# Syrian Refugee Women’s Negotiation of Higher Education Opportunities

Introduction

Considered one of the worst humanitarian crises of modern times, the Syrian civil war has resulted in the displacement of more than 5,500,000 refugees into neighbouring countries. Most of these refugees are above the age of secondary education (UNHCR 2020). Returning to education is one of the key ways in which young refugees attempt to rebuild their lives in exile. However, there are still relatively few studies which focus on refugees in relation to higher education. Studies that exist primarily focus on issues of access, and where gender is considered, discussions are usually limited to questions of parity (e.g. Cin and Dogan 2020, Mangan and Winter 2017, Dahya and Dryden-Peterson 2017). On the other hand, there has been a dearth of research which has specifically explored the challenges young refugees face as they negotiate gender norms in relation to higher education within displacement settings.

Using empirical qualitative research, and building on previous scholarship related to gender and education in postcolonial and refugee contexts, this paper explores how young Syrians negotiate gender norms as they engage with higher education opportunities made available for refugees within the context of exile in Jordan and Lebanon.

Background

Two of the countries hosting the largest number of Syrian refugees are Jordan and Lebanon. Jordan is currently hosting more than 665,000 Syrian refugees (approximately 9% of the country’s population) and nearly 10,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria. This makes Jordan the country hosting the world’s sixth largest refugee population (UNHCR 2021, Human Rights Watch 2014, UNRWA 2020). Approximately 80% of Syrian refugees in Jordan live in urban and peri-urban areas in the northwest of the country, with the other 20% of refugees living in camps run by UNHCR (UNHCR 2016, Watenpaugh, Fricke and Seigel 2013). Located in the north of Jordan close to the Syrian border, Za’atari is one of the world’s largest refugee camps and is de facto the country’s fourth largest city (Watenpaugh, Fricke and Seigel 2013). Most Syrian refugees in Jordan share a common ethnicity (Arab), language (Arabic) and religion (Sunni Islam) with the local population (Mansour-Ille, Haysom and Hagen-Zanker 2018). While cultural similarity with Jordanians can facilitate refugees’ integration into the host society, it can also complicate their construction of a uniquely ‘Syrian’ identity within the context of exile.

Lebanon is currently hosting more than 855,000 registered Syrian refugees and nearly 29,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria (as well as over 475,000 Palestinian refugees) (UNHCR 2021, Government of Lebanon 2017, UNRWA 2020). Lebanon has the highest per capita concentration of refugees in the world, and one-fifth of the current population of Lebanon are Syrian refugees.  Due to historical factors and the particularities of Lebanon-Syria relations, Syrian refugees in Lebanon face unique challenges. Lebanon was once considered to be part of Greater Syria until the state of Greater Lebanon (predecessor of the modern state of Lebanon) was declared on 1 September 1920. Then from 1976, Syria became embroiled in Lebanon’s devastating civil war and went on to dominate Lebanon’s political and economic life for the next 29 years, eventually becoming an occupying force in the country. Syria only withdrew from Lebanon in 2005 under international pressure. This history impacts how Syrians are perceived by the local Lebanese population (Watenpaugh, Fricke and King 2014).

Historical factors also influence how Syrian refugees have been received in Lebanon. The presence of large numbers of Palestinians in the country, and their perceived role in national and regional instability, has contributed to increased concern amongst Lebanese about the prospect of hosting more refugees (Watenpaugh, Fricke and King 2014).  This concern has resulted in the Lebanese government refusing UNHCR permission to establish official refugee camps in the country (UNRWA 2020, Jazar 2015, Watenpaugh, Fricke and King 2014).  Consequently, Syrian refugees are scattered across Lebanon, many living in informal settlements without adequate access to essential services (EU 2016).

Syrian refugees share a common ethnicity (Arab) and language (Arabic) with the majority of Lebanese. However, the vast majority of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are Sunni Muslim, whereas a large number (perhaps the majority) of Lebanese (30-40%) are Shi’a Muslim. There is also a significant Christian minority in the country (CIA 2020). This is significant, as the civil war in Syria has taken on a sectarian dimension, often pitting Sunni-dominated rebel forces against the Alawi (Shi’a)-dominated Syrian government. Moreover, Lebanese Shi’a Hezbollah fighters have actively backed the government of (Alawi) Syrian president Bashar Al Asaad. This complex context has important implications for the discursive spaces which are available for Syrian refugees in Lebanon to negotiate their identities.

Although the majority of Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon are above the age of secondary education, only a small fraction of refugees are currently enrolled in higher education (Jordan - 8%, Lebanon - 6%) (EU 2016). This is due to a complex range of factors, including financial hardship and depletion of family resources, refugees’ lack of identity documentation and proof of former study, lack of residence permits (Lebanon), institutional rigidity and the incapacity of local higher education institutions to absorb such large numbers of refugees. To address this need, the Jordanian and Lebanese governments have been partnering with Western donors, bilateral and multilateral agencies and INGOs to provide enough higher education opportunities to meet demand from refugees.  These opportunities have included scholarships for refugees to attend local universities (both public and private), Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), and nonformal education, online learning opportunities and international scholarships specifically set up for refugees.

