

Gender and the career trajectories of highly skilled Syrian refugees in Switzerland

Flavia Cangià,¹ Eric Davoine,² and Sima Tashtish³

Abstract

This article looks at the role of gender relations and norms in the (re)making of career trajectories of highly skilled Syrian refugees in Switzerland. We explore how refugees encounter gender regimes while making sense of their present work situation vis-à-vis their career plans. We draw upon a qualitative study conducted with 27 highly skilled Syrian refugees in Switzerland. How do refugees encounter different gender regimes in Switzerland? What is the significance of gender in their transition to a new labour market? How do they re-negotiate gender meanings and roles following the displacement? Our findings show that refugees (re)make sense of gender norms, roles and meanings across space and time vis-à-vis their career trajectories. The gender regimes these people refer to are highly diversified and shape people's negotiation of family roles and identities in complex and at times ambivalent ways, also along multiple lines of belonging.

Keywords: *Highly skilled refugees; gender; Syrians; career; life-course*

Introduction

Forced migration can lead to major changes in a person's career trajectory, with subsequent social and professional downward mobility, unemployment and status loss (Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018; Jansen, 2008; Senthanaar et al., 2020). While increasingly research now explores the lives of highly skilled refugees (Bygnes, 2021; Cangià et al., 2021; Mozetič, 2018; Sontag, 2018), there is still relatively little knowledge about refugees' experiences of gender in the making of career trajectories (Kofman, 2019). However, gender plays a major role in shaping the labour market adaptation of refugees (Kirk, 2010; Miletic, 2014; Pessar, 2005). This article seeks to fill this gap by looking at the role of gender in the (re)making of career trajectories of highly skilled Syrian refugees in Switzerland. We explore how these refugees experience gender while making sense of their present work situation vis-à-vis their past professional life and future career plans. How do they relate to different gender regimes during the migration experience? How do they renegotiate gender meanings and roles following their displacement? We draw upon a qualitative study conducted since 2018 with 27 highly skilled Syrian refugees in various regions of Switzerland.

First, we present the theoretical framework and introduce the life-course perspective, in particular the concepts of 'transition' and 'rupture', as the analytical vantage point to understand gender as a process rather than as a categorical difference shaping refugees' career trajectories. In the next section, we introduce the research context and methods. We draw upon interview extracts from the qualitative study and portray three main dynamics at stake in the gender experiences of the refugees interviewed: the encounter with new 'gender

¹ Flavia Cangià, University of Fribourg NCCR LIVES, Switzerland. E-mail: flavia.cangia@unifr.ch

² Eric Davoine, University of Fribourg NCCR LIVES, Switzerland. E-mail: eric.davoine@unifr.ch

³ Sima Tashtish, University of Fribourg, Switzerland. E-mail: simatashish@gmail.com



regimes'; the change of gender roles; and the renegotiation or reiteration of gender norms and meanings. Finally, we present some conclusions and the implications of our study.

Gender on the move: a life-course perspective

Major research about forced migration explores how gender shapes the working life of refugees, in particular the gender differences between men and women in their access to employment (Beiser & Hou, 2000; Bermudez, 2013; Franz, 2003, 2019; Tomlinson, 2010). According to these studies, refugee women seem to adapt more easily to the socio-economic downward mobility resulting from the displacement, and seek employment mostly out of financial necessity (Young & Chan, 2015). Family and social and economic stability for the price of 'menial' jobs appear to be more important for these women than their social and economic independence and career advancement (Franz, 2019; Kleist, 2010; McSpadden & Moussa, 1993). Contrary to these studies, however, Bermudez showed how, similarly to male refugees who work, middle-class Colombian women refugees in the UK also suffer as a result of abandoning their career when migrating (Bermudez, 2013).

Other scholars distance themselves from the study of gender as a classification of men and women's experiences of migration and rather look at how migration itself shapes gender (Donato et al., 2006; Elliot, 2016; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Mahler & Pessar, 2001). This research considers the dynamic and relational nature of gender as a process, how gender is made sense of, reinforced or transformed. Donato et al. (2006) make this relational and transformative nature of gender very clear:

Gendered ideologies and practices change as human beings [...] cooperate or struggle with each other, with their pasts, and with the structures of changing economic, political, and social worlds linked through their migrations [...] Migrants often become particularly aware of the relational and contextual nature of gender as they attempt to fulfill expectations of identity and behavior that may differ sharply in the several places they live. (Donato et al., 2006: 6)

This article aims to contribute to this trend of research through a life-course perspective (Levy et al., 2005) and a special focus on career in the context of forced migration. While major research in migration studies has focused on how migration shapes gender and gender relations 'back home' in the countries of origin (among, for example, 'left behind' wives of migrants), there is further need to explore how migration shapes gender 'on the move' in the making of migrants' trajectories (Elliot, 2016; Le Feuvre et al., 2022; Schaer et al., 2017). A life-course perspective particularly supports unpacking this shifting and relational character of gender, as well as the temporal dimension of migration as a developmental experience of transformation. Such a perspective explores the making of life trajectories through the conceptual lens of 'critical life events', 'ruptures' and 'transitions'. A critical life event is a significant moment that can shake the course of a person's life (Spini et al., 2017; Thomson et al., 2002) and can help to bring about a subjective experience of 'rupture', where "some taken for granted sphere of experiences is questioned or destroyed, and new elaborations are needed" (Zittoun, 2016: 8). A transition, in turn, occurs at the passage from one state to another following the experienced rupture. A transition to something new can occur due to a transformation in the surrounding context, a change of personal living circumstances, or from within the person (Zittoun, 2006). The concept of transition, hence, more specifically refers



to the remaking and re-elaboration of those aspects that people consider significant in their experience of a rupture.

