MARRIAGE FOR REFUGE?

SYRIAN REFUGEE WOMEN'S RESETTLEMENT EXPERIENCES IN EGYPT

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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN SOCIOLOGY
YORK UNIVERSITY
TORONTO, ONTARIO

October 2021

Abstract

Women navigating forced displacement are often confronted by gendered norms and expectations. The practices that they initiate in response remain under-explored. For Syrian women who settled in Egypt during the 'Syrian refugee crisis,' one such practice is marriage to Egyptian men. Many such marriages have been unregistered or polygamous and have been criticized by some feminist advocacy groups and media platforms as exploitative. By focusing on this case study, I aim to transcend interpretations that situate such marriages within the domains of sexual and gender-based violence and child and forced marriage. I instead ask: How might marriage be a strategy for resettlement? And how might it further our understanding of refugee women's decisions, experiences, and subjectivities?

In the summer of 2017, I conducted forty in-depth interviews in two major Egyptian cities, Cairo and Alexandria, with Muslim Syrian refugee women, their husbands and family members who took part in these marriage arrangements, a practice which I refer to as 'marriage for refuge.' Using a decolonizing intersectional theoretical framework, I argue that by seeking marriage, these women are not simply complying with socially ascribed gender roles. Instead, they are making a calculated decision to forge their own resettlement trajectories.

I found that, despite elements of victimization stemming from displacement and patriarchy, intersectional factors including gender, ethnicity, and displacement were resources that some respondents leveraged to enhance their autonomy and to challenge norms. The narratives underscore how displacement and marriage are connected, in that exile has led to the reconstruction of the meaning and purpose of marriage. In turn, marriage has come to be perceived as a means to overcome the precarity of displacement. To explain this, I attend to social

conceptions such as *sanad* (social capital or support) and *sutra* (protection or sheltering) and social practices such as polygamy and customary marriage.

I position marriage for refuge as a phenomenon that expands understandings of intersectional, gendered and Othered refugee experiences. In so doing, I highlight two decolonizing analytical strategies: rejecting binaries (e.g., agent/victim) and decoupling associations (e.g., agency=resistance), and draw attention to concepts such as moral agency, creative leveraging, and social capital.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank my supervisors Dr. Christopher Kyriakides, Dr. Katherine Bischoping, and Dr. Jennifer Hyndman, for all their mentorship, help and advice with this work. I would also like to thank my sons and husband, whom without this would have not been possible. I also appreciate all the support I received from my family, friends and colleagues throughout a seven-year journey (my parents a bit more than that). Lastly, I would like to thank the unapologetic respondents whose insights and wisdom illuminate new paths in critical research and engaged scholarship.

Table of Contents

1. Chapter One: Introduction

It was as a child back in Egypt in the 1990s that I first heard of the idea that solidarity with refugees could be enacted through marriage. The idea was expressed with reference to the Balkan wars. Images of Bosnian Muslim women subjected to rape, which I later learned was a gender-targeted policy of systemic violence and terror through an ethnic cleansing tactic (Doja, 2019), shocked the Egyptian public. Even at a young age, I was able to sense that. Calls (primarily within conservative Islamic circles) encouraging men to show responsibility and solidarity by marrying the Bosnian victims for the sake of their protection became a widely discussed matter. These calls, however, never materialized into an actual practice, at least a practice significant enough that I would sense or notice. I would imagine that geography might have hindered these marriages from taking place. It is also possible that the Bosnian women themselves did not see marriage as a solution to their situation.

Twenty years later, the Syrian war forces millions of Syrians out of their country to neighbouring states. As I read the news about displaced Syrian Muslim women marrying nationals of their countries of refuge and settlement, I was reminded of my early memories of the discourse of solidarity through marriage in Egypt. But these memories and that idea were soon eclipsed by a humanitarian discourse in the news and social media that framed almost all of these marriage arrangements as exploitation: forced marriage, early and child marriage and sexual and gender-based violence. This thesis aims to connect the dots between both discourses.

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This research inquiry explores the role of marriage in the resettlement strategies adopted by Syrian Muslim refugee women in Egypt. The stories of Syrian refugee women who married

Egyptian men that they barely knew shortly after arrival in the country is the subject matter with which I am concerned. While this case study focuses on the Egyptian context, marriage as a practice for Syrian refugee women in both urban and camp settings can be traced in other countries in the region, such as Turkey, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia (Bayoumi, 2013; Fajry, 2012). Such marriages have been facilitated and encouraged through different channels, including marriage brokers, social media and religious groups (Hassan, 2015; Geha, 2013; Barkan, 2012). The practice has drawn significant attention from media and advocacy groups (Heinrich Boll, 2013; Natour, 2016). While the extent of this phenomenon is not entirely clear and was never systematically tracked, many human rights organizations, not profits and media reported on–and condemned such phenomenon. For instance, according to data provided by the National Council for Women Protection in Egypt, that during 2013, about 12,000 Syrian women were married with such arrangements (Natour, 2016). Reports of Save the Children organization stated that: "about one-half of the Syrian women refugees who marry through those arrangements, do so with men who are a decade older than themselves, and about one-quarter of them have not even reached the age of 18." (Natour, 2016).

Similarly, official spokesperson, such as Ghida Shafiq Qalaaji, secretary-general of the Syrian General Commission for Refugees and Development (an organization in Egypt that works on assisting Syrian refugees), criticized the increasing number of young Syrian females getting married, stressing the importance of dealing with the root causes of the problem: "If we succeed in providing Syrian refugees with these basic needs, then this dangerous phenomenon would wane" (Hassan, 2015). Likewise, Marwa Hashem, a spokeswoman for UNHCR in Cairo, explained that "[UNHCR] found many cases where refugees were engaged in wrong behavioural patterns that included early marriage for Syrian girls in Egypt, as well as employment of children

in inhumane street jobs that are incompatible with their age," (Hassan, 2015). In a similar report, the United Nations Children's Fund linked halts in the provision of food aid with an increase in Syrian women marrying early to provide for their basic needs (Mis, 2014).

Media, alternative media and social media have also played a role in framing the discourse around the phenomenon. MEMRI[1], a US-based independent, nonpartisan, non-profit organization, published a review of the phenomenon as depicted in the Arab media. The report cited prominent media outlets such as The Egyptian weekly Al-Ahram Al-Arabi, The Algerian daily Al-Fajr, The London-based Saudi Al-Hayat, who have all described Syrian refugee women in similar arrangements as "easy prey and a valuable catch" praising those who "[dare] to speak out against the exploitation of women refugees" (Barkan, 2012). On a different front, social media campaigns such as *Ljiaat la Sabaya*[2], translated as 'Refugees…not spoils of war,' were launched as a reaction to this practice in various Arab and Muslim countries denouncing the calls for marriage that target Syrian refugee women specifically, especially in countries such as Saudi and Jordan, which in turn propagates an "exploitative trend" (Fajry, 2012). Similarly, an article titled "Syrian Women Are Not Goods In The Disguised Slave Market," posted on the Syrian oppositionist website All4syria.info, denounced how "Traders in human souls have begun toying with the future [of Syrian women refugees], exploiting their temporary need for support, for a shoulder to lean on, and for a man, whom they long dreamed would be Syrian... [The people who do this] are lustful Arab men, whose conscience died a clinical death... with the outbreak of our blessed revolution... [Now] their conscience has [re]awakened, but it is an awakening of lust disguised as emotion and compassion, and the exploitation of hardship for [personal] interests..." (All4syria.info, August 29, 2012, as cited in Barkan).

The context above frames an exploitative feminist and humanitarian narrative to the *apparent* problem, which calls for a critical and deeper analysis of how and why this phenomenon came to be and what we can make of it as scholars and advocates

Marriage as a tool to mitigate insecurity and precarity, among other subtle reasons as this research will demonstrate, is not a practice specific to Syrian women. Evidence points to similar practices, for instance, in post-tsunami Sri Lanka (Hyndman, 2008), across the North Korea–China border (Kim, 2014) and most recently among young Rohingya women from refugee camps in Bangladesh (Beech, 2020). Still, over the past few years, marriage between Middle Eastern men and Syrian refugee[3] women has drawn strong media and advocacy attention, where the practice is often referred to as exploitative (See Bayoumi, 2013; Fajry, 2012; Heinrich Boll, 2013; Hassan, 2015; Geha, 2013; Barkan, 2012). Such negative associations can be traced to the precarious status of many of the refugee women, especially those in refugee camps. Furthermore, such marriages are frequently labelled and compared to forced marriage, sex trafficking and child marriage (Pelley et al., 2017; Youssef & Ismail, 2013, Bartel et al., 2018; Acland and Gercama, 2018; Karakaş, 2018).

On the contrary, in this research, I foreground Syrian refugee women's narratives to acknowledge marginalized experiences, ways of knowing and ways of existing in the world that challenge Western-centric worldviews and what has been conventionally and hegemonically constituted as morally correct. By focusing on what I refer to as *marriage for refuge*, I focus on Syrian Muslim women refugees' experiences. Particularly, how they understand their decisions to marry Egyptian men and how their narratives compare to and destabilize the Western discourse of forced marriage and trafficking. By focusing on refugee women's subjectivities and experiences in ways beyond Eurocentric and Orientalist (Said, 1978) modes of representation, I critique and

4

reimagine the explanatory power of notions such as agency, empowerment, and victimhood. In the same vein, despite the benevolent efforts and intentions of international humanitarianism, resettlement options and solutions "are often shaped by a victim-saviour mentality that reify asymmetrical social hierarchy between refugees and humanitarian workers." (Shrestha 2011, p. 1; see also Harrell-Bond 2002). Through marriage for refuge, I seek to centre gendered, self-initiated and innovative resettlement options that pose critical questions to refugee studies and gender studies by shifting the discourse towards self-authorized modes of protection (Hyndman & Reynolds, 2020) and "self-rescue" resettlement options (Kyriakides et al., 2018).

In summer 2017, I conducted thirty qualitative in-depth interviews with Syrian Muslim refugee women, all residing in the two largest Egyptian provinces: Cairo and Alexandria. All of the women were either currently married, were due to marry or had been married at some point to Egyptian men after 2012. The stories and analysis illustrate how different narratives intersect or diverge, particularly regarding perceptions of concepts such as agency, subjectivities and survival. During the fieldwork, most women respondents stated that shortly after arriving in Egypt, and regardless of their marital status (divorced, widowed, single mother, or never been married), they had multiple marriage proposals from Egyptian men from different social classes. Informants characterized many of these marriages as:

(1) *Quick*, taking place within a few weeks or even a few days of the initial proposal;

(2) *Polygamous*, where the husband already has a wife and is seeking a second wife; and

(3) *Customary* or *urfi,* marriages that are limited to the religious ceremony and hence not registered with the state through official paperwork.

When I asked the respondents to elaborate on why they thought Egyptian men sought Syrian brides, almost all of them portrayed the same image of the Syrian woman's unique physical beauty and embodiment of desirable femininity, a strong sense of self-care, and reputation for being good housewives. Of the nine additional interviews I conducted with Egyptian husbands, their responses raised another salient issue: the financial burden of marrying an Egyptian woman, especially with the increasing material and financial demands and conditions from the bride's family that would likely follow a middle class Egyptian traditional marriage. Some men said that with limited financial resources, they had a better chance of finding a 'higher quality' partner, in terms of social class and intellectual qualities since Syrian refugees would have fewer options to choose from compared to a potential Egyptian partner.

The summary above may appear to reinforce the *exploitation narrative* of advocacy groups and social media campaigns that "Syrian refugees are cheaper, prettier, better cooks and easier to marry" (Youssef & Ismail, 2013). However, this research investigates how some Syrian refugee women perceived marriage as resettlement and a survival tool that disrupts their status as 'refugees,' displaced and uprooted. Furthermore, it tracks refugee women's changing perceptions of marriage due to, I argue, displacement. Moreover, and extending international marriage migration debates that I will detail shortly, I contend that marriage for refuge better analyzes the relationship between forced migration and marriage as a social survival option.

1.1. Theoretical Framework

This research aims to extend the critical feminist analysis of gender in forced migration. By exploring critiques of agency, empowerment, oppression, and victimhood, I seek to create a space

for a decolonizing intersectional framework in forced migration studies that furthers the understanding of gender in displacement.

In applying a decolonizing intersectional theoretical framework to this case study, I build on a growing body of literature that recognizes the ways that Eurocentrism and the colonial legacy dictate knowledge production and North-South collaboration. Such literature aims not just to identify tools and strategies but to create a paradigm shift in how knowledge is produced. Examples such as advocating for ethnographic refusal (Simpson, 2014), for researching back, writing back and talking back (Smith, 1999), for looking white people in the eye (Razack, 1998), for recognizing and rejecting epistemic violence (Spivak, 1988) and further attempts lead by subaltern studies, decolonizing studies and transnational feminism are at the center of such literature. By recognizing and linking such work to refugee research, I seek to explore Othered ways of existing while emphasizing the inadequacy of some hegemonic notions in fully explaining some refugee experiences.

Recent scholarship, especially in Indigenous and ethnic studies, tends to use terms such as anti-colonialism or decolonizing rather than post-colonialism (Daza & Tuck, 2014; Carlson, 2016; Dei and Kempf, 2006; Simmons, & Dei, 2012, Zavala, 2013; Smith, 1999). Carlson (2016), for instance, argued that

> A strength […] of using the term and concept 'anti-colonialism' is that there can be no mistake that it communicates the reality of a current presence of the structures and practices of (settler) colonialism […] terms like post-colonialism or even decolonization, facilitate the ability of academics to position colonialism as being something of the past, as in 'colonialism is over and now we can decolonize. (p. 6)

On the other hand, I lean more towards arguments that favour 'decolonizing' over 'anti-colonial' where they identify a subtle but crucial pitfall of anti-colonial struggle that often opposes coloniality by replicating it (Ayyash, 2018; Mamdani, 2001). Put simply, and to borrow Audre Lorde's (1984) renowned title "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," anti-colonialism often tries to use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house. Ayyash gives the example of the Palestinian authority fixating its struggle on the creation of a Palestinian nation-state. Instead, he proposes the importance of recognizing a more fundamental crime to colonialism beyond expropriating the indigenous, that is, "to politicize indigeneity, first as a settler libel against the native, and then as a native self-assertion" (Mamdani, 2001, p. 664, quoted in Ayyash, 2018). As such, instead of focusing on static solutions that are essentially colonial options, in this dissertation, I use the term decolonizing to explore "alternative model of social organization, which challenges modernist conceptions of the state" (Ayyash, 2018, p. 23) and reject Western hegemonic and Orientalist modes of knowledge production.

With this backdrop, I understand decolonizing as theoretical or methodological approaches and strategies that strive to offer alternative (and sometimes complementary) worldviews to hegemonic Western interpretations of history and social order, which often run the risk of further marginalizing non-hegemonic groups. In *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said conducted a historical tracing of the relationship between the West and the Islamic world. In his analysis, he illustrated how Orientalism as an ideology was constructed to "legitimize and promote Western superiority and dominance by inventing the ideology of the West-and-Islam dualism" (Samiei, 2010, p. 1146). At the core of Orientalism, Western hegemony perceives (non-Western) *Others* as less human, delegitimizing their values and experiences and invalidating their worldviews and ways of knowing. Building on Said's analysis, decolonizing, with its wide variety of approaches, reflects

an ideological response to colonial and hegemonic thought. It aims to destabilize assumptions that directly influence the "politics of knowledge production" (Laurie et al., 2019).

Dipesh Chakrabarty (1992) made the case that history has been written from a Western gaze, positioning the West as the beacon of civilization and the gauge of morality, marking anything else as backward and morally wrong. In its essence, then, and building on Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), post-colonial and decolonizing literature challenges the "Othered" portrayal of Third World countries–the leading producers of forced migrants (see, for instance, Edmond, 2017) as culturally backward and barbaric. It challenges the dominant discourse of portraying Third World women as passive victims of premodern or uncivilized patriarchy and validating the worldview of "white men saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak, 1988, p. 93). Similarly, Mohanty (1988) posited that the Western portrayal of Third World women as victims contributes to further marginalizing them. Thus, decolonizing is a response to the growing recognition of the inequality in ontological and epistemological explanations and cultural representations created by the Western political and social 'authorities' in the modern world order. Building on this idea, Spivak spoke about the necessity of "unlearning of one's privilege" (Danius, Jonsson, & Spivak, 1993, p. 1). Ilan Kapoor (2008) expands this idea and stresses "stopping oneself from always wanting to correct, teach, theorize, develop, colonize, appropriate, use, record, inscribe, enlighten; the impetus to always be the speaker and speak in all situations must be seen for what it is: a desire for mastery and domination" (Kapoor, 2008, p. 56). This "learning to unlearn in order to relearn" (Tiostanova & Mignolo, 2012, p. 12) is at the core of decolonizing research and its quest to destabilize hegemonic ways of knowing. In essence, decolonizing posits that notions such as emancipation, empowerment and victimhood are social constructs, allowing more room and imagination to understand diverse refugee experiences. Moreover, decolonization helps question

the "either/or" binaries constructed among notions such as privilege/disadvantage, empowerment / exploitation, voluntary / involuntary, oppression / emancipation, and agency / victimhood.

Nevertheless, decolonizing approaches have often been criticized, especially by many feminists, for creating a dilemma of ethical relativism (Dirlik, 1994). That these approaches are haunted by the same assumptions they are striving to critique, for example, the notion of linear history and progress (McClintock, 1992), or not paying sufficient attention to the influence of other factors such as capitalism (Chibber, 2015) and the nation-state (Herr, 2014). Although I will consider these critiques throughout the research, my commitment is not confined to one narrow theoretical school or one interpretation but instead to the essential insights that ignited decolonizing critique. Namely, that colonial modes of representations, i.e., Western hegemonic modes of knowledge production, should not be taken for granted. Orientalist assumptions often determine these modes, but at the same time cannot be separated from others such as patriarchy, capitalism, neoliberalism and the nation-state.

Furthermore, one of my research objectives is *not* to separate theoretical and methodological frameworks. Instead, I see them as inseparable, as I will expand in the methodology discussion. That is, one cannot perform meaningful fieldwork without engaging with the theoretical framework. Additionally, I use the work of scholars that are not decolonizing theorists *per se,* such as Saba Mahmood and Judith Butler, to revisit notions commonly used to understand refugee women's experiences, such as the concept of agency. By that, I aim to bring attention to what Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) has referred to as "the epistemic privilege" of Third World women (p. 511) to the study of forced migration. In other words, by exploring critiques of notions such as agency, empowerment, oppression, and victimhood, I attempt to find a space for decolonizing paradigms in forced migration studies in a way that could further the understanding

of women's refugee experiences. By situating their accounts at the centre of the research and positioning them as experts, I aim to draw attention to how methodological and theoretical insights can contribute to decolonizing research methodologies as well as refugee studies.

Additionally, an integral element of the theoretical framework I adopt in this study is that it is intersectional. Intersectionality is not just a useful analytical tool, but it also enriches the decolonizing framework. For instance, Ayoub (2017) used the example of Syrian refugees in Egypt to underscore how in research, Syrian women are treated as a monolithic category, ignoring the differences of social class, religion, and ethnonational identity. She examined to what extent class identity shapes a refugee identity and to what extent the gender problems faced by Syrian women in Cairo are directly linked to class. Ayoub argues that the exile experience is not always negative, and, in some cases, it could have an emancipatory effect on women. In the same vein, there is a growing body of work in refugee studies that is skeptical of the utility of existing labels and categories in migration policies. Such labels often impose overly rigid boundaries in capturing the complex social realities of people on the move (see, for instance, Zetter 1991; Zetter 2007; Crawley & Skleparis; 2018; Kyriakides et al., 2018; Kyriakides et al., 2019; Malone, 2015; Ludwig, 2016; Phillips, 2011). In doing so, they trace how the meaning ascribed through the refugee label is contested and varies both within 'refugee groups' and in different contexts (Kumsa, 2006; Ludwig, 2016; Hyndman & Giles, 2017). By challenging narrow legal definitions, intersectionality can bring to the forefront the multiple axes of difference that co-constitute subjectivities. Such analysis helps question binary constructs such as the deserving and undeserving migrant, voluntary versus forced migrants, victim and pariah (Kyriakides et al., 2019; Kyriakides et al., 2018) and helps to uncover multilayered experiences of displacement.

In this study, I explore journeys and stories of refuge by women who might appear similar but are in essence diverse in their marriage motivations and in the subsequent experiences of refuge they narrate. My analysis will demonstrate how intersectional elements such as age, previous marriage experience, urban versus rural background and socio-economic aspects impact my respondents' understanding of their marriage experiences. For instance, in most cases, maturity, as denoted by age, has played a significant role in dictating the marriage's power dynamics, often in the wife's favour. Similarly, the narratives will show how previous marriage experiences have shaped some of my respondents' understandings of an ideal marriage in a foreign country, propelling some of them to favour polygamous relationships. Thus, applying a decolonizing intersectional lens helps to understand better how new identities emerge because of migration, rejecting a linear, static, or singular social identity (Chulach & Gagnon, 2013). In this study, I attempt to explore the potential of decolonizing theoretical frameworks in reframing and forging new kinds of intersectionality. I like to think about this reframing as decolonizing intersectionality by which the colonial legacy dictates the meaning and categories of intersectionality. I argue that a decolonizing lens applied to the intersectional analysis can advance understanding of the power relations shaping identities and subjectivities. That is, in addition to challenging Eurocentric conceptions, absolute notions and binaries, decolonizing intersectionality scrutinizes all knowledge production that reinforces a Eurocentric understanding of the human subject and social experiences (see, for instance, Joseph, 2015; Sokoloff, 2008; Aberman, 2014; Lee & Brotman, 2013).

1.2. Research Questions and Objectives of the Study

Al-Rasheed (1993) noted that for her Iraqi women refugee respondents, "exile leads to the reconstruction of the meaning of marriage which in their minds becomes associated with security,

family life and stability in general" (p. 93). By focusing on the case of Syrian Muslim refugee women and their perceptions of and rationale for marrying Egyptian men, I explore an innovative and self-initiated resettlement option that enriches our understanding of gendered refugee trajectories and Othered ways of being. I ask: **What is marriage for refuge? How might marriage be a strategy for resettlement? Furthermore, how might examining it expand the understanding of gendered and Othered resettlement experiences and strategies?** In answering these questions, I explore some supporting questions:

- How do Syrian refugee women narrate and interpret their decisions to marry Egyptian nationals?

- In particular, how can a decolonizing intersectional theoretical framework de-Orientalize and further our understanding of those women's decisions, experiences, interpretations, and subjectivities?

- How has the practice of 'marriage for refuge' reshaped the respondents' experiences of displacement?

- In turn, how have displacement experiences reshaped the respondents' gender identities and, specifically, the meaning, purpose and form of marriage?

- Employing decolonizing intersectional analysis, how can this study unsettle assumptions about notions such as victimhood, vulnerability, empowerment, autonomy and agency?

Based on the above questions, the objectives of this study can be summarized in the following three points*:*

- *First, I seek to develop a robust understanding and original analysis of an understudied phenomenon in Refugee Studies* (Marriage for refuge) by laying out its motivations,

benefits and challenges. That is, by focusing on an intimate topic such as marriage, this study digs deep into Syrian women's private lives in Egypt to unravel marginalized narratives and subtle gendered dynamics. Similarly, on the policy and the legal levels, I seek to draw attention to the challenges and opportunities of a unique form of resettlement.

- *Second, I propose some theoretical and methodological tools to communicate Orientalized, marginalized and stigmatized realities better.* Non-Western, particularly Muslim-majority societies are recurrently accused of imposing cultural and traditional constraints on women's agency and decision-making (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Abu-Lughod, 2013; Mahmood, 2005; Mahmood, 2001; Ahmed, 1982; Ahmed, 1992; Alhayek, 2014). I seek to put this claim under scrutiny by identifying how their accounts offer alternative meanings and conceptualizations for their experiences and inform their agentive decision-making process. I explore tools and tactics mobilized by the respondents to enhance their protection through leveraging social norms and structure. I do that while applying critical reflexivity as a methodological approach employed by critical feminist, anti-racist and post-colonial theorists (see, e.g., Smith 1999, Haraway 1991; Freire 1996, Mohanty 1988/2003; Palangas et al. 2017; Chawla, 2006) to balance the power relation between the researcher and the participant. Thus, I aim to de-centre Othering and dehumanizing discourses that position migrants as either victims or pariahs (Nail 2016; Kyriakides et al., 2018; Kyriakides et al., 2019).

- *Finally, I explore a unique location of urban Egypt in a south-south resettlement experience.* Academic attention to urban refugees is relatively new, with researchers characterizing the experiences of refugees in the cities with a "high level of vulnerability stemming from arbitrary and schizophrenic international protection policies deriving from

anxieties embodied by the nation-state system" (Fábos & Kibreab, 2007). The Egyptian urban refugee context, thus, produces valuable insights about a category of forcibly displaced people that have to navigate both the challenges and the opportunities of (a) having little to no formal humanitarian support (Ayoub, 2017), along with (b) the absence of too many restrictive policies while having access to the host society (Noureldin, 2017).

1.3. Contribution of the Study

As implied above, this decolonizing attempt will build on feminist, critical race and refugee studies scholarships that have explored refugee women's agency and victimhood in order to trace how power relations influence gendered refugee experiences. The contribution of feminist scholarship in challenging hegemonic discourses and understanding the gendered experiences of being a refugee is undeniable. For refugee studies specifically, a theoretical breakthrough that emphasized the difference between "a person's 'biological' (sex) and the 'socially acquired and performed' (gender) identity" (Lutz, 2010, 1650) was particularly relevant. Leading to this breakthrough, Western liberal feminism, in specific, has been subjected to many critiques and revisions from other strands of feminism, such as postcolonial feminism, transnational feminism, Marxist feminism, critical race feminism, and black feminism (see, for instance, Kaplan & Grewal, 1999; Kapur 2013; Fernandes, 2010; Collins, 2000a; Carby, 2007). Critiques primarily pinpointed how liberal feminism emerged from the West to reflect the specific experience of White middle class cis-gender heterosexual women and reflects their historical contexts and social dynamics and hence offered a limited understanding of the challenges and meanings of liberation, equality and empowerment in non-Western cultures (Tong, 2009).

As a consequence, the ultimate shift in feminist scholarship traced issues such as the social construction of femininity and masculinity, the meaning and separation of public and private spaces, as well as an emerging intersectional critique stressing the constraints of multiple oppressions (Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2000b; Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1983). In the same vein, critical race scholars and feminists argue that 'the individual' is a patriarchal construct that connotes rational choice agency situated with a capitalist market system (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Crenshaw et al., 1995). A decolonizing approach that emanates from and builds on such critiques clarifies the usefulness of marriage for refuge as an analytical lens in advancing our understanding of gendered and Othered refugee experiences.

As I will demonstrate in the literature review, much of the existing literature focuses on human agency's resistance and subversion dimensions and how women challenge social and gendered norms. During fieldwork, I came to realize that many of the women I interviewed exercise agency and strive for autonomy by *accepting* yet *modifying* social norms and tend to utilize them strategically. In tracing these subtleties that inform their agentive decision-making process, I intend to capture the nuances of some non-Western experiences that stretch and challenge hegemonic ways of knowing and being.

The experiences of the women in this case study come in different shades. Their stories, as this dissertation will show, include elements of rational choice and pursuit of self-interest, but this is not sufficient for understanding their decisions. They have been victimized while being able to embody subtle and strategic forms of agency and constitute elements of both forced and voluntary migration and even forced and voluntary marriage. They simultaneously reject and embrace elements of patriarchy. However, none of the above binaries is sufficient to understand their stories, their distinctions, and their fluidity. It is this silenced and Othered position that I would

like to bring to the forefront in focusing on marriage for refuge. To that end, I emphasize the usefulness of some decolonizing strategies that (1) *reject and think outside of binaries* which often describe social practices such as marriage for refuge as exploitative or oppressive, and (2) *decouples social constructs from liberal connotations* through reinstating analytical concepts and tools such as moral agency, relational autonomy, and what I refer to as creative leveraging of socially ascribed gender roles. I seek to destabilize Orientalist connotations and better capture the nuances of the marriage for refuge experiences and the subjectivities of the women involved in them. In other words, the analysis reveals how intersectional elements such as age, marital status, religion, unique personality traits, and existing and newly formed support systems play a role in defining the respondents' understanding of survival, resilience[4] and resettlement (Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2012). As a result, this group's unique trajectories could contribute to rethinking the possibilities of self-authorized modes of protection (Hyndman & Reynolds, 2020) for refugees and displaced people, especially in contexts where "one's legal status does not confer a clear suite of rights and entitlements" (p. 8).

To this point, Sherene Razack (2004) has argued that it is very common when adopting a "Western feminist worldview," with its cultural and historical specificity, to fall into "cultural deficit explanations" when attempting to understand and explain the non-Western women's experiences, describing them often as "overly patriarchal and inherently uncivilized" (p. 129). Thus, recognizing the influence of patriarchy on shaping worldviews, especially around global movement and migration and the perception of gender roles and agency, is crucial. It is as important, nevertheless, to recognize the parallel role of factors such as colonialism, Orientalism and their impact on the very creation of these worldviews.

This research aims to extend critical engagement to shift academic perceptions of refugee women. By exploring critiques of agency, empowerment, oppression, and victimhood, I seek to create a space for a decolonizing intersectional framework in forced migration studies that further the understanding of women's refugee experiences. A good deal of research in refugee studies trace aspects of agency and empowerment of refugee woman; examples of women challenging patriarchy and cultural norms are illustrated in critical feminist literature (Hajdukowski-Ahmed, Khanlou, & Moussa 2008; Hyndman, 2007; Kim, 2014; Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002; Schrijvers, 1999). In this research, I extend similar academic discussions by exploring how Syrian refugee women assert their agency and promote their autonomy and self-interest through *accepting*, *leveraging* and sometimes *modifying* these norms and socially ascribed gender roles in the context of marriage.

More precisely, by utilizing a decolonizing intersectional theoretical framework, I seek to contribute to refugee studies, gender studies, anti-racist and decolonizing studies and policy research, through the following:

- ***Rethinking resettlement options by foregrounding diverse and nuanced experiences of refugee women instead of Othering them.*** By adopting a decolonizing intersectional approach, I intend to demystify some of Third World women's experiences and make their lives more understandable to Western audiences. In doing so, I highlight the striking diversity among a seemingly homogeneous group, often perceived as victims. This requires intervention into the sociology of forced migration, mainly (a) to question hegemonic understandings of concepts such as agency and how women practice it in ways other than resisting norms; (b) decentring the nuclear family and emphasizing the role of extended family in non-Western social dynamics; and (c) scrutinizing the meaning, purpose and form of marriage and the role

of factors such as love and intimacy (and the lack thereof) in defining a "real" marriage. I also trace in detail shifts in identity and subjectivity due to displacement, leading to a better understanding of urban resettlement, specifically in a south-south setting. In doing so, I seek to position this phenomenon within the body of work referred to as international marriage migration, revealing their commonalities, divergences and the importance of the explanatory power of 'marriage for refuge' in enriching similar debates surrounding marriage and migration.

- ***Outlining the nuanced forms of patriarchy, how it is practiced and how it is navigated:*** I will demonstrate a multifaceted relationship between refugee women's agency and their status as victims of both displacement and patriarchy. In other words, their trajectories and subjectivities are the product of intertwining factors central to which are displacement and patriarchy. As the chapters will unfold, it is important to recognize that women worldwide have to deal with different kinds of patriarchies that dictate distinct rules of the game and hence require different strategies and responses (Kandiyoti, 1988; Shepherd, 2019). In my analysis, I underscore refugee women's malleable and strategic understandings and utilization of socially ascribed gendered identities, by focusing on agency, marriage and family as I detailed in the above point, to sustain their own security and overcome local patriarchal practices.

- ***Extending critical feminist debates around the hegemonic understandings of notions such as agency, empowerment and resistance.*** On a theoretical level, I seek to extend decolonizing and critical feminist approaches by identifying some gaps in *the agents not victims* body of literature. I seek to move beyond identifying instances of agency, resistance, and empowerment to highlight alternative meaning-making and ways of being. In my analysis, I recognize that notions such as agency and victimhood, even love, intimacy, marriage and family, are social

constructs. Such constructs do not just hold different meanings in different locations, societies, and cultures. Rather they are flexible enough to adapt, change and evolve based on one's social, historical and geographical locations. In this case, I focus on displacement experiences and how it sometimes reconstructs the meanings of such concepts. I propose that a theoretical and practical de-coupling of notions such as agency and resistance, empowerment and independence, vulnerability, and victimhood is critical for a deeper understanding of non-Western gendered refugee experiences. For instance, I pinpoint the shortcomings of the binary of forced and voluntary marriage in capturing some of the respondents' complex realities and choices. I complement my decolonizing approach with an intersectional lens to challenge such binary, hegemonic, homogenizing and universalizing perceptions of non-Western experiences. That is, by dissecting the intersectional refugee experience and how it is determined by various interlocking factors (even within the same ethnoreligious gender group), I demonstrate how elements such as socio-economic background as well as age, location and previous marital status influence how those women experienced, utilized and reflected on their marriage trajectories.

- *Extending the conversation on decolonizing the global refugee regime.* An additional focus of this work is to engage with critiques of the global refugee regime by taking a critical refugee studies approach. My objective is to offer an intervention that can refine and develop humanitarian responses and policies by exposing the gaps created by Syrian refugee women who marry primarily (even if not exclusively) *for survival* carving their own resettlement options. I explore how their lives and subjectivities challenge Western liberal humanitarianism that often labels and stigmatizes similar arrangements as exploitation, sex trafficking or forced marriages. In doing so, I emphasize the shortcomings of "universalizing the empowerment

experience" (Bawa, 2016, p. 132) and advocate for culturally informed resistance and self-reliance strategies. Furthermore, I question the meaning of the "forced" in a forced marriage to illustrate how similar categories do not capture the volition of Syrian refugee women and the respondents' experiences in this research.

1.4. Mapping the Study

My fieldwork findings demonstrate a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of the marriage for refuge phenomenon and suggest a basis for a more thorough analysis of the subtlety and nature of agency exercised by many women in the Global South. The different themes and chapters reveal how a decolonizing intersectional perspective can portray such marriages in many cases as strategies for resettlement, survival, empowerment and self-reliance, an argument that challenges the existing exploitation and victimhood discourses about Syrian refugee 'brides.'

In **Chapter Two,** I focus on literature review tracing how feminist scholarship has gradually come to recognize the flaws in universalizing the "refugee experience" and the "refugee woman." Consequently, work has sought to include the analysis of multiple experiences while distinguishing multifaceted and fluid identities that are context dependent. The literature demonstrates how such categories intersect to create inequalities, disadvantages and privileges among different groups and individuals. In the chapter, I examine literature that discusses four themes central to gender and refugee experiences and is relevant to marriage for refuge: (gender) identity, agency, coping and international marriage migration. The chapter aims to draw attention to the different framings that trace the shifts in women's identities due to migration or displacement and its implications on gender roles, gender relations, and gendered coping mechanisms.

Chapter Three has two objectives. In addition to laying out the methodology of the study, I delve deeply into the notion of critical reflexivity as both a tactic to sustain rigorous methodological practices and as a means to decolonize narratives and narrative analysis. The ultimate objective is to ensure that our interpretations are as close as possible to the respondents' *actual* interpretations of these experiences (Bischoping & Gazso, 2016).

In the following two chapters, I offer an analytical space for the idea of the 'Syrian refugee bride' as constructed within the imagination of some Egyptian men (and their families). Such construction, in turn, shaped the features of the refugee experience the respondents had to navigate. I explore how the image of the Syrian refugee bride emerged as a viable alternative for many Egyptians by tracing the social and economic conditions that helped crystalize the phenomenon along with other marriage alternatives and innovations. Two major underlying factors that my respondents frequently referenced are the financial cost of the marriage and the desirability of the Syrian ideals of femininity. I address both in Chapters Four and Five, respectively:

Chapter Four starts with a brief overview of the reception context and livelihood of Syrian refugees in Egypt. I then focus on the Egyptian culture of marriage. In doing so, I describe the evolving meanings of marriage among Egyptians, and how subtle socio-economic factors continue to shape those meanings and the dynamics of marriage and its alternatives. I conclude by focusing on the first of two factors that I argue contributed to materializing the marriage for refuge practice in Egypt: the cost of marriage. Specifically, the financial element in matrimonial arrangements reinstating both Egyptian and Syrian cultural differences and their implications, not just on the cost of the marriage but also on the power dynamics between spouses.

Chapter Five attends to the second important factor that I postulate influenced the perception of Syrian women as desirable brides: the Syrian embodiment of femininity. I begin by discussing

the role the embodiment of femininity and masculinity play in determining gender and marriage dynamics: how both men and women negotiate their relationships and how women, in particular, use different strategies to influence the household. I use a comparative lens between Egyptian and Syrian gender dynamics, and I describe this gender dynamic as 'a dance of honour protection.' With this backdrop, I discuss two central questions: (a) In the social imagination of the respondents, how is femininity perceived and embodied differently when comparing Syrian and Egyptian women? And (b) have Egyptian women's marriage demands catalyzed the search for a Syrian bride among Egyptian men?

Both Chapters Four and Five help unravel central elements to understanding marriage for refuge and the Syrian refugee women's experiences in such arrangements. Namely, (a) What are the Syrian-Egyptian marriage dynamic (in the context of displacement) and how different cultural customs play a role in dictating the experiences, and (b) How has displacement (re)shaped some Syrian refugee women's gender identities and consequently their interpretation of the marriage as a viable option in resettlement?

After I trace the resettlement experience and the conditions that the refugee women had to navigate, I switch the focus in Chapters Six and Seven on the relationship between displacement and marriage. Specifically, how the women understood and leveraged such a relationship. I explore strategies for coping, survival and autonomy not through subversion but through complying with yet modifying socially ascribed roles. Two parallel questions that accompany this theme are: (a) how have Syrian refugee women utilized marriage to overcome the precarity of displacement? In turn, (b) how did displacement disrupt the meaning, purpose and form of an ideal marriage? Chapters Six and Seven pay attention to these two questions, respectively.

In **Chapter Six,** I explore how Syrian refugee women narrate and interpret their decisions to marry Egyptian nationals. More specifically, I ask how a decolonizing intersectional perspective furthers our understanding of those women's decisions, experiences, interpretations, and subjectivities? I argue that Syrian respondents are not simply subscribing to 'traditional' roles that emphasize domesticity by seeking marriage. Instead, they are making a calculated decision that maximizes their interest in carving their own resettlement experience. In the analysis, I demonstrate how displacement has expanded women's reasoning and motivations for marriage to include social and moral motivations, not just legal and economic ones. I particularly focus on the social and moral gains by exploring two central notions that frequently surfaced in the women respondents' narratives. Many women referred to *sanad* (best translated as social support or social capital) and *sutra* (protection and sheltering) as essential social assets lost due to displacement and uprooting, exacerbating their vulnerability. As came in many of my respondents' narratives, both *sanad* and *sutra* can be somehow salvaged through marriage. Both *sutra* and *sanad,* as social capital assets, are two central concepts that critically explain how marriage serves as a tool for overcoming the precarity created by displacement. I explore how this process unfolds in this chapter. In the final chapter, I revisit those two notions: *sanad* and *sutra*, to illustrate how they can expand the meaning of empowerment.

Chapter Seven brings us to the main inquiry: What is marriage for refuge? How might marriage be a strategy for resettlement? And how might understanding this expand the understanding of gendered and Othered resettlement experiences and strategies? This chapter continues the conversation about the marriage-displacement nexus by illustrating how displacement has reshaped the meaning, purpose and perception of marriage by simultaneously adding more restrictions on the respondents' options in some cases while removing others. Hence,

I pinpoint how the elevated sense of control of some of the respondents, which resulted from leaving certain social structures and norms behind in Syria, made them rethink their social options. I also discuss how this elevated sense of control might have enabled a more flexible understanding of marriage, its forms and options to many of my respondents in a way that challenges the hegemonic image of the ideal marriage. As such, I focus on *urfi* (customary) marriage and polygamy, two characteristics that describe the majority of the marriages of my respondents. I conclude by discussing how, in many cases, the drive behind marriage in displacement has been motivated by the respondents' sense of identity as mothers hence scrutinizing the notion of agency as solely a pursuit of self-interest.

Chapter Eight focuses on two decolonizing strategies: *decoupling associations* and *rejecting binaries*. I aim to draw attention to their usefulness in capturing the nuances in the respondents' experiences that might be missed when adopting patriarchal or Orientalist critiques. I use agency, empowerment, and forced marriage as three examples to showcase how these two strategies enrich feminist and anti-racist research in understanding the refugee experience. The discussion accentuates the conceptual challenges the narratives of many Syrian refugee women pose for hegemonic understandings of agency, empowerment and the forced/voluntary marriage binary. I begin with a discussion around agency. I explore strategies and sources for exercising agency, not through subversion, but through leveraging socially ascribed roles. In the second part of the chapter, I critique empowerment as a humanitarian response tool and a liberal form of emancipation for women. I draw attention to Bourdieu's (1989) notion of 'symbolic capital,' arguing that many women respondents gained such capital through their social status as wives and mothers. In this sense, I shed light on what could be framed as social and contextual empowerment. In the final part of the chapter, I attend to forced marriage and the voluntary/involuntary binary

through which it is often framed. I demonstrate how this either-or relationship fails to capture what I refer to as 'marriage immobility,' building on Lubkemann's (2008) gendered notion of involuntary immobility. In such cases, marriage immobility describes Syrian refugee women–once displaced from Syria–who are forced to stay in their host country because of their marriage to an Egyptian. This chapter reveals how elements of agency, empowerment, and victimhood can intertwine and co-exist in some women's stories. In other words, agency and victimhood, and similar binary notions such as voluntary and forced marriage, or empowered and exploited, should be perceived as contextual, intersectional, and in terms of continuums or a nexus, not as mutually exclusive categories.

2. Chapter Two: Literature Review

In this chapter, I discuss four themes that scholarship alerts us to that are central to gender and refugee experiences and are relevant to marriage for refuge. The first is **identity**. While I underline gender identity, I also feature how literature theorizes the intersection of multiple identities. I trace how such intersections create both oppression and privilege and how they relate to and are (re)shaped by the refugee experience. The second theme is human **agency** and how it inflates and deflates in paradoxical ways as a result of displacement. However, crucial to the discussion of agency is another concept: victimhood. I focus on the unintended consequences of treating agency and victimhood as antonyms and necessarily mutually exclusive. The third theme is **coping** and the various academic debates that trace the mixed implications of gender on refugee coping mechanisms and trajectories in response to displacement and being uprooted. In the final section, I focus on **marriage and migration**. In particular, I attend to a body of work referred to as International Marriage Migration that focuses on the role marriage plays in shaping the migration and displacement experience. The chapter's objective is to highlight different framings that trace shifts in women's identities due to migration or displacement and their implications on gender roles, gender relations, and gendered coping mechanisms.

2.1. Identity

For the uprooted and the displaced, "every new situation and location deeply (re)shape their identities, their sense of self, their agency, and their well-being" (Hajdukowski-Ahmed, Khanlou, & Moussa, 2008, p. 29). Social identity can be defined as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his [or their] membership of a social group (or groups), together with the value

and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63; see also Hogg, Abrams & Brewer, 2017). From a sociological perspective, identity amalgamates "sets of values and norms that provide symbolic meaning to collectivities by enhancing their individuation (or self-definition) and their feeling of belonging. This system of values, norms, and morality have common and shared meanings by all members it represents" (Jano, 2013, p. 28). A key characteristic of identity relevant to this research is that collective identity is constantly evolving as it interacts with new locations. That narrative plays a fundamental role in shaping and feeding collective identities with beliefs and ideas of the value system and the moral constraints of this identity (Jano, 2013).

A form of identity that is salient to this research is gender identity. Hyndman and Alwis (2008) make an important point that gender analysis, on its own, is not sufficient for understanding women's experiences in forced displacement. For example, in the Sri Lankan context, gender identity cannot be easily separated from national identity (p. 95). The intersectional approach these authors adopt helps challenge homogenizing and essentializing experiences and identities by enabling an analysis that distinguishes context-dependent, multiple and fluid identities that intersect to create inequalities, disadvantages and privileges. In particular, they scrutinize how each identity category creates positions of oppression and privilege. In turn, an individual might experience oppression in one position/intersection and privilege in another (see, for instance, Aberman, 2014; Vervliet et al., 2014); there is potentially a hierarchy of privilege and oppression (Joseph, 2015). Thus, the contribution of intersectionality to feminist and refugee research lies not only in drawing attention to multiple forms of oppression but also in challenging the idea of homogeneous and essential social identities, categories or labels (Anthias, 2012).

One of the objectives of intersectionality is to give voice to the oppressed or invisible groups (Vervliet et al., 2014). As an analytical framework, intersectionality responds to critiques in refugee studies that often focus on the problems and overlook strengths and resilience. Thus, feminist intersectional analysis enables incorporating "multiple bases" of identity that demonstrate how "the intersection of one's class, caste, religion, sexuality, nationality or race, and membership in social groups produces different gender relations across time and space" (p. 87). Furthermore, intersectionality helps "address the unequal and often violent relationships among people based on real or perceived social, economic, political, cultural, and sexual differences" (p. 88).

In a related strand of research that contributes to furthering gender analysis, especially in refugee research, Hyndman (2004) elaborates on utilizing feminist analysis in forced migration studies by introducing "feminist geopolitics," which complements other theoretical frameworks like critical geopolitics. As Hyndman explains: "critical geopolitics exposes and interrogates the power relations embedded in dominant geopolitical narratives, but it largely fails to articulate other, more embodied ways of seeing. Without a feminist sensibility […] critical geopoliticians are left with well-interrogated categories and a politicized approach to analysis, but no clear way forward in terms of political practice" (Hyndman, 2004, p. 312). In this sense, a feminist geopolitical framework reveals the role played by the "feminine," "private," or "apolitical" in global power relations. It brings in ontological questions such as the nature of the nation-state (as an important shaper of the modern global order) and the historical and ideological factors that produce it. Similarly, it attempts to challenge global hegemonic discourses that are influenced by patriarchal paradigms that dominate our worldviews about what is morally right or wrong, thus shifting the focus, for instance, from national security to human security and asks the central question of: "security for whom and how?" (p. 319).

The examples in the remainder of this section will reveal how the meanings of gendered relational identities such as wife, daughter, mother and breadwinner are diversely embodied, practiced, reinterpreted, manoeuvred and sometimes *strategically* underscored by some women in the refugee context (Kyriakides, 2019). However, it is not enough to talk about the intersections of identities, personal history, and social location when discussing identity construction determinants. Instead, it is as important to recognize identity as "an ongoing research in which human subjects are in a continual process of 'becoming'" (Morrice, 2011, p.10). Similarly, Hajdukowski-Ahmed, Khanlou, & Moussa (2008) described identity as a "continuous and relational process rather than a fixed construct" (p. 29). This is especially relevant for individuals where the refugee adaptation process often requires an "unplanned and rapid adjustment" to other cultures, which in turn necessitates creativity in establishing new cultures and new identities through negotiation, exploration and experimentation (Camino and Krulfeld, 2005, p. ix).

