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“We are women and men now”: Intimate spaces and coping labour for Syrian women refugees in Jordan

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War affects women from the bedroom to the battlefield, but for most women war is experienced within intimate spaces. Intimate spaces are rarely the focus of mainstream academic research or media reporting; thus women's experiences with war and displacement are often concealed. Building from literature in feminist geopolitics that helps focus our attention toward everyday and intimate geopolitics, I conducted in-depth interviews with Syrian women refugees in Jordan in order to examine how they are coping. Of the many ways that they've learned to cope, these women asserted that earning an income and adjusting to altered gender performances and relations have been both dire and formative. Many Syrian women refugees have become income providers for the first time in their lives. Some women have become their families' sole providers, and other women are now heads of households as well. Bringing literature from feminist geography, transnational and migration studies, and critical home studies together with feminist geopolitics, I offer the ideas of coping and coping labour as a framework to examine the intimate spaces of displacement. I highlight that paid work is understudied within feminist geopolitics, but such a focus renders important insights into how gender shapes experiences of displacement and how displacement is reshaping gendered relations. In this paper, I show that in the intimate spaces of displacement women have taken on traditionally masculine practices, but while their gendered performances shift, they are simultaneously entrenched as the ideals of appropriate feminine and masculine performances are recreated. Though these multiple gendered performances are creating numerous demands and challenges for Syrian women refugees, these women are also experiencing an increased sense of strength, confidence and respect as a result of their shifting performances.

KEYWORDS

displacement, feminist geopolitics, gender performances, household, paid labour, Syrian war

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1 | INTRODUCTION

In late 2012, Juma, her six children and her husband fled from their home in Damascus across the northern Jordanian border and into the Za'atari refugee camp. Juma and her family had been living in a standard-issue 20 × 20-foot prefabricated caravan in the camp for about a year and a half when I interviewed her in June 2014. I met with Juma and three other Syrian women refugees in the Qatar Red Crescent's caravans in the NGOs sector of Za'atari.¹ Juma and the other women I met in the caravan that day convened there once or twice a week to embroider. The Red Crescent provides the space, some training and the materials for women to embroider scarves for sale in the camp's quarterly bazaar. In this space, these women socialise, laugh and have a little respite from their struggles, all while working on their embroidery (Figure 1). The money they'll earn from selling embroidered scarves is not much, so Juma also teaches private English lessons, from within her family's own caravan, to young kids in the camp for a small fee. Juma, 37 years old at the time of our interview, has a college degree in English, but prior to her displacement she had not worked for an income. Earning a small income from her embroidering and tutoring was a huge change for Juma and her family. She told me that her husband used to be the sole provider, but now her and her husband share responsibilities. Juma and her husband now work “hand and hand,” she explained. Helping to provide financially for her household, Juma has earned respect from her family and feels more confident. She now goes to the market to shop and will bargain for goods, something she had not done in Syria. But Juma regrets having to work because, as she explained, it has taken her away from caring for her husband and children. She feels that she is neglecting her family and she worries deeply about how her working will affect her children in the long term.

Juma was one of 45 Syrian women refugees I interviewed about how they are coping in Jordan. Juma's experiences of displacement are in many ways unique to herself and her family, but her experiences resemble those of other Syrian women refugees. As a result of the war and displacement, Juma and many other Syrian women have become providers for their families – some as primary provider, others working to supplement the family income. Some Syrian refugee women have become heads of household as well, responsible for earning an income and making household decisions. The various daily practices of working, earning an income and managing families are having immense impacts on the daily lives and



FIGURE 1 Syrian women refugees embroidering in the Qatar Red Crescent caravan in Za'atari, July 2014.
Source: Photo by author [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

gendered relations of these Syrian refugee families. As these women balance the demands of provider and caretaker, their socially constructed gender performances are shifting, while simultaneously being entrenched.² As Juma said, she now feels not only as a “mother and wife, but a father, brother, and worker.” Juma's labour of embroidering and tutoring are important to her family's ability to cope with displacement. Such “coping labour,” as I refer to it, often occurs in intimate spaces, in the Red Crescent with her friends and in her family's caravan with her students. In these intimate spaces, macro-scaled geopolitics of displacement are entwined with patriarchal norms and coping practices. As I will detail below, such entanglements are having tremendous impacts on immediate and long-term gender relations and performances.

The Syrian War is a multidimensional crisis with immense human suffering. Approximately 400,000 casualties have been documented, and an estimated 11 million Syrians have been forcibly displaced. These statistics help to conceptualise the effects of war broadly, but they are disembodied and detached (Hyndman, 2007) from how war and forced displacement affects women like Juma. Indeed, mainstream academic research and media reporting typically focus on traditional masculinist topics like casualty statistics, public displays of power, state policies and/or key decision makers – leaving women largely invisible, underrepresented and underreported (Charrad, 2010; Cockburn, 2007; Hajdukowski-Ahmed et al., 2008; Puechguirbal, 2003; Sjobern, 2013). Building primarily from research within feminist geopolitics, I stress that examining the intimate spaces in which women and their families cope can help reveal some of the lesser-known effects and entanglements of war and forced displacement.³ Recognising that women and men generally experience and embody space differently (Dixon & Marston, 2011), feminist geopolitics has helped reveal the many ways in which macro-scale geopolitics are entangled in everyday, intimate life (Dixon & Marston, 2011, p. 445; Mountz & Hyndman, 2006; Pain, 2015; Smith, 2012; Williams & Massaro, 2013, p. 752). Williams and Massaro (2013) summarised that feminist geopolitics has been important for revealing that the seemingly apolitical and intimate sites of the home and body are key sites in which geopolitical, hegemonic and patriarchal power is made and contested. With its concern on geopolitics (i.e., war, displacement, securitisation, nationalism or territory), feminist geopolitics has very rarely incorporated the study of labour or paid work into analyses of war and displacement. Throughout this paper, I show that examining women's paid work can be integral to a feminist understanding of geopolitics and displacement, as such an integration helps to reveal how women and their families cope and how gendered relations evolve.

