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"Dealer raus": A retrospective case study of the Mothers Without Borders Initiative in Berlin's Kreuzberg

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Abstract

This article presents a retrospective case study of community-based responses to substance use and street-level distribution in Kottbusser Tor, known as "Little Istanbul," a neighborhood in Berlin's Kreuzberg with a high concentration of immigrants from Türkiye and their descendants. The study examines the Mothers Without Borders (*Mütter ohne Grenzen*) initiative, active in the early 2000s under the leadership of second-generation immigrant Turkish women. It is based on a document analysis of media coverage from 2005 to 2013, including news reports, interviews, blog posts, social media content, and institutional brochures. These are examined thematically to explore how the experience of Mothers Without Borders can be interpreted in the context of media representations and these women's statements. Conceptually, the study engages with debates concerning migration, motherhood, and neighborhood space, and draws notably on perspectives that understand addiction as embedded within broader socio-spatial and political processes rather than just as an individual or purely medical issue. The findings show that the women, as long-term Kreuzberg residents, mobilized to disrupt the emerging cycle of substance use and street-level distribution among younger generations. Instead of seeing the neighborhood solely as a site of anti-drug activism, they reconceptualized it as a space where belonging and intergenerational care could be rearticulated. Their experience indicates that efforts to address the conditions fostering substance use and distribution can also be viewed as resistance to the stigmatization of immigrant neighborhoods. In this context, the women's positionality is constructed through "dual positioning," in which motherhood is strategically mobilized as both a tool for activism and for neighborhood protection. By emphasizing grassroots mobilization, the article contributes to migration, space, and addiction studies by foregrounding immigrant women's agency against addiction as relationally constituted within intersecting power relations and socio-spatial inequalities.

Keywords: community-based case study, dual positioning, immigrant motherhood, spatial stigmatization, urban activism against addiction

Main points

- Substance use and drug economies are shaped by broader socio-spatial inequalities, exclusion, and limited institutional support in marginalized urban areas.
- The Mothers Without Borders Initiative instrumentalized motherhood as both a form of activism and a means of protecting their neighborhood, while also challenging the racialized stigmatization of immigrant communities as inherently "dangerous" spaces. This dual positioning (motherhood and spatial protection) reveals how immigrant women negotiate within intersectional power relations.
- The initiative demonstrates how immigrant women can exercise agency through collective urban activism, transforming motherhood into a public, community-centered practice of care, resistance, and neighborhood belonging.

Introduction

Migrants encounter various domains spanning social, political, historical, and economic contexts. These domains are interconnected at micro, mezzo, and macro levels and influence their lives. In migration studies, the link between migration and addiction has increasingly gained scholarly relevance. Social scientists particularly examine this connection in relation to trauma and stress linked to (post-)migration, integration challenges, identity crises, stigmatization, culture shock, sense of belonging, the racialization of addiction, access to services, and structural inequalities (De Kock, 2020; Demircan & Guler, 2024; Emen & Mercan, 2024; Grüsser et al., 2005; Heimann et al., 2007; Şahin & Güngör, 2022; Taşdemir et al., 2020;

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Wanke et al., 2022). Establishing a link between migration and addiction enables analysis of intersectional experiences and offers researchers a distinctive analytical window, particularly in comparative work that situates diverse migrant experiences alongside those of local populations. Addiction is not just an individual health issue but also underpins broader discussions about crime, deviance, integration challenges, stigmatization, and ghettoization, all of which shape perceptions of migrants' experiences and, thereby, the prevention and rehabilitation approaches, highlighting addiction's social aspect (see Wanke et al., 2022). Grasping the relationality between immigrants and addiction requires critically examining the socio-spatial dynamics of drug economies and the processes that lead to racialized labeling and exclusion.