Many researchers have attended to the question of the relationship between identity and displacement and how refugees adapt, reinvent, or possibly create a hybrid identity. On the one hand, a group of researchers focused on the hybridity and multiplicity that emerges due to displacement. McSpadden and Moussa (1996), for instance, focus on identity deconstruction and reconstruction among Latin American exiles by which multiple identities are made possible. In this process, the new refugee/migrant goes through two processes, beginning with what they referred to as 'critical integration', reflecting the migrant's scrutiny of the host country's dominant ideology and culture. The second process is 'transcultural identity,' which "enables exiles to have multiple identities, including the possibility of feeling that they can belong to two countries and cultures" (p. 216). Similarly, Zetter (2007) describes the "here and there belonging" where factors such as globalization and feminization of migration have impacted the refugees' diaspora, resulting

in multiple identities. A further discussion focuses on the process of strategic hybridity in which "there is no authentic shape to the configurations of identities and traditions, rather 'they are a series of adaptations, changes and borrowings' where individual migrants choose to maintain some elements and disregard others" (Samuel, 2013, p. 93). Migrants choose to display certain cultural aspects and hide others (p. 94). Furthermore, Linda Camino (2005) traced the importance of recognizing how ethnicity as an identity is a phenomenon that is reinvented differently by each generation rather than merely passed from one generation to the next. In this sense, the respondents developed a new collective ethnic identity that depended on their sense of homeland, their response to the context and situation, their displacement, and the nature of their age group: adolescence (Camino, 2005, p. 25).

On the other hand, another group argued that a new identity inevitably emerges due to displacement and this experience of 'becoming' a refugee. Mortland (2005), for instance, argues that becoming a refugee entails the adoption of a new identity. For instance, the refugee experience created a new sense of ethnic identity amongst Cambodian refugees who "became 'Cambodians' when they discovered themselves living among others who were not" (p. 7). In this sense, Cambodians were not aware of having an ethnic identity before becoming refugees; instead, they were defined in terms of their work, education, family and village. Paradoxically, their refugee identity has reshaped their Cambodian identity by incorporating new traits, such as anxiety and loneliness, which have become markers of Cambodian identity post-displacement (p. 12). In the same vein, Hopkins (2009) traces the change in the meaning of Somaliness among Somali women in Toronto, Canada. She concludes that being a woman in Somalia is different from being a woman in a refugee camp or after resettlement in a Western urban area. As Hyndman (2010) notes in an introduction to a special issue on feminist politics of refugee migration, Hopkin's study illustrates

how identities are "dynamic and interact with geographic locations of origin and resettlement […] 'Somaliness,' in short, is geographically contingent" (p. 456). This debate invites the importance of recognizing the interaction between the refugee experience, location and (re)interpretation of gender identity, sometimes even strategically.

2.2. Agency

In humanitarian, political and academic debates, the perception that refugees are often victims of turmoil and torture is frequently extended to define those refugees' subject position (Sigona, 2014; Ghorashi, 2005), to portray them as lacking in agency, powerless and helpless (Kyriakides et al., 2016; Kyriakides et al., 2018). The effect is to override refugees' voices, trapping them in the witness subject position while academics, advocates and policymakers search for solutions to empower them. Hence, the discussion about refugee identity is not complete without exploring human agency in the same context of displacement.

One can understand agency as an individual's ability to act independently based on their own motivations and choices. At the same time, structure connotes the social, cultural, political, and economic factors that influence acting upon one's independent choices and restrict life opportunities (Bakewell, 2010; Hunt, 2008). Such factors include social class, religion, gender, race, ethnicity, and particular relevance here–the refugee status (Bakewell, 2010). The notion has proven to be problematic, nonetheless, especially in refugee studies. For instance, Taylor-Gooby (2008) has argued that the meaning of agency has always been associated with rational choice, and not enough attention was paid to social values and emotional sentiments (p. 277).

Similarly, Laura Ahearn (2001) stresses the importance of defining agency as "the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act" (p. 112). Further research was more explicit in moving beyond the definition of agency that restricts it to Western connotations influenced by individualistic notions such as autonomy, resistance and independence. This is particularly relevant when studying non-Western experiences (Williams, 2010, Spivak, 1988).

With regards to the relationship between gender identity and agency, Hoang (2011) studied the impact of social identity, particularly gender identity, on the individual's ability to "exercise agency in decision-making about internal migration in Vietnam" (p. 1441). Their case study shows that social norms dictate specific gender identities, which, in turn, determine the subject's social power, power relations within the household, and the ability to negotiate decisions such as migration (whether their own or someone else's). Hoang's evidence traces how social norms typically support men's power over women in making pivotal decisions such as migration. The approach furthers feminist insights on the different avenues through which migration could be gendered. Additionally, the conclusion stresses the blurred line between voluntary and involuntary migration. This is important when we consider how gendered power relations within the household may force some people–women specifically–to migrate to accompany their husbands.

Furthermore, Minna Säävälä (2010) focused on the relationship between gender identity and agency by adopting a dialogical approach. In her study on self-representation among Kosovo Albanian and Russian migrant women in Finland, she examines how identity, in addition to being fluid, multilayered and relational, is also contextual/reactionary where self-representation is rarely consistent and is adjusted to reflect the situation/context. Säävälä concluded that the understandings and decisions of the two groups of women in her study were not just influenced by socio-cultural characteristics but also "the available migratory channels and attitudes towards them

in the receiving society" (Säävälä, 2010, p. 1150). In this sense, the Kosovo Albanian and Russian migrant women held different perceptions of the relationship between their understanding of their socially ascribed gender: specifically, their parental responsibilities to protect their children and their decision to migrate. In other words, social norms that prioritize gender(ed) identities may obfuscate other factors that impact women's agency and their decision to migrate. Additionally, Säävälä's study brings into context the attitudes of the host societies as important factors that affect how the women construct their understanding of their deliberative capacities: a nuance that is relevant to the current study.

Säävälä's study underscores the individual agency of women migrants, suggesting that women can make decisions based on their deliberative action. Nevertheless, both Hoang and Säävälä's studies imply that structural factors, such as ascribed gender identities, intra-familial power relations or the attitudes of the receiving society towards the migrant woman, are significant in determining a migrant woman's understanding of her decision and the available options.

On the contrary, other studies have suggested a more complex expression of agency where women demonstrate tactical agency (see Utas, 2005; Gale, 2007), also referred to as strategic agency[5] (see Kim, 2014). For example, Gale (2007) explains how Sierra Leonean refugees in Guinean refugee camps utilize "Bulgur Marriage" to increase their ration shares and access more resources offered by humanitarian aid. Bulgur marriage refers to conjugal unions based on the sharing of Bulgur wheat provided by the United Nations World Food Program (p. 355). Gale traced the subtleties of this conjugal arrangement. She underscores the interdependence between the native men and the refugee women who enter these relationships where the parties typically put their supply together or eat one person's supply and sell the other person's supply to buy

condiments and other needed items (p. 371). Thus, 'Bulgur wives' utilize Bulgur marriage as a form of tactical agency or "short-term response in relation to a society's social structure" (p. 357).

Similarly, Kyung Kim's (2014) study of women migration across the North Korea-China border concluded that women "voluntarily and strategically use migration, marriage and gender as arenas of agency through which to improve their lives and empower themselves" (p. 553). In both studies, women voluntarily, purposefully, and strategically utilized the structural barriers imposed on them because of their gender identity to acquire agency and control over their lives.

However, that leaves us with the central question of whether or not one can truly distinguish between structure and agency at an analytical level. A decolonizing approach reveals how the two are, in many cases, intertwined and mutually constitutive. To this point, Al-Sharmani's (2010) study of the Somali diaspora reveals how transnational family networks can be emancipating for some and marginalizing for other refugee women. In other words, the "benefits and challenges of such a way of life for women are different, mixed and uneven" (p. 499). Moreover, it can be both emancipating and restricting for the same woman at different times. Thus, Al-Sharmani's argument compels us to move away from overgeneralizing questions such as whether a phenomenon is empowering and emancipating or disempowering and marginalizing to a group of women, or whether it is a manifestation of how their agency and how they agentically and creatively overcame structural barriers. Instead, a question arising here is: what enables some women in the same context to benefit from a social situation while others do not?

Thus, although Al-Sharmani does not explicitly call her framework postcolonial or decolonizing, I argue here that her argument enriches a decolonizing critique and furthers research on refugee women's identities and their interplay with structure and agency. The perception of structure and agency and how refugee women juggle 'constraints' should be viewed as a

continuum instead of an "either/or" relationship. That said, one question that remains is: how individual factors (such as religion, geography and class, generational cohort, migration status, marital status, social capital, personality traits and personal experiences) intersect to form unique refugee women's identities and expressions of agency. In this sense, coupling intersectionality with the decolonizing approach can be helpful.

Against this backdrop of the limitation of tackling human experiences through a binary analytical approach, I would like to conclude the discussion about agency by exploring its relationship with another crucial concept: victimhood. In this discussion, I aim to draw attention to the unintended consequences of treating agency and victimhood as necessarily gendered and mutually exclusive. For instance, some scholarship has focused on the problematic conflation of victimhood with other passive connotations like innocence, grievance, and so forth. Helms (2013), for example, looked into how women, particularly Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslim women), were confined to the main social status of victims in the post-war reconstruction. Helms argued that conflating victimhood with innocence allows no room for ambiguity or "sin" they "erase the woman's ethical coping with her violation" (p. 32). Thus, in Helms' analysis, the problem is not with the notion of victimhood per se. Rather, she is more concerned with how society deals with the victim's status in a way that erases other statuses and conflates victimhood with ideal notions like innocence. Such conflation ends up dehumanizing the subject and reflects a heteronormative understanding of gender (pp. 101-103).

Furthermore, Mlodoch (2012) traces the interchanging location of agency and victimhood in the respondents' stories depending on the political and social climate. In other words, agency and victimhood were concomitant in the sense that agency was always present even in a victimizing context. In the late 1980s, she studied a group of Kurdish women who had experienced social and

economic consequences of an Iraqi attack, including the loss or disappearance of loved ones who were largely their husbands or other men in their families. Anfal women during the conflict adopted a totally different narrative than after the conflict reflecting different discourses. Initially adopting the discourse that largely portrayed them as "weak and helpless victims and symbols of the suffering of the Kurdish nation" (p. 80), they internalized gender and social norms in a way that made them present their lives are lost without their male relatives (p. 75). Later, as the political and social contexts shifted, so did the women's narratives in a way that allowed them to accentuate their agency. The more stability Kurds gained, the more the narratives of those women transformed to focus on self-empowerment, highlighting how, despite the hardships and the victimization, they did not just survive but took pride in raising their children on their own (p. 79-80).

Another group of literature underlined another aspect of this non-binary relationship between agency and victimhood, where the latter is used strategically to achieve the former. Utas (2005), for instance, challenged the heteronormative binary opposition between "peaceful women and violent men that is deep in the Western emotio-histories" (p. 406). He used the term "victimcy" instead to describe the agency of self-staging as a victim of war and explored how it is deployed as a tactic in an attempt to navigate the war zone socially, i.e. it's a form of self-representation. He thus argued against treating agency and victimhood as gendered and contradictory, which ultimately could be disempowering, disabling and dehumanizing to women in the war zone, portraying them as solely victims and creating a culture of victimhood. Utas' social navigation perspective rejected viewing women in the war zone as either solely a "victim" or an "agent/survivor" in a linear sense (p. 424). Rather, he argued for viewing these women's agency not as a "have, nor have not," but rather in terms of a "range of realizable possibilities that are informed by specific social contexts as well as larger economic and political contingencies"

(p.424). This demonstrates how the meaning of survival for some refugee women (and men) does not always simply imply safety or physical security (i.e., negative freedoms). Rather, other factors such as access to upward social mobility (i.e., positive freedoms) or moral gains as we will see in the case of marriage for refuge, are also determining factors.

2.3. Coping

As numerous studies have suggested (see, for instance, Kunz, 1981; Ager 1999; Camino & Krulfeld, 2005; Berry et al., 2006; Qin et al., 2015; Hayes & Endale, 2018), many of the refugees' experiences can be influenced by their past experiences and their emotional ties to their past as well as their socio-economic characteristics. Notably, some of the broad themes that could help understand different ways of coping include the refugee group relationship with their country of origin and the majority population, their attitudes towards displacement (e.g., those forced out by war versus refugees on the basis of freedom of expression), and the integration model and attitudes prevalent in the host society. Factors such as (a) the shared memory and narrative among a group of refugees (Holt, 2012; Farah 2000; Gupta, & Ferguson, 1997) (b) the level of exposure to and interaction with other groups and societies (Camino & Krulfeld, 2005), (c) the specific ethnic identities and generational cohort (Camino, 2005), (d) social norms and ascribed social identities (Hoang, 2011), (e) the historical and political factors that determine the attitudes towards a particular group of migrants (Säävälä, 2010), and (f) past experiences, personality traits and preferences. They all become intervening factors in shaping a refugee identity and gendered practices. In what follows, I focus on how women's identities shift due to displacement and the implications of this shift on gender roles, gender relations and the gendered coping mechanisms. By coping mechanisms or refugee adaptation, I refer to the process of responding to the unplanned

and quick adjustment to temporary but often long-term situations, whether in a refugee camp or the host society (Camino, 2005). Adaptation requires creativity, experimentation, risk-taking and negotiation, as well as leveraging cultural capital, new identities and gendered capacities (Camino and Krulfeld, 2005, p. ix).

Informed by intersectionality, a decolonizing reading of refugees' gender identity allows us to conceptualize identities along continuums rather than rigid binaries. In so doing, the concepts of emancipation, empowerment, and oppression can be better explored. In this sense, identity reconstruction, rupture or emergence go through "constant dialogical struggle between victimization and resistance, between being the helpless victim and the empowered survivor, between here (a present) and there (a past,) between what they say and what they are silent about, and between challenge and opportunity" (Hajdukowski-Ahmed, Khanlou, & Moussa, 2008, p. 49). Szczepanikova (2005), Franz (2003), Säävälä (2010), and others trace how socially ascribed gender roles are frequently a source of empowerment and resilience for many refugee women. This, however, should not lead to the conclusion that socially ascribed roles that are often domestic are an innate component of women's gender identities. Such a conclusion would fundamentally contradict our decolonizing framework and its post-structural and social constructionist premises of fluidity and flux.

Research suggests that socially ascribed gender roles have, in fact, helped women cope better and faster than men (Szczepanikova, 2005; Franz 2003; Säävälä, 2010; Van Esterik, 1996). For instance, Szczepanikova (2005) concludes that migrant women often appear to show greater resilience and adaptability than men because they maintain household and childcare routines, which provide them with "occupation and also self-confidence during the stressful period of uncertainty in exile" (p. 292). Additionally, while gender relations were negotiated in many ways

in the Chechen refugee context that she studied, the association of women with the private sphere was crucial to both their perception of ideal womanhood and, more importantly, their coping motivations (p. 295).

Franz (2003) took the previous discussion about the relationship between socially ascribed gender roles and coping even further and argued that joining the workforce did not necessarily 'liberate' Bosnian refugee women in Western host societies (p. 102). Instead, the primary motivator for women to seek work was "the survival and well-being of their families rather than their own individual development or progress" (p. 102). In this sense, both gender and the traditional understanding of it were central motivators for Bosnian women. This gendered lens to understanding coping mechanisms is central to capturing the nuances of refugee women's agency, subjectivities, decision-making, and trajectories in response to displacement and uprooting.

Case studies such as those conducted by Franz (2003), Gale (2007), Säävälä (2010), and Kim (2014) accentuate that refugee women often adapt, reinterpret and sometimes even blur the line between roles such as mother, wife, daughter and breadwinner. Al-Sharmani's (2010) explains "the dependable or the reliable daughter" as another gendered role adopted by some young women of the Somali diaspora for survival. In such cases, women engage in a transnational family-based support system wherein they exchange goods, share child and elder care, and so forth (p. 500-1). Such practices conform to relationships of "reciprocal obligations" expected to be maintained among different family members, especially women. The repercussions of this identity are mixed. While reciprocity rewards these women with a sense of self-worth and respect as well as social capital that they can draw upon when necessary, it can also be a source of constraint when they have to relinquish their personal aspirations like career and romantic goals (p. 507-8). As Al-Sharmani articulates, these women "learned in the diaspora that the main criterion for choosing a

partner needed to be that he would not hinder her role as a provider and caretaker of her family. Having a romantic attachment to the man was less important" (p. 507). Against this backdrop, I now attend to the international marriage migration literature.

2.4. International Marriage Migration

Marriage has played a unique role in shaping the migration and displacement experience and has been regarded as a strategic and creative option for refugee and migrant women.[6] Many terms have been used to describe marriage migration: cross-border marriage migration (Williams, 2010) or international marriage (Lin and Ma, 2008), cross-cultural marriage (Wise & Velayutham, 2008) or mixed marriage (Rodríguez-García, 2006). This body of literature assumes a cultural, religious, social or ethnic difference between the spouses. Another salient element that frequently defines international marriage migration is the transactional aspect of the marriage, where it is often brokered or arranged; it includes terminology such as commercially arranged marriage migration (Lu, 2005) or commodified marriage migration (Wang & Chang, 2002). Williams (2010) defines cross-border marriage migration through this transactional mutual benefit lens: "cross-border marriage either changes the immigration status of one partner (for example, by increasing their entitlements to reside or to access the social and economic benefits of the country they are resident in) or enables one partner to enter and to set up home as a non-citizen spouse in a country foreign to them" (p. 5). In this sense, marriage migration is often understood as involving an action that occurs either before migration, with migration as an end goal, or for gaining a legal migration status and stability in the country of residence. The motivations for marriage are not always economic or migration-related, however. Upward social mobility, family and extended family

duties, or an idealized image of the cross-cultural spouse can also play a significant role in encouraging these arrangements.

Marriage migration literature has largely focused on Asian and East Asian contexts (see, for instance, Wang & Chang, 2002; Lu, 2005; Yang & Lu, 2010). For instance, Yang and Lu (2010) trace the characteristics of the intra-Asian flows of cross-border marriages, tying them with gender and socio-economic imbalance where "the majority are between men of wealthier countries marrying women from economically less developed countries." (p. 15). They demonstrate how, in many East Asian contexts, marriage for upward social mobility and material considerations is common. They also explain that marriages often commence after a short period of time after first meeting the suitor, with a significant role played by marriage brokers and social networks. An important observation is that unlike relatively similar phenomena in the West, such as mail-ordered brides, commercially arranged cross-border marriages in East Asia are acceptable to a large extent. Primarily, this is because they are seen as "a solution to low fertility rates and shortages of wives and reproductive labour. It is also partly because matchmaking among locals is practiced widely, and the customary marriage rites often involve some forms of monetary transactions (bride-price and dowry)" (Yang and Lu, 2010, p. 17). Finally, and related to the social mobility point, East Asian cross-border marriages cannot be interpreted in isolation from the brides' gendered roles and duties as mothers and daughters as they are expected to continue to support their natal families in their country of origin.

To understand what others have said about the research themes within international marriage migration, I mapped the literature in three main strands. One strand examines marriage as an economic and strategic (border and social) mobility tool. Phenomena such as mail-ordered brides have been extensively criticized due to the economic and power disparity between the bride

(usually from a developing country) and the groom (mostly from industrialized countries) and its consequent consolidation of gender and racial stereotypes (Chun, 1996; Kojima, 2001). Other studies have demonstrated how cross-border marriages have been utilized voluntarily by some women to improve their social and economic status (Kim, 2014). Furthermore, some women engage in these forms of conjugal relationships out of a sense of commitment to their families in the homeland (Kim, 2014, 557). Such an outline demonstrates the shortcomings of overgeneralizing the "trafficked victim" discourse. Instead, a decolonizing reading helps us deconstruct similar phenomena and identify the multi-layered meanings of trafficking, sexuality and labour.

Another strand of research looks at the meaning of marriage and how it shifts and changes based on culture and context and due to movement. Elaheh Rostami-Povey (2012), for instance, pinpoints how most of the Afghan women she interviewed had viewed marriage across ethnicities "as evidence of harmony" in a country that is characterized by historical, ethnic conflicts (p. 149). Similarly, as Gale (2007) discussed, Bulgur marriage reflects not only a utilization of the gendered identity and the ability of women to embody different identities: a single mother, a Bulgur wife, and a "legal" refugee. But also, how the meaning of marriage shifts in one culture due to forced migration and, more importantly, how its meaning is different from one culture and one context to the other. It also illustrates how social mobility attempts can occasion creative ways to negotiate kinship in precarious situations in a way that challenges our understanding of "family-centric, conventional marriage" (p. 375). In the same vein, Katarzyna Grabska (2010) looked at some of the changes in the practice and negotiation of marriage by focusing on the impact of migration of young refugee men who moved to the West. The study reveals how migration has affected their

gender identities, transnational dowry demands, and perception of and engagement in the practice of marriage.

Finally, a growing strand of research explores how conjugal relationships challenge many Western-hegemonic conceptions. For instance, they critique the idea that the nuclear family should always be considered the natural and only form of family or that love and physical attraction are always the main reasons for a *real* marriage (see Al-Sharmani, 2010; Kim, 2014). Kim (2014), for instance, demonstrated how cross-border marriage gave North Korean women the opportunity to "choose and utilize marriage to make a living in exchange for their sexuality and labour" (pp. 559-60). Additionally, Palriwala and Uberoi (2008) stress a critical point about the different cultural interpretations about arranged marriage and marriage transaction, which often takes the form of bridewealth, bride price or more relevant to this case study, *Mahr*.[7] They argue that in some areas in the world such as in East Asia and some Muslim communities, "the marriage transaction can all too easily be construed as the 'sale' of a daughter (or the 'buying' of a wife)" (p. 35). Nevertheless, they warn against conflating these social traditions that have deeper social and economic goals and implications with trafficking discourses. Grabska (2010) again agrees and traces how the practice of the bridewealth among Sudanese refugees, known as lost boys and invisible girls, is intended for "reproducing social and cultural relations, maintaining the identity and belonging, and practising specific kinship and family ties" (p. 492).

2.5. Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I have discussed four conceptual and theoretical themes that inform my research, and that assist in understanding Muslim Syrian refugee women's intertwining experiences with both displacement and marriage. The different discussions about **identity**

(re)construction due to uprooting and displacement point us towards the importance of recognizing that the interaction between refugee experience, location, and (re)interpretation of gender identity is often a strategic decision. The academic debates about human **agency** in refugee settings show that many refugee women in different contexts have purposefully and strategically utilized the structural barriers imposed on them (due to their gender identity) to acquire agency and control over their lives. This begs for the need to move beyond asking binary questions such as whether a specific phenomenon is victimizing or an expression of agency. Instead, a more meaningful question that is relevant to this research is: what enables some women in the same context to benefit more from a phenomenon that has similar challenges and opportunities while others cannot. An intersectional approach could assist with understanding this unevenness as the following chapters will unfold.

Similarly, we have seen how gender and sexuality have affected the **coping** trajectories and were frequently leveraged among refugee women in different ways. Moreover, socially ascribed gender roles were, in many cases, a motivation for women to adapt faster than men in host societies. The discussion about the implications of gender on coping mechanisms set the tone for the final discussion laid out in this chapter. In mapping the debates within the scholarship of **international marriage migration**, I have identified key features of how similar phenomena in different contexts have been approached theoretically and conceptually. The study at hand draws from and contributes to the above debates deepening the relationship between marriage, migration, and many concepts that bridge the gap between them (e.g., gender identity, agency, and coping). However, the main contribution of this project lies not in extending existing literature but in asking how a decolonizing intersectional lens can inform us about the relationship between marriage and

migration in a way that enables us to understand better the resettlement subjectivities, agency and

gender identities of refugee women. But first, I turn to the methodology of the study.

3. Chapter Three: Methodology

Jehanne Gheith's (2007) study of Gulag memories argued that the assumption that the narrative should be at the center of the experience is a Western connotation. Instead, she explored silence and other creative non-narrative means for remembering and surviving. Other attempts have been made to challenge Eurocentric modes of analysis that fail to capture non-Western mental health experiences of depression, trauma, and coping (Shoeb et al., 2007; Tilbury 2007; Terheggen et al. 2001). This chapter serves two purposes. First, it describes and lays out the methods and methodology of the study. Second, it builds on a body of work that engages critical reflexivity to decolonize methodology (Smith 1999) and practice solidarity (Mohanty 2003). In this chapter, I use critical reflexivity as a tool to sustain rigorous methodological and empirical practices and as a means to decolonize narrative and narrative analysis. Throughout the course of my research practice and ethic, I extend the notion of critical reflexivity to unravel how research can often further marginalize 'Othered' stories by replicating colonial assumptions and reinforcing hegemonic discourses.

3.1. Methods, Sampling, Data Collection and Analysis

The poststructuralist roots of decolonizing critique lay within the posited need to challenge grand narratives. Thus, the ontological and epistemological stance that I adopt in this research rejects the existence of value-free knowledge. Instead, my decolonizing intersectional framework animates an interpretative approach that pays heed to the dialectics of meaning-making. It is also an approach that is attuned to the material and discursive power relations imbricated in the process of knowledge production (Kincheloe & Mclaren, 2002).

Context: The fieldwork was conducted in Egypt during the summer of 2017, where I interviewed Muslim Sunni refugee women who, as Syrian citizens, escaped the conflict in Syria and married Egyptian men after 2011 once they settled in Egypt. I collected the data over four months in the greater Cairo area and the city of Alexandria. Those two cities host the highest number of Syrian refugees in Egypt. I relied on personal connections, snowball sampling, social media, and a healthy dose of perseverance in getting in touch with key informants to assist me with recruiting my sample. Additionally, some ethnographical observations were incorporated to enhance the reader's understanding of the contextual terrain. Furthermore, with an upbringing in Egypt and the Middle East as a Muslim woman that bestows upon me a certain degree of cultural fluency, I also relied on my own biographical arsenal of anecdotes and common-sense knowledge to complement the analysis and contextualize the meanings and references behind some of the narratives and quotes.

Methods and sampling: As Hopkins (2009) notes, qualitative research holds the capacity to politicize the personal and bring life to its subjects (p.137). As such, in-depth qualitative interviews are helpful with marginalized groups who often need more space to be able to recall their memories and express themselves (Ghorashi, 2008, p. 120). Additionally, when discussing sensitive or intimate topics, it is beneficial to invest more time in the interview to break the ice, build a connection, and allow space for possible self-reflection and realization. Against this backdrop, thirty face-to-face in-depth qualitative interviews were completed with Sunni Syrian Muslim women married or recently divorced from Egyptian men. In addition, nine interviews were conducted with Egyptian husbands and seven mothers of those women who also currently reside in Egypt. The purpose was to examine how their narratives intersect or diverge, particularly regarding perceptions of concepts such as agency, subjectivity and survival. By comparing the

accounts of the different groups of respondents and their assessment of the phenomenon, I sought to identify potential gaps in the academic literature and the global refugee regime's responses. Moreover, by demonstrating how the narratives of the women and their families interweave, I propose a deeper understanding of the refugee women's subject formation and agency.

Regarding the sample's representativeness, I sought to represent all socio-economic levels as well as age groups and marital statuses. Even though it was primarily a convenience sample, in the middle of the fieldwork, I made some adjustments by incorporating elements of purposive sampling by seeking women from the upper-middle and upper classes who had initially been underrepresented. In doing so, I sought to balance the initial recruitments that mainly were from lower-middle and lower classes by seeking references through social media and acquaintance. Further, since Egypt and the Syrian population in Egypt are both overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim, my sample consisted only of Sunni participants. While the majority of Syrians are Arab Sunni Muslims,[8] the conclusions I draw may not reflect the experiences of other Syrian religious and cultural groups. Similarly, I was conscious of representing all age groups and diversifying the sample in terms of previous marital status before marriage. The analysis section will explicate how the intersecting axes of age, previous marital status, socio-economic situation and urban/rural origins relate to the experiences of the study sample. The table in Appendix 10.2 lists the respondents along with some of their socio-demographic information such as age group, previous and current marital status and socio-economic group.

(Re)presentation of data: To amplify the respondents' voices, this dissertation concedes the epistemic space to the interlocutors by featuring their direct quotes at length. This serves a number of purposes. Comprehensive direct quotation allows more space for voices and stories to emerge, allowing us to address the crisis of representation or a potential gap between research and

interpretation and actual lived experiences. Extended direct quotes minimize the incidents of filtered and biased interpretations between reader and respondent by reducing the researcher's interjections. We can accentuate the epistemic privilege bestowed on respondents who assume the position as capable of telling their stories and articulating their experiences with minimal interference. A parallel objective to using long direct quotations is to minimize presenting respondents as mere numbers or merely as the "Other." By emphasizing the conversation flow between myself and the respondents, I illustrate how our subjectivities intertwine to produce a certain narrative. My approach stems from the belief that the data is not "out there" waiting to be collected and analyzed. Instead, the data is a co-construction between the researcher and the researched (Halai, 2007, p. 346). What lies beyond the words and the texts–laughter, tears, and sarcastic intimations–form an integral component in my analysis, breathing new meaning into their words and narratives. From a decolonizing perspective, these detailed quotes, conversations, and emotional/body languages serve as strategies to humanize the respondents and add a face to their narrative.

Translation and Transcription: The above discussion brings me to the issue of transcribing the interviews and translating them from Arabic to English. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim in Arabic. During the analysis stages, I relied on the untranslated quotes to minimize the chance of misrepresenting cultural meanings during translation through the early stages of the thematic analysis. Dealing with translated data raises many theoretical and methodological issues that do not receive sufficient attention in the literature. The translation can be thought of as "a boundary-crossing between two cultures" (Halai, 2007, p. 345) that involves cultural decoding between the people with lived experiences and the audience and that translation. A more complex challenge is the tension between linguistic translation and cultural translation in

a way that makes the narrative intelligible to an outsider audience in a modernist context (Abdelbaki, 2021).

In translating the interviews for this study, I acknowledge that translation "cannot fully capture a culture because cultures are not autonomous, discrete, or homogenous. Translation is, thus, always partial and incomplete" (Abdelbaki, 2021, p. 8). There are many approaches to this conversion stage from the original language to the translated one (see, for instance, Van Nes et al., 2010; and Halai, 2007). In this research, I opted for a translation approach that captures the cultural and contextual aspects of the conversation and, more importantly, the voice of the women respondents. Particularly to give a voice to the respondent, which is a central concept in decolonizing literature, I use two strategies in translating excerpts from the respondents' interviews. First, I do not aim to interpret or explain the text as much as to make "the context of the source visible" (Abdelbaki, 2021, p. 12). In many instances, I spend time giving context and backgrounds that could plausibly have produced a certain statement or term by one of the respondents or to deconstruct the meanings of some of the packed terms or statements. A second strategy is to "mediate between two contexts through bilingual and bicultural texts" (p. 14). I opted to use the transliteration of some of the packed terms such as *sutra*, *ghorba* and *sanad* or as Halai (2007) explains terms that are full of meaning. Some of my respondents talk, for instance, about the notion of *ghorba,* which literally means estrangement but is rhetorically used to express meanings and experiences of exile and uprooting. For instance, translating such terms as "exile" would undermine accompanying experiences to the notions such as alienation, desolation, dreariness, forlornness, and loneliness. Thus, while translation poses an inevitable challenge of losing some of the meaning, the (intentionally) extended direct quotes in this research should also be viewed as an opportunity to listen to Othered stories in more depth and with less distortion.

Data Analysis: I utilize a number of strategies drawn from narrative analysis and discourse analysis to identify implicit and explicit cues to explore how the respondents experience this social context, where their sense of subjectivity, agency and responsibility lie, and how gender relations discursive practices are linked. Notably, in analyzing the participants' accounts, I focus on the life course processes or "stories that illustrate lives as they unfold and change, through planned and unexpected role transitions or turning points" (Bischoping & Gazso, 2016, p. 19). In examining these stories, I deploy strategies to uncover how the narrators position themselves and their agentic choices vis-à-vis other individuals in their stories. The strategies should also reveal the respondents' events to be transitional or fateful in their lives and how they make sense of them and connect them to their own cultural references (pp. 21-2). Moreover, I use discourse analysis strategies to underscore how power and hegemonic discourses shape accounts and perceptions and hence rank some ways of knowing as more valid than others. A significant part of the research focuses on the Syrian refugee women's subjectivities; thus, I apply discourse analysis to examine how discourses discipline and simultaneously speak to "embodied subjectivities" (p. 139-41). This brings me to the questions of positionality, power and trust, which I discuss below.

3.2. Positionality and Rigour

As an Egyptian Muslim married woman born and raised in Egypt, my linguistic fluency and cultural immersion have offered me ease of access to the respondents. Being of a similar religious, ethnic and linguistic background as most participants might facilitate communication and build rapport faster than someone with a different background. Similarly, the fact that I have a family and children might be a common ground to build rapport and cultivate a safe space where the participants feel that I relate to their concerns and responsibilities. On the other hand, other factors

create a gap between the participants and me. My relatively privileged socio-economic class, academic attainment, Western education and living, and most importantly, the fact that I am not a refugee generate inequity between my participants and me and may create a rift between us. Such a gap could be sensed during rapport building and communication and understanding the conveyed meanings by both sides. Hence, participants could, for instance, understand the meanings behind the interview questions in a way different than what was intended by the interviewer (Hollway & Jefferson, 2012). That said, as Bischoping and Gazso (2016) explain, the why and the how by which a story is told is essential to its analysis. This propelled me to reflect on my positionality vis-à-vis my participants constantly. In order to better communicate my participants' voices and their interpretations of their experiences, I aimed to perform constant reflexivity on my position and my engagement with the respondents, as I explain in some of the examples that I provide below. That is, I engage with reflexivity to entangle how my identity, positionality, and methods are implicated in the knowledge produced in this research.

Referring back to my position as an immigrant woman from a visible minority and Western education, while researching a topic related to my home and my community, can I legitimately represent subaltern voices? Do I have the authority to communicate my participants' voices and their interpretations of their experiences without distortion? Throughout my analysis, I sought to consider Spivak's (1988) long-asked question of whether the subaltern can speak or attain a position or a platform from which they can speak, be heard and be understood more clearly. According to Spivak, any 'outsider' attempt to give voice to the 'subaltern' will lead to reinstating a Western epistemic hegemony (Gore, 2018). That is, any attempt to speak for, with, or about Othered experiences leaves the subaltern "caught in translation, never truly expressing herself" (Briggs and Sharp, 2004, p. 665). Against this backdrop, I am building on the body of work that

attempted to reimagine a response to this inevitable 'silenced position' through utilizing critical reflexivity as a method that renders knowledge production as a form of solidarity and research as resistance (Smith 1999; Mohanty 2003; Brown & Strega 2005; Gore 2018).

A significant body of work gives due to the fluidity of the researcher position, comprising elements of being both an insider and an outsider without claiming one more important than the other. An insider researcher might have easier access and better rapport, especially to marginalized communities and a better comprehension of cultural discourses and 'rules of the game.' At the same time, an outsider researcher might have lesser chances of becoming entangled in those same cultural discourses or having pre-conceived assumptions about the respondents (Blythe et al., 2013). My intersectional positionality draws attention to the mix of traits that make me an insider on some levels and an outsider on others. I follow different strategies to optimize the opportunities and minimize the challenges accompanied by both position and rigour.

In addition to reflexivity, which I discuss in-depth in the following section, I follow other criteria to ensure rigour and quality in my research. I uphold myself to conventional standards of quality in qualitative research (Lincoln, 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Central to this discussion is 'reciprocity,' in which the image of the researcher as the expert is dropped for a more dialogical approach where both the researcher and the researched engage in a reciprocal relationship (Creswell, 1998; Hollway & Jefferson, 2012; Lincoln 1995; Maiter et al., 2008). Thus, a critical methodology furthers the theoretical objective of decolonizing research as well as the ethical objectives of reciprocity and true consent. Moreover, it serves to improve rigour. The objectives of validity and generalizability might be challenging to apply in this study due to the small sample size. That said, guided by a decolonizing framework, proving "broad claims" in a generalizable fashion is not an objective of this research *per se*. Instead, I aim for transferability, a criterion that

does not require broad claims; instead, it allows for making connections between elements of this study and other similar contexts or experiences (Barnes et al., 2012). The concept of transferability will be a guiding criterion to ensure this study can be used as an example of how some experiences and cases might defy some Western-centric assumptions.

3.3. Ethics and Trust

In carrying out this research, I abide by the code of ethics of the Canadian Sociological Association (CSA) and the Tri-Council Policy. I am accountable to York University Ethics Review Board in ensuring that this research maintains the ethical codes of respecting the safety, welfare, and dignity of human participants and treating them equally and fairly.[9] The research engages with human participants who are 18 years old and above. It is guided by the principles of "respect for human dignity, respect for free and informed consent, respect for vulnerable persons, respect for privacy and confidentiality, balancing harms and benefits, minimizing harm and maximizing benefit" (The Tri-Council, 2008, p. i.5-i.6).

Beyond the required ethical procedures, I am also committed to other standards, such as reciprocity, as mentioned earlier, as well as the principles of sympathy and respect (Hollway & Jefferson, 2012). Hence, this research's participatory approach follows the lead of critical models such as Hugman, Bartolomei and Pittaway (2011) and Mackenzie, Mcdowell, & Pittaway (2007), in which participants are viewed as partners to whom the researcher is accountable. As mentioned above, this will be enacted by seeking feedback and input from the research participants on the fieldwork's initial results. Such a process might raise concerns about whether participants can identify other participants, e.g., their family members, during this feedback process, thus breaching the research's anonymity and confidentiality. In responding to that, I have concealed any identifying information when sharing results.

Gaining trust and building rapport are emphasized not only to ensure a successful relationship with the research participants but also to create a safe and supportive context for the research participants to share their experiences in a way that ensures that the research does not exacerbate negative conditions for the participants. The latter requires an understanding of the effect that telling one's potentially traumatic story can have (Rosenthal, 2003). At the same time, knowing that I do not have the professional skills to assist participants in deep discomfort, I provided them with a list of contacts of local service providers who can assist them professionally. Specifically, I had identified Psycho-Social Services and Training Institute in the greater Cairo area such as Saint Andrew's Refugee Services, and *Souriya Al-Ghad* (Tomorrow's Syria) Relief Foundation as such service providers.

3.4. Reflexivity and Decolonizing Methodology

Throughout the planning phase, and as a self-proclaimed decolonizing researcher, I constantly reflected on the idea of the crisis of representation: the factors that mediate the analysis to alter meanings, experiences, and interpretations of the participants and people with lived experience. Such elements boil down to what Bischoping and Gazso (2016), citing Clifford and Marcus (1986), refer to *power*: the all-knowing and Othering gaze that is often immersed in colonial discourses and *poetics*: the myth that an objective tone is a sign of true objectivity–which itself is impossible to achieve. In addition to my empirical interest in the stories behind the Syrian refugee brides, I was also interested in theoretical and methodological questions such as: How do hegemonic ideas affect academic research? Which narratives and ideas, and whose narratives and ideas, are more privileged? How do the researcher's social location, ideological motivations, and theoretical convictions determine how the message will be received? How do factors such as academic

privilege implicate knowledge production? How do the different cultural, social, and intellectual references between the researcher and the researched contribute to the loss of meanings?

Like any researcher in a Western academic institution, I had to start with a clear hypothesis about how the fieldwork "fits" within previous literature and dominant theories. My initial interest was to explore how Syrian women interpret their decision to marry Egyptian men: How did they use marriage as a survival tool? And how do elements such as agency, exploitation, and patriarchy affect this decision? However, as I arrived in the field, concern about academic privilege and interest in countering hegemonic ideas about non-Western contexts started to dominate my approach. While I had to plan some questions for the semi-structured interviews in my fieldwork proposal, upon engaging with my respondents, I slowly started deviating from my initially formulated questions and let the co-creation process take its course. The respondents' narratives gradually led the way to allow me to explore unexpected avenues and dimensions of their stories. For instance, while the initial scope of my fieldwork focused on exploring how the concept of marriage has been used creatively and flexibly to promote women's interests, another question was introduced by those women's narratives shifting the focus to how displacement had (re)shaped their perception of the meaning, purpose, and nature of marriage (which ended up being the focus of chapter seven). Similarly, while I initially was focused on my respondents' identities as wives, they kept pushing for another identity: Motherhood, which has enriched the discussion of moral agency and social empowerment.

Here I want to propose reflexivity or asking "how one's self and one's methods are implicated in the knowledge one produces" (Bischoping & Gazso, 2016, p. 43) to assist in addressing some of the above questions. Reflexivity is central to both maintaining rigorous methodological and empirical practices and decolonizing research. Reflexivity in critical research is regarded as "a

process of critical self-awareness" (Smith, 1999, 166). My position aligns with the body of work that views critical reflexivity as means for decolonizing research through "breaking hierarchical barriers between researchers and participants" (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). It extends beyond the oversimplified "confession of privilege" and instead is regarded as a form of accountability and responsibility to constantly reflect on how one's research activities support resistance to epistemic colonization and hinder replicating colonial and hegemonic legacies (Lockard 2016; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). This involves reciprocity, action, and commitment to the people (Freire 1996) and actively rebalancing power relations by recognizing community members as knowledge holders and teachers and not mere witnesses (Smith, 1999). Thus, as Beeman-Cadwallader and others (2011) suggested, it is not specific methods per se that make research decolonizing, but rather "it is the intent or mindfulness taken when practicing the methods" (p. 7)

Critical researchers often use reflexivity as a tool to ensure that the message conveyed about what the participants 'tell us' about their interpretations of their experiences and subjectivities is as close as possible to their 'actual' interpretations of these experiences (Bischoping & Gazso, 2016). It allows the researcher to reflect on how their position and positionality have impacted their interpretations and outcomes. More precisely, through reflexivity, "researchers acknowledge the changes brought about in themselves as a result of the research process and how these changes have affected the research process" (Palangas et al., 2017, p. 426). Many researchers have addressed some issues that required them to apply reflexivity at different stages of their research. For instance, Halai (2007) reflected on her concerns regarding the accuracy of transcribing and translating bilingual interviews from Urdu to English. Since the issue has not been addressed in the literature, she had to develop her own customized (but consistent) guiding rules to make sure

her participants' stories are conveyed correctly. Clarke (2003) reflected on some of the strategies she employed to overcome ambivalence from her respondents and pursue higher authenticity in their accounts. Strategies such as building rapport, managing her alternating position between insider and outsiderhood wisely and paying attention to the location in which the interview is conducted were some of her attempts to ensure rigour and proper representation of her respondents' experiences. Hence, while exercising reflexivity during fieldwork, I started grappling with the question of: how can we use reflexivity to decolonize research? The question soon evolved to become: how can we decolonize reflexivity?

The question of reflexivity is closely related to the insider/outsider debate (Bischoping & Gazso, 2016), which is, in turn, related to legitimacy and who has the right to study and validate a certain group's experiences. It flags the complexity of our position as researchers in our dialectical relationships between the native and the Other. Here, it is essential to acknowledge that reflexivity is most meaningful when the researcher incorporates and reflects on "the emotional, embodied aspects of research and links this to the social and the political. This takes us away from a narrow focus on our own individual politics and positionality and offers a view of academic inquiry that expands out from the micro towards the macro." (Gore 2018). In other words, one should consider their own subject position within the local and global power relations that dictate specific power relations and hegemonic discourses.

As mentioned above, my religious, linguistic and ethnic proximity might enable access and rapport on some fronts. However, the latter could also be a reason for suspicion or fear of judgement, as participants will likely expect me to be aware of shared cultural and religious traditions and restrictions that they may not have been able to uphold. On the other hand, other factors had implications on my perceived native/insider position. During the interviews, there are

certain common aspects in all forms of migration (such as loss of social capital) that I was able to relate to. For instance, despite my migration status, I have not had any experience of being a refugee and accompanying elements such as uprooting and trauma. I tried to leverage my immigration to Canada from Egypt to understand the respondents' experiences better. However, refugeeness has unique elements that can best be comprehended via first-hand experience (Lacroix, 2004). That said, I always reminded myself that other elements would only be understood by those exposed to the refugee experience. For that, I relied on frequent probing and asking questions that might seem to have obvious answers. As Nour's story will demonstrate in Chapter Six, such questions can be an eye-opener even to someone familiar with the culture.

Another factor that affected my native/insider position, as mentioned above, is my socio-economic class and being from the academic ivory tower. The fact that I live and receive education in a Western context might create a gap between myself and the participants. Such gaps could be sensed during rapport building as well as during communication and attempting to understand the conveyed meanings by both sides. A clear example, which I detail in Chapter Six, is my encounter with Nour and how I missed her initial point about polygamy. When I reflected on this and my astonishment by her apparent acquiescence to what, by Western standards, was a very unconventional interpretation of marriage and love, I had to trace and confront my own hegemonic understanding of intimate relationships. Such understanding often relies on Western-centric convictions about the nuclear family: monogamous, separate from extended family, and so forth, as well as individualistic perceptions, commercialized romantic expressions and monopolized affections. Critical reflexivity was particularly helpful here. By constantly reminding myself, during the interview and later during the analysis, that Nour is the expert, the trajectory of the interview took a more conversational path. This allowed for a deeper narrative that portrayed Nour

as a narrator who demonstrated a clear and coherent rationale behind this marriage. That is not to say that I did not challenge her on different occasions. Instead, it means that I posed questions more out of curiosity than of contestation. In her view, other solutions such as working as a hairdresser, which used to be her job, would keep her away from her daughter and expose her to a relatively foreign culture, in turn, making her prone to exploitation and "humiliation," as she called it. For her, marriage (even if polygamous and precarious) was the "safe" or "decent," if not the obvious choice, in her situation, especially because the well-being of her daughter was her priority.

Thus, a central question that I am still grappling with is: As an immigrant from a visible minority group and a female researcher, who is returning home, equipped with "Western" education, can I legitimately represent subaltern voices? And do I have the authority to communicate my participants' voices and their interpretations of their experiences without a greater degree of fidelity simply because I may share a somewhat similar cultural background as theirs? As a diasporic researcher, I frequently contemplated the ephemeral and liminal spaces of insider/outsider. Homi Bhabha talked about the "Third Space" where he discusses this liminal or in-between mode that delineates diasporic subjects (Young, 2012). Narayan (1993) offered some helpful insights when she argued against a native/non-native dichotomy, suggesting that for researchers who might be perceived as a native, "fieldwork might be considered a deepening of the familiar rather than a discovery of the other" (p. 672). This recognition of my hybrid subject position, being a partial insider/outsider, highlights potential blind spots and puts forward the advantage I might have compared to other researchers in identifying and understanding subtle cultural discourses and linguistic registers.

