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Research Article

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'In Exile, the Woman Became Everything': Middle-Aged Syrian Women's Contributions to Family Livelihoods during Protracted Displacement in Jordan

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Abstract

This article explores the intersections of generational and gender dynamics with humanitarian governance in Jordan that cause shifts in the division of labour within displaced families. Drawing on life history interviews and focus group discussions with seventeen Syrian women in Jordan in spring 2019, we explore the monetary and non-monetary contributions of middle-aged females to the livelihoods of refugee households. Older women's paid and unpaid labour holds together dispersed families whose fathers have been killed or incapacitated, or remain in Syria or in the Gulf. In doing so, many women draw on their pre-war experience of living with – or rather apart from – migrant husbands. Increased economic and social responsibilities coincide with a phase in our interviewees' lifecycle in which they traditionally acquire greater authority as elders, especially as mothers-in-law. While power inequalities between older and younger Syrian women are not new, they have been exacerbated by the loss of resources in displacement. Our insights offer a counterpoint to humanitarian attempts at increasing refugees' 'self-reliance' through small-scale entrepreneurship. For now, culturally appropriate and practically feasible jobs for middle-aged women are found in their living rooms. Supportive humanitarian action should allow them to upscale their businesses and address power dynamics within families.

Keywords: forced migration, Jordan, gender, household, refugee livelihoods

Introduction

'In Syria, I was always like, bring me this, bring me that.' Before the Syrian conflict, 38-year-old Marwa[1] lived in various working-class neighbourhoods in Damascus, sheltered by her parents and, later, by her husband. At the age of 17, Marwa dropped out of high school to get married to a tradesman and thereafter never left the house unaccompanied. Seven years after the family fled to Jordan, we met with Marwa in Al Hashmi Al Shamali, a poor neighbourhood in East Amman. She excitedly told us about her recent cooking class and plans to buy a

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kitchen device for preparing *kibbe*, a traditional Syrian dish that she sells to her neighbours. Marwa's income from home-made catering complements the little money her husband makes by selling vegetables in an open-air market, and allows the family to keep their three teenage children in school. Unlike in her pre-war life, Marwa goes out on her own to attend NGO classes. In 2016, she joined *Queens of Syria*, a much acclaimed theatre production performed by refugee women in Amman, for a three-week tour to the UK. On stage, the women recited dialogues that drew parallels between the enslavement of Trojan women in Euripides' famous tragedy and their personal experiences of loss and displacement in Syria. While Marwa's husband was initially reluctant to let her act, she managed to convince him by pointing out that her earnings from the play would pay for diapers and milk for their youngest daughter.

This article develops a critical understanding of Marwa's claim that 'in exile, the [Syrian] woman became everything'. Since the onset of the Syrian conflict in 2011, humanitarian actors have turned the spotlight on very young female refugees in Middle Eastern host countries. In Jordan, almost 50 per cent of Syrians are female, and 7 per cent of all Syrians in the country are girls between the ages of 11 and 17 (UNHCR, 2019); and NGO and Jordanian government reports have denounced high rates of early marriage among refugees (e.g. Save the Children, 2014; UNICEF, 2014, 2017, 2018a, 2018b; Higher Population Council Jordan, 2017). While much of humanitarian efforts target women in their teens and twenties, this study makes visible more complex power dynamics in multigenerational refugee households. It zooms in on a different group – *middle-aged* women – and their affective and economic relationships with younger daughters and daughters-in-law. Drawing on life history interviews and focus group discussions with seventeen Syrian women in Jordan in spring 2019, this article explores the diverse monetary and non-monetary contributions of middle-aged women to the livelihoods of refugee families. For the sake of this article, we understand 'middle-aged' women as mothers of teenage and grown-up children, grandmothers and mothers-in-law. Some of the women in this study, like Marwa, have grown-up *and* younger children. What matters to us here is that all our interlocutors are at a stage of their life where they have secured a respected and influential position within multigenerational families. NGO reports claim that up to one third of refugee households in Jordan are 'female-headed' (CARE, 2016). Here, we present a more nuanced picture of women's economic and other duties. In the families included in this study, husbands are often half-present, rather than missing, and many wives learned to cope with separation from their spouses *before* 2011. Following Chant (2014), we redirect the discussion from displaced women's increased financial contribution to household income, to the diversification of their labour, only some of which is remunerated. In addition, we maintain that greater financial responsibilities are not only the result of displacement, the pressures of life in exile and the more prolonged absence of husbands: they also coincide with a phase in our interviewees' lifecycle in which they traditionally acquire greater authority as elders, especially as mothers-in-law. Due to their distinct positioning in their families, older female refugees experience displacement differently from younger women. Most of our Syrian interlocutors are in their thirties, forties and fifties, and have between four and eight children. Unlike younger mothers in their teens and twenties who live under the authority of their mothers-in-law and face intense reproductive coercion, older women like Marwa have often increased in social status inside their families since they arrived in Jordan. This article explores the intersections of generational and gender dynamics with humanitarian governance in Jordan that together cause shifts in the division of labour within refugee families.

