] I would like to find a place where I can start my project and to have, like, technical support". After a few meetings with Anna, Dana left the project to realize her ideas more quickly. When talking about Aleeza, Namra, and Dana, Anna adds laughing: "10 of those and everything would be fine". Besides these "few pearls" as Anna called them, who were relatively young, emancipated, and skilled, there were further participants. One was Heba. She was in her late forties, had four children, and meanwhile also grandchildren, before that 8 years of schooling and had trained to be a hairdresser. "She has mainly taken care of her family, at home. Well, she said she has done a few things as a volunteer, but that's it", Anna recounts. Heba had arrived in Germany 2 years before and her German skills were at a very basic level. Similarly to Aleeza, Dana and later a number of others, Heba's idea was a restaurant, an idea that emerged from her daily life and experience in cooking. "Now she has to figure out how she gets everything done", Anna comments. As the recruitment process continued, Anna turning increasingly to networks and associations of refugee women, there were to be many more like Heba. There were "disproportionately many", Anna describes, "that had gone to school for only between two and 5 years" and had little knowledge of German. All these features—the relative lack of education, work experience and skills, and among them German skills - along with the non-Western cultural background, were factors that the project design, built on the postfeminist assumptions, had not taken into account.

Not being socialized into the contemporary Western management discourse and the kind of relational entrepreneurial femininity (Lewis, 2014) that the planned methods of mentoring, co-working and success teams implied some of the participants were reluctant to engage in these modes of working. Moreover, since other participants were not able or willing to commit themselves to the program, formats that required work in groups did not work out and individual counseling became the main working mode. Group counseling or small workshops "were only a possibility when I was working with organizations", Anna explains, "where participants could build a small support team group. But it wasn't what I understand by a classic support team or success team. It was much more low-threshold. [...] And also then it was only these small units, because of the German language, the difficult words." Lacking interpreters, Anna had to try to figure out, "which words they know in the first place" and to try to adapt her language use to the level of the participants' language competence. "Namely simple German, that was super difficult for me", she reflects. Regarding the practical skills, language competence was not the only challenge, but also what Anna termed 'media competence'. "Today, I said they should first try to log in on a computer, to turn on a computer", Anna explains. "That's the first challenge, whether they manage to do that. They have a user profile and a user name so that they can log in with that. I said to them: 'Here you use your smartphone and everything that you can do with your smartphone [...] you can do also with a laptop', that is, I try to build bridges. Yeah, so this is how it is, you can proceed only by very small steps", she sighs.

While the aim of the first phase of the project was to "sensitize the participants to their own entrepreneurial potential" and to take into use the skills that they bring along, the unfamiliarity of many of the participants with Western management discourse, its jargon and mode of thought, made it difficult to assess their skills in the first place: "I have tried to talk about competences in the individual counseling sessions with them", Anna tells. "They all look at me with big eyes and think, what does she want from me. They don't know what transfer is, although I try to explain that it is important for self-employment. [...] Analysis and problem solving skills—I must try to explain that somehow. You need to try to explain what a 'problem' is in the first place!" she laughs. In the course of the project, Anna was confronted with a similar unfamiliarity with the presupposed entrepreneurial thinking. She explains:

I'm working with them and say, OK, now we need to make a calculation, because that's what you need to do when you're self-employed. Then they look at me like 'OK, why?' And I say, because you need to earn money. That's what many don't come to think of at all [...] That is, the whole question of economic viability... I mean, practical skills are one thing, economic thinking is another and I think it will be a long way until they have internalized that.

Apart from the seeming unfamiliarity with economic thinking, at least in the form and language in which it was presented in the project, in Anna's eyes some of the participants did not seem to meet the fundamental expectation of 'entrepreneurial potential' at all: "Co-Working doesn't... I mean, what they are totally lacking is initiative", Anna muses, "and partly they don't have any aptitude for establishing a business at all". Not having aptitude for establishing a business did not mean, however, that the participants would be lacking initiative, they just might have had other interests. In the interviews with us, they emphasized their wish to "be active", "not to stay at home", and they saw the project as a possibility for this, while waiting for a place in a language course, for instance.