This insider/outsider dilemma becomes apparent, for example, in Diab's story. Diab was in his early twenties at the time of our interview. He is the only Syrian husband whom I have

interviewed, simply because our paths crossed during the fieldwork. Below, Diab explains to me the good qualities he sees in his Egyptian bride-to-be, all of which revolve around obedience and her recognition of their hierarchy in the marriage:

> *R: Allah has granted me a woman… I mean… Milk, is it black?*
>
> *I: I'm not following*
>
> *R: Milk… is it black? Yes, it is.*
>
> *I: Oh, you mean she agrees with you on every matter?*
>
> *R: Allah has granted me someone like this if I tell her that milk is black, she agrees. But of course, that was after she understood that when I tell her, it's black, that I am not wrong. That I am correct. That "he is not trying to harm me' [talking on his wife's behalf]. That he is not trying to control me". She understands that he is a prince above, and I am below, he is a man, and I am…*

Diab was not trying to boast or provoke me in the above interaction. Throughout the interview, he was very cooperative, respectful and interested in my research. The above quote is consistent with his opinions throughout our interview. He even gave me a couple of friendly comments implying that my *hijab* was not put on the proper way because a few hairs were showing. For him, this is his way to look after women (sisters) and protect them. This hierarchy preserves decency and harmony in the marital household and society in general. Diab's interview has left a strong but subtle effect on me as a researcher who is also a Middle Eastern woman. He was very outspoken and charismatic. He was persuasive and echoed hegemonic masculinity ideas and rhetoric that are not uncommon in the Middle East.

Reflecting on this encounter, Diab's narrative reinforced patriarchal assumptions that I grew up surrounded with and that still have some residual and subconscious effects on me and, consequently, reflected on the balance of power of the interview. In revisiting the audio recording of this interview, I was surprised to note my response to this iteration of hegemonic masculinity and to hearing the ease with which I, at the time, agreed with his patriarchal conviction of gender roles. I had reverted to a form of femininity commensurate with the brand of masculinity that he embodies. I share this not to pinpoint my own latent inclinations or some form of 'feminist deficiencies,' but rather to note that power permeates different boundaries for research. Here, the gendered dynamics trumped the different perceptions between Diab and me, inadvertently and unexpectedly shifting the power balance in that encounter. As a perceived insider, I found myself complicit in replicating hegemonic gender roles that I sought to challenge through this research.

With that said, the objective of discussing the insider (native)/Outsider (Other) binaries is to draw attention to the subtlety and complexity of the issue of representation. That is to say, while designing or conducting fieldwork, and especially when exercising reflexivity, "whether native or other, we are all another in the field because there will always be facets of ourselves that connect us with the people we study and other facets that emphasize our difference" (Chawla, 2006, p. 2).

The above examples and the others that I will be sharing in the coming chapters do not just challenge many Western hegemonic conceptions about intimacy, gender roles and empowerment. They also challenged my research design and my self-perception as an insider, underscoring both my vulnerability and bias as a researcher. Is my research grounded in Othered binaries? Are my interview questions promoting a polarized (either/or) and stereotyped perception of the other? And above all, is my research contributing to social justice and attempting to offer a platform for the

marginalized? These are some of the questions and conundrums that I wrestled with throughout the different stages of the research.

3.5. Concluding Remarks

I turn again to Spivak's (1988) question and essay of the same name: Can the subaltern speak? What she argued in the early stages of postcolonial theorizing was that, despite all the benevolent attempts by scholars to offer counter-discourses that challenge hegemonic ones, they are still working within the colonial 'matrix' and hence are bound to replicate the colonial mode, its language, and its power dynamics. Thus, in this chapter, I sought to build on the critical body of work that examines issues of power, voice, situated knowledge[10], positionality and destabilizing dominant ways of knowing through utilizing critical reflexivity as a tool for accountability, self-reflection, resistance and implicating the personal as political (Smith 1999; Freire 1996; Mohanty 1988/2003, Gore 2018, Haraway 1991). In other words, how critical reflexivity helps with designing a decolonizing methodology. I sought to emphasize how reflexivity in such a case would extend beyond identifying one's position and positionality to include how their overall methodological approach resists or reinforces colonial assumptions.

My reflections on my fieldwork were able to identify helpful and dynamic strategies for expansion and refinement. First, coupling questions typically asked in narrative analysis with those types of discourse analysis helped me reflect on questions such as: How do the researcher's social location, ideological motivations, and theoretical convictions determine how the message will be received? How do factors such as academic privilege implicate knowledge production? How do the different cultural, social, and intellectual registers between the researcher and the researched contribute to losses in socio-cultural translation? And more importantly, whose narratives and

perceptions are privileged? Worth mentioning here that the narratives of the women interlocutors in this study collide with more than one hegemonic discourse. The Orientalized and Othering discourse, the Western modernist framings and the local patriarchal cultures are major ones.

Second, it took a consistent effort to maintain fidelity to the notion that critical reflexivity should be a consistent practice throughout the different stages of my research. Decolonizing methodologies are woven throughout the research, from asking in the very early stages of research design what kinds of ideologies and assumptions inform it, to formulating the research questions, and thinking through formulating the research questions, as well as thinking through and crafting various lines of inquiry in interview guides–whether they have biases or hegemonic assumptions. The principles of reciprocity and embracing other ways of knowing were crucial in designing (and re-designing) empirical research that perceived the participants as experts, not witnesses or merely as evidence waiting to be discovered.

Third, logistically during the data collection stage, I tried to be reflexive about adopting ways that minimize power inequality between the researcher and the participant. This included designing and explaining the consent form or even subtle gestures such as providing an honorarium (if any) in advance and emphasizing the participants' ability to end the conversation when they want. Similarly, reflexivity should inform other, often underestimated stages, such as transcribing and translation and their role in the loss of meaning (Smith 1999; Gerlach 2018). Some of the strategies that I utilized to manage these challenges included relying on direct and extended quotes from the respondents. The quotes showed not just their opinions but also the dynamic between them and me, the researcher. Additionally, I made sure to pinpoint gestures and body language such as pauses, laughs, and sarcasm, which textured the narratives and helped to emphasize the multifaced

aspects of the participants' identities and personalities beyond being a 'victimized' or 'helpless' refugee.

Finally, applying critical reflexivity to the researcher's position and lying on the insider/outsider continuum can be one of the most challenging exercises (Gore 2018). This mainly goes back to the non-uniform power relation and constant negotiation between the researcher and the participant. Such a power relation depends on the context, the topic and even the demographic and ideological background of both sides. This was evident, for instance, with Nour, where I found myself replicating colonial understanding of intimate relations. On the other hand, my assumption that, as a researcher, I always have more power than the respondent was challenged by my encounter with Diab, which triggered a gendered dynamic familiar to the two of us and our cultural references. Such examples underline the importance of treating the interview process as a negotiation that aligns with narrative co-construction. It also accentuates the advantages of intentionally letting go of being in charge of the interview. This was accompanied by slowly letting go of my initial questions and allowing the respondents' narratives to lead the way and explore more interesting avenues and dimensions of their stories.

On a final note, the reflections in this chapter are also intended to make a case for small-scale qualitative research. As Rodgers (2004) explained, a rising concern among forced migration researchers is that small qualitative studies are—in their view "often produced on the basis of poor designs, conducted over short time periods and drawn from small, haphazard and unrepresentative samples" (p. 48). On the contrary, Rodger argues that smaller studies allow more intimate interaction with respondents, making for "relevant, important and ethically desirable" (p. 49) encounters. Building on Rodgers's argument while using a decolonizing lens, the calls to focus on larger-scale research that pinpoints validity, reliability, replication, and representation underscores

certain assumptions. For instance, one assumption is that the researchers, who are mainly located in or from the Global North, know the relevant questions and gaps. More importantly, they assume that objectivity is not ideologically biased. They also assume that "generalizability" is the only desirable outcome from conducting research with forced migrants, dismissing the importance of recognizing the diversity and intersectionality, let alone the cultural differences and subjectivities of refugee populations. One of this study's objectives is to pinpoint how certain marginalized groups, especially those from the Global South, have non-hegemonic interpretations of what humanitarian notions such as agency and empowerment mean and how these concepts translate into their own realities. A decolonizing methodological research design features the challenges to the normative and the hegemonic.

4. Chapter Four: Seeking a Syrian Bride: Understanding Marriage Economics

As stated in the previous chapters, a central objective of this case study is to utilize a decolonizing intersectional lens to understand the under-researched (and a categorically Orientalized) phenomenon of marriage for refuge. These marriages are often compared to sex trafficking, forced marriage and child marriage. Hence, in the coming two chapters, I aim to analyze how the idea of the Syrian refugee bride was constructed within the imagination of some Egyptian men (and their families). I do so by tracing the social and economic conditions that helped shape the phenomenon along with other marriage alternatives and innovations. Two major factors frequently referenced by the wives, husbands, and family members in my sample are the financial cost of marriage and the desirable Syrian ideals of femininity. I attend to both factors in this chapter and the following one, respectively.

I start this chapter with a brief overview outlining Syrian refugees' reception context and livelihood in Egypt. I then zoom into the Egyptian culture of marriage. In doing so, I describe the evolving meanings of marriage among Egyptians and how subtle socio-economic factors continue to shape those meaning, marriage dynamics and non-traditional marriage options. In the third and final section, I focus on the first of two factors: the cost of marriage or the financial element in matrimonial arrangements. In so doing, I borrow insights from some of the respondents to reinstate both Egyptian and Syrian cultural differences and their implications, not just on the cost of the marriage but also on the power dynamics between spouses.

Thus, both this chapter and the next help unravel elements central to understanding marriage for refuge and the experiences of Syrian refugee women involved in such arrangements. Namely,

I ask: (a) What are the Syrian-Egyptian marriage dynamics in the context of displacement and how different cultural customs play a role in dictating marriage experiences, and (b) How has displacement (re)shaped some Syrian refugee women's gender identities and consequently their interpretation of the marriage as a viable option in resettlement?

4.1. Syrian Refugees in Egypt: Reception Context, Demographics and Livelihood

Egypt is host to over 5 million refugees, including five hundred thousand Syrian refugees who have entered the country since 2012 (ECHO Factsheet, 2018).[11] Displaced persons fleeing the Syrian conflict since its onset in 2011 arrived in an economically troubled Egypt with a politically polarized atmosphere. They have since faced a lack of social and economic opportunities and a high cost of living (ILO, 2018). A UNHCR report recounted that the Egyptian government estimated that at least 300,000 Syrian refugees have settled in Egypt, the majority of whom arrived in a context of relative deprivation and lack of opportunity (UNHCR, 2016; ECHO Factsheet, 2018). The report showed that 93 percent of Syrian refugee families in Egypt are unable to make the minimum expenditures for daily life (UNHCR, 2016). Additionally, the report demonstrated that 65 percent of the Syrian households headed by women are severely vulnerable, compared to 56 percent of the households headed by men. More specifically, households headed by women tend to have "much lower levels of employment, partly on account of protection concerns faced by women in public spaces and other cultural barriers" (p. 6).

Egypt is a signatory of the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which obliges Egypt to offer asylum and resettlement to refugees. However, Egypt later withdrew some fundamental rights, such as the right to work (Al-Sharmani, 2003, p. 6). Egypt does not have a policy of encampment and, historically, Cairo has hosted many foreigners and refugees, including

Armenians, Palestinians, and Sudanese (p. 6). In this respect, at least formally, refugees have the

right to freedom of movement and integration (Ayoub & Khallaf, 2014, p. 7), especially if they

are from Arab ethnic and linguistic backgrounds such as Palestinians and Iraqis. However, changes

in public and political attitudes have shaped the reception and perceptions of Syrian refugees and

their arrival in Egypt since 2012. An initial intense xenophobic rhetoric and hate speech started to

fade by the end of 2013 (Ayoub & Khallaf, 2014). This was accompanied by an emerging image

of the Syrian community in Egypt and its ability to "carve out a niche in the Egyptian economy"

(p. 25), especially in the food industry. Some Syrian businessmen started their businesses and

offered work opportunities for fellow Syrians. Many others worked in Egyptian-owned businesses,

as they were perceived as experienced and hard workers.

A survey conducted by the Center for Migration and Refugee Studies (CMRS) at the

American University in Cairo showed that approximately 80 percent of the Syrian respondents

came from Damascus and its rural outskirts, often referred to as *Reef Demashk* (the Countryside

of Damascus), followed by Homs and Aleppo as distant seconds (Ayoub & Khallaf, 2014). My

sample is consistent with this, as the majority of the respondents were from these Four areas.

However, it is worth noting that some of the respondents from upper socio-economic classes made

sure to draw attention to the distinction between Damascus and a special area called *Shām* (literally

the Levant). Some of my informants and participants explained that the *Shām* and its people,

referred to as *Shwām,* are located close to old Damascus and the Downtown area. Although there

is no empirical evidence for this, it is generally thought that the terms *Shām* and *Shwām* carry a

strong classist and elitist significance that distinguishes influential families who lived in Damascus

before the arrival of economically and educationally disadvantaged groups from rural areas,

especially from *Reef Demashk*. Alternatively, many of the respondents from *Reef Demashk*,

technically a separate governorate from Damascus, referred to themselves as from Damascus. Their reference is, possibly, to associate themselves with the prestigious and venerated area of *Shām*, as implied by some of the respondents with a higher socioeconomic status who wanted to discern themselves from other classes.

Surveys have pointed out that work is the primary source of income for most Syrian families in Egypt; nevertheless, most Syrians work in the informal economic sector such as daily and occasional labour in food services, beauty salons and cleaning services (Ayoub & Khallaf, 2014, p. 25). Recent Egyptian labour policies reinforced this. Bidinger and others (2014) explained: "The 2003 Labor Law has effectively curtailed the right to work for refugees in Egypt along with the law's implementing Ministerial Decree and the 2004 Decree of the Ministry of Manpower and Emigration" (p. 89). Similarly, many Syrians were reported to be experiencing exploitation in the housing market, where there have been incidents of arbitrary rent hikes by Egyptian landlords (p. 47). Unlike employment, Egyptian education law allows Syrians equal access to Egyptian public schools. However, with the increasing number of instances of discrimination against Syrian children and the questionable quality of education in public schools, many Syrian families prefer to keep their children at home. Instead, they rely on community-organized schools or stretch their finances to pay the high fees of private schools (PRM report, 2012, p. 27).

4.1.1. Syrian Women in Egypt

One of my key informants, Maysaa, director of *Laje'at* (the grammatically feminine Arabic word for refugees), an NGO supporting refugee women in greater Cairo, stressed the ethnic and class factors that impacted Syrian refugees' integration particularly women, in the Egyptian society. She noted the discrimination that sub-Saharan African refugees face in Egypt compared to Arab refugees such as Palestinians, Iraqis, and Syrians. Interestingly, she also highlighted that

Syrian women who belonged to lower socio-economic classes were able to integrate better than their upper-class counterparts. According to Maysaa, women from more upper-class backgrounds arrived in Egypt early on and established their businesses and internal social networks. Their lack of economic need diminished their need for social and cultural integration with the host society (Interview with Maysaa, Informant, 2017). On the other hand, as Maysaa explained, women belonging to lower classes needed to mingle with their neighbours and needed more social support from the host society. She also added that both Egyptian and Syrian women who belonged to the lower classes face the same classism from the upper classes, which helped unify their challenges and consciousness.

On the issue of marriage, Nahla, a journalist and another key informant, explained that it is hard to tell whether seeking Syrian brides is, in fact, a prevalent phenomenon or if it is taken out of proportion. She stated, however, that the stories are countless. She further stated that religious institutions such as Al-Hossary Mosque, one of the largest mosques and charitable organizations in the Sixth of October City, was involved in matching Syrian women with Egyptian men under the justification of *sutra* or protection (discussed in detail in Chapter Six), which helped propel the issue to media and public attention. Both Maysaa and Nahla agreed that some of the reasons why Syrian women have always been viewed as desirable for marriage, not just by Egyptian men but also by men from the Arab world more broadly, are their compliance, femininity, and domestic skills as housewives. Their refugee status, as pointed by Maysaa, exaggerated these traits even more. This is a central and recurrent theme to the intersectional analysis that accompanies this case study which iterates how the refugee/migration status is an axis of difference that drives differential treatments and perceptions to Syrian refugee women in Egypt. I analyze these

assumptions in more detail using the respondents' accounts, the Syrian refugee women themselves, in Chapter Five, in my discussion of desirable femininity and desirable masculinity.

4.2. Marriage in Egypt: Understanding the Marriage Crisis

For Egyptians and many of their Arab counterparts, marriage is probably the most central social event in their lives (Hoodfar, 1998; Rashad et al., 2005). Marriage in the Arab world is understood as heterosexual since homosexual relations are considered taboo and are illegalized directly or indirectly in all Arab societies. Nonetheless, their practice is reported in most societies, particularly the Gulf area (Labi, 2007). In addition to being the only way to engage in socially approved sexual activities, marriage elevates a person's status, marking the transition from through transitioning from adolescence to adulthood (see Clark-Kazak, 2013). For instance, an unmarried woman is often referred to as *bint* or girl, regardless of her age, until she is married, at which point she becomes *sit* or woman/lady. In turn, a man emphasizes his manhood by leaving his parents' house (residentially and financially) and starting a new home in which he becomes the breadwinner. Marriage also directly affects the meanings of gender roles and gender relations, particularly the meanings of femininity and masculinity in Egypt and the Arab world. Moreover, as emphasized by many researchers of contemporary Egypt (Hasso 2011; Singerman, 2007; Singerman, 2008; Botman 1999; Kholoussy, 2010) and as I will discuss in more detail in the following sections, "marriage is typically the point at which the largest intergenerational transfer of wealth occurs for most people" (Hasso, 2011, p. 8).

With a relatively newly urbanized population, Egyptian youth in major cities now have higher education levels than ever and are more likely to work in the white-collar and industrial sectors than in other sectors like farming for example (Rashad et al., 2005). Changes to education levels

and employment sectors have affected the dynamics of marriage and gender roles, propelling more women towards working outside of their homes. This, in turn, has opened up opportunities for working women to question socially ascribed gender roles (Rashad et al., 2005). The rising age of marriage, its increasing costs, the shift in gender roles and spousal responsibilities, and the increasing divorce rate are some of the critical elements that define the sociology of family and marriage in Egypt, which are more or less reflected in the Arab world as well (Rashad et al., 2005; Hasso, 2011, Kholoussy, 2010, Singerman 2007).

Central to the discussion is the so-called marriage crisis in Egypt, characterized by the delayed marriage age or even with some men and women's choice to remain unmarried (Rashad, 2015). Hasso (2011) summarized the causes of the marriage crisis to be economic in the first place:

> The rising cost of marriage, increased poverty, decreased employment opportunities, reduced state commitment towards wealth distribution and increased availability, cost, and desire for furnishing and appliances for the marital home is viewed to be the primary reasons for the delay of marriage in Egypt since the late 1970s (p. 64).

Nevertheless, it is important to accentuate that the above rationale and explanation mostly reflect middle-class views and realities (Kholoussy, 2010, p. 2). That is, the wealthier classes can meet marriage demands and financial requirements, and the poorer classes can compromise on unrealistic financial demands or offer solutions to make the marriage process smoother such as an extension room in the husband's parents' house as a marital abode if they cannot provide a separate home for the new couple. This leaves the crisis at its starkest among the middle class, particularly the urban middle class, heavily concentrated in Cairo and Alexandria. That was one of the primary

reasons this study focuses on the urban middle class clustered in those two major metropolitan hubs.

Moreover, one cannot dismiss other socio-demographic and even ideological factors influencing Egypt's marriage practices. Many studies (Hasso, 2011; Botman, 1999; Singerman, 2007; Singerman, 2008; Rashad et al., 2005) referred to the effects of globalization, industrialization, consumerism, neoliberalism and urbanization. These have worked to reward individualism, undermine family life and left women often alone to balance domestic chores and unpaid labour with education and paid work, with minimal official and social support. This can be noticed in the demographic transition, which, as Singerman (2008) explains, "has led to reduced fertility, delayed age of marriage, increased public education, reductions in the literacy gap between men and women, and improvements in public health and access to contraception" (p. 2). The conditions have led to different social groups and generations blaming one another for causing the crisis. Women consider men responsible for limiting their marital and social options through being overtly controlling and inflexible. In turn, men accuse women and their families of making excessive and often unrealistic financial demands. Similarly, younger generations are critical of older generations for being too restrictive regarding gender relations and criteria for marriage partners. In comparison, older generations accuse youth of lacking self-control, a moral compass and responsibility (Hasso, 2011, p. 14).

Consequently, alternatives to traditional marriage have emerged in reaction to the increasing aspirations of the middle class, accompanied by the economic and cultural obstacles surrounding traditional forms of marriage. Before I discuss the alternatives and innovations in marriage, it is helpful to briefly revisit the meaning of class in Egypt.

4.2.1. *Class in Egypt*

Since the mid-twentieth century, Gamal Abdul Nasser's[12] socialist ideology propelled eliminating class divides and facilitated substantial social mobility. However, he was soon succeeded by Anwar Al-Sadat and his open-door policy (*al-infitah*), which signalled economic liberalization, denationalization, and creating a new entrepreneurial and bourgeoisie, referred to as the *nouveau riche*. Such abrupt and contradictory economic developments have had a substantial impact on the definition of the Egyptian middle class, weakening the relationship between elements such as income, education, and occupation, as well as emphasizing other elements such as connections, social status and kinship, accompanied with a growing consumerist culture (Muller and Ndoye, 2017). Additionally, tensions between what is presumed indigenous and what is considered Western increasingly manifest in the daily lives of the middle class, especially pertaining to clothing, body language, cultural references and consumer habits (Muller and Ndoye, 2017).

As previously mentioned, I focus on the urban middle class (including its upper and lower strata) and its definition in the scope of this research. Many empirical socio-economic approaches define the middle class based on income, occupation, education, political orientation and consumption habits, among other factors (Muller and Ndoye, 2017). Other studies include elements such as cultural and social improvement and aspirations and political awareness (Suerbaum, 2018). Bourdieu (1989) also distinguishes between "economic capital (in its different forms), cultural capital, social capital, and symbolic capital, which is the form that the various species of capital assume when they are perceived and recognized as legitimate as factors mitigating the meaning, determination and expression of class" (p. 17). That said, focusing on a single marker for the middle class in the urban metropolitan Egyptian context, such as Gidden's

definition of class based on occupation (Giddens, 1984), would fail to capture the Egyptian husbands' diverse demographic in this study, for instance. For this research, I define the Egyptian urban middle class as a heterogeneous group that is unified by and defined through an interaction between socio-economic markers (such as income and education), social capital (such as connections, social status, and kinship), as well as a collective consciousness that reflects similar cultural, social and political aspirations.

Racism and shadeism (see, for instance, Obeyesekere, 2017) are other subtle but frequent themes in my study. Very little has been written about how race and racism affect the host-refugee relationship, especially in the MENA region. Edward (2007) has written about different forms of oppression and how they are "interlocked" to study how race, ethnicity, and gender influence the outcome of the relationship between southern Sudanese refugees and the host population in Cairo (p. 159). Similarly, Fábos (2008; 2009; 2012) wrote about Muslim Arab Sudanese women and how they negotiate their identity and racial labelling in the diaspora focusing on the Egyptian context. In the same vein, shadeism, or "discrimination against darker skin tones" often deriving from the privilege given to whiteness, anti-blackness, and desire for whiteness (Dhillon, 2016, ii), as well as their colonial roots, are under-researched, especially in the Egyptian and Arab contexts. It is, however, germane to the Syrian refugee brides' phenomenon, as Syrian women are generally known to have lighter skin tone and features (e.g., eye colour) than most Egyptian women. Some of my interlocutors cautiously refer to this subtlety, as I will demonstrate in later chapters.

4.2.2. *Marriage Alternatives and Innovations*

In the introductory chapter, I traced some commonalities between the marriage cases of the women I interviewed. A central characteristic is that the overwhelming majority of those marriages were *urfi* (or customary unregistered marriages). In this section, I position marriage for refuge

within the larger context of some marriage alternatives that many Egyptians have sought, including *urfi* marriage and marriage to foreigners. This discussion is also important in revealing the vast array of subcultural interpretations of customary marriage within Muslim majority countries, destabilizing and decolonizing the existence of a homogenous "Islamic culture."

As mentioned in the discussion of the marriage crisis in Egypt, as financial, economic, and logistical challenges grow, Egyptian youth increasingly seek alternative solutions to traditional forms of marriage. Sexual, political and intellectual repression is a common denominator among many young adults in Egypt (Hasso, 2011, p. 94). In this context, unconventional forms of marriage, such as *urfi* marriage, become a handy solution. *Urfi* marriage refers to a type of common-law marriage that's limited to the religious component and is unregistered legally. It is often kept private, including—or rather especially—keeping it a secret from the couple's parents or first wife if applicable. *Urfi* marriage is more common among urban than rural youth, mainly among university students. It is seen to offer a solution to the financial and logistical obstacles created by traditional marriage while giving sexual relations more legitimacy (Rashad et al., 2005; Hasso, 2011). There are no reliable statistics on the rates of *urfi* marriage in Egypt. However, one 2010 study referenced the Egyptian National Council for Population that approximately 400,000 cases of *urfi* marriages are contracted each year. Of this number, "255,000 cases of *urfi* marriages are contracted among Egyptian university students" (Shahrani, 2010, p. 37).

It is important to distinguish between the meaning and social implications of customary marriage in Egypt and other countries in the Arab world, such as Tunisia and Syria (Rashad et al., 2005). In the latter countries, customary marriage is referred to as *shar'e* marriage or lawful marriage, the name deriving from its compliance with Islamic *sharia*. It is common for such marriage to take place with the knowledge of both families and friends, but without informing the

state institutions for a variety of reasons: for instance, in secular Tunisia, polygamy is illegal. In Syria, customary marriage receives societal approval but is often used to substitute the engagement stage, i.e., often without the commencement of the marriage (Rashad et al., 2005; Hasso, 2011). As communicated to me by more than one respondent, it often substitutes the engagement step so that the bride and groom are allowed more time in private and without the bride wearing her *hijab* (hair covering) if that is the case.

However, in urban Egypt, *urfi* marriage has a less favourable reputation and has been condemned by social and religious figures. As mentioned, it is hard to obtain accurate statistics to describe the extent of this practice which often has more negative consequences for women. Still, it is gaining more popularity among the youth, especially university students:

> The secrecy surrounding *urfi* marriages puts young women at a particular disadvantage because these women are not able to negotiate the terms of their marriage—a role usually played by families in conventional marriages [. . .] But in 1998, according to one estimate, there were nearly 10,000 cases of contested paternity in Egyptian courts due to *urfi* marriages. It is also not uncommon for men entering into *urfi* marriages to later deny these marriages, leaving their wives in legal limbo and socially stigmatized (Rashad et al., 2005, p. 7).

Other innovations and alternatives to traditional forms of marriage that are less common in Egypt than in other parts of the Arab world are *mut'aa* and *misyar* marriages (Singerman, 2007). *Misyar* is ambulant, "passersby," or transient marriage. In this form of marriage, the husband is not legally obliged in the marriage contract to provide housing or financial support for the wife but only visits her. Many have labelled it as a "marriage of convenience" where the spouses can customize, add or remove any conditions to the marriage contract (Singerman, 2007). The

79

controversy about *mut'aa* (temporary) marriage lies in that the marriage contract specifies an end date for the marriage. It is practiced mostly among Shia Muslims. Therefore, it might not be as common in Egypt, a Sunni majority country, compared to Iran or Iraq, for example. Further research that considers such forms of marriage, especially involving Syrian refugee populations in countries with more significant Shia presence, such as Lebanon, would complement this dissertation's scope. *Urfi*, *mut'aa* and *misyar* offer a quasi-legitimate route to sexual relations, even if not socially approved, and decrease the number of unmarried women. Nevertheless, they still raise concerns, especially when it comes to sexual and gender-based violence.

Marriage among relatives, especially cousins, a practice known as consanguinity, is prevalent and acceptable in the Arab world (Rashad et al., 2005). While not necessarily arranged and often reflects the desires of the partners, such marriages do have some health implications for the offspring. In Egypt, marriage to relatives is prevalent, estimated at a quarter to a third of all marriages (Singerman, 2008, p. 12). One explanation could be that both sides of the family are familiar with one another and have a strong "blood bond." Thus, it might be believed that marrying a relative would lower the chances of mistreatment, divorce, or divorce complications. In other words, when the partners are related, and the families know each other, it is seen to lower the chances of violence or tension within marriage or amid divorce disputes. More importantly, it can make financial sense (Singerman, 2008; Rashad et al., 2005). Some studies cite that marrying a relative decreases the cost of marriage on average by 25 percent (Singerman, 2007). While the cost of the *mahr* (similar to dowry or bridewealth that is given to the bride-to-be) stays the same, the cost of housing, which is often the most expensive element in the cost of marriage, is reduced by half simply because many consanguineous couples end up living with extended family (Singerman, 2008).

Finally, marrying non-Egyptians has become an increasingly appealing option, mainly for Egyptian men. Marriage to foreigners is a trend that has taken over the Arab world, even if for different reasons. As Singerman (2007) puts it:

> Another quite common substitute for marriage that reduces marriage costs is marrying a foreigner. Whether Saudis marry Indonesians, Yemenis, or Egyptians, Lebanese marry Syrians, Moroccans marry the French, or Egyptians marry Americans or Palestinians, these marriages typically involve lower costs, financial incentives, or access to precious resources such as visas and foreign citizenship (p. 31).

Against this backdrop, this chapter aims to deconstruct the exploitation narrative by tracing how the image of the Syrian refugee bride emerged as a viable marriage alternative among other innovations for many Egyptian men (and their families). I do that by tracing the social and economic conditions that helped crystalize the "Syrian brides" phenomenon. Two major underlying factors that were frequently referenced by the wives, husbands, and family members I interviewed are the financial cost of the marriage and the desirability of Syrian femininity. Having provided an overview of the meaning, dynamics and forms of marriage in mostly middle-class Egypt, in the remainder of this chapter, I focus on the first of those two factors that are arguably the main drivers behind seeking Syrian brides in Egypt: the (increasing) cost of marriage.

I start by describing the matrimonial transactions and the negotiations that precede the marriage and elaborate on how they create a security precaution for the bride and her family (i.e. offer leverage or empowerment). The discussion of these negotiations will serve as a backdrop for the subsequent analysis of the difference between marriage economics in the Egyptian versus the Syrian contexts and how it impacted the marriage dynamics between Egyptian husbands and

Syrian wives. A question here is whether the marriage cost (dictated by different cultural practices) was the main motivation behind Egyptian men seeking Syrian wives.

4.3. Marriage Economics: Matrimonial Transactions, Marriage Negotiation and Power Dynamics

Like many aspects of society, marriage in Egypt is highly regulated by religion, which in turn is influenced by the legal aspect of the marriage, customs, and social norms. Such customs and norms dictate gendered roles and responsibilities in a traditional marriage. According to most common interpretations of Islamic texts, the man is responsible for his family's financial support. The family here includes not just the wife and children in a nuclear family sense, but also ageing parents, unmarried sisters, younger brothers, and their brothers' orphans, among others (Hoodfar, 1998; Kholoussy 2010). While the total cost of marriage (including the wedding ceremony, the cost of the residence of the spouses, furniture etc.) is often shared among multiple individuals, including the bride, the groom and their families, the primary burden for the cost of marriage, however, rests on the groom and his family, who provide around three-quarters of all expenses (Singerman 2008; Kholoussy, 2010; Salem, 2018). It is, thus, essential for Egyptian women and their families to maximize their gains in the marriage before sealing the contract and legalizing the marriage.

Mahr (a form of bridewealth)[13] is a necessary element of an Islamic marriage contract. Various Muslim cultures ascribe differing levels of importance to it, however. For instance, while it is mostly symbolic in Tunisia, it plays a more integral role in cultures such as Saudi Arabia, where it is often a reflection of social class, or in Egypt, where it is often set beyond the means of the groom as a precaution against spontaneous, reckless or unwanted divorce (Hoodfar, 1998, 103). It

is important to be aware of the variation among social classes and even between urban and rural areas in the Egyptian context in determining the amount of *mahr*. For instance, rural and urban lower classes simply follow the norm in the area without much say from the bride's family. For our study, which focuses on urban middle-class marriages, *mahr* is often regarded as a security measure. Understanding *mahr* dynamics is essential to understanding its implications throughout the marriage. Hoodfar (1998) clarifies that *mahr* is mostly understood as a debt from the man to the wife, where at least some of it: *mo'akhar* (or the amount that had not been paid before the consummation of the marriage) is due upon death or the termination of the marriage contract, especially, if the man sought a unilateral, unsolicited, unjustified or arbitrary divorce.

Many studies have tried to track the cost of marriage in Egypt. Salem (2018), for instance, contends that "matrimonial exchanges absorb about three years of the average groom's total earnings and half a year of the average bride's earnings" (p. 2616). In fact, Singerman explained that "the cost of a single marriage was eleven times average annual household expenditures per capita. The average cost of marriage was equal to the entire expenditures of all the members of a household for two and one-half full years" (Singerman, 2008, p. 8). Consequently, policymakers and religious figures have increasingly called for women to reduce the material demands to overcome the economic crisis of marriage. Although this may seem like an obvious solution, brides and their families realize it would reduce a set of complex social concerns into an overly simple remedy favouring would-be husbands.

While reducing the economic demands of marriage negotiations might alleviate the problems associated with the expense of marriage, in the view of the brides' family, it would contribute to the disempowerment of the woman in the household. Salem (2018) posited that empirical evidence from Asia, the Middle East and Africa indicated, for instance, that "a larger [*mahr*] increases the

probability that the husband performs more household chores" (p. 2619). Additionally, Salem's study (2018) on matrimonial transactions and women's power in Egypt demonstrates how the portion of the marriage cost covered by the bride and her side of the family gives the bride an advantage. It not only proves that the bride has the support of her family who invested in their daughter's marriage, but it also works to compensate and equalize gaps between the bride and groom (p. 2615). For instance, if there is a large gap between the spouses' levels of education, the bride's family will contribute more to compensate for this shortcoming in their daughter. Other studies referred to how as the bride's age increases, the *mahr* decreases, lowering the marriage's overall cost (Singerman, 2008). Salem (2018) concluded that for matrimonial transactions in Egyptian marriages, "[a]n expensive *mahr* expresses the high regard the groom and his family hold for a bride, but a dower of low value represents a bride's disadvantaged position vis-à-vis her husband and his kin" (p. 2620). Another element that plays an important role in balancing the power relation between the spouses is a unique institution, practiced exclusively in Egypt: the marriage inventory or the *kayma* or colloquially *ayma* (literally "the list"). Through this system, "all the household goods purchased by the bride and groom, in addition to the bride's gold and the deferred dower [*mu'akhar*], are listed in the marriage inventory, along with an inflated estimate of their monetary value" (Salem, 2018, p. 2623). This additional security precaution allows the wife to claim these items or the equivalent sum of money from the husband or his family, especially in scenarios such as an abusive relationship, unilateral divorce by the husband, a second wife, or the death of the husband.

Thus, the economic aspect of marriage in Egypt plays a major role in the marriage's success, not simply to make it (un)feasible financially but to set the tone for the power dynamics in the marriage (Singerman, 2008; Salem, 2018). The next section will reveal the crucial role of the *ayma*

system of marriage in dictating power dynamics among Egyptian couples–increasing it, in many cases, for women. As expressed by many of my respondents, men, women, and families, it is also a central reason that pushed men away from Egyptian women and towards Syrian women, who culturally do not practice *ayma* (list) system.

4.3.1. *Marriage Economics in Egyptian versus Syrian Marriage Traditions*

As reiterated over and over in my interviews with both Egyptian and Syrian participants, a significant difference between Egyptian and Syrian traditional marriage might seem to lie in the division of marriage costs. The discussions above reveal the importance of the financial aspect in setting the tone of the marriage dynamic. In a Sunni Syrian marriage, the bride's family is responsible only for the engagement celebration, and the groom is responsible for everything else. This includes all financial aspects, including *mahr* (bridewealth), housing, *kiswa* (the bride's trousseau) and celebration (Singerman, 2001). In return, the wife and her family accept whatever the man offers and 'formally' do not have a say in picking and choosing house furniture and items. Unlike in the Egyptian *ayma* (list) system, whereby a wife could request a monetary equivalence of a list of the main household items inventory, in the case of a divorce, a Syrian woman returns to her parents' house without retaining any household items. It is, yet, acceptable for the bride's family to contribute gifts such as a few household items (usually appliances) if they are financially able (Singerman 2008; Kholoussy, 2010; Salem, 2018).

Most of the respondents married in what they termed "the Syrian way," as opposed to "the Egyptian way." They defended this choice, explaining their belief that a man should "work hard" to find a suitable wife. They perceived any involuntary contributions from a bride's side or her family as a direct humiliation to a man and his masculinity. Additionally, they stressed that because they lost most of their financial resources after arriving in Egypt, they cannot afford to marry "the

Egyptian way." One of the respondents, Latifa, who is a Palestinian-Syrian, explained this rationale to her suitor and his mediator as follows:

> *I cannot afford household and* gihaz *(furniture) expenses like Egyptian women.*
> *I told them I am not Egyptian. Palestinian women do not contribute anything.*
> *They pay her money for marriage because our men work from a very early age,*
> *so they do not take anything from the woman. They consider the woman's*
> *contribution as a* sadaqa *(charity), and he cannot accept* sadaqa *because he is*
> *a man and is able to afford it. This is why I am astonished by how Egyptian*
> *women and men accept it on themselves and for their women to contribute to*
> *the marriage. This is charity.*

A few of the respondents were half-joking when they said they would marry their daughters the Syrian way and their sons the Egyptian way because it makes the most financial sense for them. They stressed the importance of keeping their demands reasonable, and in fact, many spoke of how they are not supposed to have a say in what the groom offers for *mahr*. They do not view it from the balance of power perspective that Egyptian families perceive.

On the other hand, some of the respondents ended up marrying "the Egyptian way", or a modified version of it. Sometimes this was because the Syrian women "went with the flow" of their new cultural context as their husbands followed the familiar tradition. Other times Syrian women adapted to "the Egyptian way" when their prospective husband could not afford a significant *mahr* (bridewealth) and *shabka* (jewelry). They were compensated by having the husband write the rest of the *mahr* in the form of an *ayma* (the inventory list), which as mentioned is a common practice in Egypt. For a third group, adapting to marriage arrangements embracing the "the Egyptian way" was the bride or her family's decision. They opted to split the cost of

marriage for two main reasons: first, they could afford to contribute, and second, they wanted to

respect the Egyptian traditions. For Zena (mid-20's) and her family, it was a matter of dignity:

> *I: And why did you choose the Egyptian way and the* ayma *system?*

> *R: My dad wanted to respect the traditions of the country we are in. Second of*
> *all, and most importantly, we are not the kind of family that would take*
> *advantage of a man even if we justify it by tradition. I started hearing that many*
> *Syrians married their daughters and receives 10 thousand (EGP)… are you*
> *selling her? My dad has dignity, and he said no […]* Mahr *and* shabka *are the*
> *groom's responsibility, and the rest was divided like the customs here.*

Zena's rationale corresponds with Salem's (2018) conclusions, mentioned in the previous section,

about the power of the financial contribution in showing family support to the bride.

Conversely, Nouran, another Syrian respondent in her early 30s, chose "the Egyptian way,"

as she found that it corresponded with her independent personality and personal preferences. She

came from a highly educated family, had a good job back in Syria, and continued to be in decent

employment in Egypt. Accordingly, she had sufficient savings to contribute to the marriage:

> *I: Did you get married the Syrian or the Egyptian way?*

> *R: No, you can say it was more like the Egyptian way. On the one hand, we did*
> *not write an official* ayma*, and we kept it friendly, but for his parents, the rule*
> *was that the bride is responsible for the kitchenware and appliances. I also am*
> *the kind that does not like it when others buy me things.*

> *I: Does that have to do with your own background?*

R: No, it is just a personality trait. So, for instance, when we go shopping to buy a couch, and it costs 2000 (EGP), and he has 1500 (EGP), I would simply tell him I will cover the difference.

I: Do you think this way is better or the Syrian way?

R: I personally think that it does not look nice that the groom would bring everything, and the bride is an additional item on top of all that, and she contributes nothing.

It was not clear during the interview if Nouran's opinion was a reflection of her social class. However, when I interviewed her mother, it became clear that they held incredibly different points of view, not only about the economics of marriage but also about class and who qualifies as a good husband. Nouran's marriage to her Egyptian husband was her first marriage, compared to many other respondents who had been married before. Unlike the typical compliant first timers in her country (*bint*: girl), she had to fight her parents to obtain their approval. Moreover, even though Nouran grew up in the same culture as her Syrian refugee peers who, like Latifa, perceived any sort of contribution from the bride's side as a form of humiliation, she had a completely different point of view. She felt her financial contribution to the marriage gave her more control over the household (Salem, 2018). Even though she and her mother had opposing opinions, she implied that her socio-economic background (growing up in a family where both parents worked as engineers) gave her a different idea about the meaning of femininity and masculinity and marital gender relations. Thus, separating marriage economics from gender relations and the meaning of femininity and masculinity might be tricky. Below, I examine the relationship between gender identities, marriage economics and socio-economic backgrounds.

4.3.2. *Marriage Economics, Cultural Tensions and Marital "Success"*

I would like to restate here that the respondents (women, men, and families) interpret marriages through a lens of cultural difference. That is to say, even while 'the West' imposes problematic homogenizing concepts of culture on the Orient, there are self-perceived cultural differences between persons located in 'the East,' even within same religious groupings. Many of my respondents constantly referred to cultural differences, habits and worldviews. The above case of different marriage customs, arrangement and their underlying philosophies is but one.

In this sense, and based on the discussion in the previous section around the roles played by the monetary aspect in marriage arrangements and dynamics, two interrelated questions help us explore the different respondents' perceptions regarding financial arrangements and their inter-cultural marriages: (a) does the tradition of marriage (i.e. Egyptian v. Syrian) affect the marital relationship, marriage dynamics and the success of the marriage? And (b) whether lowering the marriage cost was, in fact, one of the Egyptian men's motivations to marry Syrian women? In general, reaching a conclusive consensus regarding either of these two questions, especially as they also varied across respondents of diverse socio-economic backgrounds, is difficult. Most responses are anecdotal comments from both men and women that reflect personal experiences or hearsay more than general attitudes and trends.

Regarding the role of the marriage's cultural dynamics in determining its success, some stories pointed to a lack of seriousness from the husband's side regarding divorce. They also demonstrated arbitrariness and ease in divorcing their Syrian wife or letting her go after the first setback. Fatma, the youngest divorcee I have interviewed, told me she was abandoned without hesitation after the couple's first fight. Specifically, after she had decided not to stay quiet during a disagreement and

"talked back" to her husband. Her story reflects one of the extreme cases that reinforce media narratives of exploitation and victimization.

Fatma was 21 at the time I interviewed her. She explained that she stayed for three years with her mother when she moved to Egypt, and she was very bored initially. When she was introduced to her ex-husband, her initial impression was positive, but she was a bit concerned about his mother's level of control and involvement in their life. On many occasions, and whenever she tried to express any form of objection or dissatisfaction, such as jealousy, her mother-in-law would imply that if she was not comfortable with her situation, "she could leave." In trying to understand the reason behind her "easy and quick divorce," she explained that her mother-in-law often implied that since Fatma was not contributing to the marriage financially, the groom's family should pick and choose everything. While this comment upset her, Fatma was afraid to complain during the engagement because it was all new to her, and she was worried they would call the engagement off. Ending the engagement would bring her back to boredom, and she had started to grow fond of her then-fiancé. Below, Fatma was responding to my question regarding the financial arrangement of the marriage:

> R: He said I want her as is.
>
> I: So, he agreed to your terms that you are not contributing financially to the marriage.
>
> R: Yes, he just wants me with my suitcase.
>
> I: Did you feel that this has affected the balance of power in your relationship?

R: Not initially, but for example, his mother said if you are not contributing,

then we get to buy what we think is best for the house.

In reflecting on her divorce, she concluded that because she did not contribute to the marriage, she was viewed by her husband and his family as a charity case who should be grateful to be saved from displacement and therefore had no rights. Fatma felt used and cheated after the divorce. This case is similar to that of Asmaa, mid-forties, where financial arrangements have also contributed to her marriage's rough ending. In Asmaa's case, however, it was not the lack of her financial contribution that caused the problem; in fact, it was the large sum of her *mahr* that did.

Asmaa was in her early 40s when I interviewed her. She started the interview by telling me that their Syrian neighbours were not speaking to her or her family because of her questionable and failed marriage to an Egyptian. She married "the Syrian way" to a well-off Egyptian man as a second wife in an *urfi* (customary) marriage that was kept secret from his first wife. In the beginning, he stayed with her for one week, after which he only visited once every month or two. During his visit, he would only stay for one hour for the sole purpose of intercourse. Feeling exploited and ashamed about this "lawful prostitution," Asmaa eventually told her father she wanted a divorce. Although they had been married for eight months, her ex-husband, who expressed his regret for "cheating" on his first wife and family, did not hesitate. However, he had a condition: Asmaa's family had to return the *mahr,* which was around fifteen thousand American dollars. Ten thousand dollars had been paid as *muqaddam* (before the marriage commences), and five thousand were *mu'akhar* (deferred to any point after marriage commencement and in many cases only paid in case of divorce), which was never paid and had become a central cause for disagreement from both sides. When her family refused to return the money, Asmaa's ex-husband

decided to go to her conservative neighbourhood and expose the details of their marital life to put pressure on her family through shaming them:

> *R: In front of everyone... He started yelling in the street, "my first wife and my second wife are the same in bed," ... he was acting crazy. If you want to divorce me, why mention the bedroom? In front of the neighbours, he wanted them to hear; he wanted to humiliate me.*
>
> *I: Why do you think he wanted that?*
>
> *R: Because of the 10 thousand dollars. Because he paid them, then he regretted it. He would tell me you stole this money. He tried many times before, he would send people, and he would threaten to call the police on us or report us to the Syrian regime: "I will report your names to the embassy that you stole my money."*

Asmaa's marriage and *mahr* (bridewealth), the equivalent of 200 thousand Egyptian pounds, were by no means cheaper than an average urban middle-class Egyptian marriage. However, in contrast to Salem's (2018) conclusion about the relationship between the amount of *mahr* and power balance within a marriage, the *mahr* amount did not lead to more empowerment or respect for Asmaa. It was certainly not a strong reason to keep the marriage intact as well.

For some husbands still, marriage to a Syrian woman was seen as an economic solution to making an affordable marriage and finding a suitable housewife. This was especially relevant to working-class Egyptian men or those who have a relatively high education level but are still struggling financially. During interviews with both men and women, it was insinuated that "the Egyptian way" would make it impossible for men "who are not millionaires" to marry. Thus, the

Syrian woman "gave them an alternative," as Galaa, one of the mature Syrian women respondents, mentioned. This alternative was not solely related to stereotypical beliefs that Syrian women are more feminine and better housewives than their Egyptian counterparts, but also because Syrian families are more lenient about financial terms and marriage conditions, as demonstrated in the previous section. Not surprisingly, such lenience has increased due to displacement.

Some working-class husbands I interviewed referred explicitly to the lower cost of the marriage as an incentive for marrying a Syrian woman. Hamdy, who married a divorced Syrian, was trying to distance himself from exploitation narratives by admitting they exist and emphasizing that his case was the exception. Nevertheless, he explained why such exploitative marriages existed, building his explanation on hearsay rather than personal experience:

> R: Listen, there are young men in Egypt who took advantage of their [Syrian women's] circumstances. That they are on their own and without a man, so, they start to get a bit greedy […] she is in the country alone with no money, and she has financial needs, and also, she needs a man.
>
> I: and have you met cases similar to what you are describing?
>
> R: Yes, I know people like this. But of course, I met them after I got married. I met people and heard stories.
>
> I: and what would they tell you when you ask them?
>
> R: I mean, in the beginning, it's like that [meaning exploitation]. That she is alone, and he can marry her for cheap and that he has nothing to lose. But over time, most start to develop attachment.