As in Marwa's case, the activities of middle-aged Syrian women cannot simply be measured in money. Mothers, mothers-in-law and grandmothers also provide childcare, cooking and emotional comfort to their families, and build support networks with fellow refugees and NGOs through which they find jobs and marital partners for their children. For a better understanding of the material and immaterial assets, capabilities and survival strategies that refugee families can draw on, this article adopts a livelihoods approach (cf. Chambers and Conway, 1992). Looking at Syrian women's responsibilities through a livelihood lens allows us to disentangle the economic, political and social factors that shape their lives in exile. First, women's economic activities have to be understood in the context of their dense web of social obligations (cf. Lindley, 2010). In this research, we are interested in how our female interlocutors' personal income is redistributed within kinship networks, who manages family resources and how women themselves benefit from the support of other family members. This approach, of course, draws inspiration from longstanding scholarship on the importance of kinship in the Middle East (cf. Joseph, 1994, 2004) and the diversity and strength of ethnic, religious and regional groups in pre-war Syria (Stevens, 2016). Before 2011, women cemented family ties, whether among rural or urban communities (Rugh, 1996; Rabo, 2008), Damascene elites (Salamandra, 2004) or minority sects like the Druze (Kastrinou, 2016), through marriage, and mundane and extraordinary forms of hospitality. Extended Syrian families often functioned as profitable economic units, with different household members taking on paid or unpaid tasks (e.g. Rugh, 1996; Rabo, 2008). This networked perception of Syrian women's lives is vital to

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understanding that their activities in exile have economic and social ramifications for their loved ones. Of further relevance to this study are academic insights into how geographically dispersed families stick together through transnational practices, including remittance-sending (e.g. Horst, 2006; Lindley, 2010; Jacobsen *et al.*, 2014; Omata, 2017; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2019). As this article demonstrates, older women's contributions to refugee households transcend the local level, taking into account the contribution (or lack of contribution) of absent others. Existing NGO reports often focus on Syrian women's relationships with spouses, who are said to experience unemployment and their wives' new occupations as emasculating and a loss of 'traditional' pre-war lifestyles (Lokot, 2018). By contrast, we zoom in on relationships between younger and older women. Life in exile and humanitarian programming rewire gendered, but also generational power inequalities (Turner, 2004). While our older interviewees have a say in marital decision-making, they also have to deal with the fallout when the younger generation's marriages fail, and provide financial support and childcare to divorced daughters and their grandchildren.

Second, a livelihoods approach allows us to connect what happens in the intimate spaces of our interlocutors' living rooms to the workings of humanitarian governance in Jordan. Recent scholarship on gender and forced migration emphasises 'women's multiple positions within conflict and displacement situations, and […] female agency rather than depicting women as non-agentic victims' (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014: 395; cf. Hajdukowski-Ahmed *et al.*, 2008; Freedman *et al.*, 2017). Still, women seem to be visible in the Syria humanitarian response in binary ways, either as victims (of gender-based violence) or as proto-entrepreneurs (Turner, 2019). Humanitarian assistance to women chimes with older representations of passive suffering (Hyndman and Giles, 2011). More recently, economic empowerment programmes have also targeted women because they are considered more trustworthy 'entrepreneurs' (Cornwall and Rivas, 2015) and recipients of aid (Olivius, 2014). A 2016 CARE report on refugee women's new-found economic responsibilities frames displacement as a 'window of opportunity for Syrian women' (5) and vows to support them 'as they claim their space in the economic and public sphere' (8). In Jordan, aid agencies' interest in female refugees has sparked women-only (or women-majority) programmes of various sorts, including vocational training, and good parenting and early marriage awareness classes (cf. Turner, 2019). However, ethnographic studies paint a more complex picture of female refugees' opportunities for economic self-reliance. Inside Syria, cash assistance allowed internally displaced women in Raqqa to pay their debts and become less reliant on their relatives in the short-term, but financial decision-making power often remained in the hands of husbands and mothers-in-law. Monetary support also allowed women to *stop* working outside the house, in line with conservative gender norms inside their community (Blackwell *et al.*, 2019). In northern Lebanon, female refugees came to think of NGO-led vocational trainings as leisurely fun, not as a route to employment, when limiting Syrian women's opportunities for employment through ill-targeted, short-term humanitarian courses became necessary for preserving the fragile peace between locals and refugees (Carpi, 2019). Although the 2016 Jordan Compact granted Syrians in Jordan 200,000 work permits in low-skilled sectors in exchange for advantageous loans and preferential access to EU markets (Barbelet *et al.*, 2018), employment programmes seem badly matched with Jordan's largely informal and casual economy (Lenner and Turner, 2018). Because of the Jordanian government's increased levels of surveillance of Syrian men, refugee women are pushed to find work in the informal economy, often through home-based catering. But their 'survivalist' and piecemeal entrepreneurship is hampered by their lack of business skills and access to microcredit; it also heightens domestic tensions (Ritchie, 2018). In a nation-wide survey, REACH and UN Women (2016) found that 20 per cent of Syrian women in Jordan were currently working, but only 2 per cent held a work permit. More than half of working Syrian women preferred to work from home, due to lack of childcare and public transport. Similarly, cash-for-work programmes in Zaatari Camp failed to address women's lack of access to the labour market outside the camp, and added to women's labour inside the home (Tobin and Campbell, 2016).