In the next two sections of this paper, I draw on a wide range of literature – from feminist geography, transnational and migration studies, critical home studies, feminist geopolitics and feminist international relations – to assert the value of examining the intimate spaces of displacement and coping labour. I then discuss my research methods and provide some background on Syrian refugees in Jordan. Next, I draw on my interviews with Syrian women to illustrate in detail how these women's coping labour is affecting gender relations and performances in the immediacy of their daily lives and in the long term. I do this in four subsections focused on: (1) their shifting gendered performances, (2) their navigation of multiple performances, (3) new challenges that working has created within their households, and (4) some new opportunities and positive changes that have evolved out of their coping labour.

My primary goal in this paper is to help illustrate how displaced women's daily lives and gendered relations are evolving in rather invisible, intimate spaces, but I also hope that my paper will help to humanise Syrian women refugees. As rhetoric and practices across the globe (and particularly in the USA and Europe) about refugees in general and Syrian refugees specifically are increasingly negative and exclusionary, it is more important than ever to recognise Syrian women as complex individuals experiencing immense challenges, but also exhibiting incredible resilience. Though entangled in masculinist geopolitics and patriarchal structures, and deprived of many political and human rights, the Syrian women I met are not merely victims or “bare life” (Agamben, 1998; Mountz, 2011, p. 387), as they are so often depicted (Harker, 2010; Johnson, 2011; Szanto, 2016). Amid profound obstacles, hardships and challenges, these women display resilience and strength. Thus, I assert the need to dissolve the agent/victim binary and instead to understand refugees, refugee women and Syrian refugee women not as victims or agents, but as complex human beings who are struggling, coping and thriving. Examining the intimate spaces of displacement helps reveal the various power dynamics in their lives, which can help to nuance simplified and disempowering images of victimisation.

2 | INTIMATE SPACES OF DISPLACEMENT

War affects women from the “bedroom to the battlefield,” as Cynthia Cockburn (1998, p. 8) stated two decades ago. Women may be active on battlefields, but more often women experience war in less visible and more intimate sites like the body, the bedroom and the household. The scope of feminist geopolitics has included many different types of spaces – refugee camps, community centres and bodies – but I contribute specifically to research on the intimate sites and scales of

households, as this is a key space where displacement and gender relations come into focus (Brun & Fábos, 2015; Dudley, 2011; Falah, 2013; Fluri, 2010; Harker, 2009; Holt, 2015; Hughes, 2016; Mason, 2007; Smith, 2016).

“Home” and “household” are complex and evolving concepts and material sites. They are spaces of intimate daily life, where social and biological reproduction takes place, and where “families” (broadly defined) dwell and interact as a social unit. While traditionally viewed as private, apolitical and feminine spaces, research within feminist geography (Hanson & Pratt, 1995; Marston, 2000; McDowell & Sharp, 1997; Oberhauser, 1995; Pain, 2015) and critical home studies (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Blunt & Varley, 2004; Brickell, 2012; Brun & Fábos, 2015; Smith, 2016) has levelled seminal critiques of such normative assumptions. It is now commonly accepted that home and household are relational spaces connected to different bodies, spaces of work, state practices and global networks.⁴ Households are not merely gendered, familial spaces, but spaces in which multiple power dynamics coalesce and evolve.

For displaced people, their household spaces are often substandard and “profoundly unhomey” (Blunt & Dowling, 2006, p. 221), but nevertheless, in these spaces families cope and life continues. Whether a tent, a caravan, another family's home or a rented apartment, these places are often short-term residencies, as displaced people commonly move between many different sites attempting to find a safe and adequate place to live. For refugees in protracted displacement or resettled refugees, they often secure long-term residency and remake household spaces into their long-term homes (Tolia-Kelly, 2004). Though the time endured in household spaces and the quality of these spaces varies immensely between displaced people, nevertheless, these are intimate spaces where displaced people struggle, cope and thrive. Mainstream migration and refugee discourses often frame refugees as living in “limbo” and merely waiting to return home. However, as Brun and Fábos assert, despite rather dire circumstances, displaced people continue various “homemaking” practices, including recreating familiarity, improving their material conditions and imagining a better future (2015, p. 10). Thus, examining displaced people's intimate spaces of home and household can help reveal the rather invisible yet complex ways that macro-scaled geopolitics of forced displacement is entangled with daily life, coping practices and gender relations.