On the other hand, Mahmoud, a happily married affluent husband, expressed criticism of "the Egyptian way" since it offers only the illusion of protection to women. He explained that a groom could agree to a *mahr* (bridewealth) and an expensive *mo'akhar* (the deferred part of the mahr) which is typically used to protect against arbitrary divorce, only to turn his wife's life into hell if he cannot divorce her because he cannot pay. He logically concludes that she would then want a divorce even if it meant giving up that *mo'akhar*.

Similarly, although a groom could get his bride a very expensive *shabka* (jewelry gift), he can sell it after marriage. Thus, Mahmoud thinks "the Egyptian way" creates the illusion of women's control and empowerment while still creating significant financial stress for grooms. He explained his appreciation of the Syrian way, not primarily for affordability, but for the flexibility and the lenience:

> *We initially agreed to split it (the marriage expenses) like the Egyptian way, and that she will contribute with me. Then, I spoke to her mom, and I started appreciating their way. Her mother told me that I could contribute what I want and what I can to the household. She told me, "This is your house, you arrange it however you prefer. If you want to buy new furniture or used furniture, it is up to you. But in Syria, our tradition is that the groom is responsible for everything". I found that there were no obligations or conditions. I could afford more than what an Egyptian bride would afford, but it would be my choice, no obligations.*

Ahmed, another respondent who was struggling financially, provided a different rationale for why marrying a Syrian wife made financial sense to him. He had been married twice before, worked abroad and had an acceptable level of education. He had been married to his Syrian wife,

Aisha, for more than two years at the time of our interview. They already have two children together, in addition to his two older boys from a previous marriage. For him, his wife is "a catch" that he appreciates but he also recognizes that he married her at a "discounted price." He clarified that marrying an Egyptian woman with the same social and educational background, or as he puts it, a girl that is *bent nas* (a girl from a proper family, with a proper education) would have been impossible:

> *Do you want the truth since you are doing research? If I marry an Egyptian woman who is* bent nas*, she would cost me a lot. So, to find someone like my current wife but Egyptian would cost me a lot. But with a Syrian woman, you can find* bent nas*, and she costs you nothing [brief pause]. That is not what I meant! I meant it would not cost as much.*

Ahmed's situation meant he had some clear disadvantages. He has been divorced twice, has two boys, and it was a struggle for him to keep a job for long. While the affordability of marrying a high-quality wife mattered to him, his top priority was to find a wife who would accept his two children and treat them with kindness. In their separate confidential interviews, both he and his wife agreed that she is "out of his league" and that her refugee status had led her to settle for a less advantageous marriage than she might have attained had she remained in Syria. Aisha's *mahr* was 2500 Egyptian pounds (equivalent to 140 USD), but for her, the compromise was not about the amount of *mahr,* so much as in settling for a divorced man with children for her first marriage. Ultimately, she did express affection for him and stated that her home is now Egypt, as it is where her family is.

The participants in this research did not echo media rhetoric that portrayed Syrian families as selling their daughters as brides. At least their first-hand experience did not echo it. More

specifically, Syrian women marrying Egyptian men do seem to have the final say in accepting or rejecting a marriage. Additionally, there was evidence that matrimonial transactions played a role in setting the tone for marriage dynamics and power balance. That said, I will demonstrate later that gendered power dynamics between spouses were also highly dependent on other factors, the most important of which is the woman's social and moral gains from the marriage.

Displacement has indeed led Syrian families to be more lenient in their financial demands. It has also propelled some Syrian women to compromise their image of an ideal husband (Barkan, 2012; Bartels et al., 2018; Bayoumi, 2013). That said, one cannot simply conclude that a Syrian wife makes more economic sense than an Egyptian wife. Such an assumption will not hold, for instance, when trying to explain why better-off grooms seek Syrian women, often as second wives. More than half of my sample included women who are or initially were second wives. So, while financial considerations played an incentive for Egyptian men and Syrian women to marry in certain cases and among certain social groups more than others, it makes sense now to explore the second element to complete the picture: Syrian ideals of femininity which will be the focus of the next chapter.

4.4. Concluding remarks

This chapter commenced the examination of some core elements to understanding marriage for refuge as a stigmatized phenomenon and the experiences of Syrian refugee women involved in such arrangements. Namely, it addressed the questions: (a) What are the Syrian-Egyptian marriage dynamics in the context of displacement, and how do different cultural customs play a role in dictating the experiences? And (b) How has displacement influenced some Syrian refugee

women's gender identities and consequently their interpretation of marriage as a viable option in resettlement?

This chapter aims to understand the context and background into which Syrian Muslim refugee women who marry Egyptians enter and navigate. I address a central question in the quest to demystify the marriage for refuge phenomenon and scrutinize the exploitation narrative that "Syrian refugees are cheaper, prettier, better cooks and easier to marry" (Youssef & Ismail, 2013). I started by asking whether the lower cost of marriage was the main factor in explaining why Egyptian men seek Syrian wives? I trace how aspects such as monetary transactions: *mahr* (bridewealth), *shabka* (jewelry gift), and *ayma* (furniture list) play a significant role in shaping the marriage and the spousal relationship, and consequently in shaping the power dynamics of the husband and wife. In some cases, I showcase how, especially with lower-income groups, a Syrian wife offered an alternative to many Egyptian grooms' increasing financial demands. The different cultural habits, namely the lack of the Egyptian *ayma* system and the financial leniency of Syrian families, which was evidently exacerbated by displacement, played a role in gravitating some financially struggling Egyptian men towards marriage with Syrian refugee women. Nevertheless, as we will see in the coming chapter, these factors do not explain why most of the cases I interviewed were polygamous, which by the same logic, should roughly duplicate the financial cost of marriage.

In the next chapter, to conclude the discussion of how and why marriage for refuge has crystalized as a phenomenon in Egypt and set the tone for how Syrian refugee women navigated and sometimes leveraged such circumstances, I examine a second factor that complements the context. I trace how the meanings of femininity and masculinity, in both the Egyptian men's and Syrian women's imaginations, play an important role in affecting marriage choices and dynamics.

Even if an important element, I argue that the cost of marriage is less relevant to Egyptian men than other factors when pursuing a Syrian wife. That is seeking fetishized and idealized normative forms of femininity and masculinity. This should the tone for a later chapter where I look at other intervening elements that played an influential role in affecting the power dynamics in the Syrian women's marriages, namely, the socio-economic status of the partners and their families. I also introduce two concepts: *sanad* (social network/capital) and *sutra* (sheltering or protection) that help complete the picture about the motivations for and the dynamics of marriage for refuge. Two sociological notions: Bourdieu's (1989) symbolic capital and Christman's (2004) relational autonomy are central to understanding how the respondents have utilized *sanad* and *sutra* and relied on their intersectional identities to maximize their agency.

5. Chapter Five: Seeking A Syrian Bride: Understanding Desirable Femininity

In the previous chapter, I had focused on the first of two factors arguably contributing to materializing the marriage for refuge phenomenon in Egypt, as mentioned by my respondents: men, women, and their extended families. I elaborated on the central role played by the financial cost of marriage in influencing the choices of some men, especially those belonging to the working class, to seek a Syrian bride. Nevertheless, I argue that financial considerations alone are not sufficient to understand the reasons and motivations. In this chapter, I attend to another important factor that influenced the perception of Syrian women as desirable brides: the Syrian women's embodiment of femininity.

This chapter, thus, continues the discussion which focused on two central questions: (a) What are the Syrian-Egyptian marriage dynamic (in the context of displacement) and how intersectional factors play a role in dictating the resettlement experiences, and (b) How has displacement (re)shaped some Syrian refugee women's gender identities and consequently their interpretation of the marriage as a viable option in resettlement?

I begin the chapter by exploring gender roles and relations. Namely, how both men and women negotiate their relationships and how women use various strategies to influence the household. Against this backdrop, I move to discuss the central question examining how my respondents (men and women) perceive femininity as embodied differently when Syrian and Egyptian women are compared, and whether such difference has influenced Egyptian men's decision to seek a Syrian bride. In the analysis, I begin with an overview of how displacement has impacted the expression of femininity among Syrian refugee women in Egypt, more often than not, through challenging

the obedient wife stereotype. I then outline the perception and meaning of femininity as conveyed by the Syrian wives and Egyptian husbands whom I interviewed and how Egyptian and Syrian femininities are portrayed against each other in three main areas: public interactions, domestic roles, and work.

5.1. Desirable Femininity and Masculinity: A Dance of Honour and Protection

In this case study, I analyze how intersectional elements such as nationality and immigration status, but also more indirect ones such as age, previous marriage experience, urban versus rural background and socio-economic aspects impact the Syrian respondents' understanding of their marriage experiences. Such intersectionality also reveals sharp variations in the understanding and embodiment of masculinity and femininity between Egyptian and Syrian women, as the analysis will trace. I understand femininity and masculinity as "a collective of norms and values that inform behaviour expected of women [and men] in their self-representation in various sociocultural contexts" (Jaji, 2015, p. 495). Gender identity in the Arab world is also premised on a heteronormative and cis-gendered worldview accompanied by ideals of hegemonic masculinity and submissive femininity (Jaji, 2015).

Central to the discussion here is patriarchy. The term patriarchy started to be used by feminist scholars, especially from the 1960s onward, to refer to a socio-political system of male domination and female subordination and an institutionalized worldview that privileges men's superiority over women (Quek, 2019). As Denise Kandiyoti (1988) postulated, the term patriarchy often invokes "an overly monolithic conception of male dominance, which is treated at a level of abstraction that obfuscates rather than reveals the intimate inner workings of culturally and historically distinct arrangements between the genders" (p. 275). It is important to keep in mind the multiplicity of

forms patriarchy could embody with varying cultural contexts. Moreover, Feminist theorizations

about patriarchy revolutionized the analysis and understanding of gender inequality and gender

violence with its many forms (Quek, 2019, p. 116). This chapter focuses on patriarchy in the Arab

world, which, as we will see, has even more distinctive features and levels of intensity across Arab

countries. Arab patriarchy constitutes the adoption of different cultural and class-specific strategies

by women in dealing with them in what Kandiyoti (1988) coined the term: "patriarchal bargain"

(i.e., women conforming with patriarchal rules in order to gain some benefit). In the Arab world,

in general, patriarchy plays a significant role in dictating the rules of the marriage game. In this

part of the world, then, patriarchy can be defined loosely as the structures of power that endorse

the primacy of men and consolidate gendered roles that sustain the separation between the public

and private spheres. That is, women rear children in the privacy of the family and men earn the

family income in the public sphere (Botman, 1999, p. 107). This manifests in a gendered division

of labour and in other indicators that pose unequal obstacles in front of men and women, such as

age. For instance, Hoodfar's (1998) Egyptian women respondents were convinced that regardless

of a man's circumstances or age, he can always find a wife, unlike women who after hitting a

certain age might face limited options. Other studies have also concluded that statistically, the

older the bride's age, the lower her *mahr* (Salem, 2018). Patriarchy also dictates the ideals of

gender roles, gender norms and gender relations.

However, empirical research points to a shift in understandings of both femininity and

masculinity in the Arab world over the last few decades, as I will trace in the next section (Salem,

2018). Newly emerging meanings and embodiment of femininity and masculinity play a role in

shaping general attitudes and preferences for an ideal partner and marriage dynamics. I refer to the

relationship between femininity and masculinity in Egypt and the Middle East, more or less, as *a*

dance of honour and protection. I discuss each: feminine honour and masculine protection, in the below two sections where I focus on two elements: the changes in the meaning and embodiment of masculinity and femininity and the change in the relationship between men and women.

5.1.1. *Masculinity and "Being A Man" Through Protection*

Just like their women counterparts, men face social pressures they have to comply with and expectations they have to meet (Ghannam, 2013). Ghannam's (2013) ethnography studied masculinity or *ruguula*[14] and its embodiment in an Egyptian low-income neighbourhood in north Cairo. She captured the meaning of masculinity as a "collective project that is negotiated through interactions between private and public, men and women, young and old, parents and children, neighbours and strangers, friends and foes, community members and outsiders." (p. 3). Ghannam posited that masculinity is not linked mainly to sexual performance; instead, "*ruguula* is a multidimensional, contextual and contingent process… strongly linked to good grooming, nice manners, fashionable clothes, skill in navigating the city, assertiveness and courage, the ability to provide for one's family and the knowledge about when to use violence" (p. 24).

Moreover, Ghannam traces the caveats of the patriarchal rules that generally result in unequal rights to both genders, especially around the occupation of public space. For instance, although young men are usually granted more freedom than women in going out and spending money on appearance and pleasure, after a certain age, usually by their mid-twenties, they are expected to become more responsible and start saving to get married and create a family. At this phase of the age-delimited trajectory that carries varying social expectations and norms, finding a spouse becomes central to masculinity and a source of significant social pressure; note that heterosexuality and the desire to marry are taken for granted, as mentioned above. Ghannam's stories illustrate that manhood needs to be asserted and re-established over time, in various contexts and to several

audiences (p. 83). While many of the respondents in Ghannam's study emphasized the non-financial traits such as generosity, emotional containment, and honesty in their understanding of *ruguula* or masculinity, some have also emphasized the ability to provide (e.g., Housing and finances). Having a decent job, however, was a significant point of tension in those gender dynamics.

As elaborated later in the chapter, in marriage for refuge, a central indicator of a women's success in seeking social and economic protection from marriage manifests in finding a husband who can provide financially and offer her the social status of a married woman. Mohra, one of the respondents in my study who was in her mid-twenties, explained how she felt deceived and had lost all respect for her husband, who is not working and fails to provide for her and her children:

> *R: Now I wish I could work, any kind of work. I told him to let me learn how to sew. Forgive me, but I feel sorry for myself when I come to a charitable organization. I still have not received any donations yet; I just applied. I also applied for the Carrefour [grocery store] card, but it has not been issued yet. But deep inside, I feel sorry for myself. When you [referring to her husband] spoke to me before getting married, you told me, "You and your children are under my protection… what does this promise mean? We are your responsibility, and you should provide for us. since I started applying for all these charities, I cannot accept him anymore. The way I look at him is different…*
>
> *I: Based on that, how do you compare your first Syrian husband and your current Egyptian one?*

R: A huge difference! In the treatment, in the manners, in the way he shows

love and appreciation.

I: What about in terms of manhood?

R: Of course. For instance, if my first husband were still alive, it would be

impossible for him to let me go to these charities. He would rather die. If he

ended up begging in the streets, it would have been better for him than

putting me in this position

In Mohra's case above, this was her second marriage after her first husband died in the war, and she was her current husband's only wife during the time of the interview. The notion of providing or failure to provide was central to Mohra's definition of masculinity.

Moreover, Suerbaum's (2018) study of the meaning of masculinity among Syrian refugee men in Egypt touches on many of the themes I discuss above. Her analysis confirms the centrality of the separation between the public and private spheres: work, providing and offering protection for the man and compliance, docility and domesticity for the women and how such division reinforces the meanings of femininity and masculinity. Thus, the concept of work was a constant point of tension to reinforce masculinity (through the ability to provide) and femininity (through being provided for and not "needing" to work). Here, Suerbaum alludes to Syrian men respondents' opinions of acceptable forms of women's work that do not threaten desirable femininities and masculinities:

Working for pleasure, education, or networking [among women] was acceptable. However, a woman's contribution to the household translated into shame for her husband […] The common perception was that a woman had the right to be

supported by her husband, which means that he must feed the family. In return, it

is the woman's obligation to create a home (p. 667).

She also records some of her Syrian men respondents' opinions and explanations that reinforce their convictions about women's work after displacement in Egypt. For instance, many of her respondents believed that "Syrian women would not be able to handle the responsibility of starting their own businesses because they had not been exposed to work in Syria" (p. 677). Her fieldwork brings evidence that Syrian women are visibly working in Egypt in diverse fields. This gives better insight into Mohra's frustration. When she was comparing her late Syrian husband and her current Egyptian husband, she was not so much frustrated by her Egyptian husband's unemployment as much as finding herself providing for him. What made the situation worse for her is that he did not mind his wife accepting financial assistance from charitable agencies to do so. His lack of motivation to find a job and acceptance of his wife's "charity" was the main reason for her to lose respect for him as a man, more so than his inability to provide *per se*.

That is to say, masculinity is defined by femininity and through gendered interactions. They are relational and are produced together so that one is defined in counterpoint to the other (Connell 1998, p. 7; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Specific to the Egyptian context and largely across classes and locations, women play an active role in shaping the masculine trajectory. It is through interaction, rather than separation between men and women, that gendered identifications are established. Back to Ghannam's (2013) study, she traces how women keenly strive to protect their male relatives' economic and social vulnerabilities. They contribute to the masculine trajectory by "conforming to the social norms that define their responsibilities as dutiful daughters, obedient wives, and respectful sisters… they instruct their sons, brothers, husbands and male neighbours about the proper way of being a man" (p. 88).

The wife-husband relationship, specifically, is central to the construction of masculinity. "The wife is the one who can make the husband feel his *ruguula* [manhood] if she respects her husband and his family, obeys his wishes, especially in front of others and takes care of their home…he would feel he is a real good man" (Ghannam, 2013, p. 83). Ghannam notes that men are chastised as less manly for helping their wives with household chores, even if during the wife's pregnancy. Thus, a husband's ability to provide for his wife while asserting his dominance inside the house is central to their relationship. In Egypt, it is not only men who believe they are the primary breadwinners whose primary duty is to support and protect their wives financially, women themselves have internalized this assumption that men offer them safety (Botman, 1999, p. 107). This idea is not limited to Egypt. For instance, Ghalya, one of the respondents who complained about her Syrian ex-husband's abuse and exploitation, still valued his presence as a 'male figure' in her life because he still offered her this social protection. She echoed a common proverb in Egypt as well as the rest of the Arab world: *dell ragil wala dell heta* (shadow of a man is better than a shadow of a wall)[15]:

> *My relationship with my husband always forced me to depend on myself because*
>
> *he relied on me to take care of the house, including financially. When we arrived*
>
> *in Egypt, he was still reliant on me. When he left, I was relieved, but at least*
>
> *there was a man figure in the house. When the man leaves, people start to gaze*
>
> *at you. I was relieved financially, and from the fact that I had to support him,*
>
> *but at the same time, in front of society, when there is a man, no one will bother*
>
> *you. Shadow of a man is better than a shadow of a wall. This is an accurate*
>
> *proverb. People are not aware of the disagreements between him and me, but*
>
> *they know I have a man. When I walk with him, no one dares to look at it. When*

I am walking alone, everyone wants to flirt, and everyone wants to take a look.

This is everywhere, even in Syria and Aleppo.

This quote well captures how society perceives and treats women without an adult man in the household. We will explore in more detail in later chapters how some of the respondents viewed marriage as "*sanad*" (a social capital or a safety network) and as a means of 'protection' from day-to-day harassment.

5.1.2. *Proper Femininity and Bad Femininity: Honor, Obedience and Domesticity*

Many of the respondents reiterated that ability to protect is at the core of masculinity, and it is the woman's responsibility in exchange to preserve her honour and her family's honour through modesty. The latter is embodied in minute interactions and behaviours described as the ideal notions of femininity, such as not laughing out loud in public or interacting 'straightforwardly' with men (Botman, 1999, p. 108). Naziha, in her mid-forties, articulates this demeanour when she was explaining her initial interaction with her Egyptian husband when they first met as she was looking for an apartment to rent. She explained that while she is confident in her femininity, it is part of this femininity to create a distance between her and people from the opposite sex:

Our nature [as Syrian women] is that we do not joke with men. Everything we do has to be with respect. So, when I entered the place, I told him I had made istikhara (a religious prayer before making a decision). Later he told me that in his head he was thinking: "What a woman! She entered the apartment and didn't even glimpse at me. Her husband must be a lucky man". He saved my number, and I called the next morning to inform him I will not be renting his apartment. This made him think: "This woman is decent, and good people like her must surround her." After two weeks, he called and said there is another

107

apartment available. I expressed my shock and anger about him calling me
without permission. "Who are you to call me? Who said you are allowed to
call me?" He responded, "Do not get me wrong, I have another apartment,
and I wanted to let you know." I simply told him, please delete my number, and
right away I hung up.

She explained how her upfront and reserved reaction with him were the main reasons he became attracted to her, which led him to ask for her hand in marriage. This brings us back to the centrality of honour in dictating the gender dynamics in Arab culture. As Naziha reflected, women behaving in such a way idealizes principles of proper femininity mirrored in modesty, shyness, and confinement to the private sphere.

In her compelling analysis of one of the most popular Syrian TV series: *Baab al Hara*, Zaatari (2015) concluded that one of the main reasons for the show's popularity is that it promotes an antimodern form of masculinity and femininity that signify nostalgic sentiments in the Arab world. She argued that such resurrected sentiments should be regarded as a form of resistance to the current dire social, economic and political conditions in the Middle East. In congruence with this, during my fieldwork, I was advised by one of the respondents to watch this very show because, according to her, it reflected multiple realities and contemporary desires. From my respondent's perspectives, the show carries many notions regarding desirable masculinity and femininity, even though the storyline is set in the early twentieth century during the anti-colonial movements in the region. According to Zaatari, femininity is only seen through masculinity to reinforce the complementary but unequal roles. The show also accentuates elements of desirable and undesirable femininity. Obedience, shyness, modesty, and domesticity seem to be at the center of the equation:

'Good' femininity is also contrasted with 'bad' femininity. While 'good' femininity can be learned through constant policing and feedback, it still appears to be naturalized, not constructed. Some girls are by 'nature' troublesome, thus in need of policing… femininity is most significant in the 'domestic' sphere. In the public sphere, femininity is about being modest, invisible, and quiet. Women pass through the streets fully covered and are expected not to greet anyone, including their relatives [...] Further, 'good' women are happy and eager to prepare lunch and dinner for their brothers, husbands, and fathers. In the show, 'good' femininity is about being shy, loving, obedient, and responsible for one's duties towards one's family. It is about not quarrelling with the neighbours, not raising your voice, ensuring your husband's and your menfolk are not dishonoured (Zaatari 2015, pp. 25-26).

Contrasting Ghannam's ethnography (in the earlier section) with Zaatari's analysis of this dramatic work, both address the hegemonic ideals of manhood and masculinity and "docile" womanhood and femininity. Both studies are very context-specific, but they agree that masculinity and femininity are constructed in similar ways not only in Syria and Egypt but throughout the Arab world. Namely, associating manhood with protecting their women in the public sphere and womanhood with honour, obedience and domesticity. *Baab al Hara* portrays a uniform and idealized image of a "good man"; his masculinity centres on the notion of protection, symbolized in the show by protection against the colonizer. At the same time, Ghannam's research helps us see another element in the picture. The pressure men face to meet such ideals is to seek approval from the surrounding community and how more than often, they fail to. Both studies tackle different historical and geographical contexts that, at the same time, conveniently serve the

theoretical purpose of deconstructing the homogenous image of the Othered Arab men and women. However, the two cases do invite the conversation to discuss the variation in the meaning and embodiment of masculinity and femininity from my Syrian respondents' perspective, especially when it comes to comparing the femininities of Egyptian versus Syrian wives.

5.2. Syrian Ideals of Femininity in The Egyptian Social Imagination

Empirical and historical research portrays Egyptian femininity, at least in theory, as having much in common with Syrian and Arab femininity. Researchers such as Hasso (2011), Botman (1999), and Kholoussy (2010), among others, stressed the importance of obedience, virtue and modesty as central traits to femininity. Kholoussy explains: "authentic Egyptian womanhood should not threaten Egyptian manhood" (p. 64). Empirically, studies such as Sana al Kholi's, as cited in Botman (1999) in rural and urban areas in Egypt, reflected strong attitudes from Egyptian women to the centrality of marriage and the woman's place at home. While 40 percent of the women in her sample from urban areas believed that men are "better, stronger, smarter than women," the number increases to 91 percent in rural areas (p. 109). However, due to the socio-economic and historical factors mentioned in the previous chapter, including urbanization, increased level of education, and middle-class women's entrance to the workforce, Egyptian women, have gradually and increasingly challenged this image. Concerned intellectual elites in the early twentieth century commented on the dangers of educating women on forgetting their natural role of being wives and mothers. The image of the disobedient, loud, and aggressive Egyptian woman started spreading through formal media channels and a folkloric, cultural reference, starting in the early twentieth century (Kholoussy, 2010). Caricatures such as in Image (1) and Image (2) below portraying Egyptian women bullying their husbands became very

common in popular newspapers (Kholoussy, 2010). Later on, social media and memes such as in Image (3) have consolidated this image.

This portrayal was reiterated in my conversations with different respondents and was a central theme in defining their marriage experience. Here, I would like to note that many women were not comfortable pointing out Egyptian women's negative traits in front of me: an Egyptian woman. I tried to reassure them that I would not be offended, and that research objectivity is my main goal. As they already seemed eager to share, my reassurance seemed to do the trick, and they took liberty in explaining their impressions about Egyptian femininity, or more accurately, the lack thereof, in normative definitions. We will discuss this image in more detail shortly. However, first, it is important to point out how some respondents diverged from this image of the obedient and modest wife described above in the literature.

5.2.1. Egyptian v. Syrian Perceived Femininities

Back to our discussion of the Egyptian social imagination and its perceived or stereotyped Syrian femininities, Safaa is one of the Syrian women respondents I will focus on in this section. Her impression in one of the quotes I include below explaining her fear from vicious Egyptian women, who would yell, humiliate or "kill" her, sounds a bit extreme, it was not uncommon among the respondents. However, many of whom did not have frequent contact with Egyptian women. When asked why they thought their husbands sought to marry a Syrian in the first place, the men and women respondents often emphasized that Syrian women represent traits of ideal femininity better than Egyptian women do. Many of them also agreed that being a Syrian played a significant role in sealing the marriage. The image of the Egyptian woman as aggressive, loud in public, too independent, strong-willed, and careless in her home was referenced frequently.

In the below examples, I will lay down the perception of femininity as conveyed by both the Syrian wives and the Egyptian husbands and how Egyptian and Syrian femininities are portrayed differently in three main areas: public interaction, domestic roles, and work.

To illustrate the perceptions about the Egyptian and Syrian perceived femininities, Bashira offers a good example. She was 18 years old and engaged to an Egyptian man at the time of our interview. Bashira seemed disconnected from the social context around her in Egypt, where she was only in direct contact with the Syrian community. She reiterated what her fiancé told her about the difference, in his opinion, between a Syrian and an Egyptian woman:

I: So, did you ask him why he wanted to marry a Syrian woman?

R: Yes, he said he asked a friend who was married to both an Egyptian woman and a Syrian woman. He told him the Syrian is better. Because in general Egyptian women are very independent and in control… She is decisive, and her words are heard.

I: You mean, she is independent? And in your opinion, that is a negative thing?

R: No, but he told me, in general, the Syrian is better, and she takes care of her home better than the Egyptians.

In addition to having a strong personality and a say, the image of the strong, tough and violent Egyptian women was reiterated frequently by the respondents, whether as a direct impression, from hands-on experiences that puts emphasis on certain stereotypes, or through their husbands. Several women have reported that Egyptian women are known for being loud, that they talk back and even fight back in public. Aisha, who is in her early thirties, explained how displacement and the change of context made her feel that she has developed a stronger, more independent personality after seeing and interacting with Egyptian women even though she still thinks that Egyptian women often cross the line and that she would never go to the extent that they often do:

*I started feeling that Egyptian girls are stronger. He [her husband] told me, "You became rude/rebellious/bold (*Beg'ha*) like the rest of the Egyptians [laughing]. You would see the girl here yelling in the street; we do not have that at all (in Syria). It's* Eib *(Shameful). Once, I was in* Abbas *(Abbas el-Akkad Street, one of the famous retail streets in Cairo), and I heard a girl yelling and humiliating a traffic officer. I told her, [back home] no one has the guts to speak with a traffic officer. She was yelling! And we do not even hear the women's voices in the streets back home.*

113

Another very common notion reiterated by almost all respondents, but more explicitly by women than men, pertains to domestic and household chores. Many of them talked about how the Syrian wife is an ideal wife in the sense that her house "is her kingdom," and she is the "queen of the kingdom." This translated to a tidy house, a wife who is always dressed up to impress, who is obedient, never raises her voice and "treats the husband like a king." Galaa, a Syrian respondent in her 60s, was one of the unique cases, not just because of her mature age or higher socio-economic class, but also because of her exposure and experiences, which made her more cautious and selective about her choice of a husband. She ended up rejecting countless men who, in her opinion, were not serious about having a decent marital life. Even though Galaa was very cautious about rejecting the stereotypical image of the Syrian women in Egypt as prone to exploitation, she reinforced the image of the Syrian woman as an excellent housewife. Additionally, she mentioned how Egyptian women and their families had put many obstacles in front of Egyptian men regarding marriage, which, in Galaa's opinion, propelled the men to seek Syrian wives. She was not just referring to financial obstacles but also general traits that take away from ideal femininity:

> *R: The Syrian has made this [ideal femininity] possible: courtesy, respect to the*
> *man, self-care, caring about the house and his children. We never rely on house*
> *servants. We do the work ourselves in our homes. So, the Syrian woman is the*
> *full package; she has everything the man is asking for. So, the man took*
> *advantage of this point.*

In a strikingly different interview than the one with mature, experienced and confident Galaa, Fatma, the youngest divorcee in my sample, reflected various ideas about marriage dynamics and Syrian wives. She talked about how she thinks both her Egyptian ex-husband and his mother held

that stereotype about the obedient, peaceful Syrian women who would "bear it all" and are used to having a man's control of all her life aspects:

I: Did you ask him: why you wanted to marry a Syrian?

R: Yes, I did. He said I always watched Syrian TV and because of their reputation, their cleanliness, taking care of themselves. Also, they are durable.

I: Durable? What does that mean?

R: Durable like they are patient in the marriage. The divorce rates are very low with Syrians because the wife would bear it all.

I: Do you think that was one reason he wanted someone Syrian? because his impression was that they are obedient and patient?

R: Yes, exactly.

I: Do you think it has to do with your refugee status and that you do not have a support system?

R: That too, but the first reason you mentioned was the main one. The impression that Syrian women are not defiant.

Men in my sample have also reiterated the same hegemonic idea of desirable femininity revolving around obedience, modesty, shyness and confinement to the private sphere. Hamdy, one of the Egyptian husbands I interviewed, has never been married before meeting his Syrian wife. He was searching for a bride of any nationality other than Egyptian. He explained that Egyptian femininity is built on gossiping, disrespecting the husband, and interacting/socializing with others more than necessary. He stressed, in addition to his wife's excellence as a housewife, that she has

qualities such as quietness and acceptance and that even if she is trying to convince him with something, she does it calmly and respectfully, unlike Egyptian wives:

> *First of all, it's respect! Her voice is always low. Always smiling, even if she is*
> *angry or upset. She is not stubborn at all. Respecting me, especially in front of*
> *people, and even if there were no people around. Besides, her love and respect*
> *for me show in her eyes. Anyone who sees her knows that she loves, respects and*
> *cares for me a lot. The Egyptian wife could show disrespect to her husband in*
> *front of people; her voice might get loud a bit; she might use the wrong words*
> *when she is angry. This is common among Egyptian women.*

In Hamdy's perspective, femininity does not erase the woman's personality. She is encouraged to engage in conversation and convince her husband of her ideas and opinions. Nevertheless, she has to do it respectfully, in a way that does not threaten his masculinity, especially in public.

Ahmed, on the other hand, showed a mix of admiration and caution about Egyptian femininity. While he admired Egyptian women's ability to interact with public life and to defend themselves against harassment, he was concerned about the impact of work and independence on Egyptian women and their domestic roles:

> *R: This independence issue made many [Egyptian] women screw things up, to*
> *be honest. So, the ability to go out and work has turned against her. Mostly*
> *because she knows she doesn't need anything from you.*

> *I: You mean because she doesn't need the man, she doesn't compromise? Or she*
> *is not eager to alleviate any problems?*

R: Yes, she would think to herself, "what are you [the husband] going to do, we are tête-à-tête, and I am working like you. And if problems occur, courts guarantee that I get the apartment. The woman I married for a month [before Aisha], we didn't even have children, and that's what she told me (that the court would give her the apartment in case of a divorce), see how the culture is affecting her. She told me, "I have a right in this apartment," right away [laughs], even though she has no rights whatsoever.

For him, one of the main reasons behind conflict in marriage is the growing sense of independence among Egyptian women. He points out that such independence was translated to a general sentiment where the woman feels she does not need the man as much and hence refuses to settle or compromise.

Many of my women respondents explained that Egyptian husbands, in general, give more freedom to the woman: they are more lenient and generally spoil their wives more than Syrian husbands. Similarly, Bashira was engaged to be married to an Egyptian at the time of our interview. She was hesitant at first to marry an Egyptian because she was still holding to the hope that she and her family will go back home soon. Bashira told me that one of the reasons that encouraged her to reconsider marrying an Egyptian is the reputation of Egyptian husbands. As she put it, an Egyptian husband is better than a Syrian "because he respects his wife and takes her seriously." Similarly, Safaa, another mature respondent, stated half-joking that she was waiting for the war in Syria to happen so that she could leave her abusive Syrian husband and move to Egypt to find an Egyptian husband. Safaa told me that her impression of Egyptian husbands is that they are "oppressed", especially compared to Syrian husbands:

I: What did you hear about the Egyptian husband?

117

R: That he is oppressed! Forgive me [laughing]. That he's oppressed by his wife,

so put an oppressed man with an oppressed woman, they would be comfortable

together. In general, the Syrian woman will be oppressed by a (Syrian) man who

is not warm and compassionate… the Syrian man doesn't have any gentleness.

That is to say, both the Egyptian and the Syrian social imagination of Syrian hyper-femininity were frequently synonymized with oppression and docility and were often contrasted to an aggressive, independent and rebellious Egyptian femininity. I will demonstrate that this connotation was a much more important factor in creating the circumstances for the marriage for refuge phenomenon than financial motives or exploitative narratives. Moreover, and as we will see in later chapters, these connotations were leveraged by Syrian refugee women who married Egyptian men to expand their agency exercise.

5.2.2. Alternating Femininities in Displacement

As discussed by many literature, displacement plays a significant role in changing women's understanding and expressions of some aspects of femininity. Nevertheless, other intersectional factors such as age, maturity and previous marriage experiences also play a central role in this shift. Naziha, for instance, was often involved in a power struggle with her Egyptian husband, who is five years younger than her, to the extent that she kicked him out of the house until he complied with her requests and paid the house rent:

He wouldn't pay the rent, one month, two months, so I did not allow him in the

apartment. I told him, "you are not allowed in an apartment that you do not pay

its rent" I even called the sheikh and asked him to inform him [the husband] that

I want a divorce. If he is not carrying the burden with me, I do not want him. They

told me, "Dear, he cannot afford it," I replied, "It's his problem, not mine." They

told me, "He has financial issues," so I asked, "can he not pay the rent of his

children and first wife? So how come he doesn't pay my rent?" For three months,

I have been calling for a divorce, and he is sitting by the stairs in front of my

apartment. He would knock on the door and ask me to open. I would respond, "I

do not want you. I decided on divorce… You hurt me! I didn't get married to cry

more, but for a man to make me happy, instead you made me cry and, even worse,

ask my children to pay the rent?" He finally responded, "I apologize, I will pay

the rent, and you will get everything you want because I fell in love with you."

That was ironically the *same* Naziha who expressed that she had remained obedient, patient and hopeful back in Syria for over a decade that her first husband would leave his second wife and return to his original home. It is plausible that Naziha's age and experience of both displacement and previous marriage enabled her to behave in such a way, especially as she had an overarching feeling that she had nothing to lose in this marriage. Other respondents had different, more subtle approaches, such as Ghalya, who had a more vested interest in her current marriage, expressing emotional void and dependence. She explained that she often gets what she wants through indirect ways and maybe even through patronizing her husband:

> *He is the man, and we cannot change him. I need to preserve his manhood. I*
> *have to find ways to appease him. Not simply to get what I want, but for life to*
> *go on. Look, a man is like a child. You do not need to punch him or fight with*
> *him to get what you. He is like a baby.*

Before I go more in-depth in the discussion on femininity, its embodiments, and its implications, it is helpful to draw attention to a growing body of literature that is becoming more alert to equating femininity, especially in a refugee context victimhood and passivity. In her study

119

of refugee communities in Kenya, Jaji (2015) demonstrated how "femininity is a constraint in some instances and a resource in others" (P. 242) by highlighting three forms of femininity: normative, agitated and rebellious femininities, which were heavily influenced by her women respondent's marital status and economic circumstances. For example, married refugee women frequently comply with normative femininity to avoid divorce, while unmarried refugee women used rebellious femininity through, for instance, challenging elders or rejecting wife inheritance, a practice popular in the context of Jaji's study. My fieldwork identifies traces of multiple ways of embodying femininities as well. That said, I would like to emphasize the *strategic* aspect of performing and alternating femininities. Rebellious femininity was rarely captured in my conversations with the respondents. After all, the research is about Syrian women seeking to embrace their normative gender roles through marriage as a survival strategy. Nevertheless, the analysis illustrated how they had performed alternating or different versions of femininity in a way that maximizes their gains. In other words, those women strategically adopted different expressions of femininity in different contexts, which begs the question of the social construction of femininity.

Safaa's story gives an excellent example of alternating femininities. Safaa is in her mid-forties with a very outspoken and witty demeanour. She had her own retail business, where she and I had the interview, and she seemed independent and strong-willed. She proudly told me that her husband's dream "since fifth grade" was to marry a Syrian because he always thought "they are females from a different planet." Safaa's demeanour gave me the impression that she is a strong independent woman. However, when I asked her about such an impression, she emphasized two points: first that she is, in fact, scared of Egyptian women. Mostly because of a stereotype, affirmed in the images above, that Egyptian women are aggressive and engage in fights frequently:

120

*R: I refuse to have a sister-wife/co-wife (*dorra*). I cannot face an Egyptian wife. She would kill me. I would be too scared.*

I: Why so?

R: My apologies, but some Egyptian women when they come to my store, I treat them in the nicest way because I get worried, they would humiliate or yell at me.

I: What do you think she would do [the sister wife]? Like, engage in a fight of some sort?

R: She might cause me a lot of trouble, even frame me, kick me out of the house or hit me.

I: What about the women you meet at your store?

R: Some of them speak with you in an aggressive way, so I try to absorb their attitude to avoid them. I try to de-escalate by being patient as much as I can. Even if she asked me to show her the entire clothes in the store, I would do it. I get scared, to be honest. Do you see how my personality is like now? I do not like to be humiliated or engage in a fight or have someone yell at me, so I always tell them, "Whatever you want."

I: Were you ever involved in a fight with an Egyptian woman?

R: No, because like I told you, I am extra nice with them, and I try to de-escalate.

Second and most importantly, when I mentioned more than once that she seems like quite a strong personality to me, she made sure to clarify that she does not behave this way in front of her husband:

R: No, this is common among Syrian women, the man yells and fights, and the woman stays quiet.

I: Are you like that?

R: Yes, I am. Do not be deceived by how I am with you right now. As a wife, I am entirely different… I am very calm. No matter what happens, I deal with it in complete calmness. Sometimes when he gets mad at me, I feel awful, and I cannot take it …Why? Because he treats us [referring to her children as well] with respect, so I care about not making him upset. I try in every single way, even if it means I have to sacrifice something.

From these two quotes, it is hard to fit women like Safaa neatly within any of the categories: normative, agitated or rebellious femininity. Safaa does not fit within normative femininity because she insisted on having her own business to support her two children. She refused to look at her husband as less masculine because he cannot adequately provide for her and her children. Unlike Naziha in the above story, Safaa justified that he has his own responsibilities and his children from a previous marriage to support. She also left Syria after strong resistance from her parents, especially for travelling on her own, thus defying both cultural norms and the elder, because Safaa knew coming to Egypt was in her best interest. Her story carries elements of more than one form of femininity. Safaa was able to alternate and use them strategically, especially when it came to fulfilling her husband's "dream" of the ideal Syrian wife. Moreover, despite her full recognition that in Egypt, the dynamics between Egyptian husbands and wives are different, in that Egyptian women are accepted to be less docile, she still ascribed to the Syrian cultural norms of not engaging in yelling back and quarrelling with her husband. That is to say, she did not

view normative femininity as a social restriction but as an important dynamic to preserve the harmony between genders, especially within a marriage.

5.3. Concluding Remarks

The findings in this chapter confirm the intersectional argument that the meanings of femininity and masculinity are not constant across space nor consistently uniform among women and men from similar backgrounds. Many of the women respondents in the study remarked that a man must be able to provide, but they were often happy to help him fulfil this role by assisting him financially. Similarly, some respondents, such as Ahmed, have shown admiration of Syrian women's modesty and discretion in the streets. Still, he simultaneously showed admiration for Egyptian women who are able to protect themselves in the streets and fight back against harassment. We can also trace from the accounts how femininity and masculinity are frequently redefined through spousal interaction. In some instances, men struggle to fulfil the idealized image of masculinity, and women exercise their discrete influence in guiding, shaping and reinforcing hegemonic masculinity while at the same time maximizing their gains.

By concluding this chapter, I complete the analysis of two key factors that were perceived as the main motivators behind seeking a Syrian refugee bride in the Egyptian context. In the previous chapter, I had discussed the financial aspect of marriage and explored the hypothesis that Egyptian men seek Syrian women because it makes more economic sense for them in a country troubled with a high cost of marriage. I argued that reaching this conclusion might account for some cases but would still be inaccurate for many others where marrying a Syrian wife was as expensive and even more complicated financially than marrying an Egyptian, especially in cases of divorce. Moreover, it does not explain why most respondents are in polygamous marriages, often as second

wives. In this chapter, I have complemented this examination with an analysis of the perceived differences, advantages, and drawbacks of Egyptian and Syrian expressions of femininity and masculinity, in particular the fetishized and idealized image of Syrian femininity.

There are two major conclusions from the findings in this chapter. The first has to do with the role of intersectionality in understanding marriage for refuge. As discussed in the introduction of this project, this specific case study aims to explore nuanced forms of patriarchy, how it is practiced, and how it is navigated in non-Western cultural settings. The analysis in this chapter reveals a multifaceted and intersectional relationship between refugee women's agency and their perceived status as victims of both displacement and patriarchy. In other words, their trajectories and subjectivities are the product of intersecting factors central to which are both displacement and patriarchy. Women cross-culturally have to deal with different kinds of patriarchies that dictate distinct rules of the game and hence require different responses and strategies for negotiation (Kandiyoti, 1988; Quek, 2019). In this chapter's analysis, I underscore refugee women's malleable and strategic understandings and utilization of socially ascribed gender identities often translated to what I refer to as alternating femininities to seek security and overcome local patriarchal practices. A central piece in understanding the characteristics of Egyptian patriarchy that my Syrian participants had to navigate is that desirable femininity is one that does not threaten masculinity. In that regard, the image of the obedient, modest, shy Syrian wife who is confined to the private sphere was always contrasted to the Egyptian wife who is stereotyped as flawed for being too independent, too bold and too loud, in short, not feminine enough. More evidence supports the assumption that the stereotypical image of the obedient, more demure and better Syrian housewife offers a more robust explanation of why Egyptian men sought Syrian brides.

The second conclusion is that reciprocity and mutual benefits defined many of the marriage arrangements in my study. Comparing the narratives of the Syrian wives with their search for emotional, social and economic protection and the narratives of the Egyptian husbands with their expectations that a wife boosts their masculine image points to a convenient relationship of mutual benefit. As discussed, displacement played a significant role in changing the women respondents' understanding and expressions of some aspects of femininity. More importantly, intersectional factors such as age, maturity and previous marriage experiences played a central role in this shift in many cases, leading them to strategically use what I referred to in this chapter as alternating femininities. In so doing, they often reflect a clear understanding of the marriage dynamic they entered and how to strategically utilize the perceived image of the hyper-feminine Syrian wife to leverage their personal interest as well as their moral values. This will be further elaborated in Chapter Seven.

This is an appropriate segue to the upcoming discussion of *sutra* and *sanad*. After exploring the factors beyond the exploitation narrative that impelled Egyptian men to seek a Syrian wife and, in turn, how Syrian respondents interpreted, navigated, and leveraged such social relations, I focus on the women's reasons in the next chapter for marrying Egyptian men. And whether their reasons challenge the victimized image of the Syrian refugee bride. In answering this question, I focus on two social conceptions that were recurrent throughout the interviews in justifying the Syrian wives seeking marriage to an Egyptian: *sanad* (best translated as social support or social capital) and *sutra* (protection and sheltering).

6. Chapter Six: Marriage as a survival tool: leveraging *sanad* and *sutra* in *ghorba*

In this chapter, I ask, 'how do Syrian refugee women narrate and interpret their decisions to marry Egyptian nationals?' More specifically, how can a decolonizing intersectional perspective further our understanding of their decisions, experiences, interpretations, and subjectivities? Throughout the analysis thus far, I have explored strategies that highlight women's agency and self-empowerment[17] not through subversion but by accepting yet modifying socially ascribed roles. In this same vein, by focusing on two notions: *sutra* and *sanad*, I accentuate how Syrian respondents seeking marriage are not simply ascribing to societal norms that emphasize domesticity. Instead, they make a calculated decision, or what I refer to as creative leveraging, to navigate social structures, maximize their interest and carve their own resettlement experience.

I begin with an overview of women's diverse explanations as reasons or motivations for their marriages, including intimacy, legal and financial reasons. I then discuss in more depth two central themes that frequently emerged and which were of greater significance to the women than the apparent legal and financial reasons. Many of the women referred to *sanad* (social support or social capital) and *sutra* (protection and sheltering) as central motivations for them to consider marriage in *ghorba* (best translated as exile or uprooting). The chapter offers a decolonizing intersectional reading highlighting the rational and agentive aspects of the Syrian respondents' decision-making process carving their own resettlement options. Through this reading, I reveal how the women's thinking and decision making reflect deep social awareness appropriate to negotiating the socio-economic and cultural setting discussed in the previous chapters, namely the context of the marriage crisis represented in the cost of marriage and the construction of ideal femininity as constructed in the Egyptian imagination.