These findings illustrate common blind spots in humanitarian attempts at increasing refugees' self-reliance. Their success is limited by an overly narrow focus on the *economic* dimension of self-reliance and on *individuals*, overlooking refugees' social obligations and survival strategies within extended kinship networks (Easton-Calabria *et al.*, 2017). In this article, we sound a cautious note on refugees' labour market participation, which does not necessarily increase women's rights and gender equality (Abu-Assab, 2017). We also add nuance to the distinction between the public and the private: national and international refugee-reception policies compel our interviewees to work from their living rooms. At the same time, they remain connected to multiple places and people in the world through phone calls, remittance-sending and sometimes travels. The first section of this article introduces our study participants and ethnographic approach. The second section revisits Rabo's (2008) distinction between 'doing' and 'talking family', exploring Syrian women's multiple, and sometimes contradictory, ways of navigating gender relations in exile. In the third and fourth sections, we discuss the different economic and

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social roles that middle-aged women take on in displacement. The third section looks at the income-generating activities that our interlocutors engage in during the (literal or perceived) absence of their husbands. The fourth section asks how middle-aged women juggle their economic roles with more traditional duties as matchmakers, grandmothers and mothers-in-law.

Methodology and Study Participants

This project was funded by the Scottish Funding Council's (SFC) Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) Internal Pump Priming Fund at the University of the West of Scotland, where it also received ethics approval. The project team was composed of Dina Sidhva (Principal Investigator, University of the West of Scotland), Ruba al-Akash and Ayat Nashwan (Co-investigators, Yarmouk University), Ann-Christin Zuntz (Research Assistant, University of Edinburgh) and Areej Al-Majali (Project Partner, Aman Jordanian Association). In spring 2019, we conducted life history interviews with ten Syrian women in Amman, Irbid and villages outside Irbid, as well as a focus group discussion with seven Syrian women in Irbid. All interviews and the focus group discussion were held in Arabic by the Research Assistant, at times together with Jordanian academic partners. In and around Irbid, all interviewees and focus group participants were recruited through our co-investigators' personal networks. In Amman, Aman Jordanian Association, a Jordanian NGO that provides reproductive health services to displaced women, facilitated some of the interviews with their Syrian service users. In addition, the study draws on Jordanian partners' and the research assistant's longstanding experience of conducting ethnographic fieldwork with Syrian women in northern Jordan. For their contribution in the study, all Syrian women received a compensation of 10 JOD (approx. $14). The use of economic incentives in ethnographic studies is a thorny issue. There is a lack of guidance from relevant professional bodies in the UK, and some social scientists argue that paying one's informants may introduce various biases, and coerce vulnerable people into participating (for a summary, see Cajas and Pérez, 2017). However, giving gifts and money to informants has long been a common practice in anthropological research. Holding researchers and research subjects accountable to lofty standards of altruism overlooks that both parties may establish complicated, and often long-standing, reciprocal relationships (De Regt, 2019). While scholars benefit from their informants' insider knowledge to produce academic outputs, and build careers in increasingly volatile labour markets, informants may accrue social prestige through association with foreign researchers, and receive financial and emotional support. Even though we were powerless to address more wide-ranging power inequalities between the refugees and academics in this study, we were keen to avoid extractive modes of research, where data collection is outsourced to badly, or unpaid, locals and refugees (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2019). While we hope that our findings can inspire fairer humanitarian policies, this is a more long-term goal, with no immediate effect on our interviewees' lives. Therefore, we chose to compensate Syrian women financially to acknowledge the valuable contribution that they made to our project. As many of our interlocutors are working women, we calculated the amount as the equivalent of two hours of female labour in the informal economy in Jordan. Consent was obtained orally and repeatedly, first through a phone call, and later at the beginning of each interview. Building on our Jordanian partners' pre-existing relationships of trust further enabled candid discussions. All our interviews, and the focus group discussion, were conducted inside women's homes, and over a cup of tea or coffee. As older women, and often matriarchs of their families, our interlocutors were used to welcoming other women. Through home visits, we hoped to emulate everyday encounters in which the host, and not the guest, is in control of the encounter, and power inequalities between researchers and interviewees could be neutralised at least in part by the intimate setting.

Rabo (2008) reminds us of the importance of regional, rural–urban, ethnic and class differences in pre-war Syrian society. On average, rural, Sunni and less well-off Syrians had bigger families than urban residents and religious minorities, but there was great variety with regard to family-making within individual households and communities. As Syrian women from different social and ethnic groups experience displacement in distinct ways (Alhayek, 2015; Ozkaleli, 2018), we begin by highlighting some particularities of our interlocutors' backgrounds which are similar to those in Rabo's (2008) study. To refine our interview tools, we first held a focus group discussion with seven Syrian women in their forties and fifties. Originally from rural areas in Deraa and Damascus governorates, all the women lived in the same neighbourhood in Irbid, and many came from the same extended families. On a cold afternoon, we met them in the living room of Um Nadia, one of our subsequent interviewees. Soon, the women engaged in a heated discussion over issues that dominated their everyday lives: how to pay one's rent and for their children's university education, repeated attempts at setting up home-based businesses, and the painful separation from husbands and grown-up children who had stayed behind in Syria or sought refuge in the Global North. All the women we later interviewed individually in Irbid and villages close-by came from rural Deraa, often from hamlets only a stone's throw away from the Jordanian border. In Al Hashmi Al Shamali in East

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Amman, our interviewees were from rural Homs and Quneitra, as well as working-class areas inside Damascus and Homs city. Our interlocutors' living conditions are paradigmatic of Syrian displacement to Jordan, where 81 per cent of refugees live outside camps, mostly in Amman and in urban and rural areas in the north of the country (UNHCR, 2019). Among our interviewees, three women were in their twenties, five women were in their thirties, one was in her forties and one in her fifties. All the women had married in their teens, most of them at the age of 17 or 18, and had given birth multiple times. On average, mothers in their thirties had four children, some or all of them already at school; a 51-year-old mother had nine teenage and grown-up children. Most of the women had not finished high school, and had not been in salaried employment before 2011. In Jordan, many occasionally attended short-term NGO trainings on early marriage, sewing, cooking and other gendered topics, although their experiences were mixed. For example, the 51-year-old participant was sent home from an NGO centre once because she was considered 'too old' for studying.