The migration to a new country can be experienced as a rupturing and critical event at multiple levels, and career and gender relations can represent specific contexts where the questioning of taken-for-granted experiences manifests (Cangià et al., 2019). Migration can entail being confronted with new meanings regarding gender, meanings that can be in contrast with, or even new to, a person's professional and personal life before the displacement. At times, migrants need to adapt to a new socio-cultural environment and find a sense of continuity with the past, as well as learning to live with the new situation. Here, we explore the major ruptures relating to refugees' family life, gender relations and identities, as well as their transition towards new gender relations, norms and meanings when entering a new labour market.

Highly skilled Syrian refugees in Switzerland

Switzerland is a country with a significant population of highly skilled migrants (Ravasi et al., 2015; Steiner & Wanner, 2019), and yet refugees are hardly included in the public discourse on this migrant category. Highly skilled migration is often associated with the transnational movement of an elite population in a specific range of work sectors (e.g., diplomacy, business, academia, humanitarian work) (Hercog & Sandoz, 2018). The case of refugees with qualifications that are not recognized in the destination countries shows that migrants are categorized based on the institutional channels of migration through which they enter a new country (e.g., work, family reunification, education, asylum) rather than their individual characteristics (skills, education) (Sandoz, 2018).

The case of highly skilled Syrians in Switzerland is especially interesting here for several reasons. Firstly, Syrians are generally considered more qualified than other groups of refugees (OECD, 2015). While great attention has been paid to inflows of Syrians in Europe and Northern America (e.g., Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018; Mzayek, 2019; Senthanaar et al., 2020), hardly any research has investigated the specific case of highly skilled Syrian refugees in Switzerland, even less from a gender perspective. The community of Syrian refugees in Switzerland is composed of different cultural, social, ethnic and religious backgrounds, a diversity that makes the identification of a homogeneous gender regime in Syria complex. While often being associated with the image of a country of 'freedom' and more 'autonomy' for women, Switzerland, in turn, is mostly characterized by an "adapted breadwinner model", with unequal work-life trajectories for men and women: the majority of men are full-time employed while women are part-time employed and tend to adapt professional life to family and care (Le Feuvre et al., 2015).

The study

It is in this heterogenous context that we explore the gender experiences of highly skilled Syrian refugees. We carried out interviews with 27 Syrian nationals seeking asylum in various regions of Switzerland. The interviews followed a semi-structured question guide (Roulston & Choi, 2018), as this method is well suited to reconstructing the interviewee's subjective and expert knowledge about the issue under study (Flick, 2009). The interview grid included questions about: the educational and professional background of the interviewees; the difficulties encountered during the job search and strategies to deal with these obstacles; the

procedure for seeking asylum; and career aspirations before migration and for the future, as well as feelings about the present work situation. The interview guide also included specific questions about gender, in particular: “If you had been a man (or a woman), do you think it would be different (easier, more difficult) to find a job in Switzerland?” “Do you feel that your role as a man or woman has changed in Switzerland (e.g., with your partner, with your children)?”

While being semi-structured, interviews were conducted in a way that enabled respondents to focus on aspects that they considered important and to share their personal opinions and feelings. Therefore, initial questions included in the grid were slightly modified during the interview in the light of participants’ responses or any interesting topics that arose. The fact that all three authors had migrated to Switzerland in the past facilitated dialogue and exchanges with participants.

We met the respondents through personal contacts of one of the authors, public agencies and snowball sampling. Respondents were selected to maximize the diversity of gender (14 men and 12 women), degrees (minimum academic education at bachelor’s level), educational fields (e.g., medicine, dental medicine, law, architecture, literature, engineering, business and economics, informatics and social sciences), familial situation (single, married, divorced, widowed, with and without children), employment situation (unemployed, part-time and full-time employed) and residence (various towns in the German- and French-speaking regions of Switzerland). The legal status of asylum seekers varied according to the stage and outcome of their application to receive asylum. Because the rights of these people – to work, to access subsidized integration measures, etc. – were closely linked to their legal status, we ensured that the profiles of our sample were as varied as possible in terms of legal status. Our respondents included asylum seekers (permit N), provisionally admitted refugees (permit F), recognized refugees (permit B) and permanent residents (permit C). All interviewees had held high social positions in Syria. This apparent social homogeneity masks, however, a certain diversity of geographical, ethnic and religious background (including Christians and Muslims, Kurds and Armenians, as well as people from various regions and towns in Syria). Since their arrival in Switzerland, most of our respondents had been engaged in on-demand part-time jobs or employment in a different area from their field of expertise, or had started or completed local education or training courses. Some were able to continue their previous professions. A small number of people were not working at the time of their interview.