Representations of addiction are evident through media coverage, political debates, and security-focused discourse in urban settings in Germany (Bürk et al., 2016). Recently, the drug flow in Kreuzberg's Görlitzer Park and Kottbusser Tor (Kotti) has sparked significant public and scholarly debate, especially within urban studies. Critics argue that public debates on these areas perpetuate racialized security discourse, labeling, and the criminalization of migrants (see Bhimji, 2026; Blokland, 2021; Ciax, 2025). Kreuzberg, a symbolic representation of Berlin's multicultural cityscape with its diverse communities, especially in the Kottbusser Tor area known as Little Istanbul, has historically been a hub for residents of Turkish origin, embodying transnational spatiality (see Atasü Topçuoğlu & Akbaş, 2011; Çağlar, 2001; Dell, 2021; Güney & Kabaş, 2017; Kil & Silver, 2006; Mandel, 2008; Wolf, 2011). At the same time, the neighborhood has become a prominent example of spatial stigmatization, with media representations associated with crime. This portrayal fosters a view of the area as socially dangerous, not only because of the real or perceived drug-related issues but also due to the stigmatizing labels that accompany such representations (see Blokland, 2021). In this regard, the territorial stigmatization of immigrant neighborhoods like Kreuzberg as "dangerous areas" (Autor*innenkollektiv Gras & Beton, 2018; Dell, 2021; Keller, 2024), or, as in the case of the Berlin Interior Minister's 2014 statement, as "crime-burdened places" or "danger zones" (Bürk et al., 2016, p. 7), contributes to the perception of these areas as racialized problematic spaces (Ciax, 2025). This perception, in turn, serves to legitimize, from an administrative perspective, state-driven gentrification policies, displacement, and surveillance systems targeting immigrants in Kreuzberg (see Barry, 2025; Bürk et al., 2016; Hamann & Türkmen, 2020; Hinze, 2013). According to Eksner (2013), since the early 2000s, Kreuzberg and Neukölln have experienced two interconnected processes: the territorial stigmatization and ghettoization of the neighborhoods and their residents, mainly immigrants and their descendants, as well as gentrification trends. Stehle (2006) argues that historical debates on Kreuzberg reveal how questions of integration and urban containment strategies have shaped racialized and exclusionary narratives in Europe, highlighting both continuities and counter-narratives. Thus, this article draws attention to these ongoing debates, particularly to a period when public discomfort with substance use and street-level distribution in Kottbusser Tor became increasingly visible. Accordingly, this community-based case study focuses on Mothers Without Borders (*Mütter ohne Grenzen*), a civil initiative active in the early 2000s.

This study analyzes open documents to shed light on the initiative that has largely gone unnoticed in Berlin's history of urban activism. Because substance use and street-level distribution in Kreuzberg remain urgent issues, Mothers Without Borders offers a retrospective view for future urban activism against addiction, particularly highlighting the agency of immigrant women. The study focuses on the following question: How can the experience of Mothers Without Borders be interpreted in the context of media representations and the statements of these women? To explore this, the study examines how motherhood is mobilized by second-generation immigrant women, bridging sociology of space and migration studies through an analysis of urban activism against addiction.

Mothers Without Borders

Mothers Without Borders was an independent, non-governmental initiative established in 2005 in Berlin's Kreuzberg district, specifically in the Kottbusser Tor neighborhood, by a group of second-generation immigrant Turkish women aged 25 to 60 (Baumann, 2007). Led by social worker Güner Arkış, the initiative arose from growing concerns about increasing substance use among youth, with some starting as young as twelve, and the sale of drugs on streets and in front of schools (Lehmann, 2012). Arkış, who was the group's spokesperson, described the motivation for starting the initiative as follows:

> It was when we witnessed a twelve-year-old child being used as a drug courier. At that moment, we understood that we could no longer stand by and watch children and young people being exploited by dealers. That is why we came together and decided to take action against the drug dealers. (Lehmann, 2012)

According to information on the initiative's social media account[1], these developments left families deeply distressed. Over time, parents took punitive actions to safeguard their children, such as enforcing strict restrictions, blaming schools and social settings, sending children to Türkiye, or even arranging early marriages. The group adopted the motto "A society that cannot protect its children cannot protect its future." On the website[2], the initiative summarized its goals

[1] The group's Facebook account appears to date back to 2008. However, because the account was inaccessible and no response was received to emails sent to the associated address, the group was considered inactive on social media. For the Facebook account, see: https://www.facebook.com/groups/30179573172/

[2] The website is not accessible. Information was retrieved from the site (muetter-ohne-grenzen.eu) using the Wayback Machine on https://archive.org.

as: (1) preventing drug trafficking in the neighborhood, (2) providing supervised spaces for drug use, (3) stopping children from being used as drug couriers, (4) increasing awareness among families, (5) encouraging greater sensitivity from parents and residents regarding children's welfare, (6) improving communication between families and authorities, and (7) working toward a safe and harmonious environment for everyone.

To achieve their goals, Mothers Without Borders mobilized as "disturbing mothers" by organizing petitions and information sessions, holding gatherings with families, and patrolling streets, parks, and courtyards often used by drug dealers, carrying small lamps to keep dealers visible during night patrols. As a result, the initiative's efforts resonated strongly at the time and attracted considerable media attention. They are also believed to have inspired director Andreas Schmidt's play "*Zebramütter*" (Pauly, 2009), which depicts a group of mothers from Kreuzberg who jointly fight against drug dealers in their neighborhood (Slevogt, 2009). However, this momentum proved short-lived. They continued their activities at *Mehrgenerationenhaus* after 2008, holding regular breakfast meetings with 25 to 40 women and organizing occasional informational events (Lehmann, 2012). Moreover, the initiative organized aerobics and jewelry-making courses for women and children, especially for immigrant women who faced barriers to participating in sports. It also offered educational seminars and individual counseling on family- and drug-related issues (Wawzyniak, 2012). The Initiative was also involved in the *Elternforschungsgruppe*, which seeks to develop perspectives on the challenges of parenthood and its social context (Beber, n.d.). The financial and spatial difficulties the women encountered emphasize that, although the initiative began voluntarily, it struggled to maintain its previous level of activity. Halina Wawzyniak's (Wawzyniak, 2012) blog post explains the initiative's decline in visibility by highlighting the challenges the women faced in achieving their goals, noting in particular that they received financial support for only three of their seven years:

