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Gendered realities and resilience in displacement: Narratives of Syrian refugee women in Lebanon

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Abstract

Now in its ninth year, the Syrian crisis remains the largest humanitarian and displacement emergency of our time. Hundreds of thousands of people have lost their lives, while millions more have fled the country, undertaking exhausting journeys in search for safety in neighboring countries. However, when they arrive, challenges are far from over as they have to adapt to new ways of life. With more than one million Syrian refugees, Lebanon hosts the largest concentration of refugees per capita, globally. This study offers an in-depth look into Syrian refugees' livelihoods and coping strategies and an attempt to explore whether gender stereotypes have been influenced by forced displacement. In this context, qualitative research was conducted between April and July 2019 with 60 Syrian refugee female heads of households in Akkar and North Lebanon, whose ages ranged from 25 to 35. The primary focus is to analyze the words and expressions used by refugee women themselves to describe the challenges and opportunities they face, both as women and as refugees, and how far these affect their gender roles.

Keywords: *Language; gender stereotypes; Syrian refugee women; Lebanon; coping strategies.*

Introduction

Since 2011, more than 6.7 million people have been forced to flee the conflict in Syria and seek refuge in neighbouring countries or risk their lives crossing the Mediterranean in the hope of finding acceptance and opportunity in Europe[2]. In addition, millions more have been driven from their homes, but remained trapped inside Syria. Lebanon alone hosts 910.256 Syrian refugees registered with UNHCR[3], while the estimations of the Government remain at 1.5 million[4] - giving Lebanon more refugees per capita than any other country in the world. The government insists on the fact that Lebanon is not a country of asylum. It is neither a signatory to the Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees nor to its 1967 Protocol. Therefore, it refuses to give formal status to tented settlements and refers Syrians as نازحين *"displaced"* rather than لاجئين *"refugees"*. Moreover, it mainly relies on the UNHCR in the protection and assistance of Syrian refugees.

On the 6th of May 2015, Lebanon ordered the UNHCR to suspend the registration of newly arriving Syrians in order to restrict their presence in the country. This decision has prevented them from being able to access international assistance and protection, which makes them more vulnerable. Furthermore, it has resulted in an increasing number of Syrians unable to maintain legal stay in Lebanon or obtain civil status documentation, exposing them to risks of arrest, exploitation,

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[2] https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained/

[3] https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/71

[4] https://www.unhcr.org/lb/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2020/02/UNHCR-Lebanon-Operational-Fact-sheet-January-2020-1.pdf

statelessness, unregistered marriages, etc. Life has become a daily struggle for Syrian refugees who live in substandard accommodation such as informal tented settlements, garages, warehouses and unfinished buildings, with limited financial resources. According to the World Bank (2019), 71% of the Syrians in Lebanon live below the poverty line.

According to the narratives of many non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the Syrian forced displacement has disrupted social norms and gender stereotype. Many Syrian men who used to be the sole breadwinner, now find themselves unemployed and unable to provide for their families; which creates feelings of frustration, guilt and low-self-worth. On the other hand, refugee women undertake a new role of securing a viable livelihood, which force them to redefine core aspects of their identity.

This paper combines field and corpus linguistics with discourse and narrative analysis and social psychology. It aims to contribute to an improved understanding of the Syrian gender stereotype and sheds light on the perspectives of Syrian refugee women in Lebanon through field interviews. The research focuses on whether forced displacement affects the role of women, shifting positively or negatively.

Literature review

In order to be able to understand the various debates concerning the category *gender*, it is important to first explain two different but interrelated terms, namely *sex* and *gender*. Although they are often used interchangeably in public discourse, there are crucial distinctions between them. Behavioral sociologists define *sex* as the biological traits that characterize women and men, while *gender* is based on societal characteristics of women and men. It is related to their roles in society, how they perceive their identities and the way they understand themselves in relation to others. Moreover, society plays a vital role in influencing social practices and the perception of differences between masculinity and femininity. It is important to mention that gender is not static, it may change over time and it varies from one culture to another. Glover and Kaplan (2008) believe that "gender is now one of the busiest, most restless terms in the English language, a word that crops up everywhere, yet whose uses seem to be forever changing, always on the move, producing new and often surprising inflections of meaning."

West and Zimmerman (1987) explain that "a person's gender is not simply an aspect of what one is, but, more fundamentally, it is something that one does, and does recurrently, in interaction with others." In other words, gender is not inherent in each individual; it is rather what a society deems appropriate for women and men. It is deeply embedded in the social institutions, namely the family, the school, the religion, etc. The late 1960s through the 1970s mark an important turning point in the development of gender understanding and the realization of its crucial influence to an individual's life. Feminist scholars argued that gender is a vital organizing ideology around which social life revolves. Michael Kimmel (2000) says:

> Until the 1970s, social scientists would have listed only class and race as the master statuses that defined and proscribed social life. […] But today, gender has joined race and class in our understanding of the foundations of an individual's identity. Gender, we now know, is one of the axes around which social life is organized and through which we understand our own experiences.

Unger (1979) states that the term *gender* "serves to reduce assumed parallels between biological and psychological sex or at least to make explicit any assumptions of such parallels". Many scholars have been influenced by her ideas and have become selective in their use of the terms *gender* and *sex*. New terms like gender roles, gender gap, gender stereotypes, gender bending and gender blending have come into existence and are the evidence for continued attempts to challenge the marked difference between women and men.