What Anna characterized as "very small steps", "small parts", and "low-threshold things" soon become the defining features of the project. This was not only related to the truncated educational and occupational trajectories and non-Western cultural background of the participants but also and especially to their position as newly arrived refugees in German society. Instead of discussing the question of economic viability, assessing their problem solving skills, or indeed, becoming self-employed at all, the participants wanted to learn about the country in which they had landed. "How life works here in Germany, what one needs to consider in all these low-threshold things... so many low-threshold questions... their need of information is just immense", Anna explains with seeming frustration and admits: "I notice that I sometimes have big problems myself to manage all these low-threshold things". What here created a source of frustration for Anna, reveals another aspect of the agency of the participants, namely, their ability to make Anna, and through her the project, cater for their needs and interests.

Besides guiding the participants through the process of initiating and establishing their own business, a further goal of the project was, as discussed above, to sensitize stakeholders to the needs of refugee women and to tackle structural challenges that the participants confront on the way. Although from the outset this goal implied the need to match together disparate elements, the challenges and efforts required turned out to be many more than anticipated. Besides the fact that finding funding for realizing even the few business ideas (of the 'few pearls') proved to be extremely difficult, because of uncertain prospects of the women staying in the country, or racist discrimination, finding premises turned out to be another challenge. "They want to become self-employed in the gastro sector, but we cannot find any affordable premises to rent", Anna explains, "and then you get discrimination. If you don't correspond to a certain nationality, you don't have any chance at all to get a good property. I talked to an estate agent. And it all sounded fantastic. [...] And then he said, 'so this is for you, right?' and I said 'No, I'm asking for someone else.' I told him what it was about. [...] And then he said 'Well, then I can tell you right away, it doesn't stand much of a chance. [...] And I say: 'That's okay, I got it.'" Besides the challenges that Anna somehow had at least seen coming, the unexpected needs of the participants brought along new difficulties, and the obstacles accumulated. For instance, to provide the participants with support in developing their computer skills, Anna had looked into possibilities for them to sign up for a computer course. In this case, her efforts failed because the participants did not have the required competence in German for enrolling in such a course. "The result of all this," Anna says, "is that everything just meanders... there's no continuity. And that's what... that really bothers me. Because, I can't steer anything. I have little influence on anything. Yeah". When we ask her, how she is doing emotionally, she goes on to say:

My mantra is 'it is a model project' in order to be able to cope with this emotionally in the first place. How difficult it all is, how difficult... Anywhere you think you can open a door, you just run against a wall, and that really drains a lot of my energy. And that's what I really hadn't reckoned with, that it could get like that. [...] But OK, it must work out somehow.

The daily struggles to make it "work out somehow" were however only a part of a whole cluster of practices required for managing the success of the project—a cluster that we turn to next.

### 5.3 | Managing success: Smoothing out contradictions, reinterpreting failures

In contemporary projectified organizational culture, the success of a project is evidenced and measured by “deliverables” corresponding to the goals of the project, and “‘feelgood’ happy stories” demonstrating the overall ‘good vibes’ of the undertaking (McRobbie, 2016, 173). Thus, for Anna, the work of ‘managing success’ not only involved the daily struggles to make it “work out somehow” but also required effort to be able to demonstrate success against all the odds and to cope personally with the persistent contradictions. More concretely, these efforts involved work to smooth out contradictions, to reinterpret ‘success’ and ‘failure’, and to close down critical debate, practices that according to Li (2007, 265) are part of any governmental intervention. In the contemporary context of the projectified work, however, they acquire particular significance (cf. McRobbie, 2016, 173; Li, 2007, 277).

The efforts made to demonstrate success involved regulating the ways in which the project was talked about, not only at the *finissage* at the end of the project (cf. McRobbie, 2016, 173) but throughout its course. In our interviews, Anna talks volubly about the challenges that she had faced with the project, noting that she is often not able to talk about the negative aspects. “But,” she says, “I can’t always give everything a positive twist. [...] I can’t pretend to the outside that everything is just great, that they’ll all become self-employed and everything’s great”. The pressure to “give everything a positive twist”, or at least remain silent about the fundamental challenges she was facing on a daily basis, was increased by an unforeseen opportunity for public attention. The goal of raising the visibility of female refugee entrepreneurs in the (social) media could not be pursued in the way planned, because Anna lacked suitable content and sufficient time and capability to generate such content. This failure was partly compensated for, however, through an unexpected attention by international and national organizations, as a result of which the project was featured among other projects in an international conference and a policy guide and awarded for impactful social engagement. This positive attention exacerbated the need to give everything a positive twist even more.