Since their activities have come almost to a standstill, the women have become increasingly reflective. Recalling how they were portrayed by politics and the media, they state that 'the group's impact was merely instrumentalized.' For example, MWB received the "Berliner Tulpe[3]" award in 2008, which aims to promote German-Turkish civic solidarity. Yet today, their quiet disappearance is largely ignored, and no support is provided. (Wawzyniak, 2012)

Methodology

This research relies on document analysis, which involves a systematic review of materials such as newspaper reports, blogs, social media content, and institutional reports in digital formats (Bowen, 2009; Morgan, 2022). As Bowen (2009) explains, documents provide access to historical and current information about the context, allowing researchers to interpret the phenomenon's historical circumstances and content. Thus, document analysis is particularly useful when researchers are unable to employ other qualitative methods for their studies (Morgan, 2022). Historical research, in particular, relies on pre-existing materials because it is not possible to interview or observe individuals from the distant past (Morgan, 2022). In this regard, information from documents is vital for establishing the conceptual framework that guides and enriches the study (Bowen, 2009). The initial step in document analysis is identifying and collecting the relevant documents for the research (Morgan, 2022). Unlike other qualitative data collection methods, like interviews, researchers do not generate data through document analysis. However, they actively participate by selecting, organizing, and determining which data to include or exclude in their analysis (Morgan, 2022). Challenges in reaching out to initiative members via social media and to the Neighborhood Management (*Quartiersmanagement*[4]) offices in Kreuzberg, as well as the absence of archival documents from the FHXB Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg Museum Archive and Das feministische Archiv FFBIZ[5], necessitated an analytical approach based primarily on a limited number of available documents. Consequently, all relevant pre-existing documents related to the case were considered. No additional data beyond the period when the women's activities significantly influenced the neighborhood's agenda were identified. This limited access to material on the initiative constitutes a constraint of the study. Nevertheless, given the originality of the women's activism and forms of engagement, interpreting this case retrospectively is particularly important. Therefore, the study draws on 14 news reports and interviews from outlets including taz, Der Standard, Der Spiegel, Hürriyet, International Business, Tagesspiegel, Berliner Morgenpost, and BBC Turkish, published in German, English, and Turkish, covering the period from 2005 to 2013, when the initiative was most prominent. It also includes a blog page, three institutional brochures, the community's inactive website, accessed through web archives from the same period, and its inactive social media accounts.

This study adopts a reflexive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019) in thematic analysis to provide a detailed interpretation of the pre-existing documents. In reflexive thematic analysis,

[3] In 2008, the initiative received the "Berliner Tulpe," a prize awarded in Germany to individuals, initiatives, and projects that promote German–Turkish relations, community engagement, and social cohesion. For more information about the Berliner Tulpe award and the recognition of Mothers Without Borders in 2008, see the brochure: 2011- Fünf Jahre Berliner Tulpe: Für den Deutsch-Türkischen Gemeinsinn in https://digital.zlb.de/viewer/index/.

[4] Neighborhood Management offices were established as part of the Social City Program in Germany. For a detailed, empirically grounded article on the program's interventions in Berlin's disadvantaged neighborhoods—including empowering migrant women and children, improving families' access to social services, and raising awareness of substance addiction—and the structural challenges that prevent migrant women with fewer opportunities from participating in the program, see Başaran Uysal (2016).

[5] In August 2025, the FHXB archive was visited in person, and in November, a written application was submitted to the museum archive to request additional information; however, no details about the initiative could be obtained. Moreover, in May 2026 a written response was received from the FFBIZ, yet this also yielded no relevant information regarding the initiative.

the researcher actively integrates their insights into data interpretation to develop a layered analysis and achieve versatility. As a result, the coding process is not preset but can develop over time (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Initial codes are derived from the texts and then grouped into themes. Instead of simply summarizing the data, the themes are continuously examined and refined to reveal subtle and unexpected insights (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Morgan, 2022). This study's analysis follows an abductive approach that seeks to develop plausible explanations through an iterative process, moving between data and theory rather than testing pre-existing theories (Thompson, 2022). Therefore, the analysis is organized around key thematic categories: the founding process of the initiative, its public visibility and activities, (self-)representation through motherhood, interactions with state institutions, and a sense of spatial belonging. Since addiction is not just an individual or medical issue but also involves structural and socio-spatial factors, the Mothers Without Borders initiative serves as a unique case in neighborhood transformation and the integration debate concerning immigrants and their descendants in Kreuzberg. In this case study, the reflexive thematic approach enables retrospective interpretation and helps uncover the invisible experiences of Mothers Without Borders.