In the following lines, we intent to highlight the concept of gender role and the importance of communication in the transmission of gender roles. Attitudes towards an idea/action, mentalities and points of view are transmitted by communication and influence human behaviors. Communication- in all its forms- teaches the individual to behave accordingly to the gender. Religious, political, ethnic, social and educational discourses set values and norms to foster the construction of who every individual is, what can s/he do, what s/he should not do. They communicate the behaviors that are acceptable and appropriate for girls and boys. In this sense, the language itself reflects the social role of the individual. According to Beauvoir (2009) "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman". This means that an individual becomes a woman by acquiring feminine traits and behaviors. Femininity and masculinity are consequently constructed through nurture, not nature. In this context, the construction mechanism is socio-cultural learning and performative repetition of acts. It is from a post-modern feminist perspective that the theory of gender performativity was developed to examine gender in connection with language practices. In the essay *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*, Judith Butler claims that gender is performative and does not exist outside social action. According to Butler (1990), "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results". Her theory emerged from the speech act theory, particularly the work of John Searle who examines language use as social action. It is also rooted in the phenomenological theory of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty that asserts that social reality is not a given, it is rather constituted through gesture and language.

Gender roles in society refer to normative responsibilities and behaviors assigned to women, men, girls and boys. They are traditionally associated with behavioral expectations based on biological sex. For instance, men are expected to be strong, powerful, independent, assertive and competitive, in line with their established roles to protect and provide for their families (Brody, 1999; Eagly & Steffen, 1984). Comfort (1963) explains that:

> The 'gender role' which an individual adopts – 'manly' or 'womanly' – according to the standards of his culture, is oddly enough almost wholly learned, and little if at all built in; in fact, the gender role learned by the age of two years is for most individuals almost irreversible, even if it runs counter to the physical sex of the subject.

Gender roles often create an artificial opposition between the traits and characteristics of women and men. For example, if men are strong, women must be weak or if men are good in business, women are not. In addition, housework and raising children are perceived as women's tasks, whereas getting a job and earning money are the province of men. Therefore, women become subject to oppression and tend to have lower status than men and keep them from realizing their full potential. In such cultures, women are seen as dependent and living off the earnings of their fathers and husbands. Beauvoir (2009) points out that the woman has been seen as "the 'other' of man: thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him". Women are made

to understand that they do not have any self-identity and they do not exist on their own. In patriarchal societies, women do not get the chance to see themselves through their own eyes.

Gender roles are "normative expectations about the division of labor between the sexes and to gender-related rules about social interactions that exist within a particular cultural–historical context" (Spence et al. 1985, p. 150). In today's world, women are becoming more aware of their status, roles, capabilities and importance in society. Many women have gained proper education, entered new fields of employment and participated in the world outside the 'house'. Therefore, gender roles are social constructs that evolve over time and change from culture to culture, especially through women empowerment activism in every sphere of life and exceptional circumstances, such as occurrence of conflicts or disasters.

Gender stereotypes

The complex phenomenon of gender stereotypes has been studied in different fields, especially in human and social sciences. For instance, in social psychology, stereotype is a generalized thought or belief about a particular group. It is based on assuming that the characteristics and abilities of an individual can be applied to all the individuals of that group. This leads to social categorization and creates an image of "them" versus "us", "in-groups" versus "out-groups". In linguistics, stereotype is associated to speech act. "Stereotyping is an oral discourse which goes beyond its sociological and ethnic dimensions to imply language as a code and a means of communication. This places the study in its operational framework, insofar as everything is mediated by and through langue and language." (Lachkar, 2011).

The United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (OHCHR) defines gender stereotype as:

> A gender stereotype is a generalized view or preconception about attributes or characteristics, or the roles that are or ought to be possessed by, or performed by women and men. A gender stereotype is harmful when it limits women's and men's capacity to develop their personal abilities, pursue their professional careers and make choices about their lives.

In the Arab context, including Syria, the link between gender, sexes and stereotype has always marked individual and collective relationships, in particular the family. This boils down to the respect of cultural heritage, which is based on a scalar, hierarchical and layered order. In fact, the Syrian family dynamic is patriarchal; the man has the supreme authority in the family and has the responsibility to financially support his children and wife. Women's traditional role is mainly to fulfill domestic duties, such as cooking, cleaning and taking care of her children. Although Syrian women have started to acquire their rights, they still don't stand shoulder to shoulder with men. Men are expected to pursue their education, get a good job and provide for his family. While women are also encouraged to excel in their education, they are more likely expected to marry someone who is wealthy enough to support them so they don't have to work. People in patriarchal societies are educated into normative gender identities based on how men and women are expected to act. Therefore, the concept of masculinity and femininity is created through particular standards of every day practice and becomes shared knowledge.

Research Methodology

This paper is based on qualitative Participatory Ethnographic Evaluation and Research (PEER) study of 60 selected Syrian women in Akkar and North Lebanon. The regions were purposefully selected because they are one of the most vulnerable areas that are home to the highest concentrations of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. The inclusion criteria consisted of married women between 25 and 35 years old, who work in different sectors, including sales, catering, hairdressing, house cleaning, etc. This allows us to capture a wide spectrum of gender roles in migration context. They were visited five times over the course of three months (April-July 2019) in order to build a deep overview of the gendered situation and vulnerability assessment among Syrian refugee families in Lebanon.