When it started to turn out that the majority of the participants did not correspond to the presupposed subject of the project and the goal of establishing a business did not seem feasible to most of them, Anna’s conception of the ultimate goal of the project and thereby her idea of a successful outcome started to shift. The rationality of entrepreneurialism started to lose its ‘rationality’, and the postfeminist ethos gave way to a more genuine, liberal feminist approach corresponding to the orientation of *Women\_Works*. “What is success, anyway?” Anna ponders. “I have another understanding of what we want to achieve with the project, or what’s meaningful. [...] In the first place”, she explains, “I think it’s really important to get in touch with these women, to give them attention, to welcome them and to show them there are plenty of options.” And she reflects further:

We want to empower, we want to support, we want to deliver information and knowledge. And, even if they go back to their countries of origin, they can—with this insight that the world is different out there, much more multi-layered—change something in their countries. If not overnight so at least in terms of the mindset, by raising awareness. [...] I feel better that way,... when it comes to the question, what is our mission as an organization.

Although this reorientation helped Anna to cope with the challenges she faced with the management of the project and make her day-to-day work meaningful for her, it did not have the power to shift the goals, or guiding rationalities of the project on a higher level and the goal to have established at least 15 businesses by the end of the project kept looming in front of her. Whenever she talked about the objectives of the project, she added with a grin: “And of course I hope that there will be 15 foundations.”

In the concluding conference of the project, which we too attended, the main ethos, rationalities and goals were the same as at the beginning of the project 3 years earlier. Presenting the project as successful in these initial terms required skill and a number of strategic moves. The guiding question of the concluding conference and the accompanying press release was formulated as follows: “Can self-employment be a way to labor market integration for refugee women?”. Formulated like this, it needed only one case to answer the question positively, and there were

three women in the conference presenting their business projects and thus confirming the answer. One of them was Namra, who had her business plan ready and was now considering realizing it. Another was a more short-term participant of the project, who was planning to open a catering service. The third represented a group of women who had launched an online portal to sell self-made products. Aleeza with the idea of a restaurant for employing other refugee women had given up the project during its last year. In her project presentation, Anna referred to a total of nine foundations as an outcome of the project. When we asked her afterward what these were, it turned out that the figure referred to persons involved in co-foundations (such as the online-platform) and included also undertakings to be realized in the near future. Despite all efforts, the number did not reach the initial goal of 15 foundations and so the initial lack of knowledge about the target group, refugee women, was also highlighted. Although this lack of knowledge was one of the main reasons for the difficulties confronted throughout the project, at the final stage of the project it received a strategic role. "We started off at zero, we shouldn't forget about that," Anna asserts in our last interview, "and then we acquired the knowledge little by little by ourselves". Besides adding to the 'deliverables' of the project, the emphasis on knowledge and expertise also performed another function: it "present[ed] failure as an outcome of rectifiable deficiencies" and "as a matter of technique" (Li, 2007, 265). So geared in this way toward demonstrating success, the presentation in the concluding conference foreclosed the possibility of challenging the goals and the rationalities that had guided the project thereby closing down also any broader "debate about how and what to govern" (ibid.); indeed, any debate about the meaningfulness, ethics, and politics involved in projects of this kind (see also McRobbie, 2016, 173).

Despite the successes on many levels as Anna characterizes the outcomes of the project in our last interview, she expresses her doubts that at the end of the day the officials of the funding ministry regarded the project as successful. This doubt was accompanied by the anxiety that the officials might think she has "put [her] feet up for the whole day and done nothing [...] just wasted tax money. [...] Because I really have worked hard and done a lot and tried to make things happen", she assures. "We really have to try to make that clear [in the end report], that it's not just about the key figures". In the final report then, which was published 6 months after the ending of the project, the (lack of) success in quantitative terms was pushed into the background, less measurable 'successes on different levels', and the various insights gained through the project were given prominence, as was the groundbreaking nature of the project. In the description of the insights, although many of them pointed to the heterogeneity of the target group, the report was careful not to challenge the initial rationalities, but presented self-employment as a matter of technique. The hard work required over the 3 years to forge and sustain connections between the wildly disparate elements was valorized as pioneering investment in testing different methods and trying out new ways that allowed the multiple insights to emerge. Any sign of the "hidden injuries" (Gill, 2016) that this work entailed were erased.