Findings

Mothers Without Borders demonstrates how second-generation Turkish women's activism in Berlin engages with issues such as care, addiction, state critique, and spatial belonging. The initiative also offers migration and urban studies an alternative perspective for analyzing an immigrant neighborhood, which is often associated with safety concerns and spatial stigmatization. The findings show that the initiative, motivated by motherhood, played a key role in presenting Kreuzberg not as a "problematic dangerous neighborhood" but as a space of belonging and intergenerational care. The thematic categories are examined under two main headings: "Instrumentalizing Motherhood for Activism" and "Protecting the Neighborhood," underscoring the women's dual positioning, a concept further elaborated in the discussion section.

Instrumentalizing Motherhood for Activism

The initiative positioned itself and received media attention as a form of civil resistance that foregrounded motherhood. During the petition campaign, men were also reported to support the initiative. However, their participation declined significantly afterwards, and the night patrols were primarily carried out by women (Woltersdorf, 2005). İsmail Aydın, one of the few men in the group, observed: "Most fathers think that solving the drug problem is solely the responsibility of the state." (Loy, 2005). Conversely, the women framed this perspective through the lens of motherhood. The initiative members noted, "Mothers just have a greater sense of responsibility when it comes to protecting the quarter's children and their own children." (Gerson & Ataman, 2005) The women's efforts are not just about shielding their own children from drugs but also about fighting for the right to a safe environment. Blokland (2021, p. 30), in her thought-provoking study on perceived safety at Kottbusser Tor, highlights that households with children view neighborhood safety differently, mainly due to concerns about their children. Similarly, in their interactions with neighborhood residents, the initiative members stated that many people were dissatisfied with the situation, that families believed Kottbusser Tor was no longer a suitable place for children, and that even schoolyards were not perceived as safe[6].

Critical motherhood studies often emphasize how social expectations construct a sense of responsibility in individuals. However, these expectations also obscure the structural problems that Mothers Without Borders directly addressed in their public statements and activities. Therefore, they present an alternative mode of urban activism against drug dealing in Kreuzberg. Öztan's (2010) insightful research on immigrant women in the Netherlands reveals that challenges faced through motherhood can enhance internal empowerment and enable collective agency rooted in autonomy. This focus shows that the women viewed their activism as a form of "home-making" (see Erensoy, 2024; Hinze, 2013). Consistent with this view, the initiative emphasized that the problem could not be reduced to parental attitudes and caregiving. As a result, the activist women focused their efforts on building solidarity with educational institutions and created the Mothers Without Borders working group to raise awareness among families, alongside their activism (Lehmann, 2012). According to Öztan (2010), forming relationships with spatially embedded welfare institutions, such as schools and community centers, enables "good motherhood practices" that meet expectations of integration and social conformity, thereby aligning with gendered roles. Hays (1996) argues, through the concept of intensive mothering, that in neoliberal societies, mothers are expected to work in the labor market and serve as caregivers, striving to meet ideals of perfection. This ideology of "good mother" produces classifications and sharpens the distinction between good and bad mothers, increasing pressure on women as caregivers. One of the main points where motherhood is highlighted and used instrumentally is in the group's choice of name. The focus on being borderless exemplifies this positioning. Arkış, the group's spokesperson, explained their choice:

> Most of our group consisted of mothers, and because there are no limits when it comes to a mother's concern for the well-being of her child, we called ourselves Mothers Without Borders. Of course, we were also inspired by Doctors Without Borders. (Lehmann, 2012).

[6] In 2002, another civil effort to protect the school environment from drug-related issues took place in Dortmund. According to Kenji (2012), based on newspaper reports, Turkish immigrant mothers mobilized to create safe spaces for their children. After collecting more than 100 injection needles from a school playground, they launched a petition campaign and gathered 1,000 signatures. Simultaneously, they organized a large demonstration to attract the attention of local authorities.

Therefore, women's activism is driven by "borderless motherhood" and concerns for future generations' well-being, both of which are connected to ambiguous gendered expectations about what constitutes perfect care. These gender-related expectations do not only affect activist women opposing drug dealing. They also particularly affect women who use substances, as they tend to face harsher judgment than men because gender norms often position them as primary caregivers. As a result, women with substance dependence are often labeled as bad women, which causes them to lose social respectability (Agoff et al., 2022).