Displaced people start life in exile from a position of multiple material and human losses (Jacobsen, 2014). 'Life has worn me out,' says 35-year-old Asma who came to Jordan five years ago with her husband and four children. High costs of living in Amman, her husband's irregular income and, more recently, her daughter's failed marriage, have put a huge strain on her mental health. Most of our interlocutors lost their homes during the fighting in Syria. Having spent an average of six years in Jordan, displacement is a long-term condition to them, but none have managed to regain any financial safety. By way of illustration, Marwa has lived in four different apartments since she came to Jordan, each one less expensive than the last. Refugees' deprivation is made worse by structural barriers in the host country, often with gendered implications (Jacobsen, 2014). Not a signatory to the 1951 Convention on Refugees, Jordan curtails Syrians' freedom of movement and access to public services (Achilli, 2015). Families with women of childbearing age were particularly hit when authorities cut Syrians' access to free public healthcare. The cost of giving birth at a hospital went up from approximatively \$85 to \$338, and for Caesarean sections from \$338 to \$845 (Karasapan, 2018). In March 2019, the Jordanian government suspended maternity fees at public hospitals, but secondary and tertiary fees remain prohibitively high for many Syrian households (Jordan INGO Forum, 2019). The dwindling of humanitarian resources, for example cuts to the World Food Programme's voucher system in mid 2015, has further affected refugees in urban areas (Bellamy *et al.*, 2017).

In this study, we took an ethnographic approach that went beyond mere interviewing. Central to this was spending extended periods of time in women's living rooms, which were often also their workplaces. It is very likely that Syrian refugees' ample experience with the aid sector shaped the stories they told us, in line with widespread humanitarian narratives on refugee suffering (cf. Kindersley, 2015). Through 'deep hanging out' (Geertz, 1998: 69) with our interlocutors, we hoped to get a better sense of their everyday life routines and female sociability, which might have gone unnoticed in a more formal interview setting. Like Guha (2019), we avoided questions which singled out a specific traumatic moment, putting family life in exile in the context of women's wider life course. With this study, we add to recent scholarship that highlights the complex nature of Syrian women's narratives, their creative engagement with refugee labels (Gissi, 2018) and different audiences (Shalaby, 2018). Talking to Syrian women at their workplaces allowed us to ask questions about their skills and expertise, and how these helped them generate an extra income, but also became an important part of their identities as mothers, farmers and entrepreneurs. At home, most encounters took place in the presence of children, grandchildren and female friends. Therefore, younger women might have felt less comfortable to speak up in the presence of older mothers and mothers-in-law. Whenever possible, we sought to talk to women from different generations in separate rooms. However, we also recognise the strong affective bond between mothers and daughters, who often chose to be interviewed together, and complemented each other's answers. The multigenerational composition of our research team – with two of the interviewers being mothers, and one of them unmarried at the time of the study – opened up further opportunities for conversations with interviewees who were differentially positioned in their respective families. Older women preferred to address the more senior researchers, while young brides and mothers interacted more easily with the younger research assistant. This gave us valuable insights into the power dynamics of mundane all-female sociability. As most visits took place in the morning, men were outside the house and at work. As we discuss at the end of this article, several families had no men at all.

'Doing' and 'Talking' Refugee Families

In an overall context of loss and ongoing economic insecurity in the host country, our female interlocutors have to balance ideas about women's roles that they are exposed to by their Jordanian neighbours, through their children's education in Jordanian state schools, and in NGO-led training, with personal decision-making about their children's and their own futures. All our interlocutors had attended awareness-raising sessions on the psychological and bodily dangers of early marriage and motherhood – for example, by international aid agencies like CARE, but

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also the Jordanian Family Protection department. They often spoke enthusiastically about their dreams for their daughters to finish high school and become doctors or lawyers, highly appreciated professions in the Middle East. Yet, these trainings seem to have little impact on how women *make* family in exile. With regard to their own children and daughters-in-law, several older interlocutors held on to established practices like multi-generational living arrangements, and arranged and early marriage. Except for two women in their twenties, all women we spoke with had married in Syria before the war and during their teenage years. A 35-year-old woman from rural Deraa who wed at the age of 13 remembers that she mistook her wedding dress for a toy. Her 43-year-old sister, promised to a young man at the age of 14, recalls the horror of being taken to no less than thirty doctors during the first year of their marriage when she did not get pregnant. Still, while many older women are very vocal about the shock and pressures of early marriage and motherhood, several of our interlocutors in their forties recently arranged matches for their teenage daughters, usually with young Syrian men from their extended kinship networks. In every case, this caused their daughters to drop out of high school.