The aim of this research is to focus on lived experiences of Syrian refugee women, record their own stories and grant them the opportunity to reflect on emerging gender roles in light of the Syrian crisis. Giving voice to these women is crucial since it allows them to raise their concerns, have their voices heard and get accurate information about their situation. My work in the humanitarian sector in Lebanon as well as my PhD fieldwork, allowed me to explore the camps and the individual accommodations where Syrian refugees live. Therefore, my direct and regular contact with refugees allowed me to access the field, create a large network and build a trust relationship with them. For the data collection, extended one-on-one interviews were conducted based on general questions as well as some customized questions to each woman related to what was previously discussed.

All the interviews were conducted at the women's homes or tents, without the presence of their husbands, which made the conversations freer and more sincere and allowed us to concretely observe their living conditions. It is noteworthy that once the interviews were underway, the snowball sampling, also known as chain-referral sampling, was used to identify more interviewees. This method consists of identifying a small group of known individuals and expanding the sample by asking those initial participants to identify others who meet the same inclusion criteria.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, shortly after each interview, and qualitative data was stored in an Excel sheet coded based on main emerging themes providing resource for quotations that enrich our study and illustrate the gender roles in refugee communities. It is noteworthy that for protection reasons, the names of the interviewed women have been changed throughout this paper. It was made clear to the interviewees that their participation in this study was voluntary and could be stopped at any point. In addition, a consent statement was given to each participant who was asked to sign it by hand. The findings do not necessarily represent all Syrian refugee women; they offer an insight into the lives of some of them.

Key research questions and data collection

The interviews averaged 45 minutes and were predominantly prepared questions, but there were instances where I felt the need to ask further questions depending on the flow of the information and the stories the women were telling. The Main questions were the following:

What made you decide to leave your country?

When did you arrive to Lebanon?

Who accompanied you during the voyage?

What is your highest level of education?

Were you working in Syria? If yes, what was your profession?

What sector do you work in?

How long have you been working in Lebanon?

Is it a part-time or a full-time job?

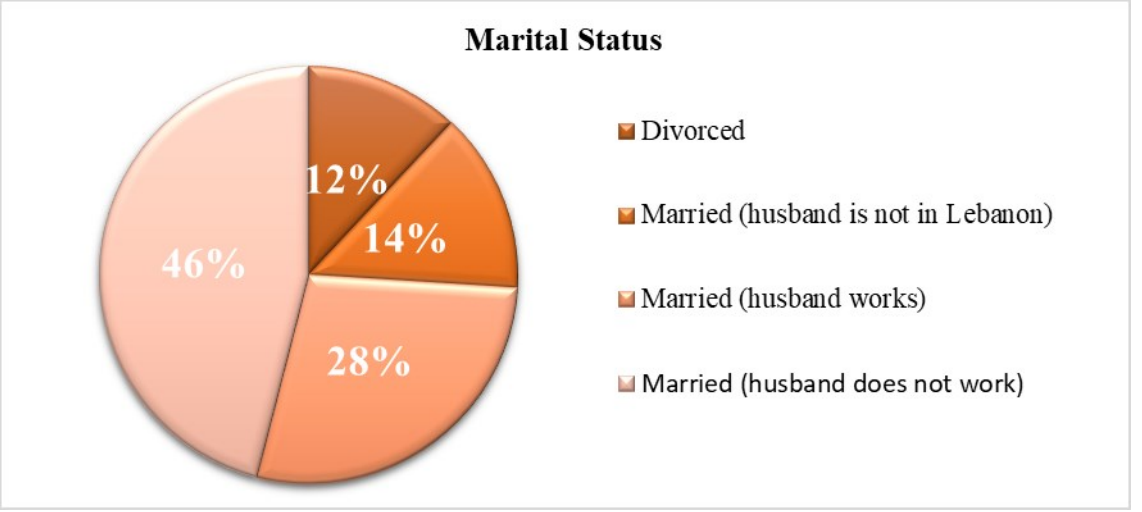
Does your husband work? If yes, what is his occupation? If no, why?

What are the main challenges you are facing?

How did your life change after the war and the forced migration?

The interview questions were designed to explore whether gender roles have changed due to the conflict in Syria and the migration to Lebanon and identify the implications of this new situation on individual, household and community levels. The following graphs show the main variables in analyzing the data