Media representations also highlight the focus on motherhood and responsibility for future generations. Douglas and Michaels (2004) note how the media consistently reproduce the imagery associated with the good mother ideology. The concerns and anxieties expressed in media outlets generate pressure on mothers to achieve perfection. Under this ideology, the mother-child relationship is viewed as a series of performative expectations, and a mother's devotion to her child emerges as a form of boundarylessness. In this regard, Dean et al. (2022) argue that the mental load of mothers involves both cognitive and emotional labor. It is performed in ways that transform this combination from merely a form of (cognitive) labor into a "load" that "operates within families and society through three characteristics: invisible, boundaryless, and enduring" (Dean et al., 2022, p. 2). This situation leaves the structural conditions surrounding mothers and children unaddressed, as inequalities arising from access to resources are rendered invisible through the performative presentation of motherhood. While Mothers Without Borders demonstrate agency by highlighting social problems and the lack of institutional support, made visible through instrumentalized motherhood, their actions can also be interpreted as an embodied critique of the emotional labor and responsibilities imposed on mothers.

Protecting the Neighborhood

Mothers Without Borders criticized municipal, security, and educational institutions and called upon them to cooperate for neighborhood safety. The initiative first organized petition campaigns with the slogan "*Dealer Raus*[7]" in response to a case in which a twelve-year-old child was found under the influence of drugs in a park. Every weekend at Kottbusser Tor, they informed residents about the situation and conducted awareness-raising activities in public spaces (Lehmann, 2012). Through night patrols, petition campaigns, and press statements, the women highlighted the inadequacy of the neighborhood's formal security networks. Anderson (1999), in his ethnographic research on inner-city youths in African American neighborhoods, describes the code of the street as an adaptation that arises from distrust towards the police, the judicial system, and other actors expected to ensure urban security. The police may not respond when called, leading many residents to feel they must be prepared to protect themselves and their loved ones. In this context, Arkış mentioned that they sometimes felt left to handle it on their own (Ataman, 2005). The women pointed out the lack of engagement by political actors, including the District Mayor of Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg at the time, Cornelia Reinauer, who reportedly told them, "We are afraid something might happen to you" (Aydın, 2005). Members of the initiative also noted: "When we call the police, they either do not come at all or only arrive hours later" (Ataman, 2005). Anderson explains this situation as follows:

> Lack of police accountability has in fact been incorporated into the local status system: the person who is believed capable of 'taking care of himself' is accorded a certain deference and regard, which translates into a sense of physical and psychological control. The code of the street thus emerges where the influence of the police ends and where personal responsibility for one's safety is felt to begin. (Anderson, 1999, p. 34)

The activist women further criticized the police for requiring permits for their night patrols and actions, stating, "What kind of permit should we obtain? Do they ask dealers in the parks and courtyards for a permit? They poison, and we are trying to protect" (Aydın, 2005). Drawing on Anderson's perspective, the women pursued their struggle by entering spaces not assigned to them and engaging in activities, such as night patrols, that went beyond the patriarchal gender roles embedded in the street code. In other words, they rearticulated the street codes through their own critical practices. Therefore, the positionality of these women, conceptualized in this article as dual positioning, is shaped not only by motherhood but also by racialized labeling, drug economies, and feelings of insecurity arising from insufficient support mechanisms within an immigrant neighborhood.

In migration contexts, various forms of motherhood are shaped by intersections of ethnicity and class as immigrant women navigate regulatory and surveillance mechanisms (Öztan, 2010). This view helps interpret the diverse experiences embedded within power relations. Intersectionality provides an analytical framework that shows women's experiences cannot be understood in a single context. Crenshaw (1989) emphasizes that not all individuals within a racial or gender category experience discrimination and disadvantage in the same way. The dominant understanding of discrimination often presumes that disadvantage arises from a single category, thereby overlooking the intricate power relations and complex structures that reproduce it, and marginalizing those who are multiply burdened (Crenshaw, 1989). Similarly, Collins (1998) argues that race, class, and gender are interconnected social hierarchies that mutually constitute one another and reproduce complex social inequality. Power relations within these intertwined categories can only be understood through an analysis of the intersecting systems of oppression (Collins, 2000, 2015). In this framework, it can be argued that these women have established an intersectional presence in the media through their activism, which is shaped by the interplay of race and gender.

[7] Eng. Dealer, out!