However, older women are not simply policing younger females' adherence to pre-war ways of life. Rather than simply a relic of 'traditional' culture, marriages involving adolescent girls are often motivated by complex social and economic drivers (Miedema *et al.*, 2020), and some refugees' longing for a stable home in exile (Van Raemdonck, 2021). And, perhaps surprisingly, our younger interlocutors, often the target audience of humanitarian empowerment messages, openly expressed more conservative views than their older peers did. Several young women deplored not the persistence, but the loss of traditional Syrian gender norms. The testimony of Nawal, aged 24, gives us a sense of her nuanced view of gendered gains and losses in Jordan. Before the war, Nawal's father had been the headmaster of a village school outside Homs. Five years ago, Nawal had to bury her dreams of further education when her father died of a stroke and her mother married her off to a fellow Syrian refugee. They first met face to face on their wedding day. Now a mother of two, Nawal lives with her husband and her parents-in-law in Amman. She cherishes new opportunities for educating herself remotely and is happy to have a private phone, a rarity in pre-war rural Syria. As her older son suffered from oxygen shortage during birth, Nawal spends a lot of time online, looking up games for disabled children. She aptly uses medical and technological vocabulary, and stays informed about new treatments. However, when asked about new opportunities for Syrian women in Jordan, Nawal is quick to fend us off. 'Many Syrians took off their niqabs [i.e. a veil that covers their entire face], they wear makeup, go out on their own and talk on social media. I think that this is wrong. We were not like that [before the war].' To Nawal, women's greater contact to the outside world is directly linked to the erosion of family life: 'They forget their house and cooking and the children.' Nawal herself refuses to wear make-up and only goes out in the company of her mother-in-law or her husband. In a similar vein, Nawal's 29-year-old neighbour Halima is happy about new study opportunities for her four daughters, all at primary school age. Yet, she also condemns young Syrian women's changed dress code and new ambitions in life. 'Girls say, I want to study, I don't want *ibn ami* [to marry their first-degree cousins],' she hisses.

How can we understand the discrepancies between older and younger Syrian women's perceptions of gendered gains and losses in exile? Even though all interviews were conducted in Arabic, the presence of the European Research Assistant may have encouraged some women to discuss girls' opportunities for education and employment in ways that they knew were encouraged by international aid workers in Jordan. Research with Sahrawi refugees shows that humanitarian discourse on gender equality is sometimes strategically embraced by displaced people to access support (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2010). However, the complexity of our interlocutors' rhetoric and practices of family-making goes beyond paying lip service to humanitarian discourse. Since the 1990s, scholars have produced new insights into the malleable nature of the 'modern family in the Middle East' (Dahlgren, 2008: 2) and the coexistence of rigid official discourse and more varied ways of 'making' family (Rabo, 2008). The stereotype of the stable patriarchal system, in which women are confined to the private sphere and reproductive activities, has been mobilised as part of colonial (Thompson, 2000) and postcolonial projects (Rabo, 1996; Dahlgren, 2008). Nevertheless, it conceals more fluid relations between genders, and interactions between public and private spheres. While humanitarian reports foreground the impact of lost livelihoods, conflict-related violence and restrictive refugee-asylum policies on gender relations (e.g. CARE, 2016), the after-effects of more longstanding gender politics in pre-war societies are often missing from debates on gender and displacement (Alsaba and Kapilashrami, 2016; Buckey-Zistel and Krause, 2017). In fact, opportunities for Syrian women to work (outside the home) have grown and shrunk repeatedly over the last decades (Rabo, 1996, 2008; Lei Sparre, 2008; Alsaba and Kapilashrami, 2016). 'State feminism' (Rabo, 1996: 157) was an ideological tenet of the Ba'th Party's attempt at overcoming social and ethnic differences in the new Syrian nation from the 1960s. Women's role as 'symbols of the nation's development and modernization' (Lei Sparre, 2008: 7) led to better

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educational opportunities, state-supported day care, the right to vote and high female employment rates, especially in the public sector. However, official discourse did not reflect many women's lived experiences. Despite the variety of Syrian women's actual occupations, ideals of marriage and parenting as markers of social adulthood persisted (Rabo, 2008), and women's salaries were often considered a means to attracting husbands, and a secondary contribution to households with male breadwinners (Rugh, 1996; Salamandra, 2004). Women also struggled with the double burden of work inside and outside the home. Since the 1990s, rising rates of unemployment, as well as the growing influence of Islamic discourse, made the Syrian state decrease its support for women in the public workforce (Lei Sparre, 2008). During the 2011 revolution, a substantial number of working-class women played an important role in organising peaceful resistance at the grassroots level (Alsaba and Kapilashrami, 2016). In retaliation, they have been targeted by rape and gender-based violence by the Syrian regime and other parties to the conflict (Abu-Assab, 2017). This brief summary of women's history in modern Syria is not meant to be exhaustive, but it demonstrates that our interlocutors' exposure to ideals of 'female self-reliance' is nothing new. In the remaining sections, we show that refugee families create 'spaces for social experimentation' (Joseph, 2004: 277), where humanitarian assistance, family separations and gender and generational dynamics all shape how women's positioning is negotiated by themselves and their loved ones – and that middle-aged women themselves sometimes change their minds about what women *could* and *should* be doing.