126

6.1. Overview of Legal, Social and Economic Reasons for Marriage

Almost all of the refugee women I interviewed referred to marriage to an Egyptian man as a social, economic or legal survival tool. However, very few women explicitly referred to marriage as a legal solution; that is, to secure legal residency status for themselves and their children, even though this is useful in the unpredictable Egyptian political environment. For Galaa, for instance, who was on a tourist visa, it was a matter of convenience more than anything. She travelled around Egypt and stayed for three years before she met her Egyptian husband, all under the tourist visa that she had to renew every few months. In fact, as I will detail in a later chapter, some women preferred to keep an *urfi* (customary unregistered) marriage in order to maintain their refugee status with UNHCR, which guarantees them a small monthly allowance. Amal, for instance, tried to delay her citizenship application for as long as possible as it made more financial sense to her to keep her refugee status than to gain residency or citizenship:

> *My passport is now expired. I applied for citizenship just one day before it expired. I am carrying with me an expired passport now, and I have the commission [UNHCR] yellow card, but I have not included my residency on it… if I added my citizenship, it would be [the yellow card] cancelled. I applied for the yellow card without informing them that I am married to an Egyptian. I thought I could help [her husband financially] with anything.*

Nevertheless, more respondents focused on the social and economic gains from marrying an Egyptian, especially since other strategies for obtaining legal or semi-legal status were available to them, such as enrolling their children in Egyptian higher education institutions or renewing their children tourist visas every few months. Many of the respondents were single mothers who had never been in the workforce, so they did mention financial support, among other reasons, such as

intimacy and companionship, to explain their marriages. Naziha, in her mid-forties, was recently divorced from her Syrian husband. The marriage resulted in four children, three of whom were still dependents at the time of the interview. Her story illustrates the mix of reasons that made marriage a logical option for her, despite initial resistance, mainly due to a painful experience with her Syrian ex-husband:

> *Look, I didn't want to get married, but I will tell you the events that showed me later (that it was the right choice). Maybe I wanted a man to carry the burden of my apartment rent. Or a man to carry my burden and my young daughter's responsibility [financially]. I want a man to tell him, "Life has been so hard on me." I want a tender man whose chest I can lie my head upon and would say to him, "I am tired." I didn't want anything else from the marriage.*

Naziha kept repeating that she did not want to get married for the sake of marriage. Her tone and body language implied she was referring to marriage in the sense of sexual gratification. As I will discuss later with Naziha's story, she was trying to distance herself from the impression that she is interested in marriage as a woman and instead position her motivation as driven mostly by being a mother. On the other hand, respondents such as Nisreen, in her late thirties, explicitly referred to the financial aspect, at least initially, as a primary motivation for their marriage to an Egyptian. I now elaborate on Nisreen's story to exemplify the financial motivations for marriage.

Nisreen met her current Egyptian husband on a matchmaking Facebook group that did not target Syrian women *per se*. She mentioned she was the only Syrian in the group. During the interview, it was clear that Nisreen was still not over her ex-husband, who had stayed behind in Syria. While working on their family reunification, her husband married her Alawite[18] best friend, and this left Nisreen, in her view, with no choice but to ask for a divorce. She admitted that she

128

never had to work in Syria and had never wanted to, that she resented the fact that she had to work in Egypt to support her children and herself. Nisreen cried when she was talking about how she could not quit smoking. She explained that she felt that she needed someone to take care of her and her children financially. Her Egyptian husband was living in Suez, a different governorate (akin to province or territory) in Egypt, so she was staying most of the year with her extended family:

> I: So, you left work after they started treating you poorly there?
>
> R: No. Not for that. I found someone who could carry my responsibility.
>
> I: So, when have you decided to leave work?
>
> R: After we did katb al-kitâb (religious marriage ceremony). I used to work to support myself and my children. Now it's over; I found a man who can bear responsibility for me.

While Nisreen did not express the same passion and affection towards him as her ex-husband, she was relieved to have someone finally take care of her and support her financially.

On the other hand, some married because they simply happened to fall in love with an Egyptian. This was prevalent among the younger respondents, such as Samar, Zena and Mursheda, for whom this was their first marriage. They all agreed that a primary reason for marriage to an Egyptian man was simply that they lived in a country with an Egyptian majority. Due to daily interactions, they would more likely meet and fall in love with an Egyptian than a Syrian. Their marriages are in keeping with the norms of any Egyptian marriage. That is, it is often the first marriage for both partners; they are young, they got married using the Egyptian *ayma* (list) system, and they married because they fell in love.

129

For older respondents, such as Galaa, in her mid-sixties, and Safaa, in her mid-forties, intimacy and companionship were the main if not the sole reasons, especially as they did not need financial support. Galaa is financially sufficient, and Safaa has her own business. Galaa talked about the emotional void she felt following the loss of her late beloved husband and her need for intimacy and a loving relationship:

> *I loved my [first] husband so much. I am also very affectionate and appreciate warmth in a relationship. I loved having conversations with him. And I love everything about men. I cannot live without one. When my husband died, I was broken. I tried to resist, but I needed a man. I need a husband, so what can I do? My Syrian friends told me I have to get married because I have a huge loving and emotional energy, and I can still live life and have fun.*

Similarly, Safaa, despite the abusive relationship with her previous husband that was even more of a reason than the war for her departure from Syria, she explained that she cannot live without a man in her life and that it is the natural course of her life things. A central reason for her is companionship and finding a way to take care of herself after her children grow up and move on:

> *I cannot be all by myself without a husband. A husband is a nice thing in a woman's life. Having a husband is nice. It is* hisn *[sexual and emotional gratification] that's number one. It prevents the woman from looking outside and being consumed by another man. Also, I need a man to lean on (sanad) especially that I am in a foreign country. In short, I do not want to stay without a man [laughing]. It is nice for a woman to have a man she can go to, they can sit together at night and she can enjoy a coffee with him in the morning. My children will get their own lives and eventually get married. What about the*

woman [talking about herself]? She needs a man to sit with. Also, there are
certain matters you cannot discuss with your children. You want a life
companion.

While participants such as Safaa had a clear vision of why they wanted to get married, Asmaa, also in her mid-forties, who was still struggling with her failed marriage attempt, did not. During our interview, Asmaa kept contemplating the reasons one after the other, trying to figure it out as she pondered on her second yet also failed marriage, but this time to an Egyptian. She explained that she did not need financial support and did not need companionship since she is among family and already had children from a previous marriage. Asmaa concluded that it was mostly to fill the void created by displacement and being uprooted, especially after she lost her job, her social life and access to her children:

I told you about the social void. My work used to fill my life; my family was
surrounding me. When I came here, I was broken. Immigration created an
emptiness inside of me. It uprooted me and created a lot of confusion.

Continuing the discussion about social and emotional gains, Bashira, who was in her early twenties, is another divorcee who agreed with Asmaa, that the void was another big reason for them to explore the marriage option. Before Bashira's marriage, she was staying with her mother without any job, school or a meaningful social life. All of this consolidated the need to fill the void through marriage, which was another prevalent social and emotional motivation behind marriage for some women.

For such experiences, however, whether they had an apparent reason for marriage or not, one should not dismiss a crucial factor: the paradoxical relationship between losing hope of returning to Syria and opening up to the idea of marrying an Egyptian. That is, for some women, accepting

131

the option of marriage increased as their hope for return decreased. Almost all of the respondents explained that their initial hesitation to get married had to do with acknowledging that marriage to an Egyptian meant that Egypt would become their permanent home. A striking exception to that is Safaa, who fled Syria to find an Egyptian husband and a new hope of escaping a bad marriage. The war has given her the perfect excuse to do so. Zena articulated this dilemma very well when I asked her why she had changed her mind about marrying an Egyptian when she had initially completely opposed the idea when she first moved. Below she was describing to me her gradual change of mind:

> *R: The war is not ending. The number of people leaving the Levant is increasing. The number of people dying in the most hideous ways is rising. The hope for return started to decrease… I started wondering: when will that [return] be? The situation is getting from bad to worse. Asylum claims to Europe are hitting crazy numbers. I started realizing that even if we return, I will not be able to live this life without electricity, water, internet, security, settlement, or money. Against this loss of hope, there was an increasing sense of settlement in Egypt. […] then slowly, I started adjusting to life here. At the same time, Hatem [her husband] was getting closer […]*
>
> *I: So, you started falling in love with him… did that correspond with the lowering hope in return?*
>
> *R: Yes, as this feeling [closeness and intimacy with her husband-to-be] increased, the other [hope in return] decreased.*
>
> *I: Which do you think affected the other more? Is it because you fell in love with him that your hope for return started decreasing, or was it the other way around?*

> *R: That the feeling of hope is decreasing, and then later, I started opening up [to*
>
> *her husband-to-be].*

During the interview, Zena signalled that when she first arrived in the country, she was convinced that she would soon return to Syria. As a result, she refused to "live" in the country and engage with its members. As she put it: she "did not want to get familiar" because, in her assessment at the time, it was all temporary. However, as her hope for return decreased, her ability to adjust and engage with Egyptian society increased. This also explains the mixed signals she was giving to her husband-to-be, where she would answer his calls sometimes but not others as she was trying to figure out this "liminality" (Al-Rasheed, 1993). For her, losing hope in return was the main reason behind opening up to the idea of marrying an Egyptian, not the other way around. This inverse relationship between losing hope in return and opening up to the possibility of marriage was echoed frequently in the respondents' accounts, such as in Aisha's:

> *I: You mentioned earlier that you completely refused the idea of marriage to an*
>
> *Egyptian because you didn't want anything to attach you to the country. What*
>
> *happened that made you change your mind?*
>
> *R: We started realizing there was no hope. It is getting worse, and we started*
>
> *seeing more people arriving in Egypt, so I started telling myself it looks like we*
>
> *are staying. So, I stopped being picky about whether he should be Syrian,*
>
> *Egyptian or Indian [laughing]. I was worried about the differences in customs*
>
> *and traditions, but they kept saying the Egyptian man will appreciate the value*
>
> *of a Syrian wife... That's what they said.*

Thus, for both Aisha and Zena, losing hope in repatriation was almost synonymous with opening up to the idea of resettlement. In such a case, resettlement took the form of marriage.

In the literature review, we have seen how some studies demonstrate that the meaning of survival and resettlement for some refugee women (and men) does not always simply imply safety or physical security (i.e., negative freedoms) and that other factors such as access to upward social mobility (i.e. positive freedoms) can be more pertinent (see, e.g. Utas, 2005). This is very relevant to the case of marriage for refuge, which is why I now turn the focus to another set of reasons and motivations that described the marriage experience of many of my respondents. While the reasons behind the respondents' marriage were diverse, with certain reasons such as financial support being more prevalent than others, I argue that for the majority of the respondents, social, moral and emotional gains were more valuable than residency and financial support. These aspects are indicative of their *creative leveraging* of assets deemed beneficial.

I use the term creative leveraging to describe the act of navigation through identifying pre-existing as well as emerging social conditions and identities to create a unique social space that maximizes the respondent's interest in a way that is tailored specifically for her status (e.g., Syrian-refugee-widow). In other words, when the respondents marry for refuge, they find themselves in circumstances that are not of their making. Still, they have used those circumstances to create an empowering social space for themselves: a social space that did not exist before. Creative leveraging cannot be reduced to voluntary versus forced situations but is indicative of nuance and complexity related to beliefs, desires and decisions through which losses and gains are negotiated within terms the women attempt to set. For instance, it recognizes that gender can be enabling and restricting at the same time, and hence alternating femininities and leveraging the image of the hyper-feminine Syrian wife in the previous chapter gave a good introduction to the notion. Similarly, creative leveraging should not be understood solely through patriarchy–it is not a one-dimensional product of an oppressive structure. I will show that both moral gains and creative leveraging point to the importance of challenging Orientalist assumptions related to forced

134

migration and marriage. Below, I highlight such moral and social gains by exploring two central notions referenced frequently by the respondents as they were trying to explain their marriage trajectories: *sanad* and *sutra*. I argue that through those two notions, women used marriage to disrupt the precarity of displacement and uprooting.

6.2. *Sutra*: Like A Tree Without Leaves

Some of the respondents referred to marriage as *sutra* (in another spelling *sotra*), an Arabic word literally meaning "to cover" that is often used to indicate protection or sheltering (see, for instance, Allassad Alhuzai, 2020; Taha, 2019; Acim, 2017). *Zawaj al-sutra* (protection or shelter marriage) is a familiar notion, even if not practiced widely in Egypt. In such a case, the man is motivated to marry a widow, especially that of another man who died because of war, with the intention of providing her and her children with a livelihood and emotional support. Such practice is arguably recurrent throughout Islamic history, where many have suggested it was encouraged in the Islamic tradition (*Quraan* and *Sunnah*). Most religious references rely on two avenues to justify and encourage *sutra* marriage for widows and divorced women. The first is to cite historical incidents where the Prophet himself or his companions were eager to marry widows and divorced women. A second avenue is to cite religious texts from *Quraan* and *Sunnah* that encourage Muslims to protect each other, especially the most vulnerable like the poor, widows, and orphans, and emphasize the reward of taking care of them. For instance,

> *One who cares for widows and the poor is like those who fight in the way of Allah*
> *or those who spend their days fasting and their nights praying. [Agreed upon, also*
> *in Adab al-Mufrad of Imaam Al-Bukhari in chapter "The Virtue of Those Who*
> *Care for Orphans"][19]*

135

The term "*Zawaj al-sutra*" has been used by both media and advocacy groups to mean a variety of things, including marrying rape victims (Barkan, 2012; Natour, 2016). In the fatwas (religious verdicts) in appendix 10.6,[20] three meanings of *sutra* marriage emerge. The first references *sutra* in a general sense to mean providing *iffah* (invulnerability against attraction) and modesty. That is, marriage is observed as a means of procreating and gratifying sexual needs (Mir-Hossein, 2003). Second, *sutra* can be perceived as a means of providing relief for rape victims or women who committed adultery and then repented. Third, *sutra* can also be understood in the sense of providing shelter, livelihood support and protection for widows and divorced women.[21] The last meaning is the concern of this chapter. In all the four *fatwas*, the notions of *sutra* (covering, protection or sheltering) and *iffah* were referenced explicitly or implicitly as "noble" grounds for marriage.

Below, I demonstrate that the women interviewed have varied approaches and understandings of *sutra* marriage and, on many occasions, defy the "victim" image characteristic of the oppressive Orientalist frameworks that often underlie the explanations of similar practices. A *sutra* marriage should not be regarded solely out of pity or as a charity case, meaning that it should not be regarded as indicating a lack of affection and companionship. Instead, marriage in such arrangements often served a dual purpose of intimacy and protection. Moreover, in this case, marriage functioned as a tool for economic support by providing financial security to the household while offering protection from other social pressures, including attempts to take advantage of these women due to their uprooting and inability to maneuver the culture day-to-day interactions. Central to the reasons behind such marriage is protection against sexual harassment.

Below I follow the stories of three women: Maha, Marwa and Nour, who offer interesting and variant trajectories to what they themselves labelled as *sutra* marriage. The three arrived in Egypt

in or after 2012 and settled in Al-Asher Men Ramadan, a newly industrial but suburban city in Al-Sharqiyya governorate and is considered part of greater Cairo. The three women had children from previous marriages, and they all referred during their interviews to *sutra* marriage or simply *sutra*. Marwa and Nour are siblings, and they are closely acquainted with Maha. Despite all the similarities, their stories offer three different understandings and trajectories to their marriage experiences. Nevertheless, one thing in common between them is how they sought and approached marriage to gain *sutra,* emphasizing the hidden moral gains and the creative leveraging of marriage for refuge.

Even with her financial stability, Maha still felt the importance of getting married upon arrival in Egypt and compared a woman without a husband to "a tree without leaves." Nour agreed that a woman's natural path is marriage which, in her view, was the most decent solution compared to other options such as finding a job that will only expose her to an unfamiliar culture and keep her away from her daughter. Marwa, on the other hand, was in a less stable economic situation. She did not lack the working experience or rejected the idea of working to support herself and her children. Rather, she met her husband because she was searching for a job. However, challenging many liberal feminist critiques that focus on empowerment through financial independence, Marwa still preferred marriage to work when given the option. Her husband gave her a choice between *sutra* (here implying *sutra* through marriage) and financial support by providing a monthly allowance for her children. She chose the first without hesitation. Those women's narratives reflected a keen awareness of their social position and the social risks and restrictions that face them. Such restrictions are often an expression of multiple social locations, including gender, nationality, displacement, and being in a foreign country where they lack social capital and cultural maneuverability. That said, they could also identify options that suited their interest and made the best out of their situation.

137

6.2.1. Maha: *Killing two birds with one stone*

Maha grew up in Damascus, a well-off area (commonly referred to as *Ash-Shām* and its residents *as Shwām*). Unlike many of the Syrian women I interviewed, she went to law school, where she met her first husband and got married after a "powerful" love story. When she got divorced, she refused to marry for 11 years because most men requested that her children stay behind with her family, which she firmly refused. After Maha arrived in Egypt in December 2012 and settling within the relatively large Syrian community in the city of Al-Asher, marriage proposals started to pour in for her, as they did for many of her counterparts. When I asked her if she was seriously considering marriage to an Egyptian and her motivation behind this marriage, Maha's response was mainly focused on emotional and social support that results from having a male figure in one's life in an Arab country:

> *I: But you weren't opposed to the idea of marriage?*
>
> *R: No, because the situation was very tough, to be honest. After my siblings left for Saudi Arabia and my parents are old, and all my siblings are married, I thought I would have to get married.*
>
> *I: And how did you generate income before marriage?*
>
> *R: My parents*
>
> *I: Oh, so you didn't need marriage for financial reasons but socially and emotionally.*
>
> *R: I am very romantic, and there was a love story with my first husband, so it was a tough situation because it lasted for ten years. It's like they say, "emotional drought" .... God bless my children.*

I: So, when you got married, you didn't feel obliged to?

R: I had to get married. As they say, marriage is sutra.

I: What do you mean marriage is sutra?

R: I found that without (marriage), many men crossed the line with me. It is protection and support for later on. And my children, too, need a father.

When I asked Maha to expand on her interpretation of *sutra* and its meaning and explain Egyptian men's eagerness to marry Syrian women, her response reflects a conscious understanding of the realities and driving forces of this notion a sense of control of the situation. In Maha's understanding, she is also offering something in return within this kind of marriage, not merely waiting to be saved or protected.

I: You mentioned that many (Egyptian men) wanted to marry you. Did you ask them why?

R: They say they want to apply sutra *to my children. They do not say it explicitly, but we get it.*

I: So, what do they say?

R: They do not say that exactly. Of course, they appreciate our tidiness, cleanliness, and beauty. But in some cases, they say it explicitly, like in Marwa's case: so that he would protect her (apply sutra*) and her children and receive a reward (religious oblation). Of course, it's not just for that (the oblation), but it's also for himself. It's like killing two birds with one stone. On the one hand, he would receive a huge reward that he raised her children, and on the other, she is Syrian. She is going to make him happy and pleased. That's the opinion of*

all of them [Egyptian men] because they have witnessed similar experiences before their eyes, and they have noticed our different nature [compared to Egyptian women]. For example, with my husband, his friends would tell me: you switched him 180 degrees. Even his children would say the same to me.

Overall, Maha narrated her marriage as a positive experience. Despite being a second wife and going through a few hiccups due to the first wife's resistance, she has repeatedly expressed that she holds nothing but respect for her current husband. She also stressed that she had fallen in love with him and tried hard to get pregnant for a second time with him. When asked explicitly about her marriage experience in Egypt compared to that back in Syria, she enthusiastically said that she is better off with her Egyptian husband and that, in general, Egyptian husbands are better than Syrian ones primarily due to cultural and socialization habits. I now turn to another story to trace the different dynamics, rationale and mitigating factors within the context of *sutra* marriage as a form of marriage for refuge.

6.2.2. Nour*: "Trying a new fruit in the market"*

Nour was the youngest among the three women. She was twenty-five years old when her husband had been killed in Damascus a year and a half before our interview. Hence, after ill-treatment in her in-laws' household, she said, she and her daughter were left with no choice but to catch up with her family in Egypt a few months later. A few months after arrival, a family friend introduced them to an Egyptian man who was married with children searching for a Syrian widow to which he can apply *sutra*. They had a religious marriage[22] three weeks after they first met. Nour quickly noticed a change in her new husband's treatment of her. He became more aloof after the first month of their marriage, which ended up with separation just four months into the relationship. Despite her negative experience and feeling of being used, Nour demonstrated a sense of agency

and responsibility in her decision to marry soon after arriving in Egypt as well as in her desire to remarry again after the first attempt's failure. Her justifications reflected deep self-awareness of her social position. Nour was able to identify the best options and alternatives to make the best out of this situation.

I: Didn't you think why would I be a second wife? I want to be a first wife?

R: No

I: Why?

R: Because I have unique circumstances, I am not a normal girl.

I: Don't you think that this is lowering one's standards?

R: Dear, it's not us; it's the world around us that forces us (to think and act this way). Even if you are convinced, the society around you will not be convinced.

I: You are right

R: Excuse me, I'm sure your study showed you, but most of our society is not like that, even if you convince yourself.

I: Do you mean that you might be convinced with one thing, but society obliges you to another?

R: Exactly. So why would I pressure myself? If I wanted to marry a single man, no one would want my daughter

I: Oh, so you mean you do not care if you are a first or a second wife as long as your daughter is with you?

R: Yes, dear. Excuse me, but for women like us, we do not think about ourselves.

We think about our children. When you buy anything for the house, do you think

of yourself or your son? […] In my country, I had my rights, and I was able to

manage. Here I am in a strange country. Why would I work and degrade myself,

meet this and meet that, the good and the bad? No, I apply sutra *to myself and my*

daughter and find a human being who is honest and straightforward and offers

me a decent life. I'm not saying that I want a car and a big house. Middle ground.

A decent life.

Nour knew there are social restrictions present not just due to her gender and social status as a widow with a child but also due to her forced migration status and being in a foreign country. She was convinced that a woman's 'natural path is to get married eventually.' However, agreeing with research which suggests that socially ascribed gender roles have, in fact, helped women with coping better and faster than men (Szczepanikova, 2005; Franz, 2003; Säävälä, 2010; Van Esterik, 1996), Nour's forced migration status has turned this natural path into a solution, an opportunity, and even, one might argue, an advantage because of her gender. That is, Syrian men would not have the same option. A decolonizing intersectional lens contributes to this evidence base and digs even deeper to explain how and why. Based on Nour's rationale, other solutions, such as working as a hairdresser (her job before marrying her first husband), would keep her away from her daughter and expose her to a relatively foreign culture. This option would make her prone to exploitation and "degradation," as she described it. For her, marriage was the "safe" or "decent," if not the obvious option in her situation, especially given that her child was her highest priority. Nevertheless, Nour expressed her dissatisfaction with the idea of Egyptian men seeking a Syrian woman *per se* and described some of them as "wanting to try the new fruit in the market."

During our conversation, we were both trying to figure out why her ex-husband called the marriage off. Nour hesitantly confessed that, after much insistence from him, she agreed to have sex with him closer to the end of the first month of their engagement. Recall, at this point, the couple was still in the *katb al-kitāb* stage (the religious component of the marriage that typically substitutes engagement in the Syrian tradition) and not yet at the commencement stage (which typically begins after the wedding). Although they had done nothing wrong in religious terms, intercourse in the *katb al-kitāb* stage is socially frowned upon. Soon after, his treatment and attitude started to change, which later escalated to the separation. We juggled a few theories to try to make sense of the situation. The 'trying the new fruit in the market' or trying 'the Syrian flavour' explanation was the first and the most depressing amongst the potential explanations, especially when taking the intercourse fact into account. His concern for his first family and fear of destroying it was another possible explanation. A common theme amongst all the potential explanations is that it seemed that *sutra* was not a good enough reason for this marriage to survive. Instead, basing this marriage solely on *sutra* created a fragile relationship, despite any noble intentions Nour's ex-husband might have had. I now turn to the last story before analyzing how *sutra* marriage as a form of marriage for refuge should be studied beyond the oppressive exploitative framework and instead as a self-rescue option that disrupts forced migration's socio-economic restrictions and stigma.

6.2.3. *Marwa: "He gave me a choice, and I chose* sutra*"*

Nour's sister, Marwa, lost her husband in the war five years ago, and soon after, she moved with her parents to Egypt in 2012. Marwa demonstrated a great deal of resourcefulness and the ability to act on her own. As soon as she arrived in Egypt, she searched for a job and moved among, and often fight for, a few decent office jobs that seemed to bring her great satisfaction. She had

two experiences with *sutra* marriage, one of which was incomplete. In the first, despite her father's refusal, Marwa wanted to marry an Egyptian man, who was also motivated by the religious oblation[23] of supporting orphans and promised her monthly allowance to support her children. However, three months in, he asked her hand in marriage again, hoping that his commitment over three months would make a good case for him. After being turned down for the second time, he withdrew from his financial commitment, and Marwa had to search for a job again. Marwa met her current husband in the second *sutra* marriage experience. He always reminded her and her family that he is doing this for her orphaned children. Interestingly, before they physically saw each other, he gave Marwa a choice between *sutra* (here implying *sutra* through marriage) and just financial support by providing a monthly allowance to support the children. She picked the first without hesitation. In the excerpt below, Marwa was describing her conflict between agreeing to marry her husband, whom she initially refused because of his looks, and what *sutra* would bring her and her children:

> *I: and what were you looking for in a husband? Did you care about love?*
>
> *R: Yes, I did care, but I cared more about commitment and religious devotion. I cared about* sutra *too.*
>
> *I: What is the meaning of* sutra*?*
>
> *R: In my opinion,* sutra *means a man… when you say, "that's it!" No one is going to harass me, no one is going to impose themselves on me. That's it! I am with this man, and so I can rest mentally.*
>
> *I: Do you mean because he is going to be your support and backbone?*

R: Yes. However, up until that moment, I was not sure how I felt. I was destroyed, but at the same time, I had the motivation because of my children […]. Of course, my dad didn't allow me to come outside and meet him when he visited the first time. I stayed inside, and then my husband said I just want to see the children. I do not want to see her. I am here for the children.

I: Oh, so he was referring to sheltering orphans?

R: Yes, and he didn't request to see me, and my dad really appreciated this gesture. He spoke with the children and gave my daughter money, like allowance, and brought them sweets, and he didn't see me despite coming from a long distance. And then my father wanted to see him for a second time, and of course, I saw him at that time, but didn't really approve of him.

I: Why? His looks?

R: Yes, he was not good-looking. Can you believe that [shocked at herself]? I was concerned about the looks! But now, despite all the problems between us, I think he has a peaceful face, and he has nice hair too. So, I started to see his good looks now.

I: After marriage?

R: Yes… slowly through his good treatment and concern about us. Even until now. Yesterday I asked him about something, and he said, are the children comfortable with it? I told him: "but I am not comfortable," so he responded: "I married you for the children."

I: Does that make you happy or upset?

> *R: Sometimes, it makes me happy and sometimes upset, depending on the context.*

Marwa was open to the idea of working to support herself and her children. She has proven both resilience and skills in acquiring jobs and expressed deep satisfaction with her "printer, computer and very nice office." However, despite trying it and experiencing the satisfaction resulting from it, she still prioritized marriage over work when given the option. When the first wife of her husband asked her: "Didn't you consider me? What would happen to me when my husband marries a second wife?" She simply replied: "No, to be honest, I didn't consider you." Like Nour and Maha, Marwa's actions demonstrated her agency within the context of *sutra* to assess the situation and her social position within it and took the decision that best served her interest, which extended in the three cases to their children's interest.

<center>***</center>

The stories above and the women's different trajectories point to the significant role the husband and his understanding (or misunderstanding) of *sutra* marriage play in shaping the marriages. That said, the women demonstrated substantial control in making and calculating the initial decision to get married. For the three women, the decision to marry using the rationale of *sutra* mitigated social pressures, some stemming from patriarchy and others arising from the uprooting and the forced migration status. I argue here that they all point out that those intersectional social structures, particularly gender and displacement, can offer the refugee women an advantage and an ability to maneuver traditions to serve their best interests. In other words, their labelling as "vulnerable" and "victims" due to their refugee status, gender, Syrian ethnicity,[24] and social position as widows or divorced single mothers had provided them with an opportunity and a solution that is not available to other displaced demographics in the same context, or what I

<center>146</center>

referred to earlier as creative leveraging. One can argue that the social rhetoric of *sutra* facilitated, even if not entirely determined, such a unique position and opportunity. An important conclusion here is that, while socially ascribed gender roles that emphasize domesticity by seeking marriage were still relevant, Maha, Marwa, and Nour were not seeking marriage simply or solely for this reason. Their trajectories emphasize an embodiment of a subtle form of agency, not through resistance but through creatively leveraging such roles. The analysis here has touched on moral agency and relational autonomy, which I address in more detail in Chapter Eight. I now turn to a second subtle moral notion that defined the Syrian refugee respondents' interpretation of why marriage became a viable survival option given their context and circumstances.

6.3. *Sanad:* Shadow of a Man is Better Than a Shadow of a Wall

> *R: After* ghorba*, I started to think I can believe anything*
>
> *I: What's the role of* ghorba *in your life?*
>
> *R:* ghorba *is hard. It makes you weak, and the safety you had in your country is not available here*
>
> *I: What are you missing the most?*
>
> *R: Even the air I breathe here is different. The accidents, the drugs, the kidnapping in Egypt, all of this scares me here.*
>
> *I: Did that encourage you to get married quickly?*
>
> *R: Yes, that played a significant role. That marriage will provide me with safety.*
>
> *(Excerpt from an interview with* Fatma*, early twenties, divorced)*

The Arabic word *ghorba*, sometimes used to mean emigration, literally means estrangement or a noun for the status of being an outsider (see Said, 2000; Abusharaf, 2002; Oleschuck, 2011). In Arab culture, the term is associated with other meanings such as alienation, desolation; dreariness; estrangement; forlornness; loneliness.[25] For instance, in studying Sudanese refugees in North America, Oleschuck (2011) quotes Abusharaf (2002, p. 128) in his discussion of the loneliness experience of Sudanese refugees as it is expressed in the idea of the *ghorba*:

> Sudanese refer to life away from home as in the *ghorba*, an Arabic expression denoting more than physical separation or even exile, for it has powerful psychological dimensions…For the Sudanese, the *ghorba* evokes loneliness, loss, uprootedness, nostalgia and yearning for the familiar. It refers to a psychological state as well as a sense of alienation one finds away from family and friends back home (p. 128).

While they do not capture the full meaning, the closest terms used in refugee literature to refer to the experience of *ghorba* are uprooting or exile. Said (2000), for instance, explained exile as "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted" (p. 174). Malkki (1995) pointed out the commonalities between the refugee experience and exile, which again are centred around isolation, loss and disruption. For the women respondents, the notion of loss was central to their understanding of *ghorba*. They associated the feeling of being outsiders and uprooted with weakness, increased vulnerability and lack of safety, as Fatma above articulated. The loss of the familiar, the loss of safety and the loss of *sanad*. *Sanad* is another Arabic word literally meaning to hold, rest, or support (see, for instance, Al-Kandari & Crews, 2014). When you say "X *sanad* something," it means that X held it or rested it on something to prevent it from falling. The term

sanad is often mentioned together with the word *dahr* (back or backbone), *aman* (safety), or even *sutra* (covering, sheltering or protection). While there is an overlap, *sutra* marriage and seeking *sanad* through marriage are not identical in meaning.

I argue that, through marriage, both *sutra* and *sanad* are understood as means of disruption to the precarity and stigma of uprooting and displacement. *Sutra* marriage, however, has a precise religious connotation relating to widows and divorced single mothers. It is also focused on marriage for sexual gratification for the woman, in which marriage allows for *iffah* (invulnerability against attraction) and *iḥṣān* (literally protection and immunity–from unlawful seduction)[26] while at the same time providing financial support for her and her children. On the other hand, many of the respondents referred to *sanad* as means to offer not only financial support or sexual and emotional gratification but also social status and moral protection. To put it differently, while they can get *sutra* from marrying anyone, not exclusively an Egyptian national, they can receive better *sanad* from marrying a local Egyptian *per se*. As such, *sanad* mainly refers to a form of a social network, often on the familial level, that creates social support, social capital or a safety network that enables the individual to navigate their social life and surroundings while feeling safe and confident. The need for this social network is not restricted or utilized by refugees alone. Instead, it is necessary for individual well-being, allowing the individual to access resources and achieve goals (Hanley et al., 2018). Nevertheless, among the respondents, their uprooting and the sudden loss of their social capital have made many perceive marriage as a strategy to restore such *sanad* and safety.

Mawadi Al-Rasheed (1993) sought to capture the gendered variation in the meaning and implications of *ghorba* or exile. In exploring the effect of exile on Iraqi wives' understanding of, and shift in, the meaning of their current marriages, she contended that exile had disrupted the

equation of marriage with security and status. Al-Rasheed argued that "exile leads to the reconstruction of the meaning of marriage which in their minds becomes associated with security, family life and stability in general. Furthermore, as the women in this study were dependent on various family networks and relations in the home country, the collapse of their 'social world' implies their living in isolation without close family support" (p. 93). This conclusion raises a relevant point as to why Syrian women might seek an Egyptian husband *per se*. In what follows, I give examples of how some of the respondents framed and navigated *sanad* as a motivation to seek marriage. I tie it back to some notions that we touched on in the previous chapter: desirable femininity, desirable masculinity, and creative leveraging.

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The notion of *sanad* is defined by Ghalya, a respondent in my study in her early forties, who explained what the presence of a "male figure" meant to her and justified why she still saw value in staying with her abusive and "useless" Syrian ex-husband. She referenced a common Arabic proverb: *dell ragil wala dell heita* (Shadow of a man is better than a shadow of a wall). Ghalya is currently happily married to an Egyptian man who appreciates her. While she boasted about being from Aleppo–and hence, believed she could not possibly marry a man from elsewhere, she eventually fell in love with this man and agreed to marry him. Before that, she had rejected many Egyptian and Syrian suitors for multiple reasons, the most important of which was safeguarding her son. However, after increasingly unbearable harassment from strangers in the street, she came to realize that she had two options: either return to the warzone or seek protection by agreeing to marry an Egyptian. The same Ghalya, who had described herself as prey, a minor and weak in Egypt, talked about her family's role in offering her *sanad* and protection back in Syria. She noted that the first time her Syrian husband hit her was in Egypt, away from her family:

I: What did you do when he hit you?

R: What did I do? I complained to Allah, and I started praying.

I: If he hit you in Syria, what would you have done then?

R: In Syria, I would pick up the phone and call my parents. Maybe the first time I would forgive him, but I would make it clear that if he tried to hit me again, "You should consider everything between us to be over." It never happened in Syria, but here he took advantage of my weakness and that my family is not with me. I come from a very reputable family, so he wouldn't have had the nerve. You enter Aleppo, and you ask where is the [anonymized family name] house, and everyone knows them. Also, my brother held an excellent official position.

However, ultimately, marrying an Egyptian remained a gamble for single mothers like Ghalya, who have no extended family in Egypt. Although those women are trying, through marriage, to emulate the lost social capital due to displacement, there is no guarantee they will not face harassment and abuse from the same person through whom they sought protection.

Another example is Mohra, whom I mentioned earlier has lost all respect for her current husband, who is not working and did not mind that his wife provides for him through charity money. I have established that her source of frustration was not that he could not provide, so much as that he was being lazy, relying on his wife and hence not performing his role as a husband: he lacks *ruguula* (manhood). Recalling Mohra's explanation as to how she sees the relationship between *sanad* and masculinity, she clarified:

R: When you spoke to me before the marriage, you told me you and your children are under my protection. What does this promise mean? We are your responsibility, and you should

151

provide for us. since I started applying for all these charities, I cannot accept him anymore. The way I look at him is different.

I: How was it before, and how is it now?

*R: So, before it was like OK, at least he is a man that I can lean [*atsinid *verb of* sanad*) on. If I fall, who will carry my children and me? He can offer* aman *(safety)and* istikrar *(stability) so that you do not feel afraid when you are with him.*

I: How so when you are saying there is no money?

R: Even the emotional aspect that "you are under my protection, so do not be afraid," that's what I was thinking before [I made the decision to marry him].

In Mohra's account, one can see a common thread between *sanad*, *aman* (safety), *istikrar* (stability), protection, providing and *ruguula* (manhood). Initially, despite Mohra's husband not working and keeping her and her children in a dire situation, she still accepted him as a husband and as a man who could still provide *sanad* in a moral and a theoretical sense least. But after he accepted his wife's "charity," she lost confidence in his ability to provide her with safety and protection. He lost his ability to provide *sanad* when he lost his manhood in her eyes. Nevertheless, its worth noting that some women also sought social capital outside (and in addition to) the marriage realm. Nouran, for instance, spoke with me about the importance of creating social networks and social relations in *ghorba*, a thing she had to teach herself after displacement:

Even though by nature, I am not a social person, and I could stay for very long periods of time by myself, but here, I found myself working on my relationship with others. This is one of the things that was changed in me. I felt like I needed to create a safety net around me. For example, one of my husband's

152

acquaintances works in the car business. I wanted to ask about a car, so knowing

him helped.

Bashira, another younger respondent, gives one more example in which finding *sanad* to compensate for displacement and uprooting was the main reason she got engaged to her current fiancé (whom she was gradually growing fond of). Here, Bashira explained that if she were in Syria, first of all, she would have wanted to get married later; she was 18 at the time of the interview. Second, she would have wanted to marry someone other than her current fiancé; and a Syrian would have been her first preference:

I: What's the role of the man for you?

R: I am still young, and my parents are not with me. He would be like my parents; he would teach me if there is something I do not understand. He will be my sanad *and* aman *(safety) and everything. He will make up for everything.*

I: If you were back in Syria and didn't have the current financial pressure, do you think you would have waited?

R: Yes, of course.

It was later revealed that she was in a relationship with a young Syrian man. However, her family refused and opted for an Egyptian suitor, evidently for financial and social support reasons. As mentioned in the previous chapter, there was a direct association between the meaning of "proper" *sanad* and desirable masculinity. Bashira's grandmother reiterated this association by explaining that they had to reject many Syrian suitors because they "cannot afford Bashira." Her impression is that Syrian youth in Egypt are financially troubled and will not be able to offer her a decent life. Similarly, Hawazen, mid-thirties, told me she did not even think about marrying a Syrian because

she wanted "local support in Egypt" and that she heard and witnessed Syrian men "being bullied and are often threatened by Egyptian to the extent that made them scared to defend their women."

Hence, such women as Bashira, Hawazen and Mohra do not seek marriage simply to perform their socially ascribed gender role as wives. Instead, they seek a specific suitor and a particular form of marriage to offer them *sanad*, in order to help them disrupt, overcome and survive their displacement and uprooting. Suerbaum's (2018) findings on how Syrian men negotiate masculinity in Egypt agree with Hawazen above. Using Bourdieu's notion of symbolic capital (1989), Suerbaum emphasizes the loss of Syrian men's symbolic capital, or the set of "assets like public acknowledgment, recognition, and honour, perceived by others as "self-evident" and permanent" (p. 681). She explains that her male respondents stressed that before their exile, a man was able to acquire such symbolic capital through his "name, the area where he lived, and his family's reputation," a resource they have lost coming to Egypt. In this sense, many of my respondents sought to compensate for the loss of the *sanad* they had back in Syria by seeking marriage to a native, someone who has an established social capital and can, in turn, extend it to them. In other words, they looked for someone whose local status can imitate the status and the security that marriage would offer them back home.

The conclusion here ties back to our earlier discussion of international marriage migration and its transactional or mutual benefit nature. The Syrian wives' search for emotional, social and economic protection and the Egyptian husbands' desire and expectations of femininity that boosts their masculine image together signify that marriage is a convenient relationship of mutual benefit.

6.4. Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I sought to accentuate the Syrian women's narratives, interpretations and justifications of their decisions to marry Egyptian nationals. This study explores strategies for coping, survival, and autonomy not through subversion but by complying with yet modifying socially ascribed roles, or what I refer to as creative leveraging. I argued that Syrian respondents are not simply complying with social norms that emphasize marriage as a way to seek domesticity. Instead, they are making a calculated decision that maximizes their interest and carving their own resettlement experience. Both *sutra* and *sanad* as social capital assets are two central concepts that explain how marriage serves as a tool for disrupting displacement and overcoming the challenges accompanied by *ghorba* and uprooting. The analysis displays how a decolonizing intersectional approach can reveal that moral and social reasons behind marriage for those women were much more valuable than legal and economic reasons. Intersectionality is significant when considering resettlement options, preferences and trajectories. Thus, intersectionality adds an important layer and consideration for humanitarian response and in understanding Othered refugee experiences. More importantly, intersectionality identifies a deeper layer of gendered challenges–as well as opportunities–relevant to this demographic and in resettlement in this part of the world. In the final chapter, I will revisit those two notions, *sanad* and *sutra*, to show how they can expand the meaning of empowerment as a humanitarian tool.

Another central aim of this research is to explore evolving gender identities, agency and subjectivities among refugee women who are displaced and uprooted. In the next chapter, I will resume the analysis of the Syrian women respondents' perspectives on marriage for refuge and explore the meaning of marriage to them and how it shifted due to displacement. That is to say, this chapter has focused on how marriage was perceived as a gendered strategy by Syrian refugee

155

women to disrupt the precarity created by displacement. In the next chapter, I explore how refugee status has disrupted and changed the meaning of marriage for those women. Hence, I explore the meanings of marriage for refuge as an agentive and a self-initiated form of resettlement. The discussion in these two chapters is meant to set the tone for the analysis in Chapter Eight on how the case of marriage for refuge contributes practically and theoretically to unsettling assumptions about the relationship between notions such as victimhood, vulnerability, precarity, empowerment, autonomy and agency.

7. Chapter Seven: Displacement and Disrupting the Meaning of Marriage

As illustrated in the discussion of intersectionality in the literature review, feminist conceptions of women's oppression have shifted in light of the critiques by black and anti-racist feminists who posited that "the intersection of one's class, caste, religion, sexuality, nationality or race, and membership in social groups produces different gender relations across time and space" (Hajdukowski-Ahmed, Khanlou, & Moussa, 2008, p. 87). Both gender and migration scholars, while situating gender as a fundamental unit of analysis, are critical of the universalization of the category of 'refugee woman' (Indra, 2008; Hajdukowski-Ahmed, Khanlou & Moussa, 2008). For instance, as mentioned earlier, Doreen Indra (2008) argued differences between Eritrean and Polish refugee women, including different displacement experiences, conceptions of their gender identities, and, more importantly, diverse subjectivities, standpoints and interpretations of their experiences. Thus, while gender identity is typically defined as a subject's experience, understanding, and expression of gender that goes beyond a binary categorization (see, for instance, Morrow & Messinger, 2006, 8), the factors shaping the realization of one's subjectivity as a woman varies between cultures as well as within them, making the category of woman and unstable one (Mohanty, 1988). The decolonizing intersectional approach adopted in this research is an apt one for considering the "multiple bases" of identity, of which gender is only one. I understand gender as a social construct emerging from a set of social relations that reflect unequal social hierarchies (Grabska, 2010). In addition, the term 'refugee' is not perceived as a label but rather as an experience and process (Malkki, 1995). Becoming a refugee can disrupt all aspects of social life, including gender roles, expectations and relations.

Many studies have discussed gender identities as an intervening factor that exacerbates the effects of displacement (see, for instance, Hajdukowski-Ahmed, Khanlou, & Moussa, 2008)–a

point thematically evident in respondents' accounts in this study. Other scholars have considered how gender identity is utilized to maneuver displacement. This was evident in Nour's story, for example, where gender (along with ethnicity) positioned her in the desirable femininity category and hence is framed as an opportunity. Similarly, scholars have explored how becoming a refugee disrupts and even alters gender norms and gender relations within the household. For instance, men struggle with their masculinity due to their inability to work, or women reinterpret their roles and femininity after entering paid work for the first time (see, for instance, Culcasi, 2019; El-Masri, Harvey & Garwood, 2013; Bartels et al., 2018; Alsaba and Kapilashrami, 2016). This chapter focuses on Syrian refugee women's subjectivities and how displacement has shifted their perception of marriage, its purpose, and its ideal form. The results of my fieldwork are in line with the literature, which posits that becoming a refugee has, in some cases, enhanced women's autonomy and ability to challenge norms. Such an elevated sense of autonomy is nevertheless dependent on other intersecting factors in addition to their refugee status, such as socioeconomic status and age (Ayoub, 2017).

In distinguishing between identity and subjectivity, Chris Weedon (2004) postulates that "[i]dentities may be socially, culturally and institutionally assigned, as in the case, for instance, of gender or citizenship, where state institutions, civil society and social and cultural practices produce the discourses within which gendered subjectivity and citizens are constituted" (p. 6). Therefore, I conceptualize subjectivity as an individual's self-consciousness–attitudes, perceptions, feelings, and self-understanding, about what they should be or feel (Bischoping & Gazso, 2016, 158). Hence, subjectivity is exercised when individuals adopt a particular view with unique images, references, and storylines about themselves and their social position. Using a decolonizing intersectional framework, I explore how displacement has altered the respondents' subjectivity and sense of agency.

In the previous chapter, I had explored how marriage is used as a response to displacement insecurities, precarity and stigma. In this chapter, I extend my analysis about the relationship between marriage and displacement, where I outline how displacement, in turn, disrupts and alters the meaning of marriage for those women. The chapter explores the meaning and exercise of marriage for refuge as a self-initiated form of resettlement. In the previous chapter, we had seen the role of *sutra* and *sanad* in gaining legal, economic, but more importantly, moral and social support for some refugee women. Here, I discuss how displacement disrupted in ways that enabled the respondents to arrive at different interpretations of the meaning, purpose and options of marriage.

I begin the chapter by providing a brief background on gender norms and gender relations in Syria before the war, especially within Sunni Muslim spheres. Although I focus on the gendered dynamics of the husband-wife relation, I also discuss other gendered familial relations such as siblings, parents and children. This context serves as a backdrop to understanding the ruptures that happened to the women respondents' sense of agency, altering their gender identities and perception of gender norms post-displacement. In the second section, I trace such ruptures and their implications on the meaning of marriage as interpreted by the respondents. I start by demonstrating how an elevated sense of control resulting from displacement has made many respondents rethink their resettlement and social options, such as remarriage, which might have been more challenging to achieve in Syria. I then explain how this elevated sense of control and relative freedom from social structure has also enabled a more flexible understanding of marriage forms and options, which challenges the hegemonic perception of what constitutes an ideal marriage. I mainly focus on *urfi* (customary) marriage and polygamy, two characteristics that describe the majority of the respondents' marriages in my study. I conclude by discussing how the drive behind marriage in conditions of conflict and displacement has been motivated by the

respondents' sense of identity as mothers in many cases. I argue for rethinking the parameters used to define a "real" marriage beyond reasons such as intimacy and creating a (nuclear) family.

7.1.   Gender Norms and Gender Relations in Syria

Empirical work has been consistent in portraying and reinforcing the social normative images of Syrian women and men, which often emphasize a gendered division of labour. For instance, El Masri, Harvey & Garwood (2013) reported that the Syrian women participants in their study, the majority of which are Sunni Muslims belonging to the working class, identify their primary responsibilities to be domestic household labour. This opinion was shared by Syrian women who were also engaged in paid labour. Likewise, men see their location in the public sphere pursuing paid work and are responsible for supporting the family financially. El Masri and others' study also identified that, among their Syrian refugee respondents and Palestinian refugees from Syria, "women's sense of self-worth [was] closely linked to their socially ascribed gender roles" (p. 13). In that sense, while they realize that domestic confinement limits their exercise of power, many of the respondents felt threatened by changing this gendered arrangement. Reiterating what I have discussed in previous chapters, these studies echoed how many respondents framed domestic chores as inherently feminine and their household description as the "husband's kingdom," in which the wife is the queen and the husband the king.