Newspaper coverage adopts headlines that highlight motherhood. Framed in media as "brave mothers," these women expressed their criticisms of state institutions and dominant discourse through motherhood. Examples include: "Brave Mothers Shine for Kreuzberg" (Baumann, 2007), "Mothers Against Drug Dealers: Turkish Women in Berlin Confront Junkies" (Gerson & Ataman, 2005), "Mothers Want to Set Boundaries" (Woltersdorf, 2005), "The Boundary-Defying Turkish Mothers of Kreuzberg" (Aydın, 2005), "Drug Hotspot Kreuzberg: The Courage of the Mothers" (Ataman, 2005), "Mothers' Night" (Kaiser, 2005) and "Shining Directly into the Conscience: Patrolling with Flashlights – How Turkish Mothers Confront Kreuzberg's Drug Scene" (Loy, 2005). Notably, the media amplifies the themes of being a Turkish mother and an immigrant in a disadvantaged neighborhood.

Reports highlight the women's bravery, dedication, and commitment, while framing Kreuzberg as an area that attracts drug dealing (Baumann, 2007; Ghosh, 2013; Kaiser, 2005; Sey, 2005a, 2005b). For example, Gerson & Ataman (2005) report that "a group of Turkish mothers organized to take back the street." During night patrols, they chased drug dealers in parks, courtyards, and other dark areas of the neighborhood, shining flashlights into dark corners. Arkış stated on night patrols: "All we do is shine a light on them and tell them, 'Get lost!'" (Ataman, 2005) In the newspaper report, Kaiser recounts his observations while accompanying the women on a night patrol:

> Günseli Boğa walks down the stairs leading to a basement. "Hello?" she calls out, carefully pushing the door open with her foot. "Günseli," a woman at the bottom of the stairs pleads, "don't go alone." (Kaiser, 2005)

Their use of the bat as a symbolic emblem is linked to these experiences. Activist Gülseli Boğa, working at a youth center, explained this symbolism: "She [bat] is like us: active at night and blind, yet she perceives everything around her. Her habitat has been destroyed by humans, just like ours" (Ataman, 2005). Newspaper reports indicate that the women on night patrols were confronted by young Turkish and Arab men from the neighborhood (Aydın, 2005; Gerson & Ataman, 2005; Ghosh, 2013; Kaiser, 2005; Sey, 2005b). Gerson and Ataman (2005), in their detailed report, note that local Turkish youth mocked the women during a night patrol, saying, "So these are the people who are going to rescue Kreuzberg." Similarly, Kaiser (2005) observes that the women were verbally assaulted by a driver during the night patrol, who rolled down his window and shouted in Turkish, "Fuck off, you whores!", and notes that two weeks earlier, stones had been thrown at them. The threats and harassment they faced during these night patrols did not deter the women. Arkış mentioned that she was also threatened through their children because the dealers knew them from the neighborhood. However, according to her, because her own sons were already grown, the real concern should be for the younger children in the neighborhood (Ataman, 2005). The women emphasized that their efforts were for all children and youth in the neighborhood: "It is not a problem of immigrants, Turks, or Germans but of all children and young people. We live here, and this is our concern" (Aydın, 2005). Kaiser describes one moment in his report as follows:

> When they hear voices on a playground, they direct their flashlights at figures in the darkness. 'We want to talk to you,' the women call out in Turkish. 'Come here if you want to talk to us,' the figures shout back before fleeing. (Kaiser, 2005)

He highlights that the women's interactions with young men during their night patrols were not motivated by a desire to fight, but by an effort to disrupt this cycle in the neighborhood. Social worker Ercan Yaşaroglu, who was involved in informing fathers in Kotti and supported the Mothers Without Borders initiative when it was founded, shared a similar perspective that women tended to act more prudently and avoid provoking conflict (Wierth, 2009). Deniz Kılıç, a member of the initiative, noted that in the early periods of their night patrols, they encountered 20 to 25 dealers known to them from the neighborhood (Ataman, 2005). According to the women, these youth initially started as drug users and later became couriers to obtain substances or earn money. Their focus on the cycle linking substance use and distribution underscores how starting as a user can lead to racialized perceptions of the neighborhood and its migrant-origin youth as being associated with drug dealing. On the other hand, they noted that Turkish girls from the neighborhood were rarely used as couriers due to local ghetto norms and that, as a result, German girls were often preferred (Aydın, 2005). This shows how race and gender intersect in street-level drug distribution, showing that masculinity is negotiated within ghetto norms. Anderson (1999) uses the concept of "manhood" to illustrate how masculinity, respect, and social status are interconnected within the code of the street. He explains that, among street men, masculinity significantly shapes their attitudes towards possession and identity. Performing masculinity serves as a way to gain privilege and respect. The street code also delineates differences in how men and women behave. Those who are not male or not deemed "masculine enough" under the code of the street are often devalued. In this context, girls engaging in street acts traditionally associated with "men" can be seen as a form of masculinization, through which they seek recognition (Anderson, 1999, pp. 66-107). Besides the fact that Turkish girls in the neighborhood were not actively involved in drug dealing, the activist women's negative experiences with young people during night patrols can also be explained by the code of the street. These cases share a common feature: they contrast with street codes about where, when, and how women are expected to be visible in the neighborhood.