3 | COPING AND COPING LABOUR

Coping is part of daily life during the months, years and even decades of displacement. Coping stems from precarity, trauma, struggles, loss and countless other unwelcomed challenges. Yet coping also means survival and resilience, from which opportunities can arise and people can thrive. The ways in which displaced people cope vary immensely, yet financial stability and employment are central. Indeed, the Syrian women I interviewed spoke repeatedly of their daily struggles (مصاعب and كفاح) and of their coping (لوضع مع تعایشن and تأقنن) as being primarily focused on their need to secure paid work in order to sustain their households. Finding paid work is important for refugees to improve their well-being and independence (Betts et al., 2016; Jacobsen, 2005). Without regular, non-exploitative paid work, refugees often rely on aid organisations for their basic needs; many may lose a sense of self-worth, independence and hope for the future.⁵

Research within feminist geography and cognate fields has, for decades, elucidated the varied effects that women's paid labour has on gender relations, including effects on the home and household (Cameron & Gibson-Graham, 2003; England & Lawson, 2005; Gilbert, 1998; Hanson & Pratt, 1995; Oberhauser, 1995). Likewise, transnational and migration studies have shown that migration, development, neoliberalism and globalisation are affected by and affect gendered relations (Kofman, 2012; Mullings, 2014; Pratt, 1997, 2009; Silvey, 2006, 2013; Wright, 1998; Wright et al., 2000). Feminist geopolitics and critical home studies have helped to focus attention towards the relationship between intimate spaces of displacement and gendered practices (Harker, 2009; Smith, 2012). However, there is very little research on the practices of paid work from a feminist geopolitical lens. For example, of the six papers plus the editorial introduction in *Gender, Place and Culture's* special issue on feminist geopolitics (Dixon & Marston, 2011), work is mentioned in two papers, but neither focuses on paid work. Of the seven papers plus the editorial introduction in a special issue on feminist geopolitics in *Geopolitics* (Williams & Massaro, 2013), none discuss women's paid labour.

Peterson (2008, 2009), a feminist international relations scholar, is one of the very few researchers who has studied the intersections of forced displacement, paid work and gendered relations in detail.⁶ She asserts that literature on wartime economies often lacks attention to gender. Filling this gap, her work on Iraq highlights that war and displacement create different, informal and highly gendered economies. Peterson develops three analytical frames of gendered wartime economies – combat, criminal and coping. She stresses that the coping economy is the “most obviously feminized” (2008, p. 15). As conflict conditions undermine social stability, erode the formal economy and disrupt traditional livelihoods, a coping economy often emerges from sheer necessity – in order to survive, to meet basic needs and to facilitate social and biological reproduction (2009). As women are often the ones who are expected to care for their families and to keep the

households functioning during crises, and because men are often fighting wars, injured, deceased or unable to find work, Peterson argues that it is most commonly women who participate in the coping economy. The sheer necessity of earning an income can lead women into different forms of coping labour that include quite undesirable forms of work (like cleaning or garbage removal), exploitative work (like being paid below reasonable wages) and precarious work (like prostitution or selling organs).

Bringing together feminist geopolitics and Peterson's work on the coping economy, I examine women's coping labour within the intimate spaces of the household as a key site in which war and displacement are experienced. In using the concept of coping labour, I show how Syrian women refugees' paid work affects daily life and gender relations in a range of ways. As displaced women engage in coping labour, they generally take on new performances within the household, including becoming a provider, head of household and decision maker, all while maintaining their existing roles as caretakers. These new performances as provider may be unwelcome, exhausting burdens that create new problems (Korac, 2004, pp. 253, 261; Koyama, 2014). Shifts in gendered performances can create tensions within the household, as the disruption of pre-existing gendered relations can create a backlash (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2009; Jacobson, 2006; Moruzzi, 2013; Szczepanikova, 2005; UNHCR, 2014; Voller, 2014). Yet among these challenges, displaced women who provide financially for their households may also experience improved status, appreciation and respect from family members. Some women experience a sense of pride and an increased sense of confidence in their abilities. Indeed, for some women the dual performances of caretaker and provider is a source of strength that has positive short- and long-term effects (Holt & Jawad, 2013; Stephan, 2014).

4 | SYRIAN REFUGEES IN JORDAN

As of April 2018, there were 661,859 registered Syrian refugees in Jordan, of which 51% are women.⁷ About 80% of registered Syrian refugees in Jordan live outside of the two main camps. Since its independence from Great Britain in 1946, the Jordanian government has allowed millions of people from neighbouring territories to seek refuge and to settle in Jordan (Culcasi, 2016). With a total population of about 9.5 million citizens, different refugee populations comprise a significant percentage of Jordan's population and have immense impacts on Jordanian politics, society and economy.

During the summers 2014 and 2015 and in the spring 2018, I conducted fieldwork in Jordan as part of a project on how Syrian women refugees were coping. I completed a total of 51 semi-structured interviews, as well as participant observation and many casual conversations. Four of the 51 interviews were "expert interviews" with humanitarian aid workers in Jordan who had worked directly with Syrian women refugees. I also interviewed two women in consecutive years. In total, I interviewed 45 different Syrian refugee women. My initial interest was to understand how Syrian women's ideas of nation and homeland were shifting in displacement. However, I quickly learned that their concerns were not about national identity but instead about adjusting to altered gender performances and relations within the intimate spaces of their households. Thus, I altered my research from a focus on women's national identity to one that focused on women's shifting gendered performances.⁸ Though there has been a great deal of published research on Syrian refugees (Pascucci, 2017), and there are several excellent NGO reports on Syrian women's daily lives (Ritchie, 2017; UNHCR, 2014; UN Women & REACH, 2017), there is very little scholarship on Syrian women and paid work.