The first phase of interviewing was carried out in Arabic and French in winter 2018/19 by one of the authors. In the second phase, between 2019 and 2022, interviews were conducted in French, German and Arabic by the three authors. Interviews, generally lasting between 1 and 2 hours, were held at a time and place chosen by participants. At times we met the participants at a café or the university; at other times we visited their homes; three interviews were conducted online due to Covid-19 restrictions in 2020. Interviews were confidential, recorded with participants’ permission, fully transcribed, and were shared with the participants.

We analysed interviews through thematic coding (Flick, 2009): interviews underwent an initial case-by-case analysis of various emerging themes, and in a second round a transversal examination of patterns across all cases. The initial case analysis showed that gender represents an essential thematic domain in the transition to a new environment. It was hence possible to compare all cases. Extracts were coded with a special focus on: the experience of



gender stereotyping and the gender roles attributed by others; the heterogeneity of gender regimes, both ‘Swiss’ and ‘Syrian’ (normative age of marriage; conceptions about women’s financial independence; gender roles before and after the migration; differences due to belonging to certain religious or ethnic communities or social classes); the perceived disruptions from previous normative roles and the transition to new meanings relating to gender (more autonomy and freedom; valuing women’s work and participation in household expenses; loss of financial dependence and the male breadwinner status). In the analysis, we keep an intersectional view on gender by considering it as always intertwined with class, ethnicity and other forms of difference (Le Feuvre et al., 2022).

We present our analysis using three main dynamics that characterize the way the migrants talked about gender and their work situation in Switzerland:

1. The encounter with new ‘gender regimes’⁴ and the confrontation with gender stereotyping by social institutions;
2. The transformation of gender roles, with a subsequent status loss for some, and a newly perceived ‘freedom’ for others;
3. The renegotiation or reiteration of gender norms and meanings.

These three dynamics are not mutually exclusive: new meaning about gender can be favoured by the rupturing event of encountering different gender regimes and by negotiation of new roles within a couple, which in turn catalyse, and are catalysed by, new sense-making about the rupturing event (Zittoun, 2006). The sense-making process, as we will see, can lead to a renegotiation of gender meanings and roles, a redefinition of one’s gender identity, and an ‘undoing’ of gender conceptions (Butler, 2004), especially when the restrictions of gender regimes are confronted and challenged with the newness of the situation. At other times, making sense of gender brings to the fore the very same normative expectations and conceptions that shaped the experience of these people before migration (e.g., breadwinning male, “Oriental woman”⁵).

Encountering gender in Switzerland

Refugees engaged before migration in a highly skilled profession or in education experienced a rupture in their work trajectories when moving to Switzerland. That is why we consider the forced migration of these people as a critical event in their life course (Bygnes, 2021). For one thing, refugees are confronted in the new context with new expectations associated with being a man or a woman and a refugee, which have an impact on their job search. For some, gender did not represent a crucial factor before displacement but became an important aspect during the job search. Refugees with a stable professional life or younger refugees from middle-class backgrounds, for example, might face the issue of gender for the first time in migration (Bermudez, 2013) and can be confronted with new gendered identities (Jansen, 2008).

One of the main occasions where refugees encounter gender is in the experience of gender-based stereotyping aggravated by their ‘refugee’ status. Male and female Syrian refugees in Switzerland often reported cases of discrimination, whereby social workers supporting them

⁴ We define ‘gender regimes’ as the institutionalization of those discourses, practices and cultural scripts on gender and gender roles that regulate the way people arrange family and couple life and make sense of themselves and others along gendered lines of belonging (Boni-Le Goff & Le Feuvre, 2017).

⁵ As often indicated by some of the participants.

in their job search tended to associate certain occupations with gender (i.e., seasonal agricultural jobs or storekeeping for men and caregiving or cooking jobs for women):

“I can’t be a warehouse worker [as the social worker suggested I do], I have back problems, I feel better with a service job.” (Akram, man, 48)

“My social manager said to me, *Madam, why do you want to work? Go home and live your life normally.* I asked him if he was telling me this because I am an Oriental woman...he started laughing and changed his speech. The last time I met him, [...] he told me to go raise kids!” (Zeina, woman, 32)

“[social workers] always ask questions such as: *why are you still looking to go to the university? You can do some training around cooking and then work in a restaurant. You cook very well [...]* I say yes, cooking is my passion but not my field of professional work.” (Hiba, woman, 47)

Those women who were formerly lawyers, medical doctors, engineers or civil servants in Syria are often encouraged by social workers to curb their professional ambitions, and to accept the kinds of jobs to which female migrants are usually assigned, specifically in the care and hospitality sectors (Seminario, 2018). Refugees with a Muslim religious background can experience further challenges when it comes to searching for a job. Some men reported changing their first names; some women raised the issue of the veil and whether or not it should be removed to make it easier to find a job in Switzerland.