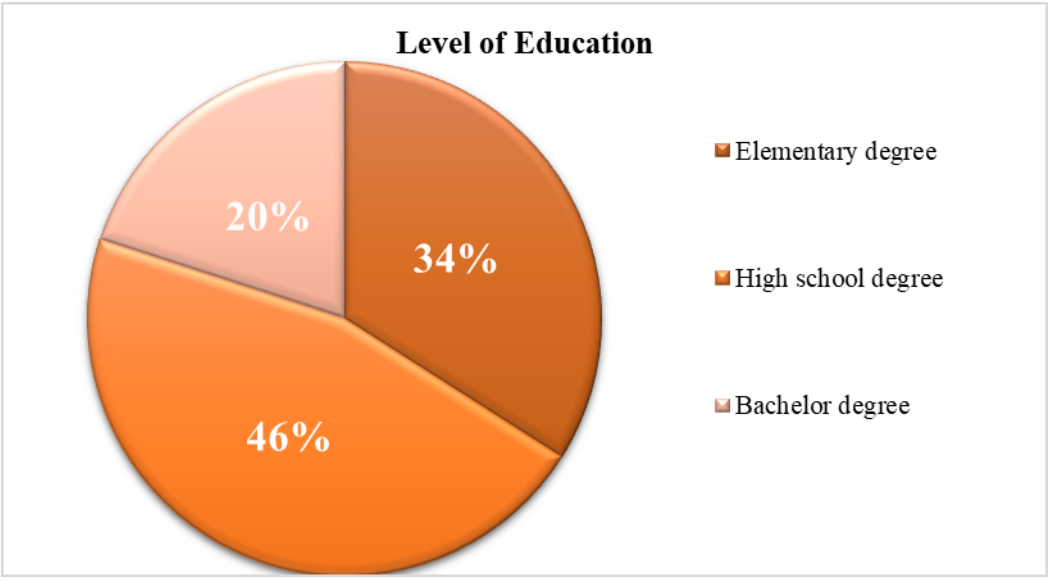
Figure 1. Marital status



Of the six divorced women, 2 got their divorce before coming to Lebanon. Seven married women came to Lebanon without their husbands because they were either detained or killed. Fourteen women work while their husbands are employed without regular income (they are mainly seasonal agricultural laborers). Twenty-three women are forced to take the sole responsibility for their families because their husbands are either sick or not allowed to work due to their illegal status.

Due to marriage at a young age, majority of the interviewees were incapable of pursuing their education and acquiring a university degree. It is noteworthy that most of the women interviewed come from rural areas in Syria, where traditional customs and norms put girls in second place in terms of education.

Figure 1. Level of education



Research findings

This section presents the research findings and highlights quotes from the interviews to support the discussion. It emphasizes the diversity of experience, reaction and perspective related to the life of Syrian refugee women in Lebanon. What often gets lost in public, political and media discourses around migration and refugees are the human beings, whose lives have been uprooted by tremendous circumstances. Therefore, it is important to hear their voices in order to understand how they position themselves. This section will examine the words and expressions they use in their narratives to describe their experiences and journeys in their search for a new life.

Profile of the interviewees

All interviewees fled the war and persecution in Syria seeking safety after they lost their homes, jobs, relatives and friends. 60% of the interviewees escaped Syria as the war escalated and their neighborhoods were occupied or destroyed, while 40% mentioned that family members were detained or killed and wanted to avoid the same fate.

> *"My brother was detained during the protests. I never heard from him, so I wrote statuses on Facebook calling for my brother's release and posting his photos. They hacked my Facebook account and deleted everything. A few days later, I fled the country, because I was afraid that they would do something to my children" (Farah, 35 arrived in 2013).*

She fled to Akkar with her three children in April 2013; the younger was 3 years old and the oldest 7 years old. Two months later, her husband joined them, but their marriage didn't last, they got divorced in February 2014. She also added *"I suddenly found myself to be the sole breadwinner of my family. It is not easy at all, but I always say as long as my kids and I are safe, I have everything."*

Amar fled her home with her sister-in-law Sarah.

> *"I was seven months pregnant at the time. After our neighbors were killed in a helicopter attack, my husband decided that I should flee to Lebanon. It wasn't safe anymore, so the next day, I packed a few basic things and went on a long and very exhausting journey with Sarah" (Amar, 27, arrived in 2013). She added, "Words cannot describe how scary it was to walk long distances amid rows of destroyed buildings, hearing heavy shelling and praying my husband would be fine."*

As the tense journey put her body through strain, Amar gave birth prematurely in Akkar. Her baby boy spent 27 days at neonatal intensive care unit, so she had to spend all the money she had. *"I wouldn't imagine I could go through such difficult experiences with no mother or husband to take care of me"*, she uttered.

It is noteworthy that the expressions and idioms used to describe the migration journey are related to the semantic field of fear. For instance, many women used the expressions:

رجف قلبي (my heart trembled)

وقع قلبي بين رجليي (my heart fell between my legs)

ماسكة قلبي بإيدي (holding my heart in my hands)

متت من الخوف (I died from fear)

مشحون بالمخاطر (fraught with danger)

نجازف بأرواحنا (risk life and limb).

These idiomatic expressions serve as intensifiers to enhance the situation and the emotional context of forced displacement. They all express the fear of the conflict in Syria as well as of the harsh circumstances they had to face. We also notice that the word قلب (heart) is used in most of these Arabic idioms, because it refers to the source of people's emotions and feelings. In addition, the interviewees used some words to describe their fears, like:

خيفانة (scared)

مرعوبة (terrified).

The semantic field of tiredness is also present in the interviewees' discourses through different expressions and words, such as:

هلكانة (exhausted)

تلفانة (drained)

استويت (worn out)

تعبانة (tired)

ما عدت حاسي برجليي (I couldn't feel my feet)

جسمي كان مكسّر/محطّم (my body is broken).