The lack of opportunities for paid work is one of the most pressing issues for Syrian refugees (Betts & Collier, 2015; Stave & Hillesund, 2015).⁹ Jordan has restrictive laws that prohibit Syrian refugees from working. Jordan's struggling economy and high unemployment rate among its citizens have made the government hesitant to open up the job market to recent refugees. A few job sectors are open (e.g., agriculture), but require a work permit that is quite difficult to obtain because of the fees and the long wait to process permits. A 2016 international agreement known as the Jordan Compact has attempted to open more economic sectors to Syrians, and formally allows Syrian women to work from home, but the Compact's effects have been mixed at best (Howden et al., 2017). Thus, many Syrian refugees in Jordan circumvent the restrictive labour laws by working in the informal economy.¹⁰ When job opportunities do arise for Syrian refugees in Jordan, whether formal or informal, the positions are generally low paying, semi- or non-skilled work. Within the coping economy, as Peterson asserts, women are frequently the ones who end up filling such undesirable and low-paying positions (Buecher & Aniyamuzaala, 2016; Ritchie, 2017; UN Women and REACH, 2017).

Many of the women I interviewed moved within Syria to seek safety before crossing the border into Jordan. In Jordan, even though there are internal restrictions on refugee movements, most women and their families have moved multiple times in search of a suitable household space. These women often moved between refugee camps (Za'atari and/or Azraq), to family or sponsors' homes and into their own modest apartments in Mafraq, Irbid and Amman. Some Syrian refugees living in the towns and cities would go to the camps if they could not make rent or during the cold winter months when

heating cost were prohibitive. Thirty-five of the women I interviewed were living in towns or cities in Jordan and 10 lived in the Za'atari camp. Within Za'atari they often moved from tent to prefabricated caravans and would rearrange the caravans to make their limited household space more comfortable (Figure 2). Some families were able to bring possessions from Syria with them, while others had money to buy furnishings, but more often than not, their varied household spaces were sparsely furnished and quite “unhomely.” Some families living in their own apartments struggled to pay for water to flush toilets. For those in tents or caravans in Za'atari, they created home spaces out of the most meagre of sites and conditions. Yet regardless of how meagre or unhomely these varied household spaces are, these are the intimate spaces of displacement and where families cope and life continues.

The Syrian women I interviewed were between 20 and 55 years of age. Most were married and most have several children. They were from urban and rural areas of Syria, and had different educational backgrounds.¹¹ Of the 45 Syrian refugee women I interviewed, 41 were working for an income in Jordan (the other four were not working in Jordan but still provided insights into gender relations and paid work). Of those 41 women who were working for pay, 17 had worked for an income while in Syria.¹²

Through networks I established during previous fieldwork and visits to Jordan, I was able to connect with Syrian women refugees quite easily. My Jordanian research assistant Dima, who completed her MA in Linguistics at my US-based institution, was invaluable for the fieldwork, as she set up most meetings with the Syrian women and helped with translations and interpretations.¹³ The interviews lasted between 45 and 120 minutes, and were typically conducted in either the interviewee's household spaces or the space in which they worked (i.e., NGO offices or a garment shop). After concluding my fieldwork, I used Atlas.ti to code, analyse and find connective themes within the interviews and my field notes. Though often discussing immensely personal and painful topics, the women I interviewed were generally pleased to share their stories and insights with me. In the four sections below, I include many translated statements and quotes from the interviews. These are partial and filtered through my analysis and writing processes, but the selected quotes help to reveal some of the less visible sides of war and displacement.

5 | SHIFTING GENDERED PERFORMANCES

Socially constructed ideas of appropriate feminine and masculine performances directly affect the types of work that Syrian men and women uphold and the spaces in which they work. Though there is variation in how gender is performed among Syrians, and there are many instances in which traditional gendered performances are transgressed, like many places across the globe, Syrian women's performances are largely that of social reproducers and caretakers (stemming from their



FIGURE 2 Household spaces in Za'atari including a standard-issue tent in the foreground and a caravan in the background, July 2014. *Source:* Photo by author [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

biological reproductive powers). As such, their work is often unpaid and within spaces of the home and household (Hale, 2009; Hasso, 2014; Moghadam, 2004; Vinson & Golley, 2012). In 2010, before the war, women's economic participation in Syria was 22% (Buecher & Aniyamuzaala, 2016). When Syrian women do work for pay, it is often within caretaking fields and in spaces in which contact with non-related men is limited. Nearly all the women I interviewed stated that unpaid caretaking of the family and home was their priority. Several women felt that paid work outside the home is acceptable for Syrian women, but only as long as they can also maintain the house and family. Many of the women I interviewed asserted that piety, dignity and modesty are social and cultural values that affect their daily practices and labour as well. As such, many women will limit contact with non-related men, which directly affects the types of spaces in which women will work.¹⁴ Of course, other factors – like education, age and marital status – also matter for gendered performances. My focus on paid work and intimate spaces, and my mentioning of dignity and modesty, are not meant to dilute these other factors, but instead reflect what these women said were dire and formative factors in their daily lives and coping labour.