Another example of encountering gender is being confronted with new gender regimes, which are often contrasted with previous conceptions about being a man or a woman looking for a job. All refugees, both women and men, describe Switzerland as a society that is generally favourable to women’s careers. Sara, a single woman in her thirties, explains how she discovered the meaning of ‘being a woman’ once she moved to Switzerland. In Switzerland, Sara explains, she finally realized the various opportunities that a woman can have:

“In Switzerland, there is no gender difference [...] Here the woman is free and well protected, she can go home whenever she wants [...] Indeed, it is here in Switzerland that I understood that I am a woman with her own rights and identity [...] In Switzerland [...] I am a free woman, and I can do whatever I want; I do not depend on my family, my reputation, and my social status.”

While making sense of this change, Sara associates her previous experience of work with specific gender expectations. This difference in gender regimes between Syria and Switzerland is also pointed out by some men:

“I find that in Switzerland there is no difference between women and men. Sometimes there is some when she is pregnant. [...] As I see it now, women are superior to men! (Laughter) [...] We don’t care what our neighbours say about my wife in terms of clothes, if she works outside, at night.” (Alan, man, 32)

“There is more equality between men and women, there’s less judgement here.” (Pascal, man, 31)

The process of searching for a new job in Switzerland is often associated with a change in gender roles within the couple or in the family, a change that we explore in the next section.



Career in transition: changing gender roles

Most respondents were faced with new gendered roles either within a couple, in the family or as single people. Men, as in the case of Sam (below), reported the loss of their role as breadwinner, which is often associated with a sense of masculinity. From being employed full time and being in charge of the family in Syria, once in Switzerland some men lose their financial independence and social and professional status:

“In our society maybe, it was accepted for the traditional family that the man is the person who ‘generates the money’ [...] so the woman is dependent on the man, and that fact gives a lot of superiority in all [...] and then here it’s not the case, the change unbalances the family.” (Sam, man, 46)

For other women, in Syria the ‘female’ work in the household had been taken care of by domestic workers. Hence it was normal for them to focus on their career before arriving in Switzerland. Most women, however, were confronted with a positive change in their life due to the new gender regime in Switzerland that gives more power and freedom, as we have discussed in the previous section with the case of Sara.

The rupture in professional status often creates a new challenge for some couples but also for single men. Sam emphasizes the difficulty of finding a partner either in the Syrian community or in Swiss society in general. There are also rules about the timing and practices of marriage. After a certain age, it becomes difficult to find a partner, and the change in professional status can only represent a further complication: the break in career trajectory can be more difficult to close due to perceived advanced age, with a sense of ‘being out of time’. Sam continues:

“There is another barrier [...] about single people [...] starting a new life and finding a partner here in Switzerland is very difficult because there are a lot of prejudices. [...] There is normally a certain age to get married, for example at 28, 29. I’m 46! [...] I arrive here, and I see that my diplomas are not recognized [...] The system in Switzerland is different from the one back home. At home [in Syria], the family is the guarantee, in Switzerland, we have maybe the health insurance, the social insurance etc. In our society, all this can be replaced by the family, by the companion or even by the big family.”

For some refugees, migration brings a new temporality (Cwerner, 2001) vis-à-vis one’s own gender identity. Whereas in Syria reaching a certain age can jeopardize the opportunity to construct a life and get married, once in Switzerland refugees discover that at their age they might be considered to ‘be still in time’:

“One of the best things about Switzerland is that I am no longer afraid to reveal my age [...] people tell me that I am still young and that [...] it’s not a problem in Switzerland if the woman is 42 or 45 and not yet married. It’s really nice to hear that.” (Yasmine, woman, 35)

Some appreciate the new opportunities offered by a new socio-cultural environment. Omar, a man in his thirties, for example, tells how before migrating he used to be responsible for his family, mother and siblings. Once in Switzerland, he says, he experiences a new ‘freedom’ in being a single man without responsibilities for his family:

“I’m alone here and I don’t have a family. In Syria [...] I was somewhat responsible for my family [...] Now, I have more freedom to change my job, whereas in Syria [...] I had to go to university, otherwise I wouldn’t be well regarded by society, and then I had to work in certain domains [...] You must be either a lawyer, or a banker, or an economist, or a doctor. I chose economics because it was a bit more sociable than other things.”

Career intertwines with, and is defined by, family responsibilities through the image of the ‘breadwinner’. In Omar’s experience, this link also becomes a constraint when it comes to choosing one’s professional path. In this sense, Omar experiences the move to Switzerland as a rupture differently from other men like Sam or those who renegotiate their professional life with their partner. Another exception is represented by Jad, a man in his fifties. Jad perceives the change in his breadwinner role positively rather than as a loss of his masculinity. Whereas in Syria, according to Jad, the fact that women want to work is only due to privilege and not to necessity, in Switzerland women are ‘obliged’ to look for a job. Jad appreciates how in ‘Western couples’ both partners contribute financially to the household. During the interview, on several occasions he pointed out the traditional role of women in Syria:

“It’s cultural that the woman must be taken care of by her husband. So [women in Syria] do not have the moral obligation to work [...] I admire the efficiency of couples here, both [partners] feel completely committed.”

