

GERMAN WORKING PARENTS' STRUGGLE FOR KINDERGARTEN PLACES

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In the last few years, German working parents have had to fight to get their children a place in one of the childhood care institutions. The State's efforts to cope with the problem have been undermined by massive immigration and have left the country's citizens in utter dismay.

In Germany working parents are having extreme difficulties in finding places for their infants in German kindergartens: the country is indeed facing a severe lack of options with regards to the care for young children. This was quantified by a lack of almost 300,000 places all over the country in a study published at the end of 2015 by the Institute of German Economics of Cologne (IW Köln). The issue is assuming increasingly overwhelming dimensions: according to the IW Köln in North Rhine-Westphalia, one of the most populated German states with more than 17 million inhabitants, many parents are trying in vain to insert their offspring into daily childcare; 16.2% of children the right age, corresponding to 77,459 children will have no place among their peers in the childcare system.

In 2013 the German Bundestag passed a new bill to address the issue and to ease the life of working parents. The new legislation states that all parents with a child aged twelve months or older are entitled to have a place in a daycare center, thus lowering the previous threshold for children aged three or older. Furthermore, the parents can challenge the decision of the daycare center refusing admission to children through a legal provision – however, this will make a little difference in the areas that do not offer any daycare possibilities at all.

Despite the new bill, the situation has indeed not yet reached a final solution and staggering differences have emerged in a country that has already been affected by a significant disruption of the curricula within its daycare institutions.

What are the reasons behind this severe lack of childcare places?

First of all, the increasing demand in daily care for children is an on-going process deriving from the fact that more and more German women are working and they are returning to work earlier after their pregnancies. As several experts have put it, early childhood care is no longer negatively perceived in society, thus the dependence on daycare structures is growing fast and steadily.

The striking point is that the German state could have coped with the shift in the country's mentality thanks to the renewed legislation, but the unprecedented refugees' diaspora that have landed in the country in recent years have caused an unexpected disruption.

Out of the 443,000 asylum applicants registered in Germany in 2015, 117,000 were under the age of 16, and among them many were pre-school children. Moreover, it must be taken into account that the actual numbers are higher because not all the arrivals have immediately been processed by the welcoming centers and because refugee flows, albeit decreased, continued throughout 2016. Therefore, considering that the 2013 legislation gives each one-year-old child the right to a place in a kindergarten, these numbers have overstretched the capacity of the childhood education institutions and schools.

Why do child refugees constitute such a big issue?

First of all, since Germany is a federal state the *Länder* have agreed different legal requirements concerning access to schooling for refugee children, such as the extension of the waiting period and the modalities for attendance. Meanwhile, in certain states children attend exclusively German language classes whereas in other states they also attend both intensive language courses and regular classes with their German peers.

The situation has generated a huge challenge for the German school system as a whole, which has had to unlock the necessary resources to cope with the massive influx. Ilka Hoffmann, a board member of the GEW, Germany's largest teachers' union, estimated that Germany would have to hire some 24,000 new teachers, without considering the necessity to get more psychologists and counsellors engaged in school support nor the need to adapt or build new infrastructures. According to experts' assessment, the education of children granted refugee status in Germany will have an overall impact on the national finances of an extra of 67 billion euros.

Nevertheless, the arising issues are not wholly economic in nature. The teachers who have to carry the heavy burden of the day-to-day education of these children are ill prepared for the task they are faced with. The children often come with a low educational background and at least one in five has witnessed traumatic events that have provoked post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Although the personnel are doing a heroic job to ensure integration, the educational institutions are frequently too poorly equipped to stand up to the task.

In addition to this, the inclusion of refugee children also has an impact on the German citizens.

On the one hand, the insertion of a percentage of refugee children in regular classes affects the German pupils' schoolwork, because the language barrier of the newcomers causes a forced adaptation of the programme that hinders the other students to advance and achieve better results.

On the other hand, the fact that the government is creating new kindergarten places to accommodate the refugee children is a major setback for German working parents who have submitted application after application and have been waiting for years for a place

in the childhood care structures. Therefore, this provision is a very contentious issue and risks raising social tensions between the German citizens and the asylum applicants. The message sent by the government is that the refugees are immediately granted a privilege that German taxpayers are not. Albeit apparently marginal, the matter of kindergarten places is just another serious signal showing the shortcomings in the German social security system, getting frailer upon the weight of societal changes and from the massive immigration waves.

It is also apparent that this problem is not likely to be crossed out of the political agenda any time soon. The parents of the refugee children, who in most cases are also arriving from disadvantaged contexts and without an education fitting into the German standards, will have a hard time in finding highly-skilled and highly-paid jobs which would allow them to become members of the active population and thus taxpayers.

Hence, these provisions are likely to create a vicious circle that will reduce the trust of the German citizens' in their local authorities and their confidence in the social security system as a whole. As a result, their growing frustrations will be directed towards the German state and authorities whom have failed to anticipate and put in place the right measures to cope with the arrival of the immigrants. In doing so the German authorities could have prevented this uncomfortable situation – in which it now sees itself engaged in a difficult stress-test with the money of its young working parents and taxpayers.

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