A large proportion of the women I interviewed who are now working for pay said that, prior to their displacement, their families were intolerant of the idea of women working for an income either inside or outside of the home. However, in this coping economy, such ideas are changing (Buecher & Aniyamuzaala, 2016; Ritchie, 2017). Sawsan, a 50-year-old widow with three boys who recently began teaching for pay for the first time in her life, reflected on traditional gender roles and the need to work.

I wasn't working in Syria, my responsibility was only my home. We, Syrian women, don't usually work outside the house, we consider our home and our children to be the number one priority in our lives ... Working, in general, is good but we didn't have to work. Everything we wanted was available.

Hana, a 32-year-old mother of five who was working outside her house as a counsellor for traumatised Syrian children and adults while also studying for her MA in psychology, recognised the same views as Sawsan, but Hana challenged traditional views on women working for pay.

Syrians see a woman just as a mother whose main role is to raise her children ... even if the woman had the chance to follow her dreams, society will still look at her as a woman in the end, meaning that she will end up at home cleaning. My husband has a different way of thinking, he likes to see me different and successful, he brags about his wife who knows more than cooking and cleaning the house.

Like Sawsan and Hana, many other women felt that traditions were against their working for pay. However, in these dire circumstances, women's paid work became a necessity for many families. Many of the working-women I met said it was preferable for them to perform income-generating work within their own households, where they could continue their domestic responsibilities and minimise interactions with men to whom they were not related. Indeed, many Syrian women work within the intimate spaces of their households to make handicrafts (e.g., scarves, jewellery or quilts), sew, cook or pickle food for sale. Some, like Juma, also tutored students within their household spaces. Yet, many women also worked outside the household as teachers, nurses, seamstresses, trauma counsellors, cleaners, hair stylists, NGO aid workers, and in making handicrafts. Even though some women are working in public spaces, they are not, for the most part, radically transgressing gendered divisions of labour nor moving into fields that men have traditionally worked (i.e., business, government or taxi drivers). Whether cooking in the kitchen of a small apartment or teaching classes in an NGO's classroom, Syrian women's paid work and coping labour greatly conforms to traditional gendered divisions of labour, entrenching and recreating the ideals of masculine and feminine types of work. Nevertheless, their shift as an income provider is having direct effects on their household finances, daily practices and gendered relations and these household shifts are disrupting traditional roles. By earning an income, they are gaining influence and often elevating their position in the intimate spaces of the household. Though some traditional gendered roles and divisions of labour are being entrenched, these women's coping labour is also disrupting gendered performances.

6 | NAVIGATING MULTIPLE GENDERED PERFORMANCES

Hana was about 40 minutes late for our interview. While Dima and I waited for Hana's arrival in her very modest two-bedroom apartment in the city of Irbid, her husband brought us tea and biscuits. When Hana walked through the door, four of her five children greeted her with hugs and kisses. It was difficult to find a convenient time to meet with Hana. She worked eight-hour a day as a counsellor for Syrian refugees and she took courses in the evening in pursuit of her MA in clinical

psychology. We began our interview about five minutes after she arrived. We moved into her small bedroom where we could have a quiet space to talk. About 10 minutes into the interview her husband brought their seven-month-old daughter into the room so that Hana could breastfeed her. Hana received a BA in Psychology while in Syria and had worked as a school counsellor in Dera'a, in southern Syria. Though she had worked in Syria, her income was supplementary to that of her husband's. Yet since being displaced, Hana became the primary provider. Her husband tried earnestly, but was unable to find work in Jordan. So he tended to the household chores and their children while Hana worked and studied. Hana explained to me that she now feels "like a man and not a woman." These shifting gender roles have caused some tensions in their household, but Hana and her husband do their best to make it work, she explained to me. Hana's situation is in some respects unique. I had not met any other women whose husbands took on household and childcare chores while the wife became the primary provider. But Hana is not unique in that she worked in order to cope and provide for her family. Again, through their coping labour, many Syrian women are disrupting traditional gendered performances. Working for pay and/or being the primary provider is generally perceived as masculine. By becoming the provider and even head of household, they were "becoming men." However, among such shifts, traditional norms and ideals about gendered work are simultaneously entrenched and recreated. The more masculine performances of provider have not relinquished them of their feminine roles as a caretaker in the household. The paid work they perform generally conforms to socially constructed ideals on appropriate work for women (e.g., teachers and seamstresses). Moreover, the continued recognition that certain work and performances in the household are decidedly masculine or feminine, even though transgressed, recreates these binary categories and structures daily practices.

Suma, a widowed 30-year-old mother of one son who worked for a NGO, noted that the shifts in gender performances were necessary in this particular situation, while her comments also simultaneously recreate clearly defined traditional gendered roles.

Now women need to provide an income for their children. Before she was depending on her husband, but now there is no one to take care of her financially, so she became the man and the woman.

Lana, a 34-year-old widow with two children, recreated this gendered binary by laughingly stating that: "I'm the man now. But I just can't leave the house at midnight."

While "becoming men," these women maintained their traditional feminine roles too. Most of them spoke of the multiple burdens of balancing paid work with their responsibilities as caretaker. Asma, a single mother of six children who had a beauty salon in Irbid, sews dresses in her home (Figure 3) and cans vegetables in her kitchen to sell in the community, highlighted the very real shift of roles that is occurring, while simultaneously entrenching traditional divisions of labour.