Similarly, Culcasi (2019) illustrates how women spoke fondly of their domestic chores, their role in the household, and how displacement fundamentally threatened their sense of femininity by forcing them to take up paid work outside the home. Culcasi articulated how the women respondents in her study viewed work as an "unwanted distraction from caring for their children" and regretted having to work because it took them away from their families, subsequently inciting

160

fears that their children might be negatively affected (p. 8). In such cases of displacement, women's relationship to work has shifted. That is to say, while some women have started working for a wage for the first time, others now lack "the option" of choosing between working or staying at home. Culcasi (2019) summarizes the evolution of the relationship between Syrian women and work in the following way:

> In 2010, before the war, women's economic participation in Syria was 22 percent […] 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 (p. 7).

Many of the women in Culcasi's study expressed that needing to take up paid work outside the home led to a mix of empowerment and familial and economic pressures. Many of these women's families would have been intolerant of the idea of work before displacement. Additionally, Culcasy traced how working was also associated with an elevated sense of control over household decision-making. However, worth mentioning, we cannot assume that all Syrian women have been "empowered" for the first time by displacement. For instance, some of the women that took part in my study were very well accomplished in their careers before displacement and marriage.

Similarly, we cannot assume that there were no women-headed Syrian families before the war (Lokot, 2018). However, I aim to extend literature (e.g., Kyriakides et al., 2016) that demonstrates how pre-conflict social roles related to being a spouse, a parent, a breadwinner, and a community member are important not only in navigating conflict during displacement but also in resettlement. Denying these social roles through imposing a 'refugee status' reproduces problematic east/west binaries.

In her examination of changing migrant attitudes towards marriage practices among South Asians in Canada, Lina Samuel (2013) argues that "[t]he process of migration and settlement affords women the opportunity to modify and transform cultural practices [referring to traditions such as dowry and arranged marriage] which are rooted in unequal gender relations" (p. 103). There is strong evidence in Samuel's work that women of South Asian descent demonstrate varying degrees of flexibility in understanding gender relations (p. 91). Samuel's conclusion could be considered neo-Orientalist[27], in that she perceives specific cultural customs as necessarily oppressive and that coming to the West is necessarily liberating. Some studies demonstrate how certain aspects of traditions such as dowry, bridewealth and arranged marriage could empower women in terms of bringing respect to their families or offering them social status (see, for instance, Al-Sharmani, 2010; Razack, 2004; Pande, 2015). Similarly, other studies challenged the idea that coming to the West is always empowering (See, for example, Franz, 2003, p. 99).

Thus, it is also important to note that shifts in gender roles, particularly in entering the public sphere through paid work, do not just shift or expand gendered performances but can also entrench and emphasize socially ascribed gender roles. So, while paid work might increase women's influence over the household, it might also increase the burdens placed on some women who are still required to fulfill their traditional roles. As Culcasi pointed, "[t]he patriarchal ideals and

practices that structure societies are not easily dismantled. Earning an income will not magically "empower" or "liberate" women from patriarchy" (p. 12). The disconnect between earning and empowerment is why it is important to scrutinize what emancipation and empowerment mean to women, as I will discuss in more detail in Chapter Eight. Briefly, challenging gender performances through work should not merely be perceived from an empowerment or emancipation lens or as an act of subversion or resistance to patriarchy (Mahmood, 2005).

Also, I use the word 'emancipation' here cautiously as it could easily be used to promote cultural deficit explanations. Emancipation in this study does not refer to the process of subverting previously ascribed gender norms, simply because many of the respondents re-inscribed such norms. Instead, it is the shift in the location that made them think and act beyond these norms. In other words, what is revealed is how displacement itself has opened up the possibility for emancipation from oppressive gendered structures and roles. Nonetheless, while emancipation is expressed tangibly through changes in women's everyday lived experiences, such women continue to retain 'oppressive' ideas ideologically.

Furthermore, a decolonizing perspective adds another element to the analysis. Those women's work roles can be interpreted as a coping mechanism and a way to respond to their familial and motherly duties. I am arguing here that the political tendencies in some liberal feminist views to deconstruct 'family' and 'motherhood' as necessarily oppressive might silence some experiences. To this point, many of the women I interviewed do not reject the normative and socially ascribed aspects of their lives. I discuss this idea in more detail in Chapter Eight. I now turn to explore how respondents find creative ways to reinterpret marriage to serve their changing needs as a result of displacement.

7.2. Disrupting the Meaning, Form and Purpose of Marriage

In my argument, I sought to trace the multitude of intertwining reasons that propelled the Syrian respondents to seek marriage after displacement as a solution serving resettlement and social survival. I have demonstrated how marriage had served other purposes outside of intimacy or even financial support, the most important of which is gaining a moral status and expanding social support and networks, through *sutra* and *sanad*. As discussed previously, this decolonizing intersectional perspective unpacks a practice such as marriage for refuge, which can easily be categorized as oppressive or exploitative. For instance, as referred to in the introduction, Sherene Razack (2004) has argued that it is prevalent when adopting a "Western feminist worldview," with its cultural and historical specificity, to fall into "cultural deficit explanations" when attempting to understand and explain non-Western women's experiences, describing them often as "overly patriarchal and inherently uncivilized" (p. 129). Thus, while recognizing the influence of patriarchy on worldviews and the perception of gender roles, it is vital to recognize the parallel role of factors such as colonialism and Orientalism and their impact on the very creation of these worldviews. The discussion in the previous chapters reveals how the social dynamics of marriage for refuge is dictated by complex gender relations and, in many cases, is leveraged by the Syrian refugee women to maximize their interests, including moral interest (as I will elaborate in the discussion of moral agency). For instance, recall Nour's response:

> *In my country, I had my rights, and I was able to manage. Here I am in a strange*
>
> *country. Why would I work and degrade myself, meet this and meet that, the*
>
> *good and the bad? No, I apply sutra to myself and my daughter and find a human*
>
> *being who is honest and straightforward and offers me a decent life.*

For women like Nour and others such as Nisreen and Ghalya as I will detail shortly, displacement has (re)labelled marriage as a "decent" or even the *only* solution to their new situation. Thus, the notion of reframing marriage as a solution emerging after displacement has to be understood through a network of reasons that often coexist. These reasons include overcoming *ghorba*, seeking *sanad*, compensating for lost status such as motherhood, and emancipation from social rules and socially ascribed gender relations. Nevertheless, this reframing of the purpose of marriage should not be seen in contradiction or mutually exclusive from the need for intimacy and affection.

In the following three sections, I examine three aspects where marriage has been redefined or repurposed after displacement in a way that qualifies it as a convenient resettlement option. First, I look into how re-marriage has become a viable option after displacement: an alternative that was not possible and, in many cases, not desirable back in Syria for a few intertwining reasons. Next, I trace how and why the image of an ideal marriage has shifted to incorporate unconventional forms of marriage for many of my respondents, namely *urfi* (customary unregistered) marriages and polygamy. Finally, I reveal how marriage has shifted from being an objective in itself to serving as a means of fulfilling the women's motherly responsibilities. This discussion aims to underscore Othered/Orientalized ways and forms of existence that are often not fully considered in academic debates. It thus points us to understanding different forms of displacement better. The case also foreshadows some non-Western gendered relations and their "eligibility to exist" (Kyriakides, 2019) beyond hegemonic discourses.

7.2.1. (Re)marriage After Displacement

In some cases, war and displacement have allowed women to escape an oppressive context. As mentioned earlier, Safaa viewed the war as an opportunity to escape an abusive marriage while retaining custody of her children:

> *R: Do you think the war has played a role in encouraging you to ask for a divorce?*
>
> *I: Yes, in fact, I was hoping that this war had happened a long time ago [laugh]. I used to say I wish a war erupts because my parents were totally against the divorce because of the children. I was adamant about getting a divorce since I had my son, but my mom would tell me he is going to suffer between you and him [the ex-husband], and it would break your heart. When the war erupted, I said, it came from Allah [meaning a blessing from Allah]. I asked for a divorce, and I took my children. In return, I left the house, the car and signed a document to agree on them travelling, and of course, he is not responsible for their expenses, and he knows nothing about them.*

Safaa's example might seem extreme; however, there are more subtle effects from displacement and uprooting on gender norms and relations. We have discussed the meanings of femininity in Chapter Five and how both men and women respondents uphold the Syrian ideals of femininity as the 'most desirable' type of femininity. Traits such as obedience, quietness, shyness, modesty and domesticity were at the core of such images. As my earlier findings have shown, these were also the direct reasons why many Egyptian men sought a Syrian wife regardless of their socio-economic background. In addition to challenging this essentialized idea, some of my Syrian respondents expressed a change in their personalities that made them "stronger" and able to fight back in public.

Some studies, such as Ayoub (2017), argue that living in Cairo has directly impacted Syrian women's shift in self-perception and gendered expressions. That is to say, observing Egyptian women and "witnessing the high level of activity of Egyptian women and the normality [in]which they are engaged in everyday life of the city, changed [the Syrian women's] perception about paid work and their role in society" (p. 89). In the example below, Amal, who was divorced from an abusive husband only to be raped during the war, explained how her circumstances have made her stronger. This strength was translated into more personal awareness as well as physical expressions of self-defence, an image far removed from the ideal Syrian femininity:

I: Did you feel you were weaker than ordinary people?

R: No, for one reason, my problem has made me stronger.

I: In what sense?

R: It made me stronger psychologically. It made me more self-aware. In my experience with my first husband, I wasn't like that. My experience with him made me stronger. For example, when I was harassed in the street, I would stay quiet and walk away. Here no, I answer, I hit, and I take my right with my own hands [ha'ee bedra'ee]. Once I engaged in a fight with my mother-in-law, and I decided to leave the house for some fresh air. I went for a walk, and I was crying, and one guy in the street told me, "It looks like the person who gave you the appointment had stood you up, don't worry, I have a place nearby." So, I turned around, and I started kicking and punching him, and people tried to hold me away from him.

This strategy of gaining control through physical strength or force was unique to Amal's interview. Nevertheless, other women explained the various strategies they have been using to gain

a sense of control. They gained a sense of control due to learning from both their displacement and their previous failed marriages. For instance, despite an intense love story and a decade-long loving marriage, Nisreen divorced her husband over the phone because he was still in Syria. During our conversation, it was obvious she still had feelings for him, to which her fondness for her current husband does not compare. Nisreen explained that even though she sought marriage in Egypt because she hated having to work to provide for her children and herself, she also had a clear plan to be financially independent if she had to leave her current husband.

> *At any moment, [her husband] and I could get a divorce. How will I live then? Will I go back to work? I will save money and start a small business, and bit by bit, I will grow. Not for me, but my children. And to prove to myself and others that I can live without a man, "your presence in my life is not everything" [directing at her husband].*

This change in Nisreen's subjectivity and her declaration about not needing a man in her life is not only a matter of principle; it is also created from her displacement. This contrast between her belief system and her matter-of-fact solution was salient as Nisreen constantly reiterated her love for her husband's protective nature and how she enjoyed being dependent on him:

> *R: I won't tell you that I want to prove myself in society. I am from the dependent type. I depend on him. I see that he is able to handle the bills, so why would I bother myself and carry this burden. You are responsible for everything, and that makes me comfortable. I am telling you; I don't like to work; I am a lazy woman.*
>
> *I: And why is that do you think?*

168

R: I don't know. Since we were little, my mom never let us worry about the future.

We were in a good financial situation, and we thought it was going to stay like

that. No one imagined this could ever happen to us [the war and displacement]

that we would need to look for work or leave the country. Our situation was very

stable, so I didn't have to think about working at all.

Other respondents also articulated this idea who noted the positive impacts of *ghorba* (exile and uprooting) on their lives. In the previous chapter, I discussed how some respondents described *ghorba* as "breaking" as they lost their *sanad,* which created vulnerability exceeding that associated with gender and displacement: a social support vulnerability. Here, I want to emphasize an aspect of *ghorba* that some of the respondents perceived as a form of empowerment. Naziha offers a striking example:

R: Before I was in my country. Here I am in a ghorba, *my dear. The* ghorba *would*

make you do things you wouldn't have done in Syria.

I: Because of what?

R: It's ghorba [exile]. *Here I am in a* ghorba, *and I got married. Back in Syria, I*

wouldn't have married for a second time. Why? There is a society […] In Syria,

you wish you have no commitments so that you can live without restrictions.

I: How is that different between Egypt and Syria?

R: We don't have this idea about marrying for a second time [bear in mind

Naziha's conservative middle-class experience]. My ex-in-laws gave me a hard

time. They started asking my children, "why did your mother marry? Your aunts

did not get married again."

I: Is it eib *[shameful]?*

R: Not Eib*, just not common. After the first marriage, the woman's community becomes her children and general socializing. You don't need a second marriage. Life in Syria is beautiful, beautiful, beautiful.*

Naziha was trying to tell me here that *ghorba* gave her a degree of freedom because she no longer had to take social pressures and traditions into account. She was explaining to me a very complicated thought process in which it would be undesirable to remarry in Syria, but possible to remarry in Egypt. In Syria, two related reasons would make remarriage a poor option for women such as Naziha, who is from a middle-class conservative social context. First, society scrutinizes and maybe even frown upon mature women who express interest in remarriage (or in the opposite sex for that matter) because their social network, including their community, children, and extended family, already exists. Hence, she does not need the marriage *sanad*/network. Second, and more importantly, remarrying is not desirable to women like Naziha because socially accepted restrictions accompany marriage, i.e. a husband controlling his wives' movement and decisions.

Naziha is implying that in her social milieu back in Syria, a "previously" married woman who is currently single has already gained the status of *sett* not *bent* (being a woman, not a girl– discussed in Chapter Five), which allows her more freedom than a married status. So not only is it socially frowned upon, but it also does not make practical sense concerning the level of freedom she receives. In Egypt, on the other hand, she is not bound by these social rules. Naziha's displacement, then, has created a shift in her perception of her relationship with her husband (i.e. gendered relations). Being mature enough, she kept her emotional attachment to her current husband under control and knowing there will be minimal social repercussions if they separate. Displacement and *ghorba* have given her more power in their relationship. We can notice this

sense of power, control and emancipation from socially ascribed gender relations in the example she offers below. Here, Naziha discusses her strategy to pressure her husband into paying the rent for her apartment. She used different techniques, including not talking to him and not allowing him into the house. I asked if she would have done the same to her previous husband back in Syria. She works through this comparison below:

> *R: Life has taught me many lessons. And the test I went through was tough. I learned that I shouldn't rely on anyone. I keep telling him [her current Egyptian husband], "I do not want to love you. I do not want to rely on you, I do not want to open my heart to you, but you are gradually defying all of this with your good behaviour and kindness".*
>
> *I: Would you have done the same with your first husband: close the door and refuse to let him in*
>
> *R: No, impossible!*
>
> *I: So, what changed?*
>
> *R: I will tell you. I don't want to allow anyone to upset me or humiliate me. He [current husband] would tell me why you are seeking revenge through me? He starts analyzing me.*

Naziha admitted she would never have done something remotely similar to kicking her previous husband out of the house. Her displacement has changed her sense of control over her emotions and the importance of relying on oneself. *Ghorba* emboldened her to utilize "frowned upon" ways to communicate with and influence her husband and maintain this sense of control.

Some of the respondents agreed with Naziha that they would likely not have remarried after divorce or their husband's death had they stayed in Syria. In her conservative area of *Reef Damashk*, after a certain age, and especially if the woman has children, dependent or not, remarriage is frowned upon. Remarriage is often viewed as the betrayal of the sacred role of the Mother (see, for instance, Maman, Falah, & Hijazi, 2019). This was reflected in Naziha's children's reaction When she informed them that she is considering remarriage. Her response to them reveals how her subjectivity and her perception of marriage (or remarriage) has shifted after displacement:

> *I told my children: "today, a suitor is coming over." One [of her children] responded: "a suitor, mom? Are you getting married? By god, if you get married, I will throw myself off the balcony," so I replied, "No, don't wait until this evening, you can head to the balcony right now, this matter concerns only me. Why would you throw yourself off? Your dad got married, and I have a right to live. Also, my marriage to this man is under the condition that I will have my own separate apartment for my children and me. If you accept this, you are welcome. If not, this is my own life. Are you going to seek revenge from me? I want to live."*

In addition to referring to age and status as factors that might restrict certain women, other women in this study have referred to cultural and social reasons, such as the expectation that if a woman remarries, she is expected to leave her children with her parents. Similarly, many expressed that they would have been afraid to bring a stepfather into their children's lives. They were mainly concerned that the children would be unfairly treated if they stayed with the mother (rather than with their father's kin, as is customary).

172

Another social explanation for why remarriage was not a feasible option in Syria is the social support that many of these women enjoyed there. Being surrounded by family and friends provided them with *sanad* and safety, replacing the need for a male figure. Thus, many women justified marrying to fill this gap, which was intensified by their new status as uprooted refugees. Naziha dismissed the idea of remarrying in Syria, describing how she would be among her family and her people, with more than one male figure to take care of her. For her, then, 'wifehood' or marriage was a way to compensate for her loss of motherhood status. Moreover, displacement has reshaped her perception of marriage. It dismantled some structural boundaries surrounding marriage (and remarriage) by removing some taboos surrounding if and when a "mother" could remarry.

7.2.2. *The Shifting Meaning of Ideal Marriage: Urfi and Polygamous Marriages*

In addition to the elevated sense of control and the emergence of remarriage as a new social option, some women were able to challenge the normative image of the ideal marriage as a result of displacement. In other words, marriage itself, its meaning, and how and when it could take place have been reshaped by the women's experiences of forced migration. We have seen how a strand of the International Marriage Migration body of work looked at the meaning of marriage and how it shifts and changes based on culture and context and due to movement. In her case study about Bulgur marriage, for instance, Gale (2007) discussed that such transactional marriages reflect not only the ability of multiple identities (in her case: single mother, Bulgur wife, and "legal" refugee) to co-exist but also illustrate how social mobility attempts can invent creative ways to negotiate kinship in precarious situations in a way that challenges our understanding of "family-centric, conventional marriage" (p. 375). Similarly, Grabska's (2010) study reveals how migration has affected young Sudanese migrants and their gender identities and perception of, and engagement with, the practice of marriage. In this section, I build on these discussions critiquing the nuclear-

173

family-centric hegemonic assumption by de-Orientalizing two unconventional forms of marriage: polygamy and *urfi* (customary) marriages, especially within the context of displacement.

Many of the respondents I interviewed were married unofficially–recall that *urfi* marriage has different meanings in Egypt and Syria. While in Egypt, *urfi* marriage, or customary marriage, is generally used to circumvent traditional marriage obstacles and is often secretive and societally rejected, it is still socially acceptable in Syria. In Syria, customary marriage, often referred to as *shar'e* or lawful/*sharia*-compliant marriage, is considered a full marriage that receives societal approval. It often substitutes for the engagement step so that the bride and groom are allowed more time in private, and the bride can take off her headscarf if she wears one. One can argue that the different evaluations of *urfi* marriage between the Syrian bride and the Egyptian groom have determined the dynamics of and facilitated many of these marriages.

One of the elements that cause significant criticism of seeking a Syrian bride in Egypt is that many of these marriages were reported to be *urfi* and polygamous. Many of the respondents involved in an *urfi* and a polygamous marriage arrangement challenged the narrative which perpetuates perceptions of this type of marriage as exploitative. By Egyptian standards, *urfi* marriage automatically implies an exploitative relationship often against the wife, since, for example, it is harder in unregistered marriages to prove marital and legal rights and even register children. However, many of the respondents defended *urfi* marriage by either equating it with *shar'e* marriage or justifying why *urfi* made the most sense in their situation. For instance, Asmaa explained:

> *I: So, your marriage was urfi*
>
> *R: You call it here urfi, but it's like a regular paper [contract]. In Syria, this same paper can be registered in court.*

I: So, there were witnesses and announcement of the marriage

R: Verbally only, like in the Prophet's times with words. But you call it here urfi.

The women were aware of the difference between registered and unregistered marriages and that the latter is less socially acceptable in Egypt than in Syria. They were also aware that it serves different purposes in the two countries: keeping the marriage secretive in Egypt versus serving as a substitute for engagement in Syria. Nevertheless, many women still found ways to justify the authenticity of the marriage and its morality and lawfulness.

A central reason contributing to reshaping those women's perception of marriage is their need to manipulate many cultural and legal rules to secure a better social and economic position for their children and themselves. One of the main grounds for preferring an *urfi* marriage is that it makes a second marriage easier and more discrete (i.e. secretive or unannounced). While polygamy is practiced to varying degrees in various Muslim societies and subcultures and social classes more than others, monogamous relationships and the nuclear family are still the most commonly accepted forms in most Egyptian communities and the majority of the Muslim Arab world[28] (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2003). Many Egyptian wives would resist the idea of bringing in a second wife. When the first wife of Marwa's husband asked Marwa after the marriage secret was revealed: "Didn't you consider me? What would happen to me when my husband marries a second wife?" Marwa simply replied: "No, to be honest, I didn't consider you, I have enough on my plate. I did not have time to consider other aspects". Thus, an *urfi* marriage offered some of my respondents economic and social benefits, at least within their social circle or neighbourhood, while avoiding both the frequently stigmatized status of the second wife and the probable fighting and rivalry with the first wife. A fight that she is not necessarily guaranteed to win. In such a case,

keeping a "precarious" status, paradoxically, offers her more stability. Other women contested the meaning of secrecy to justify their moral grounding:

I: So why did you marry in secret if…

R: It wasn't a secret! why call it a secret?

I: You said his wife didn't know.

R: Because [clears throat] … Because he knew if they knew at his house that she would get upset.

I: Hmmm

R: Do you know the mayors of the villages?

I: Yes

R: And his wife too has her own social position, she is the wife of [her husband's name], and she has a prestige. It would look awful for another woman to come and pull the rug from under her feet. So, as I was telling you, mayors act like babies in front of my husband, do you see what I mean? He has power and influence, and he ran for elections, and he got many votes, but he wasn't with the ruling party, and he wouldn't accept bribes.

I: So, you got married, and you agreed for it to stay a secret…

R: No, not a secret. Everyone knew except for his wife and children. He promised to tell them later.

I: I mean in secret from his wife

> *R: Yes, just his wife. Even his siblings knew and suspected. He promised to tell*
>
> *her after her brother's wedding.*

In the quote above, Maha is trying to justify her husband's decision to opt for an *urfi* marriage that consequently had to be kept as a secret from the person who mattered the most: his first wife. In her assessment, secrecy helped protect his first wife from the shock and humiliation while at the same time protecting the husband's social image. When I tried to be more specific about the meaning of secretive marriage, Maha explained that technically it was not secretive since everyone knew except for his family, his wife and children and even the latter had their guesses.

Additionally, unlike their preference, if they were back in Syria, some Syrian women admitted that they preferred—in fact, insisted—on keeping their marriage urfi to keep it unofficial or unregistered (with the government) limit it to a private religious ceremony. Thus, while many women sought to register their marriages to preserve both their legal status in the country and their marital rights, some women preferred the "precarious" status created by the *urfi* or customary marriage. They justified their choice in several ways. First, like Naziha, some women said that marrying an Egyptian would entail losing the legal refugee status with the UNHCR. By not disclosing the marriage, a woman can keep the yellow card that proves her legal refugee status, keeping her eligible for humanitarian financial assistance and food rations for their children and themselves. Second, by not registering a marriage with the Egyptian government, women retain more autonomy if they later decided the marriage was a mistake, chose to leave the country or wanted to go back to Syria. A customary marriage simplifies the separation process and gives the woman more control over it, primarily in proving an unmarried marital status outside of Egypt at a later date. Naziha details her rationale for preferring an unregistered marriage as follows:

At that time, he was worried he would lose his chance with me, so he said, let's have katb al-kitâb *through a* sheikh *[another subtle expression of urfi marriage] until your paperwork arrives from Syria, then we will register the marriage. I had no reason to register the marriage for any purpose, such as residency or money. And then I didn't even want to register the marriage. I was worried he would turn out to be a bad guy, and I would have another bad experience because I trust no man anymore. I prayed to God for the paperwork to be delayed, and I hoped not to register it because I didn't know who he was, and at the same time, I didn't want to hurt another family [his first wife and children]. So, I told him: my condition for the marriage is that you return to your [first] house and children. You would alternate the days between us, one day here and one day there, because the man who hurt me in my first marriage used to lie to me and wouldn't take care of his responsibility towards us [his first family]. I would ask him not to make it hard on his children and keep giving them an allowance. This was my condition for accepting his proposal to marry. He told me she [his first wife] changed the locks of the house and kicked him out, and she even started hitting him. I told him then to stay with his children and spend the night with them, "don't keep them from their father like my children had been". Grace to Allah! I started wondering maybe my marriage to him would be a reason for him to go back to his home, and he started alternating the days.*

This quote pinpoints the complexity of the decision to partake in such an unconventional form of marriage. Nevertheless, it is crucial to understand how such complexity and apparent contradiction find ways to co-exist in harmony and are still perceived as full marriages by those women. In the quote above, Naziha made a moral as well as a pragmatic case for her *urfi* polygamous marriage.

The undocumented marriage does not simply give her more flexibility and control in case the marriage ends up being a disappointment. Rather, because she suffered from a negative polygamous experience with her first husband, in which he had married another woman without asking her and slowly started withdrawing his responsibilities to his first household, she also made sure to justify her polygamous marriage morally. She emphasized that one of the conditions for her marriage to her Egyptian husband is to make sure he is available and fair to his first wife and children. She would constantly encourage him to visit them and offered excuses to his first wife when he was stressed out from his relationship with her.

Other women took up *urfi* marriage in order to maneuver through the legal system, which would not otherwise allow them to marry. Women like Naziha and Nisreen, for instance, who got divorced after arriving in Egypt, and others like Marwa and Nour, whose husbands were killed in the war zone and were unable to register their deaths before fleeing the country, were not able to prove their marriage dissolved. Nisreen spoke about her husband wanting to marry her regardless of the procedure. *Urfi* marriage, thus, solved his problem with his first wife since it left no official legal trace and solved Nisreen's problem of needing to prove she had divorced before remarriage:

> *I: So he went to your parents and told them he wanted to marry you. But who suggested the urfi marriage?*
>
> *R: He wanted to get married, and he didn't care how. But my divorce certificate is still in Syria and hasn't arrived yet, and the marriage contract needs to have the date of the divorce for* idda[29]*, and I need to show them the divorce paperwork. So, he told me, "I will talk to your mother. The most important thing in* urfi *marriage is the announcement and the witnesses [on the marriage contract], your parents are here, and your rights are lawful and guaranteed".*

179

Furthermore, some women justified their approval and their preference to be second wives, regardless of whether the marriage was official or not. Many of them arrived in Egypt as single mothers after a divorce or the demise of their husband and many did not want to be "full-time" wives, which they believed to be a distraction from their children. Being a second wife means that they only have a "part-time" husband who splits his time between two wives and two households (or more in sporadic cases), allowing her more freedom and more time with her children. That is to say, some single mothers repurposed the meaning of marriage and how and when it takes place. It has been repurposed to serve the newfound situations of these women. In this respect, marriage meant dismantling many social restrictions and boundaries that existed back home and allowed for new interpretations and options that could be created in a migration context.

For instance, Luli, one of the well-off respondents, explained how she often felt suffocated by her current husband's controlling tendencies even though she loves and respects him. Luli used to work before she met her husband and had been in a previous failed marriage where she and her ex-husband had very independent lifestyles. When her husband Tarek met her, he was already married and had a family. Luli encouraged him to stay with his family and treat them well. She believed it was in her best interest to be a part-time wife, where her husband is responsible for two households and is only available to her part of the week. She noted that when Tarek split from his first wife, she lost much of her freedom as he became a full-time resident of her house, directed all of his energy and attention toward her:

> R: One of his acquaintances told me Tarek has become so different since you
>
> married him. His daughter last week saw me for the first time, and she told me,
>
> "Baba has become so different, and he is taking it much easier on us"
>
> I: So, you felt his full energy was directed towards you?

R: I thought the problem [of his controlling tendencies] would be divided [between the two households].

I: So, you are saying it wasn't in your best interest for him to leave his first wife?

R: Not at all! I swear to Allah I begged him not to leave them and to make amends with his wife. He would say, "this is a better situation for me; she turned my life to hell." Sometimes they make amends, sometimes they split. For the past month, the situation has become so bad, so I felt that the whole focus has turned to me.

Luli was explicit that the main reason behind encouraging her husband to keep his first house intact was for her to have more freedom and more time with her children, one of whom is from her previous marriage. For Luli, polygamy served her own personal interest.

On the other hand, people like Latifa, who also reiterated the advantage of part-time marriage, were convinced that polygamy is a healthy form of marriage and is, thus, encouraged religiously. The lengthy quote below details Latifa's rationale in explaining how her husband's first wife was, in fact, the one who set them up:

I: Your husband was already married, so you are his second wife?

R: Yes, he was married, and I told him I don't want to be a second wife

I: Why

R: In principle, I don't mind. For us, in shām, they marry [polygamous]. My cousin, her matchmaker, was his first wife, and until now, they both treat others like sisters.

I: So why did you refuse initially?

R: I didn't agree until I knew the opinion of his wife. He swore to me that she

was the one who was seeking a wife for him. I told him I need proof; I need to

meet her face to face; otherwise, it won't work out. So, he agreed to let us both

meet and then Subhan Allah [an expression to reflect exclamation] now we are

both friends, even more than him.

The above excerpt touches on an important theme throughout this case study: the meaning and embodiment of agency. Latifa's rationale reflects the different factors influencing her subject formation and, ultimately, her agentive choice to agree to become a second wife. It shows how her ethical framework represented in her need to seek the first wife's approval is shaped by two core factors: moral agency and relational autonomy. I discuss both concepts in more depth in the next chapter, but it would be useful for the analysis now to consider how Latifa's agency and decision-making were informed by elements other than self-interest. The moral and ethical convictions forming her subjectivity are even more apparent below, as Latifa elaborates on the meaning and purpose of marriage and the benefits of polygamy from a religious perspective:

I: Why did she seek a wife for him?

R: She is very religious and has morals, and she loved me so much [...] she

wanted him to get married because she felt she is not paying her dues in their

marriage.

[...]

I: Are you saying she is not interested in the sexual aspect of marriage

[zahadet]?

182

R: Not that, but she has [health] problems. And in principle, she doesn't mind

getting him married because it is the natural course of life…

I: What do you mean by the natural course of life?

R: That the man would have two, three or four wives at the same time

I: So, she believes it is normal for a man to marry more than one wife at the same

time?

R: Yes

That said, as Latifa elaborates on how she feels, we notice that she realizes that she personally benefits from the marriage, and we see her moral and ethical reasoning eventually come together with her personal interests. That is, self-interest as a pillar of exercising agency was still among one of the factors that shaped her final decision:

I: And do you share this opinion?

R: Listen, if he is fair, then it is his right because this is a Sunnah *from the*

Prophet. And in fact, this arrangement removes a lot of burden from your

shoulders. When he is at my house day in and day out, he will get used to me and

know all my secrets. But when he is not around every day, you become more

comfortable around the house. When he comes back again, he will find you

different [referring to boredom in marital life] … because the man is more visual

than verbal, so he might get used to you.

Thus, even though Latifa accepts (and even advocates for) what might be perceived as patriarchal ideas about masculine and feminine preferences that liberal feminist scholars may consider

problematic, her agency is evident in a way that is not solely captured by the Western-centric view of agency in terms of resistance to norms and promoting self-interest.

Luli and Latifa come from completely different socio-economic and demographic backgrounds. Luli is in her late twenties, does not wear a hijab, and demonstrates opinions and a lifestyle that reflect fewer conservative beliefs than Latifa. Luli is also very well educated and comes from a well-off family. On the other hand, Latifa, while also well-educated and accomplished career-wise, showed a deep commitment to socially ascribed Islamic values and compliance with conservative interpretations of *sharia*. She is in her fifties and from a well-educated yet lower-middle-class environment.

Nevertheless, both women agreed on the same "part-time husband logic" as one of the benefits of polygamy, i.e. That it allows them more freedom and reduces their marital responsibilities. However, Latifa assigned *urfi* a moral and religious grounding by emphasizing how it keeps a healthy relationship between the spouses, reducing boredom from seeing each other every day. It also reduces, in her view, the chances of friction and confrontation. This practical point of view is her way of supporting her understanding of moral and religious obligations. As she rationalized, *sharia* would never allow any harmful practices, so it must have allowed polygamy for the husband for a good reason to reflect a healthy family and a healthy society. Nevertheless, both women had their points of view reinforced by their realities. While Latifa is leading a successful life with her 'sister wife' and husband as they try to maintain "their partnership," Luli started to suffer after her husband left his first wife. While they both agree on the logic, a pragmatic versus a religious rationale makes a difference in marriage and gender dynamics, especially given Latifa's assumptions regarding the different natures of men and women.

The focus in this section has been on the shift in some of the respondents' perceptions of ideal marriage and how they reinvented their perceptions upon being displaced. The analysis attended to the respondents' reasoning and preference for non-traditional forms of marriage such as polygamy or *urfi* (customary) marriages. The analysis accentuates the implications of forced migration on the respondents' perceptions of the meaning of marriage, gender identity and exercise of agency. A decolonizing intersectional lens unravels the complex web that shapes those women's decision-making process that is driven to a large extent by self-interest, but also by ethical and moral frameworks. In the final section of this chapter, I trace another implication of displacement on marriage by focusing on how marriage has shifted from being an objective in itself to serving as a means of fulfilling the women's motherly duties. I aim to foreshadow some non-Western gendered relations and subjectivities and their "eligibility to exist" (Kyriakides, 2019) outside of oppressive interpretation frameworks.

7.2.3. *The Shifting Purpose of Marriage: From Wifehood to Motherhood*

Another emerging theme is that the perception of marriage has shifted from being a goal in itself (as an ultimate form of performing one's gendered role through creating a family) to become a means or even an experience/trial. I could sense an increased willingness among my respondents to take the risk of marrying someone from the country to which they had been displaced. Reasons for this increased risk-taking can be traced back again to feelings of exile and *ghorba,* which have plausibly alleviated some of the social pressures and stigma while at the same time positioning marriage as a logical or the most decent solution for some women. For instance, many of the women I interviewed expressed that they would not accept their husband marrying a third wife despite being in a polygamous marriage, and they would seek a divorce in that case. This is all while keeping in mind that some of them had to bear it back home, hoping for a change of heart

from the husband's side. Maha and Nisreen were completely against their husbands marrying a "new" wife and said they would leave him instantly in such a case. When I asked them how they justify their logic, since they themselves imposed on another woman, both Maha and Nisreen argued that their husbands seeking a new wife would be unjustified since they offer him everything. Nisreen also seemed to be at peace when she told me that one of her reasons is utter selfishness.

However, I aim to draw attention to the complexity of their decision-making so that this increased motivation to take the risk of breaking social norms should not be understood as taking the marriage lightly. For instance, take Basema, who was in her mid-thirties and had never been married. She explained how she did not have time to think about marriage in Syria as she was consumed with working and supporting her family, including her older brother. However, after coming to Egypt and being bombarded by marriage proposals, she did not feel annoyed. Rather, she explained that the proposals have opened up her feminine side and made her more open to the idea of marriage. Basema married, willingly, a widower at least twenty years older than her, whom she considers a father figure more than a partner. She assured me that even though it was her first marriage, she is not worried about failure. She looked at it as an experience that could fail, but she went through it with confidence and optimism. Despite this statement, throughout our interview, Basema expressed that she takes her marital relationship seriously and always tries to maintain a happy and loving relationship with her husband, which she believed she is accomplishing.

Embedded in these discussions of marriage and wifehood is the idea and meaning of motherhood. It is also relevant here to draw attention to the body of literature, many of which are in psychological and mental health research, which emphasizes the importance of creating connections and good quality relationships as a protective measure in forced migration (see, for

186

instance, Gorst-Unsworth & Goldenberg, 1998). Similarly, some clinical research called for a culturally sensitive approach to assessing mental health issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression: two notions I use here with caution as similar notions have been critiqued for being Western-centric that are not necessarily representative of sometimes "pathogenic contexts" and "justified misery"[30] (see, Goldhill, 2019, Tilbury, 2007; Terheggen et al., 2001). Such clinical research underscores mothering and motherhood as a central notion that directly affects refugee women's resilience and subjectivities. Here, I would like to briefly discuss how the respondents juggled two of their core gender identities: motherhood and wifehood.

Some of the literature reviewed in this study suggested that socially ascribed, or in this case convenient, gender roles have provided women with more resilience allowing them to cope faster and better than men (Szczepanikova, 2005; Franz, 2003; Säävälä, 2010; Van Esterik, 1996). For instance, Szczepanikova (2005) concluded that maintaining household chores and childcare routines grounded her refugee women respondents, offering them a purpose, occupation and confidence during the uncertainty of exile and displacement. She argued that while gender relations were negotiated in many ways in the Chechen refugee context, women's association with the private sphere was crucial to both their perception of ideal womanhood and, more importantly, their attitude to coping and resettlement. Franz's (2003) argument sits better with the decolonizing intersectional theoretical framework adopted in this case study, in that she critiqued the very notion of joining the workforce as innately liberating. In her case study, Franz emphasized that the primary motivator for her Bosnian refugee respondents to seek work was "the survival and well-being of their families rather than their own individual development or progress" (p. 102). Against this backdrop, I turn back to how some of the Syrian refugee respondents in this study juggled two of their core gender roles: motherhood and wifehood.

187

For the women who abide by socially ascribed standards of femininity, motherhood is viewed as a "source of pride and dignity" (Jaji, 2015, 499). Ghalya's story, whom I referred to earlier in our discussion about *sanad* and how she chose to stay in her abusive relationship because "shadow of a man is better than a shadow of a wall," offers a good example. She was among the most vulnerable research participants; in that, she was contemplating going back to the war zone rather than bearing harassment in Egypt. Her solution was marriage. However, she kept rejecting all the proposals that did not address her own and her son's best interests:

> *I: Did you get a lot of proposals?*
>
> *R: Oh, too too too many! I think there was a woman who lived nearby who was a matchmaker ["girls' realtor" was her expression]. She would get them married and get paid a commission. She brought me so many suitors, and I would tell her, "No, I want to raise my boy." Seriously it wasn't an option even among Syrians. I would tell them, "I don't want to get married. I hated all men". One of the suitors proposed and asked me to give him a chance and that he will change my point of view about men. I gave him a chance, but he made me hate them even more. He simply told me: "why you don't send your boy to a boarding school?" I sacrificed my whole life for my son, and I was able to bear his father for him, and I explained that to him [the suitor], and now he wants me to prevent him from me and throw him in a boarding school in during our* ghorba*?*

Similarly, other respondents, such as Marwa and Nour–discussed in the *sutra* section–understood *sutra* as a means to protect their children. That is to say, many of the respondents chose marriage because they viewed it as their motherly duty. For instance, as discussed above, Naziha only considered marriage after *ghorba* (exile) and displacement since she would have had a support

188

system and retained her motherhood status in Syria. For her, 'wifehood,' or marriage, was a way to compensate for her lost motherhood status.

Thus, a central theme that emerges from the respondents' narratives–Ghalya and Naziha here, Maha, Marwa and Nour, in the previous sections and Mohra and Shirin, as will become more evident in the following chapter–is the centrality of motherhood in shaping their subjectivity and informing their decision-making process. For them, they found empowerment *in* and *because of* motherhood. In addition to giving those women a sense of purpose and motivation to survive and adapt, motherhood also offered them social status. Moreover, my analysis critically destabilizes the role of romantic love and intimacy, or the lack thereof, in defining a "real" marriage. The stories here highlight how some conjugal relationships challenged the idea of the nuclear family, intimacy and romantic attraction as driving forces for marriage. More importantly, the narratives demonstrate that intimacy and creating a family and other less hegemonic reasons for marriage, such as those relevant to marriage for refuge, are not necessarily mutually exclusive and are not in a hierarchical relationship. These less popular reasons for marriage were stated in other studies that I touched on earlier in my discussion of International Marriage Migration (see, e.g., Al-Sharmani, 2010; Kim, 2014; Palriwala and Uberoi, 2008). For instance, Al-Sharmani's study (2010) postulated that women respondents in the Somali diaspora had identified romantic attachment to their partner as secondary to their main criteria of choosing a husband, which is that "he would not hinder her role as a provider and caretaker of her [transnational] family" (p. 507). In the same sense, many of my respondents reported that their affection for their husbands took place only at a later stage of the marriage if at all, emphasizing the role of social support and protection (*sanad* and *sutra*) as a vital factor in keeping the marriage intact. Similarly, we have seen evidence in the above that some women have entered marriage not to create new families but to preserve pre-existing ones.

In Chapter Eight, I revisit the implications of forced migration on the shifting purpose of marriage and how it redefines the meaning of agency and empowerment for some of the respondents. I argue for decolonizing the perception of socially ascribed gender roles and for considering them as possible "avenues" for empowerment. In doing so, I elaborate on what I refer to as social or contextual empowerment dictated by moral agency and relational autonomy. In many non-Western contexts, one can trace how women and their communities can perceive motherhood status as more important than socioeconomic or educational accomplishments (Bawa, 2016). Motherhood can offer a woman an elevated status in her community that comes with a robust social network and respect. This is not to imply that the influence of motherhood is exclusive to non-Western women. It is important here to note that it is certainly the case that many women in the West will feel the same about motherhood, in the sense that it can be a driving force and offer social and moral satisfaction and wholeness. However, in such Western contexts, feminist critiques of these perceptions often centre around a critique of patriarchy. In a Muslim Non-Western context in turn, the nature of critique about the same issue of motherhood often takes a different form, tying it not just to patriarchy but also to cultural deficit explanations and oppressive Orientalist discourses (Razack, 2004). One of the objectives of this study is to trace this double standard in some feminist and humanitarian discourses that tend to label the respondents' acceptance and elevation of the motherhood status as culturally oppressive. Such framing would be an imposition that obscures the subjectivities and experiences of the respondents. To entertain this last point, in Chapter Eight, I delve into the contribution of moral agency and relational autonomy in understanding marriage for refuge as a self-rescue resettlement option for some Syrian refugee women.

7.3. Concluding Remarks

The narratives of these women reconfigure marriage and pose significant conceptual challenges to some hegemonic humanitarian and liberal perceptions of marriage that center mostly around the notion of the nuclear family. One could identify some pragmatic motives behind such challenges. For example, women gain flexibility and some financial benefits from preferring and pursuing polygamous marriage to allow them freedom of movement and control of the household. Similarly, refusing to officially register the marriage and limiting it to a customary contract gives them more flexibility and even some financial benefits (e.g., the UNHCR yellow card). However, beyond those pragmatic motives, one can trace malleable meanings of marriage and family, which pose challenges to the explanations of gender inequality in non-Western, particularly in this case, Muslim cultures.

For instance, despite her negative experience, Nour was actually pleased with her ex-husband's interest in applying *sutra* to a widow and her orphaned children. Even my own interpretation and reaction to Nour's case (namely, shock that a woman would allow herself to be married as a form of charity) evidence how I, as a researcher exercising critical reflexivity, failed at the moment to realize how my own subjectivity can reproduce Western perceptions of unfamiliar, unpopular and different social relations and social arrangements. To my astonishment, Nour clarified that she appreciated his honesty and noble intention. She was convinced that love, which remains an essential factor, is a gradual process that will come later. When I reflected on my astonishment, I could trace elements of a colonized understanding of intimate relations that are often explained through convictions around the nuclear family as well as individualized perceptions, commercialized romantic expressions and monopolized affections. This malleable understanding of marriage and gender identity should not be understood merely in terms of

191

strategic malleability, but also as "emerge[ing] *because of* her [the woman's] traditionally ascribed gender identity not *despite of* it" (Taha, 2017, p. 117). This understanding of marriage should ignite further exploration and analysis and require decolonizing and gender analysis and a political economy lens.

This chapter brought us to the main inquiry of this research: What is marriage for refuge? How might marriage be a strategy for resettlement? And how might it expand the understanding of gendered and Othered resettlement experiences and strategies? In order to capture the flaws of an Orientalist interpretation of a phenomenon such as marriage for refuge, I sought to analyze how marriage and resettlement intertwine. I traced how respondents understood marriage for refuge as a self-initiated form of resettlement that offers them not just legal and economic security and integration but, more importantly, social and moral support through *sanad* and *sutra*. In turn, by applying a decolonizing intersectional framework, we could trace how the notion of marriage, its form, and its purpose were reshaped by some refugee women. By removing some social and cultural restrictions, displacement has made remarriage possible for some women, where it would not have been possible had they not been displaced. Displacement has also propelled some women to consider non-traditional or non-normalized ways of marriage, such as seeking unregistered polygamous marriages in order to maximize their interest and control over the marriage. Finally, displacement decentred the notion of intimacy and the nuclear family as the sole reason for a "real" marriage, emphasizing the role of extended family in non-Western cultures as well as the role of socially ascribed gender roles such as motherhood and wifehood in exercising moral agency, and acquiring contextual empowerment and relational autonomy.

In the final chapter, I discuss moral agency, social empowerment and what I refer to as marriage immobility and their role in decolonizing Othered experiences. I draw from the marriage

for refuge case study to highlight how some decolonizing strategies can contribute to a more robust

and nuanced understanding of intersectional and 'Othered' gendered refugee experiences.

8. Chapter Eight: Discussion: On Moral Agency, Social Empowerment and Marriage Immobility

As demonstrated earlier, a good deal of feminist research in refugee studies trace aspects of agency and empowerment of refugee women. Examples of women challenging patriarchy and cultural norms are illustrated in various critical feminist literature (see, e.g., Hajdukowski-Ahmed, Khanlou, & Moussa 2008; Hyndman, 2007; Kim, 2014; Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002; Schrijvers 1999). In this final chapter, I continue to build on and extend similar academic discussions by exploring how Syrian refugee women assert their agency and promote their autonomy and self-interest through *accepting*, leveraging and sometimes modifying these norms and socially ascribed gender roles in the context of marriage for refuge. By critically engaging with the respondents' narratives, I outline examples of how a decolonizing intersectional approach enriches our understanding of gendered refugee experiences and Othered ways of knowing through demonstrating how marriage during war can be reinterpreted and become a resettlement strategy and sanctuary for displaced women.

In the literature review presented in Chapter Two, I explicated the body of research that repositions women from the category of helpless victims to agents of change. More accurately, it does so by examining how they experience a mix of opportunities and structures of oppression yet remain active shapers of their own future by making use of social tools. One of this study's objectives, for example, was to underscore the aspects of symbolic capital or assets like public acknowledgment, recognition, and honour (Bourdieu, 1989), which many of those women gain through their social status as wives and mothers. For instance, in the previous two chapters, we have seen that some of the respondents perceived *urfi* and polygamous marriages to be better options than traditional forms of marriage, thus disrupting the normative meaning and purpose of

marriage. Another example of complying with socially ascribed roles was choosing marriage over work as a better and more decent option for women and their children when weighing moral or immaterial gains such as *sutra* and *sanad*.

