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BYSTANDER INTERVENTION LOST IN TRANSLATION

(mis)Steps Towards Safer AZCs

Harassment, discrimination, intimidation and (sexual) violence are only some of the issues a person living in a Dutch Asylum Seekers Center (AZC) is subjected to while waiting for their legal status to be approved or denied. A great deal of everyday interactions are very complex and influenced by multiple factors and therefore there is no one-fit-all solution that can solve all of the problems arising from those interactions. Considering that this is a multi-layered issue, we wanted to approach this problem from another perspective; by offering Bystander Intervention (BI) as a potential solution that has proven its effectiveness in various contexts. The adaptation of BI for safer AZCs was one of the two knowledge products of the Let's Talk Safety project, for which we involved a diverse group of refugees and asylum seekers to give us feedback on our methodology. The second knowledge product was the Policy Brief which can be found here.

The feedback we received from the participants on the Bystander Intervention methodology led us to seriously reconsider the approach. The methodology and approach that we use in our workshops were developed

and designed to prevent types of harassment and (sexual) violence that predominates in western societies. Even though this methodology can be effectively used in different situations and by different people, the foundations on which it was based can greatly differ and therefore it can not always be translated into every context. When used in different regions of the world, it is usually adopted by the local initiatives and organizations to fit the cultural context, so it makes sense when used by the local communities. As it was pointed out to us by multiple participants during the co-creation session, life inside AZCs is not the same as the one outside of it. The rules are not the same, or at least are not implemented in the same way, and power dynamics among different actors have a huge impact on the residents' safety. Moreover, the BI methodology was designed as a tool to resolve the incidents occurring in public spaces. However, AZCs are more of a grey area between public and private with the idea to be very temporary. In order for BI to foster positive change within the centers and increase the feeling of safety, engagement and ownership, other systemic changes need to take place, some of which our participants mentioned and are included in our Policy Brief.

Another important challenge for the application of BI in the context of AZCs is that of effective communication. The strongest remarks on the BI methodology from participants referred to misunderstandings among AZCs' residents caused by language barriers, cultural differences, tensions caused by the uncertainty of the situation and lack of structural, institutional and systemic support.

People who live in AZCs come from many different parts of the world and speak various languages. Not everyone speaks and/or understands English or Dutch. It is not an unusual situation in which residents of AZCs don't understand each other as they don't have a common language to communicate among themselves, or sometimes even with COA (Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers) staff. This could potentially present a great problem in detecting harassment and executing the majority of BI strategies. Communication barriers mean not being able to **direct**ly set boundaries, or **delegate** intervention to another bystander, or **check in** with the person who was harassed, or even recognize verbal harassment if it happens in the language you are not familiar with. For these reasons, detecting and responding to incidents of harassment, while avoiding misunderstandings and escalation, is extremely difficult in the AZC context.

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Additionally, the majority of asylum seekers and refugees come from countries with poor human-rights track records and a weak rule of law (especially war zones) where sexual harassment and violence may not be defined or recognized by the same patterns of behavior. Discrimination and persecution of religious, sexual and gender minorities are also common in these countries which is the reason why many people seek asylum in the first place. However, this is not the case for everyone, as the project participants



explained that they still face difficulties being surrounded by nationals from their home countries who hold onto and often act upon worldviews that do not tolerate or accept certain groups. This is especially difficult when this type of behavior (intimidation or harassment) occurs with no consequences in the context of AZCs.

Participants explained that sometimes targeted violence and harassment appearing among people of a similar cultural background might be harder to recognize and respond to by someone who is not familiar with the dynamics among certain groups of people within those communities. Even within the same community, the interventions may not be safe for everyone, potentially putting the bystander in great danger for breaking social rules and norms. Moreover, translating the values underpinning the BI methodology could be even more difficult when sexual harassment is not recognized as s serious issue (as raising awareness continues to be a challenge globally) and the facilitators may not be taken seriously. Here we see it as an imperative for the AZCs residents to be introduced to their human rights, Dutch laws and cultural values, prior to learning and practicing the BI methodology, an approach that even the Dutch society is still learning to embrace.

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Another level of problems is added when we introduce the LGBTQI+ identities. These communities are still among the most vulnerable and at higher risk of experiencing violence everywhere in the world, but even more so in cultures where their existence is forbidden and punishable by law. A great number of LGBTQI+ people seeking asylum protection in the Netherlands left their homes exactly because of their identity and the danger they were constantly exposed to. Meeting your nationals and other people of similar cultural backgrounds in the AZCs means being exposed to the same type of danger





and risk of violence they are seeking protection from. If an AZC community is made of many individuals not recognizing and disrespecting a queer identity, it is hard to believe that they would be willing to help them in a situation of harassment or violence. On the other side, being an LGBTQI+ bystander could mean that your help might be seen as undesirable because your presence is seen as unwelcome.

scale and less concentrated, and the safety of the LGBTQI+ community is not entirely ensured, it would be hypocritical to impose all the weight and the responsibility of solving this problem solely on the bystanders living in the AZCs without stronger systemic support and protection.

Moreover, according to our participants, a great number of

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The intervention itself would be significantly more difficult and unsafe than outside of the AZCs context and could put a bystander into immense danger, potentially risking their own life.

Since these same problems and obstacles to effective Bystander Intervention also appear outside of AZCs, on the streets and other public spaces in the Netherlands, on a smaller

incidents arise from a constant tension in the air built by the uncertainty of their future and the lack of activities to fill their time while they can only wait for life to happen. Ambiguity, temporality and vagueness of their position erases the line of normality and security of everyday life, the very security necessary for a person's wellbeing. While continuously being alerted and afraid for their own life (for a prolonged time as they left the



unsafety of their own homes some months/years ago), it would be wrong to expect them to always be ready to jump into action when they witness harassment or violence. Without strong institutional support focused on the prevention of violence among AZC residents, BI methodology would be just another tool left for them to solve their disputes among themselves and for the institution to take fewer responsibilities for the outcome.

The reason why BI wouldn't work in the current context of AZCs is that the same rules do not apply for the people inside as they do for the people outside of the Centers. Incompatibility of BI methodology within the context of AZCs is a clear example of the system failing to provide the same level of safety for the residents of AZCs as it is provided for everyone else in the Netherlands. This project unveiled a lot of these points within the system which requires improvement and our participants suggested a great deal of possible solutions that would contribute to the safety of people living in AZCs. This conclusion doesn't mean that we see our job done here. It means we have to focus on points a few steps back, those that have to precede the successful and safe Bystander Intervention.