Women became men and vice versa ... men are staying at home drinking tea and coffee while women are in the streets [working]. There is no such thing as woman anymore. I lost my feminine side ... A woman who struggles outside her house from sunrise until dawn and from one place to another is filling two roles, that of the father and the mother.

7 | NEW CHALLENGES IN THE HOUSEHOLD

For many women, their increased burdens, multiple responsibilities and coping labour are creating stress and new challenges within the intimate spaces of their households. Aida, a 24-year-old teacher's assistant, talked about the stress that her new responsibilities created.

Sometimes I feel like I am carrying the world on my shoulders. I feel like everything is my responsibility now ... Now I help them with the income and they depend on me because without me, my family wouldn't have money.

Women often spoke of two particular new challenges that developed alongside their working. First, many mothers found working to be an unwanted distraction from caring for their children. Many working mothers expressed a deep sense of regret that they have less time to care for, play with and educate their children. A few mothers I met who had infants mentioned that their ability to breastfeed was restricted due to being away from their babies while working. Some mothers



FIGURE 3 A dress Asma recently made for sale to a bride. Her son, cropped from the image for privacy, watches and waits. Irbid, July 2014.

Source: Photo by author [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

mentioned that their children's behaviours were changing for the worse. Asma was deeply concerned about how her numerous different forms of coping labour were affecting her time with her children.

My son tells me I'm 'out of service,' that I no longer listen when they speak to me. They nag and cry for me but I don't respond because I'm always busy with other things.

Farooz, a 36-year-old mother of four, whose husband is working in Kuwait, was deeply concerned with how women's shifting performances and burdens have affected Syrian children.

The burden has fallen on women to support her children. This is not right! She should be home taking care of her children. I feel that my children are missing many things because I work long hours.

Fatima, a 19-year-old mother with a one-year old son and a teacher in the Za'atari camp, likewise struggled with how her multiple gendered performances were affecting her son.

I spend a lot of time away from him. My son is always nervous and angry ... I keep him with my mother-in-law who takes care of him and once I get back home his eyes would be filled with tears. He also cries every time I leave him. He is changed now, because I leave him for long periods of time without breastfeeding. The mother, when she breastfeeds her child, offers him tenderness and love and I denied him some of that. He is not getting what he wants.

Second, many married women said that their husbands are struggling with the shifting gender performances. Many women explicitly discussed that their husbands feel helpless, have lost self-esteem and have become frustrated at their inability to provide for their families and fulfil their traditional masculine roles. Durrah, a 50-year-old mother of five children who was working in a sewing shop, articulated how women's work is impacting men.

Before the man was the only person responsible for the family, but now the woman and children participate and share responsibility. When the man is the only breadwinner in the house, he controls everything but now since everyone is working, the man's prestige or status gets lowered a little bit, at least in his own mind.

Hana's husband was entirely supportive of her working and he was proud of her accomplishments. Nevertheless, as she explained, the shifts in their gendered performances were not without tensions.

A problem that I am dealing with is my husband, he feels that he is the one responsible for the family and is the one who should provide for us, but he can't be in an illegal situation.

Isar, a 34-year-old mother of three, explained the effects that her working is having on gender relations in the household.

My husband keeps telling me that I've changed. This change is necessary for our lives, if I didn't work and get money, how else would we afford the rent? ... He didn't like it at first when I started to work, but since he's not allowed to work he had to accept it. It was hard for him to accept, when you think about it you realise that he was the man of the house, he provided for our needs, but now he does none of that. I understand that [he] can't accepted that easily.

Ghadir, a 43-year-old mother of two who was a seamstress in both Syria and Jordan, explained the negative impact of her husband's unemployment within the household.

Back then, my husband and I were sharing responsibilities, he had a salary and I had one too. But here, he feels that he is a burden on me and his son. This made him think about going back to Syria. We spent a week trying to convince him to stay but he is convinced that it is better to go back. Unemployment is really hard on him, he has always been productive and hardworking, now he is not doing anything, and he's not used to living like that.

Within the intimate spaces of the household, these women are navigating multiple responsibilities and shifting gendered performances. They are grappling with difficult emotions like having guilt and regret for not spending enough time caring for their family, while also trying to quell tensions that have emerged with their husbands. Yet among these difficulties and tensions, these women are also experiencing some new and rather positive changes as well. Within the household, family members have complex, mixed emotions and different reactions towards their mothers, wives and/or sisters working. As I discuss below, among tensions, many women are also receiving positive reinforcement in the form of appreciation, respect and love.

8 | NEW OPPORTUNITIES AND POSITIVE CHANGES

Working in a coping economy is replete with challenges, yet there are also some notable positive effects stemming from women's coping labour. Indeed, I found that many women felt positively about certain aspects of working. In addition to creating a small income for basic necessities, many women talked with me about a growing sense of power and strength, of an increased sense of purpose (particularly when they worked as counsellors and teachers for other Syrians), and garnering more respect within the household.

Again and again, the women I interviewed asserted that though working creating many stresses and challenges, it also made them stronger, more confident, more mature, more resilient and more independent. Suma spoke in general and specific terms about Syrian women becoming stronger as a result of their paid work.