The change in the gender expectations due to migration, in the case of Omar and Jad, represents a chance to look for a job in new and more ‘favourable’ conditions (with fewer or simply other responsibilities towards the family, or with the freedom to change job). In this sense, the rupturing new gender situation shows the potential for a positive transformation towards new possibilities (“Now, I have more freedom to change my job,” says Omar).

How do these refugees respond to these multiple and complex transformations that touch their professional lives to the core?

(Re)negotiating or (re)doing gender?

Refugees often put in place strategies to respond to this change in the context of gender, to avoid separation in the couple, to renegotiate gender roles and to re-make sense of the transition to the new context. First, refugees make sense of gender conceptions vis-à-vis other members of the Syrian community in Switzerland and back in Syria, as well as vis-à-vis the Swiss society, a complex, incessant and idiosyncratic process (Butler, 2004). On the one hand, gender norms are often made sense of through a plurality of references relating to religious, geographical and cultural backgrounds:

“The woman in our country always stays at home and does not work. [...] We Kurds are not like the Arabs, we are more open than the Arabs. [...] Our culture is a little different from Damascus or Aleppo. However, the person in charge is always the man! He is the one who works and he is the one who decides.” (Alan, man, 32)

“In my family, I can say it’s more or less equality [...] but then in the country in general, there are places where it’s not really equality and it’s always the man who has more power [...] It’s the religion of course and social class too [...] if you’re more or less upper class you have more access to the ideas and thoughts of anything from the



West for example. So you know that they normally have equality [...] whereas if you come from a village where you don't have internet, how can you know that?" (Pascal, man, 31)

"The Arab women are a little bit different than the Swiss women. That's difficult for us, just getting to know someone. For Arabs, I am a very open girl who goes out at night with friends. For the Swiss and Europeans in general, I am a conservative Arab girl who puts limits in her relationships. I feel that I am not well understood in both societies." (Gaya, woman, 29)

The different gender regimes to which refugees refer are not completely homogeneous (e.g., Syrian or Swiss, 'traditional' or 'modern') but shape the signification of gender in complex ways, also along multiple lines of belonging (e.g., ethnicity, religion, community). According to respondents, Swiss people often draw upon stereotyping representations of male and female gender roles associated with 'Middle East or Arab culture', as illustrated by Gaya. Refugees particularly stress the divergence between these representations and their own everyday experience of gender.

On the other hand, this sense-making process around gender is ambivalent: refugees can simply mirror general conceptions of gender, can put these into questions, or can even reiterate them as the only way to adapt to life in Switzerland. When entering the new work situation in Switzerland, respondents may be confronted with the need to renegotiate roles within a couple, and work priorities, family responsibilities and childcare, for example with the man contributing to the household chores to allow his partner to continue her professional life. Like for other dual career migrant couples in Switzerland (Mancini-Vonlanthen, 2021; Ravasi et al., 2013), the negotiation of gender roles in the couple is not fixed, but transforms over time, depending on available opportunities and the priority given to the career of each partner (Shinozaki, 2014):

"My husband helped me a lot with the organization and childcare during my studies. Before, I used to cook every day [...] but when I was busy with work and studies, he started to bring ready-made meals and he tried to make things easier for me. He was very supportive and always motivated me during that time, he would even help me clean the house!" (Rim, woman, 39)

"At the beginning, we did the language courses alternately [...] When I went to the class in the morning, he stayed home with the child and in the evening, I looked after the children and he went to the language class [...] but when he started his internship, the situation became difficult and problematic for both of us." (Zeina, woman, 32)

We also observed, especially among women, strategies of time investment and engagement in professional women's associations, associations supporting other women, or in parents' and school clubs:

"I became a member of an association committee to help women in difficulty. I wanted to contribute to the development of the organization. In this committee there are Swiss women and migrant women." (Hiba, woman, 47)

"The parents of my children's friends at school have also played a big role in our integration, because we speak French with them, and we visit each other. Also, they

explain to us a lot of small details of daily life and thus bring us closer to the country.”
(Rim, woman, 39)

A rupturing event does not always turn into a reconfiguration of gender. At times, in the face of uncertainty and obstacles and discrimination encountered when accessing the newness of the local labour market, migrants can try to uphold hegemonic models of gender rather than subverting them. Alexandra Urdea, for example, recently showed how the experience of migration for Romanian men working in London’s construction industry entails a reinforcement of ‘traditional’ gender values of ‘hypermasculinity’, necessary to navigate a perceived competitive and risky environment (Urdea, 2020). Similarly, for Sam, it is important to reconstitute the very role of breadwinner in order to deal with the new rupturing event of being a single man in Switzerland:

“I think the first pillar is to find a job [...] If you are financially independent and you meet a Swiss woman, the first thing she would ask is if you are a person who produces or just a refugee who waits, this is super important.”

Shaza, a woman in her forties, still considers it important to maintain her husband’s role as the breadwinner:

“It was a priority that it was my husband who worked first before it was me who found work. For us, it wouldn’t have been optimal for me to find a job and not him.”
(Shaza, woman, 45)

Yasmine, when asked if it might have been easier to find a job if she were a man, replies:

“Yes, easier. Men can do whatever they want, they do are not judged like women. For example, when I meet European men, I think a lot before saying yes when they ask me out for a coffee. So, it’s easier for Arab men. They can do what they want. They can also work in gardens or shops, that’s acceptable. But we women, everybody looks at us and judges us.”