'We're All Widows Here' – Middle-Aged Women as Breadwinners

'We're all widows here,' laughed a 70-year-old Syrian woman who had accompanied her two grown-up daughters to the focus group discussion in Irbid. Her joke caused general amusement among the other participants, all of them in their forties and fifties. Syrian women in Jordan are more likely to be widows than their Jordanian counterparts, and by the age of 50, almost a third of female refugees have lost their spouses (Sieverding *et al.*, 2019). Even though most of our interlocutors' husbands were still very much alive, middle-aged women often remarked upon the literal (or perceived) absence of their spouses and their economic responsibility for their children and sometimes grandchildren. Older women's greater authority vis-à-vis their families is nothing new. In Middle Eastern families, men, but also female elders, tend to control resources, including the labour of younger family members (Joseph, 1996). Pre-war ethnographies of Syrian families are full of powerful matriarchs who intervene in their children's private lives and business ventures (Rabo, 2008; Chatty, 2013). In this regard, our interlocutors' increased social status reflects changes in the lifecycle of their families, as they have progressed from shy young brides to respected mothers of grown-up children and grandmothers. For many older female refugees, absent husbands are not a by-product of war – in pre-war Syria, there was a strong tradition of male seasonal migration among poor populations. In the 1990s and 2000s, against the backdrop of Syria's youth bulge and shrinking employment opportunities in the public sector, men's additional income from farming and construction work in Lebanon (Chalcraft, 2009) and Jordan (Lagarde and Doraï, 2017; Zuntz, in press) and as drivers, waiters and labourers in the Gulf (Khalaf and Alkobaisi, 1999) kept livelihoods afloat in rural areas. As one woman from Deraa confirmed, 'before the war, [our] men worked with cars' – that is, as cross-border taxi and lorry drivers. In the temporary absence of men, older women in rural areas often ran family-held shops, and worked as nurses and teachers (Rugh, 1996; Rabo, 2008), while unmarried girls were hired out to local farmers as low-skilled day labourers (Chatty, 2013; Abdelali-Martini and Dey De Pryck, 2015).

The current whereabouts of some of our interlocutors' husbands, two in Kuwait and one in the United Arab Emirates, testify to the ongoing presence of Syrian labour migrants in the Gulf. All the men had worked in the Arab Peninsula before 2011 and had remained there while their wives and children were displaced to Jordan. The spouse of another interviewee, a former labour migrant in Kuwait, had returned to Syria to be with his second wife. Since the onset of the Syrian conflict, border closures and high costs for residency permits in the Gulf have made the separation between migrant fathers and their families more permanent. What has also changed is that many older women do not cohabit with their parents-in-law and their husbands' relatives any more, often because members of the grandparents' generation stayed behind in Syria or have passed away. This greatly limits the degree of social control that more senior family members exert upon married women. Back home in Deraa, Abeer used to live with her in-laws, and her husband only visited once a year for a month from Kuwait. In 2013, she and her children accompanied her uncle's family when they fled to Irbid. However, her elderly relatives soon grew tired of Abeer's young children and encouraged her to rent a flat of her own. For the first time in her life, Abeer now lives alone with her children. Being apart, at least temporarily, is thus not a new experience, but spousal support has waned for the wives of migrants in our sample. In the focus group discussion, women from Deraa detailed how before 2011, their husbands had brought back hard currency and luxury goods from outside Syria, enabling them to

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lead a comfortable life back home. In 2019, only Abeer, a 33-year-old mother of three, still receives money, as well as regular visits, from her husband in Kuwait. While his monthly remittances, approximately $424, cover the rent of her apartment in Irbid, his salary as a waiter is not enough to pay for Kuwaiti residency permits for herself and their children. Others receive no support from husbands abroad or from whom they are separated. Even husbands who are present in Jordan are often disabled and unable to work. Given the difficulties with accessing work permits, and low wages in the informal economy, most grown-up sons are equally unable to contribute more regularly to the household income. These findings chime with existing studies on mutual support among refugees in Jordan. While the financial pressures and social isolation in exile may have damaged Syrians' social networks, Stevens (2016), Lokot (2018) and Zuntz (in press) argue that displacement does not simply disrupt, but rather reshapes transnational kinship-based networks and coping strategies: geographically, but also with regard to shifts in the gendered division of labour within households. Hence, we now turn to new income-generating activities that older women take on in addition to their unpaid domestic labour.

Among the members of the focus group discussion, most middle-aged mothers financially support grown-up children through their university studies. For example, Um Nadia, a 50-year-old housewife, became responsible for her husband after he suffered a stroke. Her two grown-up sons were severely traumatised by the fighting in Syria and could not continue their studies. Through signing up for assistance with numerous NGOs, incurring debts with her landlord and local shops and selling homemade food to the neighbours, Um Nadia keeps the family afloat. Like Um Nadia, older mothers in our sample rely on a combination of aid and informal home-based work. While many, like Marwa, sell Syrian delicacies to their Jordanian neighbours, one woman with a background in education entered the gig economy: she now writes articles for a Syrian online forum. It is quite telling that this woman comes from rural Damascus, where women used to have higher educational levels before the war. Working inside their own living room protects our interlocutors from Jordan's restrictive labour market policies and the bureaucratic procedures necessary to obtain a work permit. It also makes it easier for them to fulfil domestic tasks. Nevertheless, women often illustrate new-found economic responsibility through references to their experiences with public transport. Lama, a 32-year-old mother of four from rural Quneitra, first learned how to navigate a big city when her husband took the family to Amman. Accustomed to being driven around by family members in Syria, she now had to take buses and visit NGO centres on her own. 'I only learned to walk here,' she explained. In 2016, she took even bigger steps when travelling to the UK with Marwa and the rest of the *Queens of Syria* theatre company. The use of public transport thus becomes part of a wider mobility experience that also involves NGO trainings, small-scale home-based entrepreneurship and new female friends.