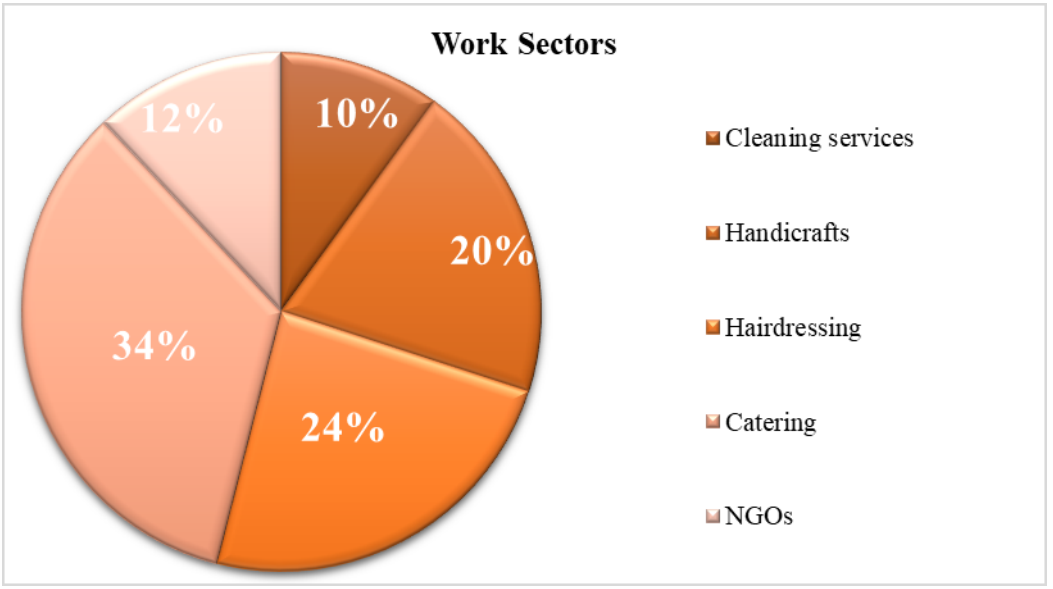
The interviews reveal that 55% of the women fled the conflict in 2013 compared to 30% in 2014 and 15% in 2015. It also shows that 50% of the interviewees arrived to Lebanon with more than four family members, including children, parents and siblings. Only 30% of the total Syrian

refugee women interviewed were working in Syria, mainly as public sector employees, schoolteachers and handicraft artisans.

> *"I used to coordinate environmental and agricultural projects between the government and some UN agencies in Syria. When I first came to Lebanon in 2014 with my husband and two children, we couldn't find a job, we relied on the UN assistance to survive." (Shams, 32, arrived in 2013). Today, Shams is working at a factory that produces soaps, oils and creams in Tripoli, North Lebanon. "It takes me 20 minutes to arrive to the factory. I go there every day and I love my job because it reminds me of the scent of soap making in Aleppo, my hometown."*

Only 8 women reported working part time or intermittently, often depending on the availability of jobs. They are mainly domestic cleaners, who work whenever they could find a job. As per Decree 197 of the Ministry of Labor, employment of Syrians is restricted to three sectors: construction, agriculture and cleaning services. It also states that recipients would not be allowed to receive aid from the UNHCR, forcing refugees to choose between legal employment and aid (health services, cash and food assistance, education, etc.). Findings show that these restrictions limit formal employment opportunities, and the vast majority of interviewees are engaged in informal sectors. The procedure of getting a work permit requires company sponsorship and is considered as time consuming and expensive for employers (240,000 LBP).

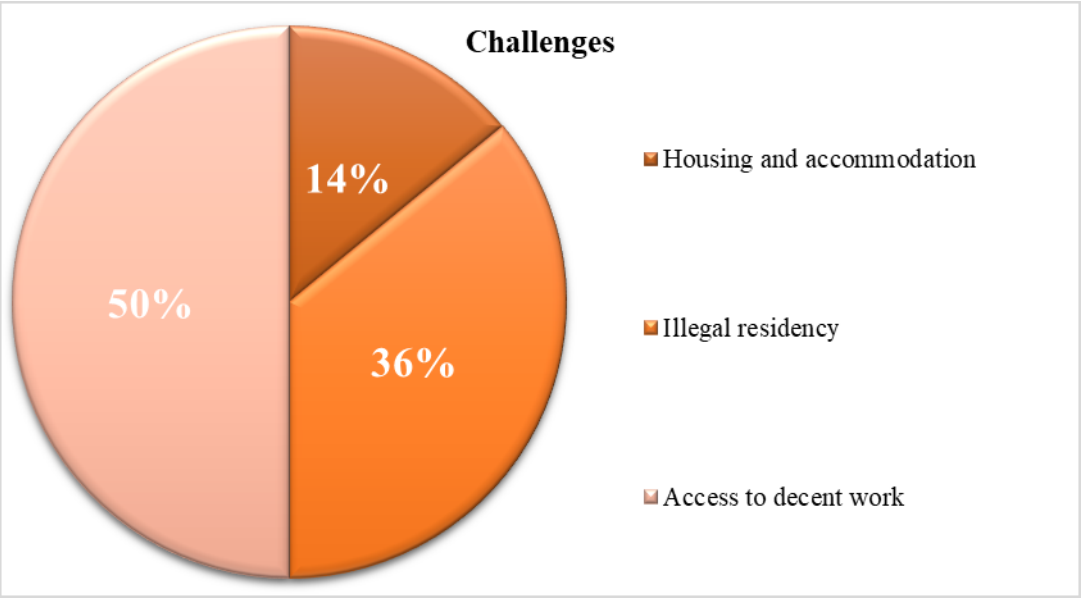
Figure 2. Work sectors



Challenges of exile

Throughout the interviews, women described the main challenges they have faced in their new life as refugees whether in camps or urban housing; they are summarized in the graph below:

Figure 3. Challenges interviewees have faced in Lebanon



For the women interviewed, life in forced migration has not been easy because they have to cope in a new and unnerving environment. The large number of refugees in Lebanon has increased the demand on accommodations and consequently rental prices have been drastically raised. The majority of the women interviewed owned houses with their families in in Syria. However, in Lebanon, they are paying high rents in Lebanon for poor-quality accommodation.

For instance, Sahar arrived to Mashta Hammoud-Akkar with her husband and two children. Her husband was injured during the war and is now unable to work.