They say what doesn't kill you makes you stronger and it's true. Syrian women can now do men's work and survive life regardless of the bad situation they are in. For me, I became confident in the street and everywhere.

Likewise, Ibtihal, a 20-year-old mother of one son and a primary school teacher, discussed that along with increased responsibility came confidence and a sense of productivity, both within the household and within the larger Syrian refugee community in Jordan.

Since my husband doesn't have a job here, I carry the responsibility of work. So now my responsibilities start with the house and my son and then my work with my students. I was always depending on others but here I am a contributor and I feel more productive. Working also made me stronger and made me more self-confident because here I have something. I am a productive person.

Many women mentioned that, because they're earning an income to support their families and because they're helping other Syrians, they've gained respect from family members in their households. Hana said that her family did not believe that she could accomplish all that she had done – of both working full time and getting her MA. But now her family is immensely proud of her and gives her more respect. Durrah likewise said that she gained more respect and more love within her household, particularly from her five children.

They started appreciating me more. They were caring about me and my health. They try to make me as comfortable as I can be. Love grew bigger!

Working gave many women a sense of purpose and added value to their lives, particularly for those whose work focused on helping other Syrian refugees. Hana, who counselled traumatised Syrians, proudly said that she had helped more than 150 mothers and another 150 injured individuals. She felt productive and asserted that she would never stop doing this work. Teaching or helping Syrian youths was also considered particularly meaningful work for many women. Fatima, who worked at a school in Za'atari, expressed the broad effects of her teaching.

I feel now that I help others, at first I was doing nothing with my life, but now, I feel more productive and I am helping my family and helping the less fortunate. Working as a teacher enables me to help others.

The increased sense of strength, purpose and respect that some women gain through working can be transformative and can have long-term effects (Haddad, 2014; Korac, 2004). For example, Hana said that working opened up new horizons and paths for her “culturally, socially, professionally, mentally and morally.” Working gave her the knowledge, confidence and connections to pursue her dream of starting her own counselling practice. Nasim, a single woman and teacher who was working for the first time, explained how working was giving her knowledge to grow.

Working allowed me to get out of the house and gain experience and knowledge. I didn't want to work only for money, I wanted to gain experience and grow.

Fiddah, a mother of three children who was working for an income for the first time, reflected on how working facilitates long-term changes to gender relations.

The woman who learns how to work will not tolerate staying at home. They'll no longer depend on their men to get them what they need. They will work with their men hand in hand to achieve that. A girl who is working now and is going to be married in the future will not accept staying at home; she will take his hand and tell him that they will rebuild things together.

Likewise, Rihana, a mother of six children who is working for pay for the first time, noted the potential long-term effects that working may have on gender and household relations.

I am not against respecting the husband or the father, but you also need your own space.... Men need to change the way they think of women, like they are born to please them and be responsible for the house and raising the kids. There is more to a woman than this.

9 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Syrian women I interviewed in Jordan are not on the battlefields or in the headlines of mainstream news, nor are they leaders of movements or high-profile figures. These women – with their varied pasts, presents and futures – are coping with

war and displacement in rather hidden, everyday spaces. In the intimate spaces of displacement, their coping labour is having immense impacts on immediate and long-term gender relations and performances.

Syrian refugee women are living in precarity and face countless challenges. One of their most significant challenges is earning an income and adjusting to shifts in gender performances within the household. The women I met talked at length about their worries about their children's behaviour and development, their guilt for not spending more time nurturing their children and for their husbands' decreased sense of worth. Yet, among such difficulties, many women found work to be rewarding and life changing as well. Working for an income, whether supplementary or as the primary provider, made many of them feel stronger, more capable, more valued and more respected.

The roles of space and paid labour are key to understanding gendered performances and coping for Syrian refugees in Jordan. As gender performances shift towards women taking on traditionally masculine practices of financial provider, traditional gender ideals and divisions of labour that place women in homes as unpaid caretakers are being disrupted. Yet, simultaneously these same gendered ideals are entrenched. While Syrian women are "becoming men" in the sense of their role as provider, this shift also recreates traditional gendered categories and binaries of acceptable feminine and masculine performances. Furthermore, women's traditional gendered responsibility as the caretaker of their families is not being forgotten or lessened, but instead most women now navigate the gendered responsibilities of being the masculine provider and the feminine caretaker. Amid shifts in gender performances within the household, ideals about gender and divisions of labour are quite static. Farah, an Iraqi-Jordanian UNHCR employee asserted that Syrian women's work is altering gendered relations, but "breaking out of cultural and social norms that are so embedded is hard." In her study of a refugee community in upstate New York, Koyama (2014) found that men and women held on to their ideas about gender, even as women became financial providers. Likewise, in her research on Chechen women refugees in the Czech Republic, Szczepanikova (2005) found that even when women work for pay and even when they become heads of household, their gender ideals do not change. The patriarchal ideals and practices that structure societies are not easily dismantled.¹⁵ Earning an income will not magically "empower" or "liberate" women from patriarchy (Abu-Assab, 2017; Mertus, 2000, p. 35). During war, displacement and transitions towards peace, conditions for women often get worse. Societies may be re-masculinised, traditional ideals preserved and gender-based violence may increase. In post-Saddam Iraq, for example, conditions for women have greatly worsened (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2009; Enloe, 2010; Voller, 2014). Moreover, the ideas of "empowerment" and "liberation" stem from a western liberal feminist project that does not necessarily resonate with women across the globe. In summary, the gendered shifts I've underscored in this paper are not an act of subversion or resistance against patriarchy (Mahmood, 2005), but a crucial way in which Syrian women and their families are coping in displacement.