Matchmakers and Matriarchs

Older women's greater freedom of movement has helped them establish support networks with their neighbours, fellow refugees and NGO workers. During the individual interviews, mothers in their early twenties were usually alone at home or in the company of their mothers-in-law. By contrast, we often found women in their thirties, forties and fifties amidst a lively crowd of female neighbours and sisters of similar age. In turn, our interlocutors use these networks to circulate information about humanitarian assistance and potential spouses for their children. Their new capacity as breadwinners goes hand in hand with more traditional roles as matchmakers and family matriarchs. In many cases, older women have themselves become mothers-in-law and thus gained control over their sons' income and their daughters-in-law's unpaid labour in the household.

Those women who find themselves at the bottom of family hierarchies spoke very graphically about the power of older women. Newlyweds in their teens and early twenties, but also older women in households with several wives, deplored that the matriarchs of their families controlled their movements and spending. Younger mothers like Nawal and 22-year-old Farah, who resides in at-Turrah, a village close to Irbid, often live under the roof and authority of their mothers-in-law. For some, like Nawal, this is a source of support: her husband's father happily volunteers to take her sons to the playground and to the market so she can get some rest. For others, like Farah, the presence of a mother-in-law cements her vulnerable position in the family. Farah, originally from a village in rural Deraa in southern Syria, got married in Jordan to a fellow Syrian when she was only 17. During the interview, she nervously draws her one-year-old daughter onto her lap. In at-Turrah, Farah is frequently beaten and accused of being lazy and capricious by her husband and his family. When she tried to run away, her own parents sent her back. Her mother-in-law threatened that if Farah escaped again, she would marry off her son to another woman the very same day, and Farah would not be allowed to see her daughter again. Her husband's infrequent income as a day labourer directly goes to his mother and, worst of all, during arguments, her husband always takes his parents' side. Newly pregnant, Farah describes herself as a prisoner in her own house. She does not attend NGO

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classes and has no friends. Despite their different family backgrounds, what young women like Nawal and Farah have in common is a strong sense of isolation, a lack of peers from their own age group and pressure to have many children. Reproductive coercion, a recurring theme in older women's testimonies, continues to be a main mechanism of control wielded against younger women – and it is often employed by husbands, but also by mothers-in-law. By way of illustration, the 22-year-old daughter of Um Nadia was forced by her parents-in-law to undergo medical testing when she failed to conceive in the first three months after her wedding.

The ordeal of young wives like Farah echoes the experience of older women forced to coexist with second, and more beloved, wives. The limited decision-making power of both groups is well-documented in pre-war ethnographic literature on Syria (Rabo, 2008; Chatty, 2013; Rabho, 2015). However, resource scarcity in exile has exacerbated power inequalities between young and second wives, their husbands and female elders. In at-Turrah, we interviewed two sisters in their forties whose husbands had both remarried and brought their two families to Jordan. Mona and her four children stay in one room, while their father and his second spouse share another chamber. Usually, he either ignores or beats his first family, and refuses to pay for his children's school material. Mona's sister and her six young children have an apartment to themselves in at-Turrah. Her husband sometimes supports her financially, but rarely visits; recently, her 15-year-old son started beating his mother, as he had observed it from his father before. Neither Mona nor her sister are allowed to leave the house without company. In a similar vein, we interviewed a 50-year-old mother of six in Irbid whose husband had decided to return to Syria to live with his second wife. He left her and three sons behind in Jordan; they survive through her oldest son's job in the carpark of a big supermarket, where he earns approximately $10 a day as a valet.

Middle-aged women who hold influential positions in their families reflected on the challenges that come with advising their children. The art of match-making, in particular, strikes a delicate balance between romance, compatibility and family obligations, and often involves the entire family (Adely, 2016). Some women in our sample arranged marriages for their teenage daughters, and had to come to terms with unexpected results. 'She came too late,' Lama joked about Asma, her 35-year-old Syrian neighbour. Asma, originally from rural Homs, lives in East Amman with her husband, her four children and her grandchild. She took an NGO class on the dangers of early marriage, but only after she had married off her oldest daughter at the age of 16, to a fellow refugee four years older than her. Although her daughter was against the match, Asma and her husband agreed that a family of her own might be best for their daughter who did not enjoy going back to school in Amman. However, her daughter's husband soon abandoned his wife and baby, and Asma's daughter returned home to her parents. Asma thought her son-in-law irresponsible, but also found her daughter immature. 'In my generation, girls were more ready to be the head of the family at the age of 18. There was greater patience.' While her oldest daughter now stays at home with her child, Asma tries to support her husband through her income from occasional NGO trainings. Mothers' old social and new economic responsibilities thus become intertwined. We have already encountered Um Nadia, a Syrian housewife who now lives in Irbid with her disabled husband and two mentally ill sons. We interviewed Nadia in the presence of her 22-year-old daughter who had recently returned to her mother's house with her two young children. When the family fled Syria six years ago, Um Nadia arranged a match with her daughter's maternal cousin, the son of Um Nadia's sister who had married a Jordanian thirty years ago. After the wedding, the girl moved in with her Jordanian in-laws in a village close to Irbid, but the marriage soon turned sour. Her parents-in-law did not allow Um Nadia's daughter to continue her education and beat her regularly. Um Nadia and her daughter had to hire a lawyer to allow the granddaughters to live at Nadia's and her husband's house. These days, Um Nadia provides financial support to her daughter whose estranged husband now works in the United Arab Emirates and refuses to pay alimony. As her daughter hopes to go back to high school, and later to university, Um Nadia also provides free childcare for her grandchildren. Like other Syrian women of her generation, Um Nadia's paid and unpaid intimate labour challenges, but also retrenches socially constructed ideas of femininity (cf. Abu-Assab, 2017; Culcasi, 2019). During the interview, Um Nadia stressed the novelty of having to provide for her husband, grown-up children and grandchildren. At the same time, she resorted to typically female activities like cooking that allowed her to reconcile her work with her childcare duties. At least part of Um Nadia's motivation comes from ensuring her young granddaughters' marital prospects, whose future she envisions not as successful career women, but as brides. 'One day soon, a suitor will come,' Um Nadia said, explaining why it is important to give her granddaughters, still merely toddlers, a good start in life.