## 6 | CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated the gendered operation of governmental power in the contemporary European political and organizational context by focusing on a model project, initiated by a German federal ministry, aimed at the social and economic integration of refugee women by empowering them to become entrepreneurs. In the examination, we conceptualized this intervention as a governmental assemblage, a collection of rationalities, discourses, strategies, techniques, and embodied subjects. Although elements drawing on the discursive realm of postfeminism were the most characteristic for the assemblage at hand, rationalities that we called the 'rationality of entrepreneurialism' and the 'rationality of project', both of which draw on the logics of neoliberalism, were other integral constituents in the governmental intervention. The examination directed its analytical gaze on the practices of assemblage, opening up a twofold perspective: first, it enabled us to investigate the operation of postfeminist and neoliberal power in relation to its envisioned subjects, refugee women in Germany, and second, how this power acts upon the subject, entrepreneurship counselor Anna, tasked with the work of governing in the contemporary organizational context. In this concluding section, we consider the findings from these two points of view.



Linking to the goals of *Refugee\_Women\_Start\_Up*, a central strand of discussion in the feminist scholarship on postfeminist governmentality has been concerned with the question of inclusion and how postfeminist governmentality may contribute, or fails to contribute, to gender equality, diversity, and inclusion in organizational settings (cf. Section 2, above). The particular appeal of *Refugee\_Women\_Start\_Up* to women of color and the subsequent public presentation of the project as a success suggest that even in the field of entrepreneurship postfeminism is by no means “for white girls only” (Butler, 2013, 35). To a limited extent, through the public display of the selected cases at the end of the project, the project can also be seen to contribute to the diversification of entrepreneurial female subjectivities (Lewis, 2014). The approach of the present study, drawing on an “ethnographic imaginary” (Forsy, 2010), allowed us, however, to go beyond these external impressions. The analysis showed how, depending on project funding and thus subject to the “speeded-up temporality of project working” (McRobbie, 2016, 173) *Women\_Works* seized the opportunity for a new project and assembled the intervention from elements at hand at that moment. Consequently, the project for refugee women was largely modeled on the then still ongoing project for migrant women, whose success had impressed the funding Federal Ministry. Lacking any first-hand insight into the lives of refugee women who had recently arrived in Germany, the organizers resorted to the public discourse of the time. Echoing, moreover, a broader “ethos of vulnerability” (Brunila et al., 2018), the psychological traits of vulnerability and trauma became the markers of ‘refugeeness’, and, as such, of difference. Otherwise, based on the postfeminist assumption that freedoms of some are freedoms of all (Projansky, 2001), the envisioned participants were attributed a postfeminist subjectivity: Western, educated, and above all free and emancipated. Arguably, the success of the project with migrant women was owing to the fact that the participants were able to approximate the postfeminist subjectivity and commodify their characteristic—ethnic/cultural—difference, turn it into added value in the sectors of communication, gastronomy, cosmetics, and more. In the project with refugee women, the differences turned out to be much more manifold than expected; differences that derived from structural positionings of the women tied to complex multilocal patterns of subordination. Some were lacking basic education and many carried the bulk of care responsibilities. As new refugees, not all had permanent housing or even a residence permit and many depended on social benefits. The mismatch between the postfeminist subject figure of the project and the subjectivities of the actual women not only shows how postfeminist governmentality radically fails in promoting equality and inclusion when it comes to differences deriving from structural positionings of women but also lays bare the arrogant naivety of the postfeminist assumptions. At the same time, however, the points of mismatch shed light on the agency of the women involved, with their ‘unruly’ ways of responding to the governmental attempts. Not corresponding to the psychologizing notion of a vulnerable subject but rather urging to get on with their lives, some of the women regarded the 3 years of the project as far too long and either soon dropped out or opted out altogether. Some others participated temporarily primarily to “stay active” and “not just to sit at home”, and many used the project as an opportunity to learn more about the country in which they had landed. While, to some extent, this will have contributed to the women’s participation and inclusion in German society, the credit for that should not be given to the postfeminist governmental logic, but, rather, to the initiative and creativity of the women involved.

