

## **Family forum with international parents of the Zalando Parents Group on 20.04.2023**

### **– Results –**

Venue: BHS Zalando at the Koppenstraße 8 in 10243 Berlin

Organizers: Berliner Beirat für Familienfragen (Family Advisory Council) in cooperation with the Zalando Parents Group

Thirteen parents of nine different nationalities and native languages from five continents participated in the roundtable to share the challenges of arriving and living with their families in a new city with a foreign language and to share these experiences with the Family Advisory Council.

Zalando Berlin employs people from around 140 countries and communicates in English. The Zalando Parents Group (ZPG) is one of 11 Employee Resource Groups at Zalando. These are voluntary groups organized and formed by employees based on a shared identity or experience. Because the ZPG specifically draws attention to the needs of the parent community at Zalando, it was happy to host the Family Forum.

The exchange was mainly about the difficulties they experience as foreign professionals: from a lack of a welcoming culture, the unwillingness of offices and institutions to adapt to non-German speaking people and other cultures, the complicated procedures and applications that are omnipresent in German everyday life. However, there were also positive reports about the new life in Berlin, especially with regard to prosperity and leisure activities.

The basic lines of questioning were: What helps us in family day? What exhausts us in everyday life? What would have been helpful in my family's arrival and settling in Berlin? What wishes and recommendations do we have?

### **Language and integration**

Participants concluded that there should be "onboarding social workers" for the city, where immigrant family members could be potential employees and who could introduce and accompany new immigrants. Single parents especially need support. It would also work with "substitute grandparents", a system could be made of this. Quote from a participant: *"It's pure luxury to live here, it's really the first world, but how can I understand how it works?"*

Families reported that it exhausts them to discover new information every day that should have been available to them when they arrived. The following question is on their minds, *"How can I be sure I'm making the right decision if I don't understand everything?"*

People in Berlin would have to become more open to foreign professionals who do not know German and also bring different cultural upbringing methods. Quite a few foreign employees have been specifically advertised to come here and only want to stay in Germany for a few years for professional reasons. At the same time, however, they find it difficult to arrive in a foreign country with a foreign language. They ask themselves: *"We only came because you called us. Then why do you treat us so badly?"*

In order to learn German, parents need German lessons to which they can take their child. Such offers are missing. Regarding the integration of their children, they cite good experiences: *"The German pedagogy supports our children in learning a new language and observing their development. They learn a lot more than at home to take care of themselves and be independent."* But there are also negative experiences: *"Our lack of knowledge of German is used as a means of oppression and exclusion."*

Those present reported that sports clubs, family centers and counseling centers help them with integration.

In managing everyday family life, parents are helped by the fact that there is generally good access to public services, such as transportation, health care, education, etc., and also free medication for children.

Parents report that the housing infrastructure in Germany is *"fantastic, e.g., access to many playgrounds and parks for everyone."* They experience a higher overall quality of life here compared to their home countries, such as hot water from the tap and cushioned seats on public transportation.

### **Bureaucracy and difficulties with infrastructure**

German bureaucracy is perceived as particularly burdensome for everyday family life. It costs families a lot of time and is exhausting. According to the participating parents, bureaucracy should be simplified, e.g. access to visas, recognition of degrees, general application procedures in everyday life, etc. They report: *"Getting a registration date is like getting a ticket to a famous band."* *"There are waiting lists for documents, daycare, everything else ..."* *"It's like playing the lottery for: Housing, school/daycare, civil service appointments, doctor's appointments, job/career."* *"It is all just as bad for us as it is for German families, but there is the language barrier on top of it."*

There is a need for simple explanations of bureaucratic procedures and mobile access points for foreign families newly arriving in the city for a job, such as a daycare finder, a doctor finder for English-speaking doctors, explanations of the school system. An Expad guide to family life in Berlin and checklists in English are desired. They have many questions where they can't find answers, such as: *"How do I find a doctor? I was told I can't just go there. But then how does it work?"*

Due to the lack of tolerance of authorities, institutions and legal regulations towards foreign professionals, they face the loss of career opportunities, e.g. because certifications are not recognized, even in professions that are in demand.

The search for housing and daycare centers in particular is described as incredibly difficult. Even school places are hard to find. One mother described this as follows: *"My son is having a hard time settling in Berlin: no school, no leisure activities, no schedules. I've been here for 2 months and my 12-year-old son still doesn't have a place in school. If I don't find a school for my child, I will leave again."*

There is a need to ease the transition from daycare to elementary school and from elementary school to secondary school, especially for people who are not so familiar with the system.

It is particularly difficult to find a place in a daycare center, for example, in an English-speaking daycare center. When a Kita place was found in a good Kita or even an English-speaking Kita, the participants described this as *"a great system"*. One mother reports that it took over 2 years for her daughter to get a special needs Kita.

The daycare and school space situation makes it difficult to balance family and work: *"I have to plan my day according to my child's plans (daycare, classes, playground)."*

Parents also report difficulties in finding a midwife.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

The goal should be to enable and encourage international guests. The current system is perceived as "exclusionary". There needs to be a welcome package for arriving foreign people as part of the information about the introduction to Germany.

There is a need for guides, ideally as an online offer for introduction to the German school system, medical system, help in finding housing as well as doctors and daycare centers (especially for English-speaking daycare centers and doctors), and much more. There is also a lack of special information services for children to give them an impression of the paths and opportunities in the German education system.

Bureaucracy urgently needs to be simplified, especially also in order to keep international professionals in the city, including as spouses. This affects almost all areas of everyday life: from obtaining visas and the recognition of foreign degrees to daycare and school registrations and applications for state benefits.

Berlin has more and more English-speaking residents. Therefore, English-speaking staff is also needed in the citizens' offices, e.g. with badges for the employees indicating their foreign language skills. It would also make sense to have a simple guide for international professionals in the citizens' office.

One solution could also be to create a platform for the exchange of information and solutions to issues concerning international professionals.