Conclusion

When Marwa returned to Amman from her trip to the UK with the Queens of Syria theatre company, she found that for the first time in their marriage, her husband had decorated their apartment and even organised a welcome

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party. His surprise signalled to her that he finally acknowledged her contributions – emotional and financial – to the family. As our findings suggest, many middle-aged women's intimate labour, usually inside their homes, makes an important contribution to refugee livelihoods. It helps displaced families access money, jobs, spouses and humanitarian support. Displacement, refugee-reception policies that disadvantage male workers and more prolonged separation of spouses, have caused shifts in the complex gendered and generational rifts that shape resource management within Syrian families. In exile, many middle-aged women have become the most senior female members of their kinship networks. In a legal setting where male Syrian labour is pushed into informality and often severely punished, they have also emerged as breadwinners. Older women's paid and unpaid labour holds together dispersed families whose fathers have been killed or incapacitated, or remain in Syria or in the Gulf. In doing so, many are able to draw on their pre-war experience of living with – or rather apart from – migrant husbands. In addition to the financial contribution that older women now make to refugee households, they also provide more traditional, non-monetary forms of care: cooking, cleaning, looking after children, grandchildren and unwell spouses. Often, Syrian mothers in their forties and fifties step in for their grown-up offspring: their income keeps children at university and allows divorced daughters to return home. Female matriarchs may also use their new-found social status to marry off their teenage daughters, exploit the unpaid labour of their young daughters-in-law and control their sons' wages. While power inequalities between Syrian women are not new, they have been exacerbated by the loss of resources in displacement. Our findings come from research with a small, and highly specific, sample: Syrian women from rural and working-class backgrounds, and with low levels of formal education. It remains to be seen whether middle-class, and more highly educated, Syrian women, may have experienced similar shifts in their families and work in exile.

Our insights offer a counterpoint to humanitarian attempts at increasing refugees' 'self-reliance', especially through turning displaced women into small-scale entrepreneurs (see introduction). Following Easton-Calabria and Herson (2020), we argue that refugees' 'dependencies' should not be understood as signs of disempowerment or vulnerability, but rather as indicative of the manifold ways in which they relate to family members in different sites of refuge and in Syria, to host communities, host states and aid providers. In Jordan and elsewhere in the Middle East, dwindling international funds and restrictive refugee-reception policies have heightened the importance of work in the informal economy to urban refugees' survival and thereby increased their vulnerability to exploitation at the hands of employers, labour brokers and governmental authorities (Bellamy *et al.*, 2017). At the same time, the lack of a coordinated aid response at the regional level has turned Middle Eastern countries into a laboratory for humanitarian programmes that foster urban refugees' economic self-reliance. Bureaucratic and practical obstacles prevent Syrian workers from applying for work permits under the Jordan Compact (Jordan INGO Forum, 2019; Lenner and Turner, 2018), but studies like ours also point to gender-specific challenges. Home-based catering that many older women resort to relies on their social networks – for example, their Jordanian neighbours as clients. It does not free Syrians from the trap of informality, nor does it provide them with a stable income. Younger women who do not engage in 'entrepreneurship at home' complained to us that they lacked the necessary skills and could not find childcare. Critical evaluations of livelihoods programmes have led scholars to reformulate the question: instead of simply producing more formal (but potentially exploitative) jobs for refugees in host countries in the Global South, how could humanitarian action help create *decent* jobs (Gordon, 2019)? In the short-term, it might not be realistic to include more Syrian women into the formal labour market in Jordan. After all, it is one of the countries with the lowest female workforce participation in the world (World Bank, 2019). From our conversations with Syrian women in Jordan, it becomes clear that for now, culturally appropriate and practically feasible jobs are found in their own living rooms. Supportive humanitarian action should allow them to upscale their businesses and address power dynamics within refugee families. Instead of additional cooking classes, small-scale entrepreneurs might benefit more from acquiring business skills, marketing techniques and financial literacy. Start-up grants – for example, for cooking equipment – would allow women to overcome initial costs to launch home businesses. Age limits for vocational trainings should be suspended, because older women make a critical economic contribution to their families. Younger female refugees need childcare – but also to make allies among older women. Awareness-raising sessions that tackle early marriage could also be used for establishing mentoring schemes between successful, older women and young mothers. Finally, humanitarians should take seriously how women themselves imagine their future and 'good lives'. We found that for middle-aged refugee women from working-class and rural backgrounds, female employment and economic self-reliance are not always goals per se. For some of them, a sign of a good life is being able to afford *not* to work – and to care for their loved ones in other, non-monetary ways.

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Note

1 We use pseudonyms for all our Syrian interlocutors.

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