Sam, Shaza and Yasmine illustrate that at times the rupturing event of being confronted with new gender regimes and a new gender situation does not lead to a complete transformation of gender meanings or an ‘undoing’ of gender (Butler, 2004; Risman, 2009). Some refugees, while perceiving the newness of their circumstances in Switzerland (e.g., more freedom, fewer responsibilities), still reiterate, rediscover or reassert certain meanings and representations that mark a line between women and men. They might refer to different gender regimes depending on the circumstances. A job search represents a situation where different gender regimes play a contrasting and ambivalent role. In this sense, the new gender situation, while creating “continuity between lives before and after migration” (Bygnes, 2021: 37) – the same gender relations as before migration – does not provide a resourceful grounding for finding a job or succeeding in a career.

Conclusion

This article explored how migration shapes the experience of gender for highly skilled Syrian refugees in Switzerland. Forced migration becomes an occasion where refugees see their professional lives disrupted, they confront a change in their status, and they come to be aware of new opportunities or constraints that are often related to gender differences. Our study



showed how migration affects gender as a process, rather than merely as a differentiation category (e.g., by influencing the career and life paths of women and men differently) (Elliot, 2016). It is through movement, at times, that refugees with high qualifications and a well-established professional life before migration encounter the issue of gender in new ways or even for the first time. Others stress the different gender regimes that have had different implications for their everyday life in Syria and now in Switzerland.

Our contribution is threefold and tackles three major aspects of migration: gender as a process; career and migrants' categories; and life-course and career trajectories. First, our study responded to the need to avoid considering migration as necessarily liberating for people (Gaibazzi, 2015), but rather as a challenging force for some when it comes to gender relations and when they are disrupted following displacement. The encounter with a new gender regime and meanings becomes the expression of other inequalities, not only between genders but also between national, ethnic or class-based identities. These categorical and structural barriers are not only defined by the destination of migration, but also by previous and shifting positions, roles and meanings mobilized or transformed through the displacement (Seminario & Le Feuvre, 2019). We particularly contributed to this aim by considering the career trajectories of refugees, an aspect that in the context of migration studies has long been explored with a limited focus on gender differentiation between women and men in their integration into the new labour market. By tracing how migration defines specific kinds of gendered people (e.g., the image of the "Oriental woman" or the male or female refugee being associated with respective low-skilled jobs, even when they are highly skilled), we can start redefining what gender means rather than treating it as a fixed category (Elliot, 2016). Gender regimes for these refugees are not homogeneous but shape the negotiation of gender roles in complex and at times ambivalent ways, also along multiple lines of belonging. Further research should address the specific experiences of gender among LGBTQ+ communities in the context of forced migration.

Second, our study aimed to address the problematization of the category of the 'highly skilled migrant', a category that is usually defined by the level of qualification and/or degree of skilled labour (Hercog & Sandoz, 2018). This is often associated with the transnational movement of an elite population in a specific range of work sectors (e.g., diplomacy, business, academia, humanitarian work, military work, sport). We contribute through a specific focus on Syrian refugees with high-level qualifications. We propose that focusing on the experiences of highly skilled refugees challenges monolithic and stereotyping representations about the refugee with no career aspirations (Tuzi, 2019). Refugees can indeed have career aspirations and expectations that dissonate from the surrounding society's perception about refugees' trajectories (Cangià et al., 2021).

Our final contribution is to offer a life-course perspective to the study of gender in migration. Such a perspective explores individuals' experiences of rupture and transition, as well as their strategies to make sense of change and create continuity despite the disruption and transitoriness of migration (Bygnes, 2021; Levitan, 2019). Understanding migration as an experience of rupture and transition when it comes to gender allows us to look at change as also occurring at the level of the individual, at the level of the couple, and not only in the surrounding environment (Zittoun, 2006). The way people go through the experience of change at the subjective level can be highly ambivalent (Cangià, 2021): on the one hand, one can 'undo' gender as previous images of being a woman or a man or one's role in the family

do not fit personal aspirations any more; on the other, the same person, depending on the circumstances, can continue to experience gender in the same way as before, just trying to adapt their conceptions to the new environment and the new context's expectations. Migration therefore becomes an experience in which gender can be redefined and remade altogether, or maybe not, depending on the personal experience of the rupture and the way an individual deals with the transition itself.

Acknowledgments

This publication benefited from the support of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research LIVES – Overcoming vulnerability: Life course perspectives (NCCR LIVES), which is financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation (grant number: 51NF40-185901). The authors are grateful to the Swiss National Science Foundation for its financial assistance. We would also like to thank particularly Nicky Le Feuvre for her constructive comments on previous versions of this article.