As the examination showed too, however, there were also participants who were able to access the offered subject position. Could entrepreneurship provide for them a way toward inclusion and equality in the world of work? In their study, Ahl and Marlow (2021, Section 2, above) point to a structural subordination of women in the field of entrepreneurship. In the present examination, Namra’s description of “starting below zero” with no networks, no financial background support, and no knowledge of the country or language, gives an indication of the structural positioning of many refugee women. The open racism Anna witnessed while trying to find business premises for the project participants gives a glimpse at the ongoing subordination of non-white female entrepreneurs, a fact that is well documented relating to the dependent employment sector in Germany (e.g., Koopmans et al., 2019; Weichselbaumer, 2020). Although recognized at the outset as a structural problem that the project sought to address, the scarce resourcing of the project, owing to the cost-efficiency calculus of the rationality of project, turned the effort into one woman’s battle. Determined, at the outset, to clear the way for the participants, Anna’s experiences during the project shifted her sentiments to frustration, desperation, and exhaustion. After the project, the participants have to go forward on

their own. In this way, instead of promoting equality, postfeminist governmentality, in a neoliberal spirit, passes the responsibility for inclusion on to the subjects themselves (cf. Ahl & Marlow, 2021, 63; Dlaske, 2022).

The second angle of investigation showed how the governmental logics through which the refugee women were to be governed acted upon Anna, the entrepreneurship counselor tasked with the work of governing. In this connection, the investigation sheds light to the amount and nature of practical and cognitive work Anna had to invest throughout the project in matching and holding together the disparate elements to prevent the project from falling apart and turning it into 'success'. In the interviews with us, she did not want to disclose how much time she actually invested in the project while she was officially working on it part-time. Moreover, the examination indicates the amount of emotional work required in day-to-day working at the limits of her capabilities. The more time passed, the more evident it became that the postfeminist logic did not hold and the more impossible the project goals seemed, the more Anna's concerns grew. At the same time, the requirement to "give everything a positive twist", when presenting the project to the outside, forced Anna to keep her anxiety and desperation to herself. Not only was she struggling to reach the goals set. In the course of the project, she also started to doubt the goals themselves and also the rationality of entrepreneurialism. To make her day-to-day work meaningful to herself, Anna redefined the goals and the terms of success to herself, exchanging the rationalities of entrepreneurialism and postfeminism for a more genuinely feminist approach, corresponding to Women\_Works' orientation. Although this shift ultimately testifies to the irrationality of the apparent rationality of entrepreneurialism, it did not have the power to change the overall goals and the concomitant terms of success of the project. Women\_Works' operation depended on project funding, and this in turn on the demonstrated ability to deliver successful projects. To meet the expectation of "deliverables" and "'feelgood' happy stories" (McRobbie, 2016, 173), the presentation of the project at the *finissage* and in the final report restrained from any substantial criticism of the rationalities that guided the project and the "hidden injuries" (Gill, 2016) of neoliberalized project work were once again given a positive twist or erased altogether. In this way, despite the experiences from the project, the contemporary mode of 'governing by projects' led to a reaffirmation of the political faith in the rationality of entrepreneurialism and of postfeminist governmentality as its ideological ally.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There are no conflicts of interest relating to the study.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> All names relating to the project are pseudonyms.
- <sup>2</sup> The notion is borrowed from Gill's discussion on the affective climate of contemporary academia, which she examines as an "excellent example of the neoliberalisation of the workplace" (Gill, 2016, 53).
- <sup>3</sup> The postfeminist makeover refers to a discursive regime that leads women to seek to solve (made-believe or actual) problems in their lives through self-transformation by following expert advice. Most notable manifestation of this paradigm is the genre of makeover shows (see e.g., Gill, 2007, 156).

- <sup>4</sup> Except for two interviews (see Section 4), the materials collected for the study are in German in the original and were translated by the authors.
- <sup>5</sup> Katharina was involved in this monitoring, but only after the design phase of the project.

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