Drawing on the marriage for refuge case study, this final chapter aims to trace strategies in which a decolonizing intersectional approach can enrich and expand research that (un)silences Othered forced migration experiences. By scrutinizing three concepts that were present in and central to all the themes and accounts discussed in the previous chapters: agency, empowerment and "forced" marriage, *I highlight the usefulness of two strategies inspired by decolonizing scholarship* that can deepen refugee studies as well as feminist and anti-racist analysis:

The first is: **decoupling associations** or deconstructing hegemonic concepts in a way that separates them from some limiting connotations. Here, I focus on agency (as resistance) and empowerment (as independence) with the premise that language can be very powerful in challenging or perpetuating colonial notions. I question the liberal origins of those two concepts and the assumptions accompanying them, which often originate from liberal, individualistic, and capitalist tenets. For instance, in the first section of the chapter where I discuss agency, I argue that restricting the analysis to a liberal definition of agency can sharply limit our understanding of some refugee women's full experiences and subjectivities. A decolonizing approach here, thus, takes the form of reimagining the notion through decoupling it from resistance and emphasizing the value of concepts such as *moral agency* (Mahmood, 2005) to capture the respondents' marriage rationale and decision-making process. In other words, I position agency as a social construct that should be dissociated from subversion and resistance and instead trace a complex and iterative web of pursuit of self-interest, relational autonomy and moral agency that shaped those women's agency and informed their decision making.

Similarly, in the second section of the chapter, I emphasize contextual or social empowerment in an attempt to decouple it from financial independence and present marriage as a social arrangement that fulfills purposes beyond intimacy and reproducing the nuclear family. In particular, I emphasize how motherhood galvanizes many women's decisions in the study and can be traced as one of the sources they draw upon for empowerment, a concept that might be counterintuitive to some liberal or Western feminists. In doing so, I tie the conversation back to recognizing moral agency and relational autonomy in capturing the nuances of the respondents' experiences and meaning making.

The second decolonizing strategy is: ***rejecting binaries*** and thinking outside of the either/or connotations that label many non-western experiences as oppressive or exploitative. To that end, I question the value of the notion of forced marriage in capturing the less fortunate marriage experience for some of the respondents. In the final section of this chapter, I focus on how the forced/voluntary marriage binary is limited in explaining many of the respondents' marriage experiences. I argue that by decolonizing and disrupting such binaries, we can avoid the shortcomings of using only oppressive or patriarchal discourses to explain Othered gendered refugee experiences. In other words, by capturing this state of in-betweenness, we can describe complex social phenomena in a way that usefully reveals and goes beyond the limitations of approaches that begin from the premise of victimhood, forced marriage and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).

8.1.   Decolonizing Agency as Resistance: The Location of Moral Agency

Research existing within the International Marriage Migration body of work points to the intertwining and interdependent relationship between gender identities and agency (see, e.g., Al-

Sharmani, 2010; Säävälä, 2010; Franz, 2003; Szczepanikova, 2005; Van Esterik, 1996; Kim, 2014; Utas, 2005; Gale, 2007). Several of these studies imply that structural factors, such as gender identities, intra-familial power relations, or the attitudes of the country of settlement towards migrants or forced migrants, are significant in determining a migrant woman's understanding of her agency. Other studies have suggested a more complex expression of agency where women demonstrate tactical agency (see Utas, 2005, Gale, 2007) or strategic agency[31] (see Kim, 2014) to improve their lives and empower themselves. Gale (2007) highlights how Sierra Leonean refugee "Bulgur wives" have utilized Bulgur marriage as a form of tactical agency or "short-term response in relation to a society's social structure" (p. 357). In many cases, migrant/refugee women voluntarily, purposefully, and strategically utilize the structural barriers imposed on them because of their gender identity to acquire agency and control over their lives.

Beyond such interdependence between identity and agency, I would also like to posit that, for different refugee women, certain norms and structures can sometimes be emancipating while at other times marginalizing. Furthermore, they can be both emancipating and restricting to the same woman at different times. A clear example that recurred in this case study is how displacement 'unsettles' the meaning and purpose of marriage for some refugee women. Another example is how the status of motherhood, unlike in some feminist critiques of patriarchy, was perceived by some women as a source of empowerment and encouraged their marriage decisions. Thus, one thing I hope to achieve from this case study is to move away from questions such as whether a practice is empowering/emancipating or disempowering/marginalizing. Instead, I make a case for the relevance of a decolonizing intersectional approach in refugee research by introducing 'marriage for refuge' as a language that better traces how marriage during war and displacement can have an evolved meaning and become a survival strategy and sanctuary for displaced women. Rather, many women sometimes managed to leverage displacement to navigate their socio-

economic status in the country of displacement. In this sense, perceptions of structure and agency and how refugee women juggle them should be viewed as a continuum instead of an "either/or" relationship.

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Many Western liberal scholarships have often defined agency ultimately as the individuals' resistance to different forms of domination, the ability to subvert norms and the capacity to realize one's own interest against custom (see, for instance, Asad, 1996; Butler, 1990; Mack, 2003; Bilge, 2010). As Saba Mahmood (2001) explained: "the normative subject of poststructuralist feminist theory remains a liberatory one, her agency largely conceptualized in terms of resistance to social norms" (p. 208). Mack (2003), for instance, defined it as "the free exercise of self-willed behaviour" (p. 149). Bilge (2010), in turn, traces agency's theoretical roots that are intertwined with a liberal subject, "a rational, free-willed, choosing agent" (p. 12). Agency in that sense is also "tied to the spirit of capitalism, invoking 'the mutually dependent figures of the entrepreneur and the consumer, or, more abstractly, the functions of initiating and choosing'" (Asad, 1996, as cited in Bilge 2010, p. 12). As a response, a poststructuralist critique pointed to the role of subjectivity in constructing human agency, namely that "human subjectivity is constructed by ideology (Althusser), language (Lacan) or discourse (Foucault), [hence] any action performed by that subject must be also to some extent a consequence of those things" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2000, p. 8). Other poststructuralist attempts, the most influential of which is Butler (1990), drew on Foucault's paradox of *subjectification*[32] that sees power as both subordinating and enabling. That is, the modes that allow agency are in fact the products of power operations; they did not exist before the dominance of this power (Thiranagama, 2011). In other words, an act of

agency is necessarily a product of structure and discursive powers which we "depend on for our existence" (p. 11).

My intention here is not to utterly reject a feminist discourse of freedom, emancipation and resistance to patriarchy. Instead, the objective is to draw attention to how some of this discourse's presuppositions become normalized (i.e., hegemonic). For instance, Bracke and Fadel (2012) use the case of veiling (*hijab*) within European secular multiculturalism debates to showcase how the dominant discourse promotes a model of agency dominated by a language of rights. They question how such hegemonic liberal language leads to a narrow understanding of resistance and emancipation. Such understanding necessarily informs a hegemonic meaning of agency, risking making the voices of Othered women less intelligible.

Similarly, a significant gap in the "agents not victims" body of work, as mentioned in an earlier chapter, is that it necessarily assigns a *positive* understanding of agency and, in turn, a *negative* one of victimhood (see Chapter 2, section 2.2). Thus, as Gudrun Dahl (2009) posits: "it tells us that the value of the described people *depends* upon them being prepared to act, or on acting with an impact" (p. 404). She argues that such understanding is a direct result of neoliberalism and individualism that are products of the Western experience (p. 391 & 396). Dahl contends that the constant push to extract agency from victimhood can potentially produce a "blame the victim" discourse, at least for some groups. Thus, even when the "agents, not victims" literature succeeds in recognizing agency and victimhood as concomitant or not necessarily mutually exclusive (see Raven-Roberts, 2012; Utas, 2005), this literature's very repetition of the moral message that individuals should be valued based on their ability to subvert, resist and challenge is problematic.

In this sense, the strategy of decoupling associations highlights the need to question the assumption that agency is necessarily associated with subversion and resistance to norms. This strategy also encourages viewing notions such as agent, victim, rational choice, and desire to be social constructs whose meanings and embodiments are time and space dependent. The example of *sutra* marriage and viewing marriage as an opportunity is particularly relevant here. In that case, Maha, Marwa and Nour's stories show that the decision to marry using the rationale of *sutra* mitigates certain social pressures, some stemming from patriarchy and others stemming from the uprooting and the forced migration status of those women. The women were still able to utilize relational autonomy[33] and agency–the latter in its liberal sense–to pursue their interests. For instance, this was established when Marwa simply replied to her husband's first wife that she had not considered the interest or feelings of [the first wife] when calculating the cost and benefit of this marriage. However, a major fracture to this "pursuit of self-interest" rhetoric is that those women still proactively identified themselves with the traditional marriage institution and many patriarchal discourses. Such fracture was manifested in Maha's earlier statement that: "a woman without a man is like a tree without leaves," in Nour's conviction that a woman's ultimate path is to get married and in Marwa's decision to choose marriage over just monthly financial support when given the option by her husband.

The case above highlights both the social construction aspect of agency, particularly the role of norms and structures in (re)producing agency and subjectivity and the usefulness of disassociating agency from resistance. As Butler (1990) argued, the modes that allow agency are, in fact, the products of power operations. She locates the possibility of resistance to norms, and any act of agency for that matter, within the structure of power itself "rather than in the consciousness of an autonomous individual" (Mahmood, 2001, p. 211). That is to say, an act of agency should be understood as a product of structure and discursive relations. Personal

preferences, desires and gender roles are social constructs dictated largely by culture, upbringing and other social forces. For instance, Nour*'s* conviction that marriage is the natural path for any woman has helped form her options and preferences. It shapes her understanding of marriage as "the decent" option for her. It has also helped set Nour's priorities when it comes to her obligations to her daughter and her understanding of love and intimacy.

Mahmood (2001) captures the above and describes the diversity of historically and contextually specific elements involved in subject formation and embodying agency:

> [I]f the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific (both in terms of what constitutes "change" and the capacity by which it is affected), then its meaning and sense cannot be fixed a priori, but allowed to emerge through an analysis of the particular networks of concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity. Viewed in this way, what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may very well be a form of agency-one that must be understood in the context of the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment. In this sense, agential capacity is entailed not only in those acts that result in (progressive) change but also those that aim toward continuity, stasis, and stability (p. 212).

Thus, while I argue in this research that marriage should be viewed as a practical, "decent," and a culturally relevant solution for many refugee women who might also be single mothers, it cannot be viewed in isolation from other cultural norms and discursive powers that have shaped those women's consciousness. This is not to deny the patriarchal and unjust conditions, such as fear from harassment or distress about personal safety, that underlie these women's socio-cultural milieu and

201

shapes their preferences and decisions to marry. Rather, as Mahmood (2001) eloquently puts it: "in order for us to be able to judge, in a morally and politically informed way, even those practices we consider objectionable, it is important to take into consideration the desires, motivations, commitments, and aspirations of the people to whom these practices are important" (p. 225).

An objective from the analysis of this case study is to challenge the Western assumption that the desire for freedom from subordination is universal and desirable (Mahmood, 2001, p. 256). While those women's testimonies correspond at some level with the liberal understanding of agency, associating it with the pursuit of self-interest and resistance, this understanding of the notion of agency captures only a thin layer of those Syrian refugee women's experiences discussed above. In other words, restricting ourselves to a definition of agency as resistance sharply limits our understanding of those women's full experiences and subjectivities. Instead, I argue that the decision and desire to marry for those women are determined by a complex web that is shaped by:

(a) Liberal understanding of agency and weighing one's interest against custom;

(b) patriarchal dictations that re-articulate marriage as the decent and almost the only solution, which corresponds with the constituencies of relational autonomy; and,

(c) the women's moral agency. Such moral agency does not particularly aim to enhance one's material interest or status but rather to "attain a certain kind of state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (Mahmood, 2006, p. 210).

We had seen the striking example of Latifa when she was rationalizing her agreement to become a second wife and basing it on factors such as (a) self-interest: her justification of how this decision directly benefits her in the sense that it frees her from day-to-day scrutiny by her husband, (b) relational autonomy, i.e. It reflects her choice as socially positioned and shaped by social discourse that defines her basic value commitments in terms of interpersonal relations and mutual

dependencies, in such case it was gender relations hierarchies and (c) her moral agency, represented in religion and specifically her ethical interpretation of religious text and tenets. In short, by introducing moral agency into the analysis, I argue that those women have perceived marriage as an agentive act not just in terms of promoting their socio-economic interest or maneuvering social structure but also as a moral and virtuous act that complements their existence and understanding of their gender and femininity. I now turn to empowerment as another example of decolonizing strategies, particularly by deconstructing and reimagining it within the frames of social capital.

8.2. Rethinking Empowerment: Making Room for Social Capital

A growing body of scholarship is critical of Western humanitarianism as a form of neo-colonialism (Fluri, 2008; Riley, Mohanty & Pratt, 2008; Rutazibwa, 2019; Daley, 2013). Critical scholars draw attention to the "colonial rescue" rhetoric used to justify Western intervention–utilizing soft and hard powers through the "misuse of feminism" and the brand of "saving brown women" (Fluri, 2008). Against this backdrop, I apply a decolonizing critique of some of what I suggest to be Eurocentric premises of humanitarianism through bringing the experiences of the intended targets of humanitarian support to the foreground. As Rutazibwa (2019) explained: "decolonial approach to humanitarianism […] poses questions not so much about the political will, operational implementation and technical capabilities of humanitarians as about the perpetuation of colonial power relations in seemingly benevolent activities" (p. 66).

In humanitarian and economic development discussions, women's empowerment technically refers to women's ability to make strategic life choices that they have been denied before (Huis et al., 2017). More than often, though, women's empowerment is translated as

economic and financial independence (Huis et al., 2017; Kurtiş et al., 2016) or in terms of emancipation and subversion where the less powerful are released from constraints of oppressive social structures that limit their subjectivities (Khanna, 2011). Growing evidence, however, suggests that economic empowerment or autonomy are not necessarily coupled with progressive or even favourable outcomes for women (Huis et al., 2017). Instead, women are urged to draw upon local understandings that "resonate with local realities and better serve local communities" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 223). In other words, social and cultural differences mean that different components of empowerment will be relevant or meaningful to members of a particular community. The decisions they *can make* are reliable indicators of true empowerment (Huis et al., 2017; and Kurtiş et al., 2016). More importantly, to understand some Othered experiences, one might need to reject the individualism assumed in discourses of empowerment, as many critical feminist literature had suggested (Khanna, 2011).

Drawing on the analysis in the previous two chapters, I contend that some refugee women can find empowerment in cultural practices, such as *sutra* marriage and socially ascribed gender roles, such as motherhood. As I demonstrated earlier, many studies have revealed that a primary motivator for women to enter the public sphere, mainly in the form of paid work, was "the survival and well-being of their families rather than their own individual development or progress" (Franz, 2003, p. 102). We can see how the latter aligns with some of the Syrian respondents' narratives, in which they expressed that their children's interests outweigh any other priorities. Recalling Nour's earlier quote, for instance, when she chose to be a second wife in an unregistered marriage, putting her in a very precarious position, Nour clarified her choice as follows:

> *I: Oh, so you mean you do not care if you are a first or a second wife as long as*
>
> *your daughter is with you?*

N: Yes, dear. Excuse me, but for women like us, we do not think about ourselves.

We think about our children. When you buy anything for the house, do you think

of yourself or your son? [...] In my country, I had my rights, and I was able to

manage. Here I am in a strange country. Why would I work and degrade myself,

meet this and meet that, the good and the bad? No, I apply sutra to myself and my

daughter and find a human being who is honest and straightforward and offers

me a decent life. I'm not saying that I want a car and a big house. Middle ground.

A decent life.

Based on Nour's rationale, other solutions such as working as a hairdresser, her job before she married her first Syrian husband, would keep her away from her daughter during the workday and expose her to a relatively foreign culture. Such paid work would make her prone to exploitation and "humiliation," which also implies sexual harassment and unwanted attention. For her, even if in secret or as a second wife, marriage was the safe or "decent," if not the obvious, option, especially considering that her priorities are set in relation to her only child.

That is to say, many of the respondents chose marriage because they viewed it as their motherly duty. They found empowerment *in* and *because of* motherhood. In addition to giving those women a sense of purpose and a motivation to survive and adapt, motherhood often also gives them social status. Such status can be perceived, by the woman and the members of her community, as more important than socioeconomic or educational accomplishments (Bawa, 2016). It can offer a woman an elevated status among her community that comes with a robust social network and respect. Earlier I had showcased Naziha's story, a 45-year-old previously divorced respondent who is currently married to an Egyptian man. Her trajectory offers a good example about the role played by social status, *sanad* and *ghorba*. She explained that she only

considered marriage upon arrival in Egypt as a refugee, as the analysis earlier has shown that she would have had motherhood status back home. For her, 'wifehood,' or marriage, was a way to compensate for her lost motherhood status.

I admit that the argument that motherhood underlies some women's rational choice and decision making would sit uncomfortably within some feminist scholars who might view the choices available to those women to be structured by patriarchy. That is, by elevating gender roles such as motherhood and practices such as marriage as an empowerment tool, I might seem to be reinstating patriarchal practices and ideals that have historically given women a subordinate position. However, I want to argue here that a decolonizing intersectional lens is particularly helpful in revealing the nuances of social or contextual empowerment. Recall my previous argument that, in Western contexts, feminist critiques of similar perceptions to motherhood and empowerment often centre around a critique of patriarchy. In a Muslim non-Western context, however, one can notice that the nature of critique about the same issue of motherhood often takes a different form, tying it not just to patriarchy but also to cultural deficit explanations and oppressive discourse (Razack, 2004). Eliciting this analytical double standard helps highlight the Orientalist interpretations that might obscure the role of some socially ascribed gender roles such as motherhood in influencing agency and empowerment in some non-Western experiences. I suggest here that notions such as moral agency, relational autonomy and social or contextual empowerment help position marriage for refuge as a self-rescue resettlement option for some Syrian refugee women.

Going back to the point discussing how family was the motivation for many refugee women to seek paid work, it is important to recall the scholarly work addressing notions that have been labelled by feminist scholarship as patriarchal, central to which is the nuclear family, which was

framed as a key source of women's oppression (Mahmood, 2005). Challenging this assumption, Indigenous and African American feminists have pointed to the fact that such label is a description of a white middle-class movement and instead argued that for them, "freedom consisted in being able to form families since the long history of slavery, genocide, and racism had operated precisely by breaking up their communities and families" (Mahmood, 2005, 13). In this vein, Black, indigenous and racialized scholars have centralized considerations such as history, class, race, ethnicity, and status to analyze what constitutes an agentive act (see, e.g., Collins, 2000a; Collins, 2000b; Davis, 1981; Lorde, 1984).

This critique of sources of patriarchy, oppression and empowerment ties directly to the earlier discussion emphasizing agency and its embodiment as a social construct and the need to decouple it from subversion and resistance and instead highlight a symbiotic web of self-interest, relational autonomy and moral agency. Here the notion of relational autonomy becomes particularly salient. Relational autonomy provides an alternative conception of what it means to be "a free, self-governing agent who is also socially constituted and who possibly defines her basic value commitments in terms of interpersonal relations and mutual dependencies" (Christman, 2004, p. 143). Utilizing relational autonomy in this decolonizing critique helps us see those women as subjects who are aware of their social position. Most importantly, they are agents who are aware of the social transaction, or the mutual benefit created by this form of marriage. In other words, by standing within the power relations of patriarchy and adopting non-traditional marriage practices, these women were able to exercise relational autonomy, exert moral agency and derive contextual/social empowerment. In this sense, marriage for refuge, I argue, should be studied as a self-initiated and self-empowering resettlement option.

During my interviews, I encountered a range of opinions and sentiments about marriage, divorce, work, and socially ascribed gender roles. Nevertheless, the notion and meanings of, and responsibilities attached to, motherhood created the least variability and controversy among the respondents. To reiterate, stories such as Ghalya's could be representative of all the respondents, who more or less abide by socially ascribed femininity. The stories view motherhood as a "source of pride and dignity" (Jaji, 2015, p. 499). As long as such cultural perceptions about gender roles and responsibilities remain unchanged, they will continue to shape how certain groups of women view empowerment, exploitation, and related notions such as the meaning and purpose of marriage. Recall Butler's (1990) argument that agency is not free from norms and structure and, in fact, is produced within and because of them. Thus, an important takeaway from this discussion is that a good practice for a politically responsible scholarship is to try to understand the coherence of a discourse, not with the intent to justify or critique it, but driven by academic curiosity and the principle of (un)silencing marginalized and underprivileged realities and ways of existence. More importantly, this approach would help address refugee women's Othered worldviews and offer appropriate support to vulnerable cases without generalization or stigmatization.

The experiences of my respondents were not uniform, however. After discussing cases in which some of the respondents were able to use subtle forms of agency that are a product of an assortment of elements and social and contextual empowerment, I now turn to other cases in which marriage for refuge had exacerbated a woman's precarity. I argue, however, that the notion of forced marriage is not an accurate description of their situation.

8.3. Disrupting the Forced in Forced Marriage: Marriage Immobility

Critical feminist scholarship on forced and early marriage pointed to the fixation of humanitarian and legal measures on culturalist interpretations, the 'clash' between Western and non-Western cultures, the victimized Muslim or 'imperilled Muslim women,' and oppression rooted in non-Western cultures (Razack, 2004). Such scholarship draws attention to the patriarchal elements that manifest themselves in different societies at different levels and in different forms. It proposes, for instance, that the solution "lies in the commitment to ensure women's sexual and social agency […] and demonstrates that otherwise, the legal measures for the prevention and prohibition of forced and polygamous marriages create profound negative consequences for the immigrant women that they purport to protect" (Kivilcim, 2016, p. 201). While such literature is focused on solutions, I am concerned in this section with differing perceptions of marriage. In other words, what is 'forced' in a forced marriage? Moreover, what makes a marriage voluntary? In dissecting these questions, I draw attention to cases that do not fit neatly between the two definitions: voluntary and forced (or involuntary).

Several reports highlight the adverse effects of early marriage on girls (See, for instance, Pelley et al., 2017; Youssef & Ismail, 2013; Bartel et al., 2018; Acland and Gercama, 2018). Evidence demonstrates, nevertheless, that early marriage was common before the war in Syria, with "13% of girls under the age of 18 reportedly married in 2006" (Bartel et al., 2018, p. 2). Forced displacement has led to an increase in this percentage to approximately 35 among Syrian refugees. Bartel et al. (2018) point to economic desperation and the risk to women at large of sexual violence and harassment to explain this increase (p. 2). While the research above focuses on early or child marriage in particular, commonly, the reasons for explaining forced marriage are economic or for the protection of a women's (and her family's) honour. The same rhetoric was

echoed by women rights advocates, such as in the *lajiat la sabaya* (refugees not captives) social media campaign, to explain the phenomenon and the exploitation of Syrian women and girls taking place not just in Egypt but in several other countries in the Arab world, including Lebanon and Saudi Arabia (Acland and Gercama, 2018). Similar online feminist campaigns (along with mainstream global media) have been described as self-Orientalizing (Ong, 1999) as they reflect disconnection from the realities of Syrian refugee women who, in turn, might not have the economic and educational privileges that allow them to mobilize and speak for themselves via online platforms (see, for instance, Alhayek, 2014). Similar initiatives and campaigns run the risk of replicating hegemonic representations of Eastern cultures as innately oppressive and uncivilized (Razack, 2004; Said, 1978). For that, I now demonstrate how marriage for refuge offers useful decolonizing analytical observations than other notions such as forced marriage in demonstrating how the notion of marriage has evolved and was utilized as a survival tool by some displaced women.

During the interviews, in an attempt to understand the level of choice (or lack thereof) they had in their marriages, I asked the respondents if they would still marry their current husbands had their circumstances been different in terms of the war and displacement (i.e., Would they have married the same person if they were still back in Syria). Some women enthusiastically affirmed that they would have still married their current husbands. In contrast, others hesitantly suggested that the limited options they had as refugees were decisive in choosing that particular man (or, more accurately, the first available option) as a husband. While they had a choice, their options were limited because of their displacement and their gender, among other individual and intersectional factors such as previous marital status, financial situation and age. This second group is the focus of the analysis in this section as I try to scrutinize the analytical usefulness of the voluntary/forced marriage binary and how, in some cases, it fails to capture Othered experiences.

Ghena offers an excellent example of this second group. At the time of the interview, she was already doing well financially and running a family business in Egypt along with her uncle. She got married to a well-off Egyptian man whom she described as good-looking with a successful career. She explained that even though she is fond of her husband and has an understanding relationship with him, she would have preferred to marry someone from her "own culture." Despite describing him as a suitable suitor, Ghena said that the main reason she agreed to marry a non-Syrian is that she was forced to leave her country:

> *I: If you were back in Syria and the war didn't take place, and you haven't left, would you have married Mohamed with his current situation and personality?*
>
> *R: Of course not! Because I wouldn't have considered marrying someone who is not from my own country, and I wouldn't have considered living in a country other than my own. Mohamed is very easy going but…*
>
> *I: I mean, if you were to marry a suitor with the same description in Syria*
>
> *R: No, I wouldn't have married because I was among my family. I left against my will, and it's been five years. For the past two years, I wasn't able to visit Syria. Maybe if I was able to visit Syria, I could have met a Syrian potentially.*

On the other hand, Mohamed, Ghena's husband, explained how he fell in love with her the moment he saw her in a coffee shop. He made sure to clarify to me that his marriage was not motivated by *sutra* since he already supports many Syrian families financially. Mohamed was doing well and was married at the time he proposed to Ghena. Not only was he happy with his first wife, but he also begged her not to ask for a divorce after his marriage to Ghena. He justified seeking a Syrian bride by articulating that even though his Egyptian wife was a decent woman whom he loved and respected, she was not as pretty as Ghena. She had a loud voice, among other

imperfections. He also started our conversation by asserting that he always wanted to marry someone who is not Egyptian, albeit not necessarily Syrian. His opinion brings us back to the (un)desirable femininity discussion I laid out in earlier chapters. Below, Mohamed explains how he and Ghena met and how he convinced her to marry him after her initial hesitation:

> *I fell in love with her the moment I saw her to be honest […] when I saw her, I greeted her, but she said, "listen, I am here just to have lunch, and I am not interested in [marriage]". So, I told her, "I will not disagree with you, let's just talk, I can also leave if you prefer." So, we started chatting, and then I started joking with her to ease things and told her 'Forget about marriage," but then I gave her a ride home, and we met the next day again. We got married ten days later.*

Ghena and Mohamed's story by no means qualify as exploitation or as involuntary marriage, even though marrying Mohamed had not been her first preference. This can be explained mostly by Mohamed and Ghena's socio-economic statuses, making marrying Mohamed for Ghena one of many other options. Still, in her mind, displacement has made marrying an Egyptian a sound, even if not a preferred option.

Other stories, especially coming from lower socioeconomic levels, pose challenges to the voluntary/forced marriage dichotomy. In this section, I want to highlight the unevenness in my respondents' experiences and how marriage for refuge, which offered some respondents ways to disrupt the implications of displacement, has also ended up with unfavourable outcomes for others.

For many women refugees, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is a particular threat. Such threat is not just limited to physical violence but includes psychological and emotional abuse as well (Young & Chan, 2015). As a result, many refugee women suffer from mental health

symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder (Guruge and Humphreys, 2009; Guruge, Roche & Catallo, 2012; Young & Chan, 2015). For many women, marriage is the only alternative to homelessness or deportation in Egypt. Thus, some refugee women will still choose or feel obliged to stay in that marriage, despite suffering from an abusive relationship, or even an unhappy marriage, due to factors such as incompatibility, marrying based on what is available or staying in a loveless marriage (Ho and Pavlish, 2011). Marriage for refuge in such cases is a reflection of oppressive structures, namely patriarchal and classist realities, that limit the options available to women, especially the uprooted. During the interviews, many women described feelings in which marriage had made their situation more precarious. Here, I want to highlight what I refer to as "compounded precarity" that describes some of the respondents' situations in this study. Such compounded precarity results from two elements: the woman's gendered uprooting and the loss of her family and social support, along with a precarity resulting from the marriage itself. Recognizing compounded precarity as a reality for some of the women I interviewed is central to capturing the voluntary/forced marriage binary's analytical shortcomings, as I detail below. It highlights the role of location in dictating the power relations in gendered refugee experiences. In other words, "the power of place — in cultural and social processes can provide another layer in the understanding and demystifying of the forces that affect and manipulate our everyday behaviour[*sic*.]" (Cresswell, 1996, p. 11).

The women I interviewed can be categorized roughly into three groups: (a) those, such as Maha and Safaa, who are happily married and appreciate the quality of their Egyptian husbands; (b) those, like Marwa, Ghena or Naziha, who mainly married for social and economic survival and who might be slightly satisfied or slightly unsatisfied with their current husband, whether for cultural, financial or compatibility reasons; (c) a third group, like Mohra and Shirin, those who married because they lacked other viable alternatives, and as a result, experienced a more

precarious and vulnerable situation than before the marriage–a compounded precarity. The stories

of Mohra and Shirin are the focus of this section.

Mohra, a 26-year-old Syrian mother of two, was lured to Egypt by the man who would become

her husband. He had offered to marry her and take her and her children out of war-burdened Syria.

Mohra married her husband when she was still in Syria by mailing him a power of attorney, which

he used to legalize the marriage in Egypt. She travelled to him alone, hoping her children would

follow soon, only to be shocked by the dire social and economic situation in which he was living.

Her Syrian children followed her a little over a year after her arrival. Having given birth to her

"Egyptian" daughter, she is now forced to choose between leaving her husband and thus leaving

her Egyptian child behind or suffering along with her Syrian children in Egypt every day. In

previous chapters, I explored how Mohra lost all respect for her husband for various reasons, most

important being that he allows her to seek donations from charities to support their household.

Despite her complete dissatisfaction with her marriage, in the conversation below, she explained

to me that saving her children from the war zone was worth the initial risk of the marriage as well

as the current situation she is in:

> *I: What was your children's situation like back in Syria?*
>
> *R: I wasn't worried about my children because they were with my mother and*
> *she loves them so much, and they were happy… later on, I submitted a request*
> *[for family reunification], and the man [the officer handling family reunification*
> *requests in Egypt] felt bad for me, and he told me he would approve it on his*
> *own responsibility.*
>
> *I: Did that make you happy or upset?*
>
> *R: I was so happy*

I: I thought you were going to be upset because now you don't have an excuse to leave your husband, and you won't go back to Syria

R: No, I was more worried about them over there from all the bombing. Here is still much better. Back there, I didn't even send them to school. Even though after trying the Egyptian educational system, it is better for them not to be educated [sarcastic tone]. So back to our topic, I travelled to Syria to get them.

As she reflected on her current situation, she started contemplating her options, which seemed limited due to her *ghorba* and lack of *sanad*, especially given her young age and fear of sexual harassment. Furthermore, her lack of social support was complicated by a legal element: her pregnancy with her Egyptian daughter:

R: I got pregnant, and I was upset about it. I can't go back to Syria, and even if I got a divorce and took an apartment here by myself, will the Egyptians leave me alone? A woman and her children? Of course, I am going to be subjected to harassment a thousand times. So, I can't take this step. I am here alone I don't know anyone. Who do I seek refuge in?"

I: Did you consider abortion?

R: No one would accept my case, not a pharmacist or a doctor or a medication

I: How did that make you feel? You are the one who will get pregnant and raise the child, and no one is helping you?

R: I felt like I was going to die. Even him, he didn't want the baby, and I didn't want it. I'm sure he knew someone who could help me. He would tell me: "Do the abortion away from me. I don't want to carry the sin". He would then change

215

his mind and tell me, let's just keep it and I couldn't find anyone to help. And I

gave birth to a girl.

Mohra's story offers an interesting interpretation and even expansion to Stephen Lubkemann's (2008) notion of involuntary immobility: a term used to analytically decouple the meaning of displacement from that of migration, in order to include other notions such as those "'displaced in place,' not as a result of their own movement but rather because of the war's immobilizing effects" (p. 456). Recalling the decolonizing lens and emphasizing its rejection of either-or categories, I posit that some respondents are neither in a forced nor a voluntary marriage. They experience *marriage immobility*, a term I coin–building on Lubkemann's (2008) involuntary immobility–to refer to this in-betweenness of marriage status, neither forced nor voluntary. In this vein, after having been forced to migrate to flee war in her home country, Mohra went through a secondary displacement in the receiving country. Mohra was convinced that eventually, she would end up separating from her husband. However, when I followed up with her two years after our initial encounter, she was still "frustratingly" married to her husband, reinforcing the marriage immobility status that I argue describes her experience and her compounded precarity. The voluntary/forced marriage dichotomy cannot capture her experience.

Shirin was also in her late 20s. Her interview was particularly challenging in a revealing sense. She contradicted herself often and changed critical parts of her story halfway through during our interview. I initially intuited that she was not telling me the whole truth, which she later confirmed. During our interview, I kept repeating the same questions and imposing some assumptions to obtain more details while doing my best not to cross ethical boundaries. Every now and then, I would receive some bursts of insights such as the one below:

I: What would you advise another woman in the same situation?

216

R: I would advise her to stay by herself and not get married. It is better and more dignified. I lost my children [from a previous marriage], and this who doesn't have a thing cannot give it [fakid al shei' la yo'teeh – a common saying]

I: What do you mean by that?

R: It means I have nothing to give to anyone anymore. Bottom line, I advise women not to get married.

Shirin thus is another woman who weighed the risks and benefits of her situation and chose to remain in her marriage, despite feeling stuck or unhappy. During the interview, Shirin presented herself as happily married, only to call me a few days later to confess that she had lied because she was afraid of her husband, who was not even in the same room during our conversation. However, Shirin was still worried he might be eavesdropping. Shirin contacted me after, and we agreed on a password that she would give me before starting the chat conversation to make sure it is she and not her husband trying to trick her and me. Although she did not refer to any physical abuse, Shirin recalled being kicked out of the house after some arguments and sleeping in the street more than once. She contacted me hoping for legal guidance to explore options that would help her gain financial independence. Shirin mainly was thinking about financial aid and not job opportunities since she also has an Egyptian child by her husband, which complicates her options (of leaving the marriage and leaving the country). For her, and similar to Nour in a previous discussion, paid work is not an option because she would have to spend her income on daycare; even where she to find a job that could help her afford daycare, she might not be able to bear the harassment of her husband's family after divorce. Shirin also mentioned her desire to flee the country and join her older children (from her previous Syrian husband), who had risked their lives on a boat to seek

asylum in Germany. Still, even that would not be possible unless she was willing to leave her Egyptian toddler behind.

To bring us back to our discussion about forced and voluntary marriage, both Shirin and Mohra felt stuck in their marriages, but their resentfulness did not translate into expressing will to leave their current husbands. Mohra was adamant that she would eventually find a way to leave the country with all her children and declared her lack of interest in remarrying despite her young age. Shirin, who was not interested in working whatsoever, hinted that a possible solution, or a way out of this immobility, would be to leave her current husband for another one (she did not specify a nationality). Such a prospect might offer her protection from harassment by an ex-husband and his family while also providing for her and her son financially. In this sense, Shirin's story shows the limitations of the analytical usefulness of the forced/voluntary marriage dichotomy in capturing her story and reinforces some of the respondents' perception of marriage as a tool for survival, resilience, and refuge. When I followed up with them more than two years after the interview date, Mohra and Shirin were still with their husbands, where there are some highs and many lows with which they previously described their marriages. They remain in a status of "marriage immobility."

The notion of marriage immobility offers a useful analytical tool for understanding how marriage was used a strategy of self-rescue in conditions of displacement. Here, it is appropriate to recall the analytical double standards in tackling similar gendered issues in Western versus Othered contexts. There is no denying that women in the West face similar patriarchal oppressive circumstances that force them to be stuck in an abusive relationship or an unhappy marriage. That said, those same oppressive circumstances for Othered women in places outside the West are often quickly dismissed using Orientalised and cultural deficit interpretations, such as forced marriage

218

in this case, without the nuanced, multidisciplinary, and intersectional analyses that Western women are subjected to.

The example here illustrates that while women all over the world have to 'bargain with patriarchy' (Kandiyoti, 1988), Orientalized women are quickly described as oppressed by their cultural practices, simplifying some gendered experiences such as the one discussed here as forced marriage or solely from the lens of exploitation. Thus, by applying a decolonizing intersectional reading to marriage for refuge, we can identify that the binary relation between forced and voluntary marriage is insufficient in describing those women's experiences. I argue that marriage for refuge offers the nuances necessary to robustly describe these experiences and capture dynamics such as marriage immobility. By capturing the state of in-betweenness, or as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) puts it, by "not taking for granted the binary categories" (p. 26), I seek to move towards generating an analytical category that renders the lives, experiences and challenges facing some refugee women more visible. This conceptualization, I argue, is more nuanced than what a simplified exploitation framework enables. We need a more nuanced capture of the multiple elements that inform marriage experiences for women in displacement.

8.4. Concluding Remarks

In this final chapter, I focused on mobilizing two decolonizing strategies: ***decoupling associations*** and ***rejecting binaries***–namely, rejecting the forced/voluntary marriage binary, in the context of displacement and marriage for refuge. I focused on concepts such as agency and empowerment and labels such as forced marriage as three examples to build on decolonizing and critical feminist research that traces how these two strategies can enrich our understanding of Othered gendered refugee experiences. For agency, I tried to further the "agents-not-victims" body

of work. Instead of focusing on agency as resistance or subversion of norms, I showcased how some women derived agency from leveraging socially ascribed roles and often embodied agency through a carefully calculated combination of self-interest, relational autonomy, and moral agency. Regarding the expressions of empowerment, we have seen that some of the respondents utilized certain gendered statuses such as motherhood to extend their sources of empowerment. A decolonizing intersectional approach also reveals the shortcomings of the forced/voluntary marriage humanitarian binary in capturing all the marriage arrangement experiences and its relationship with coercion and choice.

Where is victimhood in all of this? A common denominator among the three concepts that I focus on in this chapter: agency, empowerment and forced marriage is victimhood which is often perceived as their opposite: loss of agency, lack of empowerment, or involvement in a forced marriage. Victimhood then becomes understood as associated with passivity, weakness, and the lack of motivation and capabilities (Helms, 2013; Cole, 2016). The repetition of this specific moral message that accentuates neoliberal perceptions of individualism, independence, and individual agency ends up assigning a positive valence to agency and a negative one to victimhood (Dahl, 2009). What I am arguing for here is a reframing of the research question that I posed at the beginning: is marriage for refuge exploitative or empowering? Instead, we should ask when, how and why a victimhood label is assigned to a particular individual or group?

Denying the victimhood status entirely is fundamentally problematic because it reduces the diverse experiences of refugee women and stands paralyzed against instances of exploitation and oppression that many women, particularly refugee women, are subjected to–such as Mohra and Shirin. For that, I sought to carve an analytical space that de-stigmatizes understandings of victimhood, which should be addressed "without recourse to matters of innocence, character,

220

resilience or agency" (Cole, 2016, p. 271). While many of the women in this study are in an undeniably vulnerable situation, or as Cole would refer to it as a "more-than-ordinary vulnerable" condition, whether due to their uprooting, precarious legal status, gender or lack of stable financial resources, their status(es) should not necessarily entail ongoing or static victimhood. Recall that intersectional elements such as martial status, migration status, and gender can enable and restrict the same woman at different times. One can notice how the social restrictions and social structures that produce this victimhood label have opened up new spaces and opportunities for some of the respondents. That is, displacement has offered them new social statuses (e.g., the Syrian widow as discussed in Chapter Seven, motherhood as discussed in Chapter Six or the desirable Syrian wife as discussed in Chapter Five) that are mainly available to this gendered and ethnicized[34] displaced group. Hence, a decolonizing intersectional approach refuses to accept victimhood as a permanent state of being and offers analytical tools to encompass the diverse narratives of these women's lives while avoiding reductionist categories. A decolonizing intersectional approach also avoids stigmatizing the statuses of these women whose fortunes have been compromised by displacement but who have also forged their own pathway in response.

9. Chapter Nine: Conclusion

This case study is a portrait of the nuanced social, economic and political power relations of marriage for refuge. The analysis reveals that elements of religion, ethnicity, gender, and displacement are *resources* that Syrian refugee women drew upon to inform their decisions. Such factors should be considered when attempting to understand marriage for refuge and the gendered refugee regime at large. Reducing 'culture' to a 'patriarchal Muslim culture' that 'oppresses women to be saved' obscures the importance and the nuances involved when women use these resources. In particular, decolonizing analytical strategies such as *rejecting binaries* and *decoupling associations*; or thinking outside of either/or binaries and decoupling social constructs from liberal connotations by incorporating concepts such as moral agency, creative leveraging, and relational autonomy in the analysis are key to decolonizing phenomena such as marriage for refuge. Respondents' use of these strategies accentuates how on many occasions, and despite elements of victimization, the respondents were still able to apply a form of agentive choice and "self-rescue" (Kyriakides et al., 2018). By no means were they waiting to be saved.

A central theme in tracing marriage for refuge is understanding how the refugee experience ***challenges the hegemonic meaning of marriage itself*** (i.e., nuclear, heteronormative, monogamous marriage ignited by romantic or physical attraction). A decolonizing intersectional lens reveals that refugee identities and their coping mechanisms can challenge many Western-centric understandings of marriage and trafficking. In many of the stories analyzed above, conjugal relationships questioned the idea of the nuclear family, intimacy and romantic attraction as primary forces in such relationships. We have seen, for instance, that in *sutra* marriage women's attempts to advance their moral agency worked in tandem with the benefits they perceived in part-time marriage for one's freedom and autonomy. Similarly, we saw how women like Naziha had revised

222

their understanding of an ideal marriage, favouring an unregistered *urfi* form to advance their personal interests. Not disclosing the marriage allowed some women to retain their legal refugee status, keeping them eligible for humanitarian financial assistance and food rations. More importantly, by not registering the marriage with the Egyptian government, as Naziha explained, she is holding onto a higher level of autonomy if she later decided she wanted to separate, chose to leave the country or wanted to go back to Syria.

It is worth mentioning that this is not unique to Syrian refugee wives. Rather, in many cases, marriage turns into "an arena of exchange" to satisfy needs. For example, in North Korea, "women may choose and utilize marriage to make a living in exchange for their sexuality and labour and, in this process, it is possible for marriage brokers, often generalized as "traffickers," to work as the facilitators who enable North Korean women and Chinese men's [different] needs" (Kim, 2014, p. 560).

Another theme is the importance of recognizing the mixed-effects displacement has on some of the respondents in terms of empowerment and disempowerment. For instance, ***gender identity has mixed effects on mobility on different occasions***. Hyndman and Walton-Roberts (2000) argue that movement is a highly gendered phenomenon in which people have different levels of accessibility based on their socio-economic status, location, gender roles and the responsibilities associated with them (p. 248). Mohra was able to leave the war zone because of her gender when she mailed a power of attorney to her future husband, which allowed him to marry her remotely and apply for family reunification. Ironically, this same marriage has also become a hindrance to Mohra's mobility. She ended up feeling stuck in a disappointing marriage and, consequently, stuck in the country after giving birth to her Egyptian daughter.

A final theme is that many of the narratives ***challenged liberal notions such as empowerment as independence and agency as resistance***. Lutz (2010) argues that "if individualism and the language of individual rights are stronger today, it is likely because of their compatibility with racial as well as capitalist research" (p. 148). A decolonizing lens critiques the Western-centric view of identity as the quintessential marker that separates *her* from the Other. An example was Ghalya, who made the decision to marry initially for the sake of her child, where she perceived that as her direct interest. Furthermore, the 'uniqueness' of the refugees' displaced identities reveals how notions such as moral agency, contextual or social empowerment and suppressing individualized identities for reasons such as extended family reciprocal obligations (Al-Sharmani, 2010) are core elements shaping the respondents' subjectivities, agency and "rational" choice.

<div align="center">***</div>

A major objective of this study was to understand the phenomenon of marriage for refuge, how might it be a self-initiated and self-empowering strategy for resettlement, and how might it challenge and help understand Othered resettlement experiences? The response to such questions through the marriage for refuge case study expands the humanitarian notion of resettlement beyond passivity and positioning the refugee on the receiving end and instead poses challenges to the saviour-victim assumptions that underlie the current refugee regime. In the remaining four sections of this conclusion, I try to briefly summarize some emerging ideas that help capture the essence of this question and identify how the findings of this research contribute to refugee studies, gender studies, anti-racist and decolonizing studies, and resettlement policies. The below addresses those four areas respectively.

9.1. Marriage for Refuge or Marriage for Exploitation

International marriage migration literature resists, rightfully, the reductionist victimization approach that portrays women involved in these arrangements as the racialized victims of violence or exploitation. In this study, the respondents' experiences corresponded with many elements stressed by this body of work: namely, the power imbalance that is often prevalent between the partners, the multiplicity of reasons and motives for the marriage beyond exploitation and material gains, as well as the importance of recognizing but moving beyond the vulnerability resulting from these marriages and the cross-cultural aspect between the partners. Nevertheless, marriage for refuge is distinct from the above in terms of the difference in the context, options available, and the unique nature of forced migrants' agency, compared to other forms of migration. As mentioned, the literature on marriage migration focuses on the issue of marriage *for* migration. In such a case, migration often happens because of marriage for both physical mobility (cross-border) and social mobility reasons. In this study, all but two of the respondents had little choice in being in their current country of residence. Their marriage took place to *survive* their involuntary migration, not *in pursuit of it*. This is why I proposed a notion that is better capturing of the respondents' experiences: marriage for refuge.

In this research, marriage for refuge refers to a survival and resettlement tool with a complexity of factors defining and dictating it. While the direct reasons behind (re)marriage for the respondents were diverse, I argue that social, moral and emotional gains were more valuable than legal (residency) and financial support for the majority of the respondents. Being uprooted and suddenly losing their social capital have made many perceive marriage as a tool to regain such social capital, reflecting a more desirable (and more long-term) source of security. Moreover, I demonstrated that by seeking marriage, the Syrian respondents are not simply abiding by their

225

socially ascribed gender roles that emphasize domesticity and the private sphere as core traits in desirable femininity. Instead, they apply what I referred to in the analysis as creative leveraging, making a calculated decision that utilizes pre-existing and emerging social conditions that might seem victimizing or oppressive in the apparent to maximize their interest. Both *sutra* and *sanad* were social concepts that help understand how marriage serves as a tool for disrupting displacement precarity and overcoming the challenges accompanied by *ghorba* (exile) and uprooting. That is to say, because of their forced migration status, the connotations of resettlement and survival for those women intertwined to mean almost the same thing, and their understanding of the importance of social survival has, in turn, shaped how they define empowerment and how they embody agency.

The results of my study contend that it would be inaccurate to conclude that many Egyptian men sought marriage from Syrian women because they are easy marriages that make economic sense in a country troubled with a high cost of marriage. In many cases, as this study traced, marrying a Syrian wife was as expensive and even more complicated financially than marrying an Egyptian, especially in instances of divorce. Moreover, such a conclusion does not explain why most of the respondents are in a polygamous marriage in which they are often the second wife, which by this logic should roughly duplicate the marriage expenses. Thus, a discussion of desirable femininity and desirable masculinity had to follow in order to complement the picture proposed by this hypothesis. I argued that more evidence supports the assumption that the stereotypical image of the obedient, more feminine and better housewife Syrian bride explains why Egyptian men sought Syrian brides. The Syrian women, on the other hand, had different reasons and motivations behind marrying an Egyptian.

My sample did not strongly echo the media rhetoric that portrayed Syrian families as selling their daughters as brides. The women seem to have the final say in accepting or rejecting the marriage. It could be a methodological question since families involved in these forms of suspicious and stigmatized marriages (with a blatant element of force) would not want to be exposed through my research or would simply not admit it. Nevertheless, it was indeed evident, at least for my sample of women that their marriages were a step that they had contemplated and in which they had a say.