References

- Beiser, M., & Hou, F. (2000). Gender Differences in Language Acquisition and Employment Consequences among Southeast Asian Refugees in Canada. *Canadian Public Policy / Analyse de Politiques*, 26(3), 311–330. JSTOR. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3552403>
- Bermudez, A. (2013). A Gendered Perspective on the Arrival and Settlement of Colombian Refugees in the United Kingdom. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 39(7), 1159–1175. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2013.778139>
- Boni-Le Goff, I., & Le Feuvre, N. (2017). Professions from a Gendered Perspective. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia, Business and Management*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190224851.013.89>
- Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing Gender* (1^o edizione). Routledge.
- Bygnes, S. (2021). Not All Syrian Doctors Become Taxi Drivers: Stagnation and Continuity Among Highly Educated Syrians in Norway. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 22(1), 33–46. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-019-00717-5>
- Cangià, F. (2021). *Liminal Moves. Travelling Along Places, Meanings and Times* (Berghahn Books).
- Cangià, F., Davoine, E., & Tashtish, S. (2021). (Im)mobilities, waiting and professional aspirations: The career lives of highly skilled Syrian refugees in Switzerland. *Geoforum*, 125, 57–65. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2021.06.015>
- Cangià, F., Zittoun, T., & Levitan, D. (2019). Work and Geographical Mobility: The Case of the Male Accompanying Spouses. In P. Bendassoli (Ed.), *Culture, work and psychology: Invitations to dialogue* (Information Age Publishing, Vol. 3, pp. 159–182).
- Cwerner, S. B. (2001). The Times of Migration. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 27(1), 7–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830125283>
- Donato, K. M., Gabaccia, D., Holdaway, J., Manalansan, M., & Pessar, P. R. (2006). A Glass Half Full? Gender in Migration Studies 1. *International Migration Review*, 40(1), 3–26. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2006.00001.x>
- Eggenhofer-Rehart, P. M., Latzke, M., Pernkopf, K., Zellhofer, D., Mayrhofer, W., & Steyrer, J. (2018). Refugees' career capital welcome? Afghan and Syrian refugee job seekers in Austria. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 105, 31–45. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2018.01.004>
- Elliot, A. (2016). Gender. In N. Salazar & K. Jayaram (Eds.), *Keywords of Mobility: Critical Engagements* (1 edition, pp. 73–92). Berghahn Books.
- Flick, U. (2009). *An Introduction to Qualitative Research* (Fourth edition). SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Franz, B. (2003). Transplanted or Uprooted?: Integration Efforts of Bosnian Refugees Based Upon Gender, Class and Ethnic Differences in New York City and Vienna. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 10(2), 135–157. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506803010002002>



- Franz, B. (2019). Bosnian Refugee Women in (Re)settlement: Gender Relations and Social Mobility: *Feminist Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400077>
- Gaibazzi, P. (2015). *Bush Bound: Young Men and Rural Permanence in Migrant West Africa: Young Men and Rural Permanence in Migrant West Africa*. Berghahn Books.
- Hercog, M., & Sandoz, L. (2018). Highly Skilled or Highly Wanted Migrants? Conceptualizations, Policy Designs and Implementations of High-skilled Migration Policies. *Migration Letters*, 15(4), 453–460. <https://doi.org/10.33182/ml.v15i4.534>
- Hondagneu-Sotelo, P. (1994). *Gendered Transitions: Mexican Experiences of Immigration*. University of California Press; JSTOR. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1ppnvq>
- Jansen, S. (2008). Misplaced masculinities: Status loss and the location of gendered subjectivities amongst 'non-transnational' Bosnian refugees. *Anthropological Theory*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499608090790>
- Kirk, J. (2010). Gender, forced migration and education: Identities and experiences of refugee women teachers. *Gender and Education*, 22(2), 161–176. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540251003606925>
- Kleist, N. (2010). Negotiating Respectable Masculinity: Gender and Recognition in the Somali Diaspora. *African Diaspora*, 3(2), 185–206. <https://doi.org/10.1163/187254610X526913>
- Kofman, E. (2019). Gendered mobilities and vulnerabilities: Refugee journeys to and in Europe. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45(12), 2185–2199. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1468330>
- Le Feuvre, N., Cangià, F., & Davoine, E. (2022). When mobility meets gender in the multidimensional transnational life course. In D. Spini & E. Widmer (Eds.), *Withstanding Vulnerability throughout Adult Life. Dynamics of Stressors, Resources, and Reserves*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Le Feuvre, N., Kuehni, M., Rosende, M., & Schoeni, C. (2015). Gendered variations in the experience of ageing at work in Switzerland. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, 34(2), 168–181. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-03-2014-0017>
- Levitán, D. (2019). The Art of Living in Transitoriness: Strategies of Families in Repeated Geographical Mobility. *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science*, 53(2), 258–282. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12124-018-9448-4>
- Levy, R., Ghisletta, P., Le Goff, J.-M., Spini, D., & Widmer, E. (2005). *Incitations for interdisciplinarity in the life course research*. 361–391.
- Mahler, S. J., & Pessar, P. R. (2001). Gendered Geographies of Power: Analyzing Gender Across Transnational Spaces. *Identities*, 7(4), 441–459. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2001.9962675>
- Mancini-Vonlanthen, N. (2021). Career difficulties and strategies of female self-initiated expatriates and self-initiated expatriate couples in Switzerland (Doctoral dissertation, Université de Fribourg). <https://doc.rero.ch/record/330530/files/ManciniVolanthenN.pdf>
- McSpadden, L. A., & Moussa, H. (1993). I Have a Name: The Gender Dynamics in Asylum and in Resettlement of Ethiopian and Eritrean Refugees in North America. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 6(3), 203–225. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/6.3.203>
- Miletic, B. (2014). *Psycho-Social, Work, and Marital Adjustment of Older Middle Aged Refugees from the Former Yugoslavia* [Thesis, Université d'Ottawa / University of Ottawa]. <https://doi.org/10.20381/ruor-3584>
- Mozetič, K. (2018). Being Highly Skilled and a Refugee: Self-Perceptions of Non-European Physicians in Sweden. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 37(2), 231–251. <https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdy001>
- Mzayek, M. (2019). Understanding waiting and wellbeing through liminal experiences of Syrian refugees. *Migration Letters*, 16(3), 369–377. <https://doi.org/10.33182/ml.v16i3.640>
- OECD. (2015). Is this humanitarian migration crisis different? *Migration Policy Debates*, 7.
- Pessar, P. R. (2005). *Women, gender, and international migration across and beyond the Americas: Inequalities and limited empowerment*. Expert Group Meeting on International Migration and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean, New York: United Nations.
- Ravasi, C., Salamin, X., & Davoine, E. (2013). *The challenge of dual career expatriate management in a specific host national environment: An exploratory study of expatriate and spouse adjustment in Switzerland based MNCs*. Université de Fribourg. <http://doc.rero.ch/record/208749>
- Ravasi, C., Salamin, X., & Davoine, E. (2015). Cross-cultural adjustment of skilled migrants in a multicultural and multilingual environment: an explorative study of foreign employees and their spouses in the Swiss context. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 26(10), 1335–1359. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2014.985328>