> *"I cannot afford renting an apartment here. My salary is 200 USD so I have to prioritize our expenditures. I preferred living in a tent to be able to provide food and medicines for my family" (Sahar, 35, arrived in 2014).*

Farida is living with her 8-year-old girl, her parents and her two brothers and their families in a garage in Zgharta. Farida's husband was detained during the war and she hasn't heard from him since 2013.

> *"We are 15 people living here. We share the same toilet. No one has privacy, but I don't have a choice. I am afraid of living alone with my daughter" (Farida, 28, arrived in 2013).*

36% of women interviewed reported they entered Lebanon legally, but their legal residency has expired and they are unable to renew it stating that the cost is the major inhibiting factor, hence, they are considered de facto as illegal migrants in the host country. In fact, they earn a small income while the cost of living is high in Lebanon. Thus, they do not prioritize renewal of residency; they rather limit their spending to basic needs that are critical to survival. However, this causes great challenges, including restrictions on their freedom of movement and on the access to healthcare services. Working without valid residency is considered as a criminal offense for which refugees can be arrested and makes them vulnerable to exploitation in the workplace, without the ability to turn to authorities for protection.

"I am not able to pay the 200 USD renewal fee for each of my family members. My husband and 15-year-old son don't currently work, they are afraid of being caught and arrested" (Hanan, 33, arrived in 2014). She also added "I work in a bakery in Akkar from 7:00 am till 6:00 pm every day. However, I cannot complain about the long working hours. I am afraid of my boss."

Some women also reported exploitation by their employers, who are their sponsors at the same time.

"I work at a hairdressing salon in Zgharta, where I am underpaid. My Lebanese coworkers are getting paid double my salary, and when I complain, the manager threatens to cancel my sponsorship" (Raneem, 29, arrived in 2015).

Moreover, for the women interviewed, who are working on a sponsorship residency, they mentioned not having work contracts.

I work at a restaurant in Akkar but I don't have a contract. Consequently, I am always stressed and worried because I may be fired at any time without getting my rights" Amar, 30, arrived in 2014). "My husband is unable to work because he has a spine inflammation. I didn't really have a choice; either I accept this job or we die from hunger", she added.

Gender roles in Syria pre-conflict

Prior to the conflict, some women had individual and social opportunities and had the chance to become empowered, however, many did not. When asked about the differences between their role in household in Lebanon and back in Syria, 82% of the women reported that they now have a larger role. Some said that they felt independent, as they had to do everything on their own, just as their male counterparts. They also reported increased engagement in decision-making since leaving their country, due to changing inter-family dynamics.

Lubna is a housecleaner and lives in an informal tented settlement in al-Abboudiye, Akkar.

"In Syria, I hardly left my home. I was a housewife, cooking food and taking care of my four children. My routine has completely changed in Lebanon. I go to work every day, excluding weekends, from 8:00 am till 3:00 pm, then I prepare food for my family and take care of my children and husband" (Lubna, 33, arrived in 2015).

Sumaya lives in a small apartment in Zgharta with her husband and two children.

"When we were in Aleppo, my husband worked at an engineering company and we depended on his salary. In Lebanon, he works in construction and formwork, while I work at a hairdressing salon to be able to provide for our family. Therefore, we both now have major roles in the household" (Sumaya, 29, arrived in 2014).

Ameera lives in Zgharta with her five children, while her husband stayed in Syria.

"The trip was exhausting, stressful and unbearable. My children kept nagging and crying, they were too young to travel long distances or to bear to stay with no water and food" (Ameera, 35, arrived in 2015). "I am not a man, but I was strong enough to flee alone with my children. I still don't know how I made it here", she added.

Jana fled to Zgharta with her husband and two children. Her husband is a seasonal worker, so she had to secure a stable job somehow. She works at a restaurant that offers Lebanese food.

> *"I never had a job in Syria, because women are not supposed to work. Today, I am forced to work to be able to provide for my family. I didn't choose this hard life. I sometimes feel I cannot bear it anymore" (Jana, 30, arrived in 2014).*

In this context, women used various expressions to describe feelings of helplessness, such as:

مو طالع بإيدي شي (nothing that my hands can do)

حاسي اني انشليت (I feel paralyzed)

سكرت الدنيا بوجهي (life shut the doors in my face)

اسودت الدنيا بوجهي (life blackened in my eyes)

الضغط كبير عليي (too much pressure on me)

أحيانًا بحس اني مو قدرانة اتحمّل (sometimes I feel I cannot bear it anymore)

العيشة صعبة (life is hard)

حياتنا مو سهلة (our life is not easy)

حظي عاطل (I'm having a run of bad luck)

العين بصيرة والإيد قصيرة (the eye sees, but the hand can't reach)

شو بدي احكيلك (what am I supposed to say)

ما إلي سعد بهالدنيا (I can't seem to find happiness in life).

The challenges associated with the forced displacement have had pervasive effects on the psychosocial wellbeing of Syrian refugee women who have been shouldering increased responsibility. Many expressions and words show their stress and anxiety, such as:

عتلاني هَم (I am worried)

أكلني الهَم (worry is killing me)

عم بموت ألف موتة (I am dying a thousand times)

الهم دبحني (worry slaughtered me)

هموم الدنيا عراسي (the weight of the world on my shoulder)

مو عرفانة شو بدي أعمل (I don't know what to do)

ضايجة (cramped)

مخنوقة (I am suffocating)

متوترة (anxious)

معصبة (stressed)

مو شايفة قدامي (I cannot see in front of me).