My findings provide unique insights into the particularities of the intimate lives of Syrian women refugees from the lens of coping labour. With the exception of Ayoub's (2017) recent research on the socio-economic conditions of Syrian women refugees in Cairo, there has been no in-depth scholarship looking at the complex changes to gendered relations for Syrian refugees. I hope that my work at the intersection of gender, displacement and labour may invite further inquiry and more reflection on how gendered performances and relations shift and entrench within the contexts of forced displacement, as well as within the contexts of other forms of transnational migrations across the globe (Conlon, 2011; Ehrkamp, 2017).

Feminist geopolitics has contributed much to examining the gendered dimensions of displacement, but this body of research has largely missed examining paid labour. Studying paid labour and gender relations is important for feminist geopolitics (and geopolitics more broadly) as it helps reveal varied and evolving gendered relations within the intimate spaces of displacement. Offering the idea of "coping labour," I add to the very sparse body of literature on women's paid work and displacement specifically. I argue that incorporating ideas on paid work that stem from feminist geography and critical migration studies helps examine how gender affects experiences of displacement (and vice versa) in general, but specifically it also reveals that paid work is having profound impacts on coping and gender relations.

Though many Syrian women refugees in Jordan have been victimised by geopolitical violence, by international and state policies and practices, by normalised patriarchy, by exploitative labour practices and by other highly unequal power relations, the women who shared their time and insights with me are not bare life or passive victims. These women's daily lives are replete with challenges, but most of them have found incredible strength, resilience, ingenuity and confidence to cope and even thrive. The women I met and talked with are not necessarily empowered agents, but as they cope, as they work, as they navigate changing gendered performances in the intimate spaces of the displacement, they also gain strength and resilience. Reflecting on how working and displacement has affected Syrian women, Farooz told me, "I want the world

to understand that there are women who did great things that even men couldn't do." I hope that this paper has helped to fulfil Farooz's small desire.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ There are many uses of the term “refugee” (Aleinikoff, 1995; Hyndman & Mountz, 2007). The women I formally interviewed, with the exception of one, were all within the legal UN definition, as they have crossed international borders due to war/persecution.
- ² I use the term “performance” in this paper to indicate that gender is constructed, changing, negotiated, contested, and enacted (as opposed to some pre-existing biological category). I use the term “gender roles” on occasion when referring to traditional divisions of labour or traditional gendered expectations. “Relations” refers to social interactions.
- ³ Horn and Parekh (2018, p. 504) recently noted in their edited special issue on displacement in *Signs* that scholars have examined gendered dimension of displacement in the past, but there is not yet any established “canon” on this topic.
- ⁴ Though the terms “home,” “house,” “domestic space” or “dwelling” are also appropriate, I use “household” throughout this paper as it alludes to both spaces and gendered relations that occur in such spaces. Moreover, many of the spaces in which refugee women live are “unhomely.”
- ⁵ There are countless cases of refugees being terribly exploited by employers and of children being withheld from school to work. These are, of course, important issues, but outside the scope of this paper.
- ⁶ Looney (2005), Hyndman and de Alwis's (2008), Kuttab (2006), Enloe (2010), Koyama (2014) and Szczepanikova (2005) have to lesser degrees examined gender, labour and displacement.
- ⁷ <http://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html>
- ⁸ Feminist and transnational feminist methods have influenced all aspects of my research design, fieldwork, analysis and writing. I have attempted to maintain a non-essentialised view of my research subjects, to learn from them, to carefully reflect on my representations of their lives and to adjust my research focus as necessary (England, 1994; Mohanty, 2003; Mountz, 2011; Oberhauser, 2014).
- ⁹ Physical safety, acquiring food, clean water and shelter are key immediate needs. Gender-based violence is also a major concern. Lack of privacy, harassment on the streets, loss of dignity and health (menstruation, prenatal care and breastfeeding) are common gendered concerns (UNHCR, 2014).
- ¹⁰ A recent UN study found that 2% of Syrian refugee women have work permits (UN Women & REACH, 2017, p. 23).
- ¹¹ I do not discuss intersectionality explicitly in this paper, though class, race, age, place of origin, marital status, number of children, education and wealth are all factors of a women's position and her experiences.
- ¹² Eleven of the women I interviewed were “heads of household,” in that these women had children but no male relative with them. Farah, a UNHCR employee who worked specifically with women, estimated that about 20% of the Syrian women who are working in Jordan did not work in Syria. My non-representative sample – as I sought out women who were working – is at 40%.
- ¹³ Dima provided complete text translations of 30 interviews and interpretation of the remaining. Though my comprehension of Arabic is good, Dima's translations and interpretations were essential for me to grasp details and nuances of these interviews in which multiple accents of Arabic were being spoken.
- ¹⁴ Virtue and modesty are often foundational for daily life and practices for Muslim women (Mahmood, 2005), and the large majority of women I interviewed are Muslim.
- ¹⁵ I'm following Mahmood's (2005) theorisation of agency as ability to take action. I am developing this idea in another paper.

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