- Risman, B. (2009). From Doing to Undoing: Gender as we Know it. *Gender and Society*, 23(1), 81–84. JSTOR.
- Romina Seminario. (2018). A life-course perspective of South American women's experiences as care workers in Switzerland. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 71, 68–75. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2018.08.009>
- Roulston, K., & Choi, M. (2018). Qualitative interviews. In U. Flick, *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Collection* (pp. 233–249). SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Sandoz, L. (2018). Understanding access to the labour market through migration channels. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 0(0), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1502657>
- Schaer, M., Dahinden, J., & Toader, A. (2017). Transnational mobility among early-career academics: Gendered aspects of negotiations and arrangements within heterosexual couples. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 43(8), 1292–1307. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1300254>
- Seminario, R., & Le Feuvre, N. (2019). The Combined Effect of Qualifications and Marriage on the Employment Trajectories of Peruvian Graduates in Switzerland. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-019-00730-8>
- Senthanar, S., MacEachen, E., Premji, S., & Bigelow, P. (2020). Employment integration experiences of Syrian refugee women arriving through Canada's varied refugee protection programmes. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 0(0), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1733945>
- Shinozaki, K. (2014.) Career Strategies and Spatial Mobility among Skilled Migrants in Germany: The Role of Gender in the Work-Family Interaction. *Tijdschrift Voor Economische En Sociale Geografie* 105 (5), 526–41. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tesg.12111>.
- Sontag, K. (2018). Highly skilled asylum seekers: Case studies of refugee students at a Swiss university. *Migration Letters*, 15(4), 533–544. <https://doi.org/10.33182/ml.v15i4.5>
- Spini, D., Bernardi, L., & Oris, M. (2017). Vulnerability Across the Life Course. *Research in Human Development*, 14(1), 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15427609.2016.1268891>
- Steiner, I., & Wanner, P. (Eds.). (2019). *Migrants and Expats: The Swiss Migration and Mobility Nexus*. Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-05671-1>
- Thomson, R., Bell, R., Holland, J., Henderson, S., McGrellis, S., & Sharpe, S. (2002). Critical Moments: Choice, Chance and Opportunity in Young People's Narratives of Transition. *Sociology*, 36(2), 335–354. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038502036002006>
- Tomlinson, F. (2010). Marking Difference and Negotiating Belonging: Refugee Women, Volunteering and Employment. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 17(3), 278–296. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0432.2008.00399.x>
- Tuzi, I. (2019). From Insecurity to Secondary Migration: “Bounded Mobilities” of Syrian and Eritrean Refugees in Europe. *Migration Letters*, 16(4), 551–561. <https://doi.org/10.33182/ml.v16i4.560>
- Urdea, A. (2020). Fashioning Masculinities through Migration: Narratives of Romanian Construction Workers in London. *Migration and Society*, 3(1), 272–286. <https://doi.org/10.3167/arms.2020.030126>
- Young, M. Y., & Chan, K. J. (2015). The Psychological Experience of Refugees: A Gender and Cultural Analysis. In S. Safdar & N. Kosakowska-Berezecka (Eds.), *Psychology of Gender Through the Lens of Culture: Theories and Applications* (pp. 17–36). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-14005-6_2
- Zittoun, T. (2006). *Transitions: Development Through Symbolic Resources*. InfoAge.
- Zittoun, T. (2016). A sociocultural psychology of the life-course. *Social Psychological Review*, 6–17.