Furthermore, some women used expressions that reflect unconscious cultural stereotypes like:

أنا ماني رجال أنا مرا (I am not a man, I am a woman)

كَوني امرأة مطلّقة بعرّضني للاستغلال (being a divorced woman puts me at risk of exploitation)

ما في رجال يحميني (I don't have a man who can protect me)

الرجال في يشتغل كل شي بس المرا لأ (men can work in any sector, but women can't)

زوجي تعبان كتير من هالوضع بس ما بيبكي لأنو الرجال ما بيبكوا (my husband is very tired of this situation, but he doesn't cry because men don't cry)

المرا ما فيها تستغني عن الرجال (women cannot dispense with men)

الرجال غير (men are different)

بشتغل من الفجر للنجر، حاسي حالي المرا والرجال بهالبيت (I work from dawn till dusk, I feel like I am the woman and the man in this house).

These expressions show that some women believe they are weaker than men, they cannot surpass the challenges they face without the presence of a man and they are not supposed to work because work is a masculine task. The interviews with Syrian refugee women demonstrate that language manifests generalized images about women and men in societies. Other than the cultural and social factors that define gender roles, language used by these women proves that words and expressions are important means of the expression of gender stereotypes within the Syrian refugee community. It also shows that some women are not very conscious of the language they are using. However, language matters and can contribute to a great change, it can either reinforce existing stereotypes or puncture them.

Resilience and women empowerment

Many women said they found exceptional resilience and strength in themselves in the face of hardships and challenges. Manal fled to Zgharta with her twin daughters while her husband stayed in Syria.

> *"It was an exhausting and dangerous journey to Lebanon. It was raining bullets and I was carrying a large bag on my shoulders and holding my four-year-old daughters close to my heart. They constantly cried, they wanted their father and were afraid of the bombings. They got traumatized" (Manal, 30, arrived in 2014). "This is the first time I realize that I don't need a man to thrive and survive. I am financially capable of providing for myself and my daughters and I am very happy that I was able to enroll them in school", she emphasized, smiling through her tears.*

Yasmina, 26, attended a chocolate molding and decoration workshop implemented by an NGO in Akkar.

> *"When I arrived to Lebanon, my life was empty. In April, I attended a workshop that helped me gain confectionery skills, and in May I found a paid training at a local chocolatier. I am enjoying my job and I feel independent and confident" (Yasmina, 26, arrived in 2015). "When we go back to Syria, I will open my own chocolatier", she added with a big smile.*

Heba also embraces her job as a sewing trainer at a workshop implemented by an international NGO in Tripoli. It has not only been a source of income for Heba, but also a stress-relieving activity and a source of empowerment.

"I never worked in Syria, but I have always been good at sewing. I am so glad that the fifteen trainees are benefiting from my knowledge" (Heba, 30, arrived in 2014). "When I arrived to Lebanon, I didn't have friends, which made me feel the bitterness of forced displacement. However, through this workshop I got the chance to meet amazing Syrian and Lebanese women. We share our problems, our fears, our plans, everything. We are now a family", she added. "My role changed for the better. Now I see myself in a different way. When I go back to Syria, I will look for a job, I will not go back to being a housewife!" she said *with confidence.*

"In Lebanon, we have started to realize that we, as women, could be active in society and be more than just wives and mothers. We have realized that we can work, be independent, participate in decision-making, and have a voice in the household. Many of us have left their comfort zones and have felt the need to take a step forward and be active without the help of their husbands or fathers. And look at us now! Many Syrian women are very autonomous in Lebanon" (Futun, 33, arrived in 2015)

It is also important to shed light on the fact that all the interviewees are prioritizing the education of their daughters. Hind didn't pursue her education in Syria, she got married when she was 17 years old. However, she attended a cooking workshop with an NGO, which allowed her to find a job at a restaurant in Zgharta.

"My daughter is enrolled in school because I believe that the most powerful weapon of women is education. Boys can work in many sectors, but girls' options are limited in patriarchal societies. Therefore, she needs to have her education" (Hind, 26, arrived in 2015).

"I dropped out of school when I was 14 years old, because my parents believed girls will end up in the kitchen. I was married to my cousin, arranged by my parents, when I was 16 years old. My experience has taught me that education is the most important thing in life. I won't make my daughters leave school even no matter what. I want them to make their own decisions when they grow up and be financially independent" (Asala, 25, arrived in 2015).

Women interviewed used various expressions that refer to empowerment, such as:

ما بقول غير الحمدلله (I can't but praise God)

انفرجت علي (I feel relieved)

صرت قد حالي (I became strong)

شغلي زدلي ثقتي بنفسي (my job increased my self-esteem)

حياتي صار الها معنى أكتر (my life has more meaning)

شغلي هو نقطة قوّتي (my job is my strength point)

أنا مو بس ست بيت أنا امرأة عاملة متلي متل الرجل (I am not only a mother, but also a worker just like men)

مو محتاجة حدا يعيّشني (I don't need anyone to support me financially)

المرا مو ناقصها شي لحتى تتعلم وتشتغل (women lack nothing to learn and work)

إذا بدها المرا فيها تعمل من الضعف قوة (if women have the will, they can turn weaknesses into strengths)

ما في شي بيقدر يكسرني بقا (nothing can break me down anymore)

ولادي فخورين فيني (my children are proud of me)

ما في شي بيوقف بطريقي (nothing stands in my way).