Public debates, political discourse, and media representations of Kreuzberg contribute to the reproduction of the racialized perception. Meanwhile, the women also made it clear that "Our Kreuzberg has become a drug market. You can hardly walk 100 meters without being offered everything under the sun" (Gerson & Ataman, 2005). For these women, who had lived in the neighborhood for thirty years and expressed their deep sense of belonging (Ataman, 2005; Kaiser, 2005), the phrase "our Kreuzberg" does not merely signal an individual

sense of belonging. It also carries a specific meaning in the context of Berlin's migration history. As a "diasporic space" (Kil & Silver, 2006, p. 98), the neighborhood has historically been a battleground over identity and spatial belonging for Turkish communities in Berlin (see Dell, 2021; Hinze, 2013; Kaya, 2001; Mandel, 2008). In her detailed ethnographic research with second-generation immigrant women in Kreuzberg and Neukölln, Hinze (2013) suggests that women's spatial and everyday practices, deeply intertwined with the neighborhood, create a connection between place and immigrant identity. She underlines that "the immigrants' life practices within the neighborhood represent a reaction as well as an alternative to the political debate, which often creates or enhances the (exclusionary) conditions under which immigrant enclaves form in the first place." (Hinze, 2013, p. 83) In this regard, for example, the slogan *Dealer raus*, used by the initiative, can be interpreted in relation to historically used racist slogans in Germany, such as *Ausländer raus*[8] or *Türken raus*[9] (Alexopoulou, 2019; Mandel, 2008). However, from the activist women's discursive perspective, their slogan does not portray immigrants and their descendants as inherently threatening or undesirable. Instead, it shifts the grammar of exclusion by highlighting dealers as threats to the neighborhood's perceived safety and as indicators of drug economies, while also emphasizing limited institutional support and structural challenges. This discursive positionality, therefore, opens a critical intersectional praxis. Following Collins's (2015) formulation, Mothers Without Borders' activism can also be defined as a form of "critical praxis" in which "social actors use intersectionality for social justice projects." In this sense, intersectionality offers an analytical framework for understanding their experiences and serves as a repertoire for revealing their dual positioning between motherhood and spatial protection. Thus, the women claim the right to safety while resisting racism and the racialized framing of immigrant neighborhoods as inherently problematic.

Discussion

This study retrospectively explores the Mothers Without Borders initiative, a group of second-generation immigrant Turkish women in Berlin's Kreuzberg district that emerged in response to increasing substance use and street-level distribution in the early 2000s. Their struggle to shield their children from drugs also opposed the cycle of drug dealing, which was driven by the transition of local youth from users to dealers. Although data on the initiative is limited, existing documents illustrate how motherhood is instrumentalized to foster collectivity and to draw attention to the structural dimensions of social inequalities and systemic problems. As Anderson (1999) states, underground economies mirror the structural changes caused by economic shifts in the global economy. He suggests that factors such as alienation intersecting with race relations, unemployment, dislocation, and poverty can create social conditions that lead individuals to become drug dealers. This focus on the role of structural inequalities in these dynamics questions the notion that crime is an inherent part of immigrant neighborhoods and challenges racialized security narratives. Research on the urban securitization and transformation of Kreuzberg indicates that the primary justification for gentrification policies is the labeling of a neighborhood as criminal (Barry, 2025; Ciax, 2025; Keller, 2024). According to Eksner (2013), young people from marginalized areas who are educated in local schools and obtain diplomas marked by the territorial stigma attached to the ghetto are explicitly constructed by ghetto discourse as ethno-cultural and social others. Such processes of othering and racialized labeling reinforce the cycle of substance use and street-level distribution. Although the women's activism might seem to support the main argument for gentrification, their discourse on the cycle of drug dealing implicitly challenged the gentrification process targeting their neighborhood. Media narratives emphasize that the women advocate for collective responsibility, often expressed through motherhood, thereby constructing a sense of community based on spatial belonging rather than supporting spatial displacement. Kadıoglu Polat's (2020) insightful analysis of gentrification in Berlin demonstrates that it can give rise to complex forms of social exclusion closely connected to pre-existing racism and discrimination. The women's focus on "our Kreuzberg" offers a rooted, belonging-based alternative to the racialized stigmatization of the neighborhood.