I have also discussed factors such as matrimonial transactions and the meaning of femininity and masculinity in determining the marriage dynamics and the power relations between partners. Understanding the dynamics between femininity and masculinity or the dance of honour and protection, as I described it in Chapters Five, is integral to understanding my respondent's justification of marrying to compensate for the deficits created by displacement. For instance, I demonstrated how Ghalya, one of the respondents who was complaining about the abuse and exploitation of her Syrian ex-husband, still valued his presence as a "male figure" in her life because he still offered her social protection citing the common proverb "shadow of a man is better than a shadow of a wall." This same rationale defined her most viable options as either remarrying in Egypt and retain the "Mrs." status or going back to the war zone. I discussed the complex understanding and embodiment of the above by focusing on two core themes that frequently emerged during fieldwork. Many of the women referred to *sanad* (best translated as social support or social capital) and *sutra* (protection and sheltering) as main motivations for them to consider marriage in *ghorba* (best translated as exile or uprooting). I argued that women used marriage to gain social values such as *sutra* and *sanad,* which contributes to mitigating their uprooting. Moreover, and unlike what the international marriage migration literature claims, the results of this study underscore the direct association between losing hope in returning home and accepting

the idea of marriage to locals, or remarriage in many cases, which reflects long-term or permanent settlement.

The study showcases how the respondents used marriage to disrupt the precarity of displacement, and in turn, how displacement has disrupted and changed the meaning of marriage for them. Central to this idea is how an elevated sense of control, resulting from displacement alleviating certain social structures and pressures, propelled many of my respondents to rethink their social options—such as the option to remarry, which might have been less available to them in Syria. Namely, I explain how this elevated sense of control has allowed a more flexible understanding of marriage, its forms and its options in a way that challenges the normative image of the ideal marriage. I mainly focused on *urfi* (customary) marriage and polygamy, two characteristics that described the majority of the marriages of my respondents. In our conversations, many women expressed their approval and preference to become second wives, regardless of whether the marriage is *urfi* or not. Since many of them arrived in Egypt as single mothers after a deceased husband or a divorce, they expressed that they did not want to be "full-time" wives. Polygamy, as well as the likely secrecy of the *urfi* marriage, offers them what can be described as "part-time" status as a wife, which gives them two critical advantages: more time dedicated to their children and more freedom of movement and decision making in their day-to-day issues.

That is to say, the meaning of marriage, along with if, how, and when it takes place, has been repurposed to serve those women's new circumstances and status as uprooted. The analysis, I argue, challenges many social restrictions and boundaries that existed back home and allowed for new interpretations and options created due to their new social position as forced migrants. That said, it is essential to recall that during my interviews, I have met women who were left in a more

228

precarious situation than prior to their displacement and even before their marriage in Egypt. For many women, marriage is the only alternative to homelessness or deportation in Egypt. Thus, despite suffering from an abusive relationship, or even just a loveless marriage, some refugee women will still choose or feel obliged to stay in that marriage. However, in some cases, it would still be inaccurate to jump to the conclusion that characterizes such marriages as forced or abusive. Instead, I suggested that some of the respondents were neither in a forced nor a voluntary marriage. They experienced 'marriage immobility,' a term I coined to refer to this in-betweenness of marriage status, neither forced nor voluntary. By capturing this liminal state in using the notion of marriage immobility vis-a-vis forced marriage, we can generate an analytical category that renders the lives, experiences and challenges facing some refugee women more visible. I argue that such a category is more nuanced than the exploitation and "conventional" Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) rhetoric that does not necessarily capture all the elements that lead to such experience.

9.2. Marriage for Refuge and Gender Studies

My objective from this thesis is not to deny instances of SGBV and exploitation in the Global South altogether. On the contrary, by referring to stories such as that of Naziha–the long obedient and dedicated wife back in Syria, who forbade her Egyptian husband to enter their marital residence to pressure him into paying the rent–alongside Shirin's, who slept many nights with her child in the street after being forced out of the apartment by her Egyptian husband following quarrels only to keep coming back, demonstrate how marriage for refuge has had mixed effects on the respondents. Moreover, applying a decolonizing intersectional "filter" detects the different cultural shapes patriarchy could manifest in and how women utilize various strategies to "bargain"

with it (Kandiyoti, 1988). Jaji's (2015) study of the different embodiments and the mixed effects of femininity, which I refer to as *alternating femininities* was very useful to my analysis. Her investigation revealed that, within a refugee context, "femininity was a constraint in some instances and a resource in others." She highlighted three forms of femininity: normative, agitated and rebellious femininities, which were heavily influenced by the women's marital status and economic circumstances. My fieldwork reinforces the conclusion that multiple femininities are not just culture-based but also context-based giving a more in-depth meaning to performing and alternate femininities *strategically* to maximize their gains.

Similarly, the intersectional lens in understanding phenomena such as marriage for refuge and accounting for elements such as age and previous marital status was essential to the analysis showing how the implications of such arrangements varied among women. Intersectionality enables a better response and more culturally appropriate support to refugee women and women in the Global South at large. Understanding *sutra* as means for protection from sexual harassment and recognizing the different challenges resulting from marriage immobility vis-à-vis forced marriage are two examples discussed in detail in this research that contribute to a better understanding of marginalized gendered experiences. More importantly, the proposed decolonizing approach does not just help challenge women's image as either mere victims or gold diggers. Instead, it questions the meaning and implications of victimhood while offering the respondents a meaningful platform to be engaged in co-creating the narrative.

Refugee women, especially those from the Global South, are often seen as victims, not just of displacement but of their patriarchal and 'backward,' 'traditional' cultures and practices. The views expressed by the respondents describing a woman without a husband "like a tree without leaves," choosing marriage over career, or believing that marriage is the woman's natural path,

violate core assumptions in liberal feminist conceptions of victimhood, agency and empowerment. From this perspective, such a woman might be seen as: "complicit in the socio-cultural practices that might be interpreted as oppressive to her. Her idea of 'her place' in the home, society and the world at large may offend the delicate sensibilities of feminists, who may view her choices as non-choices, giving her little credit for her agency in the world" (Bawa, 2016, p. 5). In this study, I sought to demonstrate how women's multifaceted subjectivities and decision-making processes are often based on their awareness of their social and cultural positions, which in turn are exacerbated by both their gender and displacement.

In sum, the major objective of this study was to trace the versatile interpretations and embodiments of Syrian refugee women to their gender roles and their decision to marry Egyptian nationals. We have seen how their forced migration and displacement experiences have (re)shaped their perception of gender relations and how as a consequence, it helped them reshape the meaning, purpose and form of marriage after displacement. This also points us to the importance of recognizing the interaction between the refugee experience, location and (re)interpretation of gender identity. The Syrian refugee women who settled in Egypt did not just reinterpret their national identity as Syrians. Instead, both their gender and national identities intertwined to inform their new identity as Syrian wives. The appealing social perception in Egypt of the "reputation" of the Syrian wife has made many of those women rethink their identity and how it had been reinvented as a result of displacement in paradoxically more advantageous ways than back home: creative leveraging.

9.3. Marriage for Refuge and Unsettling Colonial and Orientalist Connotations

A significant focus in this study was to explore how the respondents' narratives offer ways to rethink and challenge the hegemonic perceptions of concepts such as agency, empowerment, gender roles and family, and marriage. I sought to challenge conceiving the embodiment of agency and empowerment solely in terms of resistance and independence. Instead, I draw attention to the fluidity of such notions by examining how the respondents strived for autonomy through *accepting* yet modifying norms and *utilizing* them strategically. Such women, hence, do not seek marriage simply to perform their socially ascribed gender role as wives. Instead, they seek a specific suitor and a particular form of marriage that is calculated to offer them *sanad*, which in turn helps them disrupt, overcome and survive their uprooting and displacement. More importantly, the narratives offered an opportunity to decolonize some of the categories and binaries that those women are often perceived through, such as agency/victimhood, forced/voluntary marriage, and marriage for intimacy/marriage for interest. In this sense, a decolonizing lens proposes a theoretical de-coupling of notions such as agency and resistance, empowerment and independence (especially economic), and vulnerability and victimhood.

Thus, while not challenging the idea of marriage as an institution *per se,* many of the respondents have posed critical questions to the hegemonic conception of marriage in the modern world order. The women's malleable understanding and embodiment of agency have directed them to certain options and strategies such as preferring and pursuing polygamous marriage, refusing to officially register marriages and limiting them to a customary (*urfi*) contract. However, beyond those pragmatic motives and throughout the narratives, one can trace a fluid understanding of intimacy, romantic love and the nuclear family, which pose challenges to the explanations of gender inequality in non-Western contexts. Western connotations are influenced by individualistic

notions such as autonomy and independence. In this study, I tried to carve a space for actions that might be perceived as non-liberal, such as docility, or non-rational actions, such as non-registered marriage, to be de-Orientalized in a way that explains marriage for refuge as a survival strategy and an innovative self-initiated resettlement option.

9.4. Marriage for Refuge and Policy

Based on the above theoretical debate and building on emerging insights about resettlement, survival and self-empowerment, I want to conclude by suggesting some possible practical contributions to forced migration and resettlement policies. The first would be developing geographically, historically, and culturally relevant definitions and indicators to measure empowerment. Such an approach should include economic, social and cultural indicators such as reducing social pressures (e.g., harassment, public shaming and tribal and familial pressures) and preventing the erosion of social statuses such as elderhood or motherhood. Another potential contribution to this study is that it makes a case for local initiatives and solutions that are culturally informed about practices and norms, particularly of social protection.

Moreover, beyond this study and marriage for refuge (or marriage as a response to displacement), this framework could be used to draw attention to issues such as family reunification policies or designing programs and solutions that support, or overcome tension with, the refugee women conventional gender roles, especially motherhood, along with their entrepreneurial goals. For instance, this would include promoting initiatives that support work environments where children can accompany their mothers, which might encourage more women to participate in such programs and initiatives. This potentially might be more effective than other solutions such as affordable daycare, which might entail logistical, financial or cultural obstacles.

Hence, it might be helpful to provide culturally relevant and context-specific legal and mental health counselling capable of recognizing specific challenges (e.g., marriage immobility and the repercussions of not being able to flee the marriage and the country). Such an approach also entails ensuring that service providers have sufficient representation by women for women, are familiar with the implications of colonial history, and are trained to mobilize local values to reinforce social justice and empowerment. For example, religious values were central to many of the respondents. Incorporating them properly in counselling, support groups, and initiatives can create more impact. Ultimately, listening to those women's voices and opinions in this fieldwork makes a case for the importance of finding methods and solutions that meaningfully engage refugee women in identifying challenges, designing solutions, and implementing initiatives. This thesis is hoped to centre such an approach.

<center>***</center>

In tracing the stories of the Syrian refugee "wives," I have analyzed an under-researched phenomenon: marriage for refuge. I have pinpointed the voices of a highly marginalized and Orientalized group: Muslim Syrian refugee women who have married Egyptian men. I have argued that through marriage, the respondents were trying to carve their own security through resettlement, often by leveraging socially ascribed gender roles, in particular, that of the 'Syrian wife.' The women demonstrated a strong sense of their available social options and restrictions–a few of which, I argue, were altered due to displacement. In parallel, by applying a decolonizing intersectional lens to the analysis, I build on the critical feminist body of work that seeks to demystify the (often) non-Western experiences of forced migrants by applying decolonizing strategies in an original context: marriage in war or marriage as a response to displacement. Throughout the analysis, I aspired to trace the complexity and multiplicity of the Syrian women's

trajectories and identities and how they influence their agentive choice and decision-making process. That is, I sought to expose the nuanced power relations that boost as well as mitigate the respondents' agentive choice and decision-making under conditions of patriarchy and displacement not of their own making. In other words, by adopting a decolonizing intersectional critique, I reimagine the explanatory power of agency, empowerment, and victimhood and unentangle aspects of resilience, self-empowerment, and innovation in the resettlement choices of those women, some of which pose critical questions to both refugee studies and gender studies.

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10. Appendix

10.1. Sample Interview Questions

Some guiding questions for the Syrian wives/ex-wives:

1) Where were you born? Where did you grow up as a child?

2) When did you leave Syria?

3) When did you arrive in Egypt? And why did you choose Egypt?

4) Who supported you on arrival? Where did you stay?

5) How do you like living in Egypt? With whom do you live? How is that going?

6) Would you describe yourself as a refugee? Why or why not?

7) How did you meet your husband?

8) Did you actively seek to marry an Egyptian man? Why or why not?

9) How would you compare Egyptian and Syrian husbands? What are the common popular conceptions about an Egyptian husband versus a Syrian one?

10) What are common popular conceptions about Egyptian wives vs Syrian ones?

11) Do you face any pressure or harassment from the Egyptian or the Syrian communities or notice any change of perception after marrying your husband?

12) Do you ever get the feeling that people might think you are using this marriage for other reasons?

13) Why would you think some people might refer to these marriages as taking advantage of Syrian women? And how would you respond?

14) How do you handle disagreements with your husband?

15) Were you always close to your family? Are you still as close to them after the marriage as before? In what ways?

16) What is your daily routine? Do you work?

17) Do you feel you are better off in Egypt or back in Syria before the war?

18) What do you miss the most about Syria?

19) Would you ever go back to Syria? Why or why not? And if you were to leave Egypt, which country would you go to and why?

20) How do you see your future?

21) How would you raise your children here? What are the main factors that determine your upbringing philosophy?

22) Before I close, is there any story or any points you want to share? Especially to western academia?

23) Are there any questions that you were expecting to be asked but weren't?

Some guiding questions for the families of the wives/ex-wives (by birth):

1) When did you leave Syria?

2) When did you arrive in Egypt? And why did you choose Egypt?

3) Who supported you on arrival? Where did you stay?

4) How do you like living in Egypt? With whom do you live? How is that going?

5) Would you describe yourself as a refugee? Why or why not?

6) What are the main obstacles that you faced in Egypt?

7) How did your daughter meet her husband?

8) What was your first impression about this marriage when it was just a possibility?

9) Did you actively seek to find an Egyptian man for your daughter or encouraged her to seek one? Why or why not?

10) How would you compare Egyptian and Syrian husbands? What are the common popular conceptions about an Egyptian husband versus a Syrian one?

11) What are common popular conceptions about Egyptian wives vs Syrian ones in your opinion?

12) Do you, your family or your daughter face any pressure or harassment from the Egyptian or the Syrian communities or do you notice any change of perception to you after the marriage?

13) Do you ever get the feeling that people might think you are using this marriage for other reasons?

14) Why would you think some people might refer to these marriages as taking advantage of Syrian women? And how would you respond?

15) How do you handle a situation where your daughter involves you in a disagreement with her current husband?

16) Were you always close to your daughter? Are you still as close to her after the marriage? In what ways?

17) Do you feel you are better off in Egypt or back in Syria before the war?

18) What do you miss the most about Syria?

19) How do you see your future?

20) How did you raise your children? What are the main factors that determine your upbringing philosophy?

21) Before I close, is there any story or any points you want to share? Especially to western academia?

22) Are there any questions that you were expecting to be asked but weren't?

Some guiding question for the families of the wives/ex-wives (by marriage):

1) How did your son meet his wife?

2) Did you actively seek to find a Syrian wife for your son or encouraged him to seek one? Why or why not?

3) What was your first impression about this marriage when it was just a possibility?

4) How would you compare Egyptian and Syrian husbands? What are the common popular conceptions about an Egyptian husband versus a Syrian one?

5) What are common popular conceptions about Egyptian wives vs Syrian ones?

6) Do you notice any change of perception to you, your family or your son after the marriage?

7) Do you ever get the feeling that people might think you or your son are using this marriage for other reasons?

8) Why would you think some people might refer to these marriages as taking advantage of Syrian women? And how would you respond?

9) How do you handle a situation where your son involves you in a disagreement with his current wife?

10) Do you think the fact that your daughter-in-law is a refugee would have any social, cultural, legal or economic implications on your family, your son, or their children (if any)?

Some guiding questions for key informants

1) Can you tell me a little bit about your organization? Its history and mandate in Egypt?

2) Can you describe the Syrian refugees' situation in Egypt from 2012 until today?

3) What kind of challenges and opportunities do they face?

4) How are service providers in Egypt addressing the Syrian refugees' needs and problems? Examples?

5) Do you think Syrian refugee women's situation is similar or different from that of Syrian refugee men? If so, in what ways? (If so, or if not) Why is that?

6) How would you assess the situation in Egypt as a host country for refugees? Is it a supportive or a challenging environment for refugees? Why so?

7) How would you compare Egyptian and Syrian husbands? What are the common popular conceptions about an Egyptian husband versus a Syrian one?

8) What are common popular conceptions about Egyptian wives vs Syrian ones?

9) Do you notice any change of perception to you, your family or your son after the marriage?

10) Do you ever get the feeling that people might think you or your son are using this marriage for other reasons?

11) Why would you think some people might refer to these marriages as taking advantage of Syrian women? And how would you respond?

12) How would you assess the Syrian women's marriages to Egyptians?

13) What do you think were the main reasons that encouraged such marriages? (e.g. Cultural, religious, practical reasons)

14) How do you think the marriage would impact those women's lives?

15) Have you heard of any stories, positive or negative, about such marriages?

16) How did your organization address such marriages?

17) How do you think the humanitarian community could enhance their services or response to the Syrian community in Egypt, particularly women?

10.2. List of Respondents and their Demographics

First name*	Age group	Marital status prior to displacement	Marital status at the time of interview	Residence in Egypt	Notes (incl. Work and class)
1. Saga Khudair	50s	Widow	Divorced again (urfi)	Al-Rehab	First interview
2. Samar Badr	Late 20s	Single (NBM)[35]	Married	Al-Haram	Volunteered at Laji'aat
3. Amirah	Late 30s-early 40s	Divorced	Married	6th of October	
4. Amal Khalil	Mid-late 30s	Divorced	Married (urfi)	Al-Haram	
5. Hawazen	Mid-late 30s	Divorced	Married	6th of October	
6. Ekram	Mid-late 30s	Single (NBM)	Divorced	Faisal	Was unhappily married and got divorced a few months after the interview
7. Marwa Haram	Late 20s	Widow	Married	Haram/Tersa	
8. Safaa	Early 40s	Divorced	Married	Al-Obour	
9. Basema	Late 30s	Single (NBM)	Married	Nasr City	
10. Aisha	Mid 30s	Single (NBM)	Married	Ezbet el Hagana	
11. Reeham (a.k.a Fatma)	Early 20s	Single (NBM)	Divorced	Obour	

12. Bashira	Early 20s	Single (NBM)	Engaged	Obour	
13. Nesreen	Late 30s	Separated	Married (*urfi*)	Faisal	
14. Zena	Late 20s	Single (NBM)	Engaged	Hadayek al Maadi	
15. Latifa	50s	Divorced	Married (urfi)	Hadayek al Maadi	
16. Naziha	50s	Separated then Divorced	Married (*urfi*)	Gesr el Suez	
17. Galaa	60s	Widow	Happily engaged	Nasr City	Followed up after interview and Now unhappily married and contemplating divorce
18. Morsheda	Early 30s	Single then divorced	Married	Al-Talbeya	
19. Noura	Early 30s	Single (NBM)	Married	Madinaty	Upper class - From Shwām (higher class residents of Old Damascus)
20. Shireen	Mid-late 30s	Married then divorced	Married (*urfi*)	Alexandira	Contacted me after our interview seeking legal representation to seek asylum or family reunification with her children in Germany
21. Roba	Mid 20s	Single (NBM)	Married	Alexandria	
22. Asmaa	Early 40s	Divorced	Divorced (*urfi*)	Alexandria	

241

23. Shahrazad	Late 20s	Single (NBM)	Married	Kafr al-Sheikh	Interview over phone but met her husband at a coffee shop in Cairo
24. Marwa	Early 30s	Widow	Married (*urfi*)	Al-Asher min Ramadan	
25. Nour	Late 20s	Widow	Married (*urfi*)	Al-Asher min Ramadan	
26. Maha Thol-Ghena	Early 40s	Divorced	Married (*urfi*)	Al-Asher min Ramadan	Upper class
27. Rowaida	Mid-30s	Single (NBM)	Married	Al-Asher min Ramadan	
28. Basma	Early 30s	Single (NBM)	Married	Obour	Worked for CARE- Egypt
29. Ghena	Late 20s	Single (NBM)	Married	Al-Rehab	Upper class
30. Rania abol Dahab	Mid 30s	Single (NBM)	Married	Alexandria	Upper class
31. Hamsa Nabulsi	Mid 30s	Unclear	Married	Mokattam	Upper class
32. Luli Abu Chaar	Early 30s	Divorced	Married	Al Sheikh Zayed	Upper class

33. Mahmoud	Early 30s	N/A	N/A	Kafr al Sheikh	Shahrazad's husband
34. Mohamed	Early 30s	N/A	N/A	Al Talbeya	Mursheda's husband
35. Ali	50s-60s	N/A	N/A	6th of October	Amira's husband
36. Diab	Early 20s	N/A	N/A	6th of October	Amira's nephew – Syrian engaged to an Egyptian woman
37. Ahmed	Mid-30s	N/A	N/A	Ezbet al Haggana	Aisha's husband
38. Hamdy	Mid-30s	N/A	N/A	6th of October	Hawazen husband
39. Mohamed	Early 40s	N/A	N/A	Al-Rehab	Ghena's husband
40. Tarek	Early 40s	N/A	N/A	Al Sheikh Zayed	Luli's husband
41. Arabawy	Mid-30s	N/A	N/A	Alexandria	Shireen's husband
42. Kawthar al Nakshabandy (Mother)	50s	N/A	N/A	Hadayek al Maadi	Fatma's mother
43. Bashira's grand mother	60s+	N/A	N/A	Al-Obour	
44. Eman	60s+	N/A	N/A	Faisal	Nisreen's mother

243

45. Fatemah	60s+	N/A	N/A	Hadayek al Maadi	Zena's mother
46. Rowaida's husband	Late 30s	N/A	N/A	Al-Asher min Ramadan	
47. Morsheda's mother	60s+	N/A	N/A	Al-Talbeya	
48. Nour's mother	50s	N/A	N/A	Madinaty	
49. Name unknown (mother	60s	N/A	N/A	Al-Asher min Ramadan	Marwa and Nour's mom
50. KI - Nahla Nemr	NA	N/A	N/A	Alexandria	Freelance journalist and advocate of Syrian Refugee rights
51. KI- Maysaa Abwab	NA	N/A	N/A	Al Haram	Head of Laje'aat NGO

10.3. List of Local Organizations that Assisted wth Recruitment (Including Key Informants)

Name	Description	Contact
CARE-Egypt	CARE Egypt works to promote and support quality education and girls' leadership, as well as effective governance and civic engagement, and equitable social protection for vulnerable groups – especially women. They also organize programs and workshops for Syrian refugees in Egypt.	34 Street 106, Hadaek El – Maadi, Cairo 11431, PO 2019, Egypt. Phone: +202 25260096, +202 25263373. Fax: +202 25257074
CMRS	The Center for Migration and Refugee Studies (CMRS) at AUC aims at furthering scientific knowledge of refugee and migration movements in this region. CMRS functions include education, research, training and outreach.	AUC Avenue P.O. Box 74, New Cairo, 11835, Egypt Phone +202 2615.2670 gapp@aucegypt.edu
Fard Foundation	The work focuses on providing refugees (particularly Syrians) with: Humanitarian assistance, education and training, and healthcare	Building 1, Block 2/15, District 12, Gharb Summid, Opposite "Gihaz 6 October" 6th of October City, Giza Info@fardfoundation.org +20127 117 6698/+20122 911 4388/+20100 177 8362 Http://www.fardfoundation.org

Plan Egypt	"We focus on child rights, implementing programs designed to enable communities to improve the lives of the most marginalized children by working with women, youth and civil society organizations. Plan International Egypt has deep grassroots local knowledge and relationships with communities and works to build the capacities of communities and organizations to promote child rights." (Plan Canada Egypt Website)	St.105, building number 71 - Hadayk el Maadi, Cairo 11559 Cairo - Egypt + 202 - 25247369 - 25245765 - 25245764 - 25247382 Fax: 25246855 Egypt.co@plan-international.org
Saint Andrew's Refugee Services	"Founded by St. Andrew's United Church of Cairo, stars was one of the first organizations in Egypt dedicated to improving the quality of life of refugees, asylum seekers, and vulnerable migrants. They also have psychological services for refugees in Egypt and I will be directing any respondents who need any professional psychological assistance to them." (St. Andrew's Refugee Services Egypt Website)	Address: 38 July 26 Street, Downtown, Cairo Info@stars-egypt.org , +20 0225759451.
Syria al Ghad Relief Foundation	Focuses on relief, health and community development of Syrian refugees in Egypt.	Info@syria-algad.org Http://www.syria-algad.org/

Tadamon (the Egyptian Refugee Multicultural Council)	"Tadamon is an independent, non-political network of civil society organizations working to promote the welfare of refugees and their mutual co-existence with Egyptians through networking and coordination of cooperative efforts." ([Tadamon Official LinkedIn Page](#))	1 Abou Bakr Khairat, 5th Floor, Flat 17, off Al-Kadi Al-Fadel, (in Boursa, Downtown Cairo) Cairo 11121, Egypt +20 2 23928681

English version

Informed consent form

Date: May 2017-December 2018

Study name: Marriage for refuge: A Postcolonial Perspective on Syrian Women's Survival Mechanisms in Egypt

Researcher: Dina Taha, Doctoral Candidate, Graduate Program in Sociology, York University.

Contacts: [removed for confidentiality]

Purpose of the research: to explore the phenomenon of Syrian refugee women's marriage to Egyptian nationals.

What you will be asked to do in the research: You will be asked to participate in an in-depth interview. The interview should take approximately 1-2 hours. You might be also asked later on to comment or give feedback on the preliminary research results, which you are encouraged to be critical about.

Risks and discomforts: There are minimal risks associated with your participation potentially associated with remembering trauma. In case you feel any discomfort, I will give you a list of contacts of local service providers who can assist you professionally.

Benefits: You will receive 10 CAD (150 EGP or the equivalent in value) when you participate in the interview. You may also find satisfaction in recalling your experiences in a safe environment.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any point. Your decision not to participate will not influence the

nature of your relationship with me, the Egyptian or Syrian governments, local organizations, or York University either now, or in the future.

Withdrawal from the Study: You can stop participating in the study at any time, for any reason, if you so decide. Your decision to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions, or to refuse to provide later feedback will not affect your relationship with me, the Egyptian or the Syrian governments, local organizations, or York University. In the event you withdraw from the study, you will still receive the incentive, and all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed wherever possible.

Confidentiality: All information you supply during the research will be held in confidence and unless you specifically indicate your consent, your name will not appear in any report or publication of the research. Your responses will be noted on paper or recorded electronically, with your consent. Data collected during this study will be stored in my personal laptop and/or a locked file cabinet for 10 years from the date of my graduation, after which it will be destroyed. Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law.

Questions about the Research?

If you have any question/require further information about this study, please contact the researcher, Dina Taha, Graduate Program in Sociology, [removed for confidentiality] ; or the supervisor, Christopher Kyriakides, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, York University, [removed for confidentiality]; or the Graduate Program Director in Sociology, Professor Harris Ali, [removed for confidentiality].

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University's Ethics Review Board and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process, or about your rights as a

participant in the study, you may contact the Senior Manager and Policy Advisor for the Office of

Research Ethics, 5th Floor, York Research Tower, York University [removed for confidentiality].

Legal Rights and Signatures:

I _____, consent to participate in the above-mentioned research study

       [participant's name]

Conducted by Dina Taha. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am

not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

Please check if applicable:

☐ Audio: My signature below also indicates my consent to be audio recorded.

☐ Video: My signature below also indicates my consent to be video recorded.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

      [Participant]

Signature: _____ Date: _____

   [Principal investigator – Dina Taha]

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أستمارة الموافقة علي المشاركه في بحث ميداني

التاريخ: مايو 2017 حتى ديسمبر 2018

اسم الدراسة: زواج من أجل الملجأ؟ نظره نقديه لأساليب التأقلم للاجئات السوريات في مصر

اسم الباحث: دينا طه ـ طالبه دكتوراه ـ برنامج الدراسات العليا قسم علم الاجتماع بجامعه يورك بكندا

للتواصل: ‹تم المسح لحفظ الخصوصيه›

الغرض من البحث: دراسه و استكشاف حاله زواج اللاجئات السوريات من مصريين

المطلوب منك في البحث: سوف يطلب منكم المشاركة في مقابلة و التي ستستمر تقريبا ساعتين من الزمن. قد يطلب منكم أيضا في وقت لاحق التعليق أو الادلاء بتقييمكم على نتائج البحث الأولية والتي نشجعكم فيها بإعطاء أراء صريحه ذات نقد بنّاء.

المخاطر: لا يوجد مخاطر تذكر مترتبه علي مشاركتكم. قد يواجهكم بعض الضيق من استرجاع ذكريات قاسيه. في حال شعرتم بأي انزعاج، سوف أعطيكم قائمة من الارقام لبعض الخدمات المحلية و الذين بامكانهم مساعدتكم.

الفوائد: سوف تتلقون (150 جنيه مصري او ما يوازيه في القيمه) لمشاركتكم في المقابله. أيضا قد تجد الارتياح في الحديث عن خبراتك في بيئة آمنة.

المشاركة الطوعية: مشاركتكم في هذه الدراسة هو طوعي تماما ويمكنكم ان تختارو التوقف عن المشاركة أو عدم الادلاء بالتعليق في أي وقت. وقراركم بعدم التطوع لا تؤثر على طبيعة علاقتكم معي، أوالحكومات المصرية أو السورية والمنظمات المحلية، أو جامعة يورك سواء الآن أو في المستقبل.

الانسحاب من الدراسة: يمكنك التوقف عن المشاركة في الدراسة في أي وقت ولأي سبب كان. قرارك لوقف المشاركة، أو رفض الإجابة عن أسئلة معينة، أو عدم الادلاء بالتعليق لن يؤثر على علاقتكم بي أوبالحكومات المصرية أو السورية أوالمنظمات المحلية، أو جامعة يورك. في حال الانسحاب من الدراسة، سوف تتلقون الحافز المادي علي اي حال، وجميع البيانات المرتبطة التي تم جمعها عنكم سيتم تدميرها فورا.

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السرية: سيتم حفظ جميع المعلومات التي شاركتم بها خلال البحث في مكان ثقة . وإلا إذا اشرتم تحديدا بموافقتكم، لن يظهر اسمكم في أي تقرير. ردودكم سيتم تسجيلها على الورق أو تسجيلها إلكترونيا، مع موافقتكم. سيتم تخزين البيانات التي تم جمعها خلال هذه الدراسة في جهاز الكمبيوتر المحمول الخاص بي أو سيتم حفظها في ملف مؤمن لمدة 10 سنة من تاريخ تخرجي، وبعد ذلك سوف يتم تدميرها. وسيتم توفير السرية إلى أقصى حد ممكن مسموح به قانونا.

أسئلة حول البحث؟

إذا كان لديكم أي سؤال تحتاجون إلى المزيد من المعلومات حول هذه الدراسة، يرجى الاتصال بالباحثة، دينا طه، برنامج الدراسات العليا في علم الاجتماع، ‹تم المسح لحفظ الخصوصيه›. أو المشرف، كريستوفر كيرياكيدس، أستاذ مشارك، قسم علم الاجتماع، جامعة يورك، ‹تم المسح لحفظ الخصوصيه› أو مدير برنامج الدراسات العليا في علم الاجتماع، أستاذ هاريس علي، ‹تم المسح لحفظ الخصوصيه›

لقد تم الموافقه على هذه الدراسة من قبل اللجنة الفرعية لمراجعه شؤون مشاركي البحوث، بجامعة يورك بما يتوافق مع معايير المبادئ التوجيهية الكندية لثلاثي مجلس أخلاقيات البحوث. إذا كان لديك أي أسئلة حول هذه العملية، أو عن حقوقكم كمشاركين في الدراسة يمكنكم الاتصال بمدير أول ومستشار السياسات لمكتب أخلاقيات البحوث، الطابق الخامس، برج بحوث يورك، جامعة يورك، ‹تم المسح لحفظ الخصوصيه›

الحقوق القانونية والتواقيع:

أنا _____ ، اوافق على المشاركة في الدراسه المذكورة أعلاه و المسؤله عنها الباحثه دينا طه.

[اسم المشارك]

لقد فهمت طبيعة هذا المشروع وارغب في المشاركة و لا يعتبر هذه الموافقه او التوقيع بمثابه تنازل عن أي من حقوقي القانونية. يشير توقيعي أدناه علي موافقتي علي المشاركه.

يرجى التحديد إذا كان الامر ينطبق

☐ توقيعي أدناه يشير ايضا الي موافقتي على أن يتم تسجيلي صوتيا اذا تطلب الأمر

☐ توقيعي أدناه يشير ايضا الي موافقتي على أن يتم تصويري بالكاميرا او الفيديو اذا تطلب الأمر

التاريخ: ـــ   التوقيع: ـــ

[اسم المشارك]

التاريخ: ـــ   التوقيع: ـــ

[القائم بالبحث- دينا طه]

Fatwa (1): Marrying with the intention of providing chastity[36]

In this *fatwa*, the inquirer is referring to some Facebook pages that facilitate the marriage of Syrian women living in Egypt. He expressed his wish to provide chastity (*Iffah*) to a Syrian sister and asked whether this wish and intention are permissible and if the *Muftī* (jurist) has any advice for him. The *fatwa* responds by confirming that it is permissible to marry a Syrian Muslim woman; rather, it encouraged the inquirer to do so because providing her with chastity and emotional support in her hardship is an act that will be rewarded generously.

Fatwa (2): Marrying a widow with orphans[37]

In this *fatwa*, the inquirer seeks guidance as he took the intention to marry a widow as a second wife and intended to keep it as a secret from his first wife. He explained that he sought this marriage in order to take care of her orphaned children but then changed his mind last minute after realizing that his intentions were not "pure." He concluded that he could support the orphans without the marriage or the secrecy. The *fatwa* responded by describing sheltering a widow and her orphans through marriage as a good deed that one should be rewarded for. It encouraged him to be honest with his first wife but clarified nevertheless that he is not obliged religiously to inform her.

Fatwa (3): Marrying to cover a sin[38]

In this *fatwa*, a woman was asking about the legal and religious obligation of a man she was in a relationship with who made her lose her virginity. She mentioned that he has always expressed his loyalty to her and his will and desire to marry her eventually, but his family ended up opposing

the marriage. The woman is asking the *Muftī* to encourage the man to take responsibility for his actions. The *fatwa* started by condemning both the man and the woman for their action (of committing adultery) and asserted that even though the man is not religiously obliged to do so, he "should" marry her to apply *sutra* to her. He would be rewarded for his deed. The *fatwa* quotes the *hadeeth* "*Whoever shields [or hides the misdeeds of] a Muslim, Allah will shield him in this world and the Hereafter [...]*"

Fatwa (4): Marrying a rape victim[39]

In this *fatwa*, the man states that after proposing to a girl, she asked to meet him privately and confessed that she was raped at 17 and that she has not told anyone, including her parents. He is asking about the religious opinion if he is to marry her. The *fatwa* responds that, under the condition that he can trust that she is telling the truth, he should pray *Istikhara* (the prayer of seeking guidance from Allah) and weigh in her religious devotion before he moves on with the marriage. The *Muftī* stresses that there is no objection in marrying her, especially that what happened to her is not her fault and beyond her control. The *fatwa* also encouraged him, whether he decided to marry her or not, not to disclose her secret to anyone and also cites the *hadeeth* "*Whoever shields [or hides the misdeeds of] a Muslim, Allah will shield him in this world and the Hereafter…*"

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Endnotes

[1] According to their website description: "Exploring the Middle East and South Asia through their media, MEMRI bridges the language gap between the West and the Middle East and South Asia, providing timely translations of Arabic, Farsi, Urdu-Pashtu, Dari, Turkish, Russian, and Chinese media, as well as original analysis of political, ideological, intellectual, social, cultural, and religious trends. Founded in February 1998 to inform the debate over U.S. policy in the Middle East, MEMRI is an independent, nonpartisan, non-profit, 501(c)3 organization. MEMRI's main office is located in Washington, DC, with branch offices in various world capitals. MEMRI research is translated into English, French, Polish, Japanese, Russian, Spanish and Hebrew.

[2] From the campaign Facebook page: 'Refugees not captive was founded in 2012 in response to the war crimes in Syria. Today, Refugees... Not captive is active in Jordan, turkey, Lebanon and Egypt Our aims. We are working to give women in crisis areas the self-confidence, the strength and the opportunity to -take control of their lives- overcome threats to themselves and their families-perform active reconciliation work'. More information available at: https://www.facebook.com/Lajiaat.Lasabayaa

[3] Frequently, it has been argued that terms such as "forced migrant" and "refugee" should include categories such as asylum seekers, economic migrants, the involuntarily immobile[3] (Lubkemann, 2008), sex migrants, mail-ordered brides, and deportees,[3] i.e., that the terms should encompass a greater variety of forms through which one becomes "uprooted" (Hajdukowski-Ahmed, Khanlou & Moussa, 2008). That said, in this dissertation, I focus on the refugee, as defined by the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees 1951, and particularly on the woman refugee experience. The convention defines a refugee as a person who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country" (Morrice, 2011, 21).

[4] While definitions of resilience differ, it is often associated with a person's ability to bounce back "following adversity and challenge and connotes inner strength, competence, optimism, flexibility and the ability to cope effectively when faced with adversity" (Wagnild & Collins, 2009, p. 1).

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[5] Utas (2005) however, distinguished between strategic agency and tactical agency by arguing that "the idea of tactic agency is that of short-term responses in relationship to a society's social structure. Tactic agency forms part of the trajectories travelled by the weak. In opposition to this, there is strategic agency-an agency for those who can forecast future states of affairs and have the possibility to make use of other people's tactical agency" (p. 407).

[6] In this research I do not discuss sex trafficking because it is a relevant but separate issue with different dynamics and power relations (where agency can be less visible and can be expressed through different strategies) but I do recognize it is a form of forced Migration as mentioned earlier in the paper.

[7] "*mahr* (A): in [islamic] law, the gift which the bridegroom has to give the bride when the contract of marriage is made and which becomes the property of the wife." [source: Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition].

[8] For instance, there were no Kurds, Alawits or Shia in the sample.

[9] Refer to York University research ethics tip sheet: https://research.info.yorku.ca/ore/policies-guidelines/

[10] Haraway's notion of situated knowledge reponded to the long standpoint theories which attribute epistemological privilege to subjugated knower or the hegemonic and privileged ways of knowing. Instead Haraway suggests that a 'situated knowledge' is more dynamic, hybrid, necessarily partial and involves 'mobile positioning' (Haraway 1991, p. 192). In situated knowledges neither the subjects nor the context can be treated as straightforward entities, 'innocent and waiting outside the violations of language and culture' (Haraway 1991, p. 109).

[11] Most of those refugees are not included in the official UNHCR statistics, which only verify 119,665 registered Syrian refugees (Karasapan, 2016).

[12] Gamal Abdul Nasser was the second president of Egypt and one of the leaders of the 1952 revolution that overthrew Egyptian Monarchy. He adopted leftist policies and introduced far reaching land reforms which, among other policies, was a direct reason for a major restructuring of the social and class system in Egypt (See for instance, Luciani, 1990).

[13] While sometimes used interchangeably, *mahr* and dowry do not mean the same thing. *Mahr*, which is practiced in Islamic cultures, is given by the husband to the wife whereas dowry, mostly in South Asian non-Muslim cultures,

most of the times is given by the family of the wife to the husband (see for instance Samuel, 2013; Grabska, 2005; Hoodfar, 1998).

[14] *Ruguula*, literally translates to manhood. The author details and unfold its layers, preconditions, and the multiple agents who invest time and energy in the 'making of men' and the trajectories it goes through different life events and by age.

[15] Learn more about this saying here: https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/32/98/128568/Folk/Folk-Arts/Proverb-of-the-day-Shadow-of-a-man-is-better-than-.aspx

[16] For copyright considerations, all three images were included in the defense revision of the thesis but were removed before submitting the successfully defended version to York electronic reporsitory.

[17] Self-empowerment entails agency (Drydyk, 2013).

[18] As explained by Nisreen, Alawites are a sect of Shia Muslims that are concentrated in Syria. Even though they represent a small minority, they have taken power over Syria's political system since the Baa'th party has taken over. Bashar al Asad and his political elite are all Alawites. Thus, for Nisreen's husband, marrying someone from the ruling elite would help him navigate his way in the war.

[19] In the Science of Islamic Hadeeth, "agreed upon" is part of the methodology of validating Sunnah and Hadeeths (Prophet sayings). Mainstream hadeeth scientists include "agreed upon" label in their references which is an indication it was quoted by more than one companion of the Prophet who has heard it directly from him. It signifies a higher reliability and accuracy of the hadeeth.

[20] The religious verdicts (fatawa) were retrieved from The Fatwa center website. This is a scientific Islamic portal affiliated with the Ministry of *Awqaf* and Islamic Affairs in Qatar. It is concerned with answering questions related to the Muslim faith, worship, transactions, ethics, behavior, and other matters. The small sample size of the selected *fatwas* goes back to the rigorous verification process. During this verification process I was committed to the following criteria: (1) excluding any *fatwas* that did not mention the name and the credentials of the jurist *(mufti)*or the body of jurists responsible for issuing the *fatwa*; (2) excluding any *fatwas* mentioned on social media or blogposts due to the overrepresentation of fabricated *fatwas*, fake news, unauthenticated post-sharing about Islamic

scholars issuing controversial *fatwas* surrounding Syrian refugee women in particular;[20] (3) excluding *fatwas* that were acquired orally, no matter how prevalent they were. The latter contained *fatwas* acquired through personally asking a scholar or those propagated during Friday sermons. This criterion also excluded *fatwas* mentioned by some of the respondents during the interviews. More information about the fatwa center available at:

http://fatwa.islamweb.net/fatwa/index.php?page=aboutfatwa

[21] In the nineties, the notion of *sutra* marriage started to gain cultural association with Muslim war victims and refugee women, it began with Bosnian women in the late 90s followed by Iraqis and recently Syrians.

[22] So she would be his lawful wife religiously but socially she still stays with her parents until they prepare for the wedding and the new place. This facilitates his visitation and them getting to know each other. Having sex would be lawful but its socially frowned upon. If they separate, she is considered divorced but there are usually no documentations to prove the marriage and divorce.

[23] An oblation is different from a religious obligation. An obligation is a must. It's a rule that has to be fulfilled by a muslim e.g. prayer. Oblation is an optional offering like additional charity.

[24] Compared to other sub-Saharan refugees such as Sudanese, Eritreans and Somalis who due to their ethnic background might not have the same appeal to Egyptians, as came in the discussion about race and shadeism.

[25] Definition and translations retrieved from *Kamous Al-Maani* (Meanings dictionary).

https://www.almaany.com/ar/dict/ar-
en/percentD8percentBApercentD8percentB1percentD8percentA8percentD8percentA9/

[26] *iḥṣān* (noune) *muḥṣan* (adjective): in [Islamic] law, a term denoting a certain personal status: married (and the marriage has been duly consummated), free, and Muslim. The quality of *iḥṣān* resides in each spouse when both satisfy all three criteria. [source: Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition].

[27] Samiei (2010) in an attempt to explain neo-Orientalism explained "… [A]lthough many preconditions which were responsible for crystallisation of the Orientalist discourse are no longer in place, it would be naive to think that the old patterns of human history and destiny which had shaped the West-and-Islam dualism have simply been removed.

Far from it: they have been reconstituted, redeployed, redistributed in a globalised framework and have shaped a new paradigm which can be called 'neo-Orientalism'." (p. 1148).

[28] Al-Krenawi & Graham (2003) estimate that polygamous households represent only 2 to 11.5 percent of the all in the Muslim Arab world.

[29] *'idda*: in law, the duration of widowhood, or the legal period of abstention from sexual relations imposed on widows or divorced women, or women whose marriages have been annulled, providing the marriage was consummated, before remarriage. [source: Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition].

[30] Quoting Samah Jabr, chair of the mental health unit at the Palestinian Ministry of Health with Olivia Goldhill (See, Goldhill, 2019).

[31] Utas (2005) however, distinguished between strategic agency and tactical agency by arguing that "the idea of tactic agency is that of short-term responses in relationship to a society's social structure. Tactic agency forms part of the trajectories travelled by the weak. In opposition to this, there is strategic agency-an agency for those who can forecast future states of affairs and have the possibility to make use of other people's tactical agency" (p. 407).

[32] The same processes and conditions that secures the subject's subordination are also the means by which he or she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent (Mahmoud, 2006, p. 45, citing Foucault).

[33] Relational autonomy provides an alternative conception of what it means to be 'a free, self-governing agent who is also socially constituted and who possibly defines her basic value commitments in terms of inter- personal relations and mutual dependencies' (Christman, 2004, 143). Recognizing relational autonomy as an analytical tool help us see those women as aware of their social position, aware of the social transaction or the mutual benefit created by this form of marria

[34] Refer to the discussion on shadeism in section 4.2.1. Also see Obeyesekere, 2017 and Dhillon, 2016 for further analysis.

[35] Never been married.

[36] Fatwa # 235441 originally posted on Islamweb.net at:

http://fatwa.islamweb.net/fatwa/index.php?page=showfatwa&Option=FatwaId&Id=235441 (website updated and link removed). The same fatwa was reposted at: https://www.raya.com/home/print/f6451603-4dff-4ca1-9c10-122741d17432/1a71790c-45f0-48ab-bbeb-d35a17385765 [last accessed October 29, 2019].

[37] Fatwa# 66438 originally posted on Islamweb.net

at: http://fatwa.islamweb.net/fatwa/index.php?page=showfatwa&Option=FatwaId&Id=66438 (website updated and link removed). Same fatwa, with same fatwa number was reposted

at: http://www.islamport.com/b/2/alfeqh/fatawa/%C7%E1%DD%CA%C7%E6%EC/%DD%CA%C7%E6%EC%20%C7%E1%D4%C8%DF%C9%20%C7%E1%C5%D3%E1%C7%E3%ED%C9/%DD%CA%C7%E6%EC%20%C7%E1%D4%C8%DF%C9%20%C7%E1%C5%D3%E1%C7%E3%ED%C9%20805.html [last accessed May 31, 2021]

[38] Fatwa # 63748 Originally posted on Islamweb.net at https://fatwa.islamweb.net/ar/fatwa/63748/ (link has been removed). The same fatwa with same fatwa number was reposted at this

link: http://www.islamport.com/b/2/alfeqh/fatawa/%C7%E1%DD%CA%C7%E6%EC/%DD%CA%C7%E6%EC%20%C7%E1%D4%C8%DF%C9%20%C7%E1%C5%D3%E1%C7%E3%ED%C9/%DD%CA%C7%E6%EC%20%C7%E1%D4%C8%DF%C9%20%C7%E1%C5%D3%E1%C7%E3%ED%C9%20755.html [last accessed May 31, 2021]

[39] Fatwa # 7994 originally posted on Islamweb.net at: https://fatwa.islamweb.net/ar/fatwa/7994/ (link has been removed) but available through: archives.org http://islamport.com/d/2/ftw/1/15/1814.html [last accessed May 31, 2021] (link has been removed and fatwa could not be retrieved).