As a result, this qualitative study, one of the few among Syrian refugee women in Lebanon, revealed the shift in gender roles within their community, the concerns over their new responsibilities as well as their positive impact on women empowerment. Women's experiences before and after the conflict in Syria differ and their perceptions of their roles and identity differ as well. Moreover, the ways Syrian refugee women experience that shift and describe it is wholly individual. This study highlights the change in norms, roles and expectations within the Syrian refugee community in Lebanon in order to increase support to women who are grappling with that change on their own in difficult circumstances.

In times of conflicts, social and material demands increase and affect masculine and feminine identities as well as gender roles within the household. Many women have been traumatized as a result of the conflict and have experienced challenging journeys on their way to Lebanon. They also have been forced to cope with migration and the social changes that brings, including being required to fulfill the breadwinner and caregiver roles in their households. As a result, women emphasized the stress and pressure they experience in Lebanon trying to provide for their families in the absence of their husbands or with unemployed husbands. High rent, expensive health system and food, constraints to mobility, exploitation and lack of some basic rights can put increased burden on women.

Many Syrian women have become independent from their husbands. While for some this may be a choice, it is mainly a product of forced migration. Many women demonstrate confidence, high self-esteem and independence, while some of them remain reluctant and feel unable to fulfill their new roles. Most interviewees agreed that gender roles were shifting such that women had more responsibilities, power and influence inside their homes, and that this change is generally a positive thing. They agreed that it has not been an easy shift, but they are appreciative of the new opportunities they have and they are optimistic about the future of Syrian women. They all emphasized the importance of education for their children, especially girls, as a key to social and economic independence.

To summarize, refugee women should be empowered to reach their maximum potential and push them to identify themselves as more than just "the other of men". If empowered, they will not only improve their personal situation but also that of the people around them.

Conclusion

The conflict in Syria has taken severe toll on the country's people and women have been particularly affected on all levels. As several studies have demonstrated, migration and new socio-cultural contexts often hinder refugees from reconstructing their gender identities (McSpadden 1999; Jaji 2009). The new economic and legal circumstances of Syrian refugees in Lebanon have forced women to take on responsibilities that were once a man's domain. It is indeed difficult for women to see their lives change overnight and their role as mothers and housewives suddenly switch

to that of the head of the household and the main breadwinner. Syrian refugee women have been forced to cope with a new situation, in a new country and struggle to provide for their families.

This study shows that the identity of Syrian refugee women in Lebanon has implied a renegotiation of gender roles in the patriarchal society and has reshaped gender roles and household patterns. As Strathern (1988) explains, gender is perceived as what men and women do to define it. As men are absent, engaged in the conflict, killed or wounded, Syrian women move out of their traditional roles. They have found themselves the sole provider for their families and have proven to be strong, hardworking and resilient. Finding ways to support themselves and their families has become a dire need.

The narratives of Syrian women in Lebanon illustrate how social contexts create pressure on women and men to fulfill expected roles. In fact, society creates gender stereotypes based on people's observations of normative actions of women and men and assume the existence of gender-specific dispositions (Eagly & Wood, 2011: 458-476). This study further contributes to the academic research on gender specific issues in forced migration, and fills the gap in the research on the Syrian refugee question. It can be further applied to broader sample of participants and include men to understand their own approach and view on this issue especially that they come from societies with rigid gender role structures.

The novelty in our approach lies in combing gendered discourse with field of corpus linguistics, which allowed us to identify gender roles and their linguistic representation within the refugee community in Lebanon. The words of Syrian women refugees in this study paint a picture of what their life looks like amid forced displacement. Some of them are raised to take care of the stereotypical gender roles that include duties not beyond those associated with the housewife. While some refugee women feel they have lost their feminine identity, others believe that their new responsibilities have strengthened their sense of empowerment and autonomy and have made them feel equal to men. Many of them think that war and forced displacement could be a turning point for female empowerment. In fact, they have given them the chance to do something for themselves, learn new skills, work, and be independent and influential within their households and community.

Shifting gender roles is critical in forced displacement contexts, especially that women did not choose their new responsibilities. They were forced to relocate, work and look after their families. However, it remains a great opportunity for them to change roles and practices in patriarchal societies. Taking on new work responsibilities in host communities give refugee women the opportunity to explore the new culture and adopt new cultural behaviors and values (Hojat et. al, 2000). Moreover, Inhorn (2012) explains that the man in the Middle East is taught to be a family patriarch and dominate women in his surroundings. However, this stereotypical image is not fully reflected in forced displacement contexts. Women interviewed show remarkable resilience as they expand their role in their communities. They spoke highly of the way accessing work, sometimes for the first time, has completely changed their lives. Nevertheless, this flip in gender roles within the framework of forced displacement has sometimes put women at a higher risk of exploitation and increased the pressures they face. For instance, some women admitted they weren't able to report exploitation at workplace due to the lack of proper identification.

Hajdukowski (2013) points out that the term 'refugee woman' is currently being remodeled, giving way to new contexts and meanings to better understand the concept. For instance, the image of victimized woman is fading away and being replaced by the resilience of women in emergency

situations. The personal narratives presented in this study show the determination and strength of Syrian women despite their difficult journey.

To conclude, the shift in gender roles among the Syrian refugee community in Lebanon has occurred in response to acute need. As Chatterji and Chaudhy (2014) argue, women, in times of conflicts, are the bearers of culture and national identity and transmit traditional and acquired values to the succeeding generation. Therefore, it is important to reflect on the future of gender roles after the conflict. In other words, will women choose to revert to previous norms when they return to Syria? Will this positive change and women empowerment be extended to younger generations?

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