A clear generational shift can also be seen within the immigrant community. The women leading the initiative, in particular, drew on their insider youth work experience in their everyday interactions with local youth and families, while also using their social, cultural, and linguistic capital in press statements and in their engagement with public institutions. Günseli Boğa highlights this situation by comparing their generation to their "guestworker" parents: "Our parents had to work hard. All they had were their hands, and they did not know the language. We want more. We want to live here." (Kaiser, 2005) Therefore, the neighborhood, experienced as a lived space, functions as a home for intersectional, fragmented immigrant identities within the transnational setting and becomes a site of *Kreuzberger* identity (Hinze, 2013). In this regard, Çağlar (2001) argues that transterritorial spaces such as Kreuzberg become arenas where the sense of belonging to Berlin is redefined and negotiated beyond the categories of ethnicity and community. She argues that the form of belonging in these spaces extends beyond a diasporic collectivity and instead positions one as a local member of an unbounded community. Recognizing immigrants' claims to these spaces, which encompass various civil, socio-economic, and cultural rights in the public sphere, is essential to understanding what constitutes belonging. Additionally, the performative aspect challenges the given meanings and practices of belonging, revealing new forms of membership. Collective identities are woven through multiple affiliations and positionings (Çağlar, 2001). This illustrates the complex social location of immigrant women involved in activism within marginalized urban areas. It

[8] Eng. Foreigners, out!

[9] Eng. Turks, out!

challenges the neighborhood's negative label by promoting a different narrative of belonging, care, and collectivity, often shaped by motherhood. In this sense, their struggle unfolds through two interconnected dimensions: motherhood and spatially embedded critical practice. Therefore, the women's positionality and lived experience open up the possibility of conceptualization. By identifying substance distribution and use as a significant social problem and taking action through instrumentalized motherhood, while also offering an implicit critique of the racialization of both the phenomenon and the neighborhood due to their intersectional social location, the women's positionality is constructed as a form of dual positioning.

Their actions blurred the lines between private and public life by turning motherhood into a collective and spatialized critical practice. By patrolling at night, confronting dealers, and engaging directly with public institutions, the women created an alternative bottom-up form of urban governance. According to the newspapers, by making themselves visible in the public sphere, the women challenged prevailing gendered codes, such as domesticity, passivity, and isolation, that typically linked earlier-generation Turkish women (Aydın, 2005; Daldrup, 2006; Gerson & Ataman, 2005; Ghosh, 2013). As Hinze (2013) suggests, immigrant women are aware of the visibility produced through ethnocultural markers of difference and the symbolic roles attributed to them. For the women, the neighborhood offers a space to escape this visibility and integrate into a shared neighborhood identity. By occupying the streets at night, Mothers Without Borders blurred the gendered boundaries between the codes of the street (uncanny/street) and motherhood/home. In this way, through women's solidarity, they challenged socially imposed markers of difference and moved beyond the given gendered space and time. Consequently, this initiative also opposed the narrative that portrays immigrant women solely as victims of oppression. Instead, they demonstrated agency through urban activism against addiction.

The dual positioning of these women, as discussed in this study, is deeply integrated into their activist performances. Their activism demonstrates how motherhood can serve as a form of collective action, not limiting their agency but enhancing it, and granting their critiques of the state moral authority in public debates. By diagnosing the problem, mobilizing local residents' support, and directing criticism toward state apparatuses, these women also resisted the stigmatization of their neighborhood. This dual positioning becomes particularly visible in the slogan *Dealer Raus*. It repurposes a familiar linguistic form associated with the racist slogan *Ausländer Raus*. The women, however, rearticulated the slogan within the neighborhood in a new discursive context. Rather than targeting an ethnic "other," it is redirected toward an anti-dealer stance, while also refusing to shy away from naming the problem of substance use and distribution.

This article contributes to critical migration and addiction studies by arguing that addiction cannot be reduced to the domains of substance use, public health, and social networks alone. As this case illustrates, drug economies may also generate indirect and often unforeseen effects, particularly for disadvantaged groups. Micro-level analyses that foreground narratives and lived experiences are especially valuable, as they illuminate the forms of agency and negotiation within intersecting power relations. Future qualitative research, particularly ethnographic and community-based studies, would therefore benefit from further examining new urban settings while also taking into account the positionality of different actors within broader structures of inequality and exclusion.

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Conception and design: F.G.A.V.; data acquisition: F.G.A.V.; data analysis: F.G.A.V.; data interpretation: F.G.A.V.; drafting of this study: F.G.A.V.; critical revision of this study: F.G.A.V. The author reviewed the results, approved the final version of this study, and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of this study.

Ethical approval

Ethics committee approval and informed consent were not required for this study.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that this study was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Generative AI statement

The author declares that during the preparation of this study, the following AI-assisted technology was used: ChatGPT-5, Grammarly. Extent of Use: AI tools were used during the preparation of this study to improve linguistic fluency, correct grammatical errors, and assist with translation. The author

reviewed and finalized all revisions. The author confirms that he/she has critically reviewed and edited any AI-generated content and takes full responsibility for the integrity, accuracy, and originality of the publication. The author certifies that the original human contribution is maintained and that AI-assisted tools are not listed or cited as authors.

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