Gender and Higher Education

Within the Syrian context, the relationship between gender and higher education has been complex. Before the war, women made up slightly more than half of all university enrolments and graduated from higher education at higher rates than men (Buckner and Saba 2010). However, despite the fact that Syria had exceeded gender parity in higher education in favour of women, this did not result in a corresponding increase in female participation in the labour market (El Araby 2011, ILO 2015, IMF 2012, Kabbani and Salloum 2011). In fact, Syria had one of the world’s lowest rates of female labour force participation with only 15.1% of the entire labour force being female (IMF 2012, Kabbani and Kamel 2009). This can be explained through the socially and culturally constructed gender roles and obligations in Syrian society. As Syrian women are not considered to be primary ‘breadwinners’ for their families, cultural norms (e.g. female seclusion, notions of ‘honour and shame’) discourage all but professional employment for women.  This has meant that Syrian females have not entered the labour market unless they could obtain a professional job. In this way, higher education has been a much more powerful mechanism for female entry into the labour market than for men, who are able to accept any job (Kabbani 2009). Moreover, since Syrian females are not culturally responsible for providing for their families financially, they are often free to participate in higher education for reasons other than economic advancement (e.g. intrinsic and social reasons) (Collier, Gilchrist and Phillips 2003, Pasternak 2005, Antonio 2004, Mullen 2009). However, as the war has dragged on and family resources have become depleted, the perceived link between higher education and employment has been strengthened within the Syrian community. For many Syrian families, this has resulted in a reprioritization of investment in men’s education.

It is against the complex backdrop described above that young Syrians negotiate gender norms as they engage with higher education opportunities provided for refugees in Jordan and Lebanon.

Theoretical framing

This paper builds on previous scholarly work on themes related to gender and education within postcolonial and refugee contexts, as discussed below.

All individuals construct their identities (including gender) with reference to their particular temporal and spatial localities and through the particular discourses which are available to them (Butler 1990, Mouffe 1992, Hall and du Gay 1996). For most Syrian youth living in exile in Jordan and Lebanon, the dominant discourses which are available for them to negotiate their gender identities are traditional Arabic culture (as it is locally performed in Syria) and adherence to (Sunni) Islam[[1]](#footnote-1). Within traditional Arabic culture, dominant ‘femininities’ are constructed in relation to ‘masculinities’, and tremendous emphasis is placed on preserving ‘difference’ between women and men (Peteet 2006).  Within this cultural construct, men dominate the ‘public sphere’, where they are charged with protecting and providing for the family, and women dominate the ‘private sphere’, where they are responsible for maintaining the household, bearing and raising the (nation’s) children and protecting the family’s ‘honour’.

Within the context of the Middle East, gender identities are often regulated through religious scripts which shape notions of appropriate behaviour in relation to particular interpretations of Islamic doctrine (Butler 1990, Conway-Long 2004). Within postcolonial settings, such as Syria, adherence to Islam can be a particularly important means of resisting Western hegemony and constructing national distinctiveness. Moreover, within contexts of fragility, uncertainty and displacement, devotion to Islam can offer individuals a sense of ontological security, a guiding purpose, clear rules for living, a framework for understanding the world and communion with a global community of believers (Richter Devroe 2005). It is within this broader socio-political context that attraction to and participation in Islam has become salient for many Muslim youth across the Middle East and for Syrian youth in particular.

To some extent, the identity constructions discussed above are common within the wider region. However, the historical role of Damascus as the seat of the (Sunni) Umayyad Caliphate and Syria’s historical role as leader of the Arab nationalist movement against colonialism and Western imperialism have helped to construct it as the proud custodian of traditional Arabic and Sunni Muslim culture throughout the region[[2]](#footnote-2) (Al Jazeera 2008, Jouejati 2009). By contrast, neighbouring Lebanon has aimed for national distinctiveness by constructing itself as a multifaith, cosmopolitan crossroads between East and West (Dunne et al 2017).

As Syrian youth attempt to rebuild their lives in exile, they engage with higher education opportunities provided for refugees in Jordan and Lebanon. Far from being neutral, education is a key influence and disciplinary technology on discourses of identity, as it privileges certain perspectives and values (Foucault 1977). Within the context of global hegemonic power relations and the internationalisation of higher education through Western providers and partnerships, the values which are privileged and promoted through education in refugee contexts are largely Western, including those of ‘modernity’ and secularism, individualism (the presumption of self-interest and rational optimisation over wider family and tribal affiliations) and global capitalism (competitiveness, efficiency and effectiveness) (Dale 2000, Rizvi and Lindgard 2000). As Syrian youth engage with higher education opportunities provided for refugees in exile, they are directly impacted by these values. In this way, refugees are called upon to negotiate their identities with reference to both the local and the global.

Although individuals may be constituted through discourse, they are still able to exercise agency and form temporary attachments to specific subject positions based on positions of strategic advantage (Bhaba 1994). It is within this context that Syrian women may, at times, appear to sanction dominant gender norms privileging men. However, gender equality and gender empowerment often mean different things to different groups of people within different contexts (DeJaeghere and Wiger 2013). For example, Syrian female refugees may choose to perform traditional scripts of marriage and motherhood to prioritise national values and to obtain enhanced social status (Dunne et al 2017). In this way, Syrian women’s voluntary adherence to traditional cultural and/or religious codes may be a means of exercising agency in ways which are more nuanced (Mahmood 2012, Dunne et al 2020).

It is within the complex context described above that young Syrian refugees negotiate gender norms through higher education within the context of exile in Jordan and Lebanon.

The research

This paper was inspired by an empirical qualitative research study (September 2016 – March 2017) conducted with Syrian refugee youth in and out of higher education in Jordan and Lebanon as part of a wider research project investigating Syrian youths’ perspectives and experiences of higher education opportunities for refugees in the MENA region. The larger study was commissioned and funded by a large INGO and multilateral organisation. All standard ethical procedures were followed, including the process of informed consent from all participants.

As the objective of the research was to privilege young Syrians’ perceptions about their experiences with higher education opportunities provided for refugees, an interpretivist theoretical perspective was adopted for the study.  Data was collected through non-participant observation and semi-structured focus group interviews using prepared interview schedules.  Qualitative methods were chosen to enable local, individual and marginalized viewpoints to emerge, as well as to recognize the existence of multiple perspectives within the Syrian refugee youth populations in the two country contexts. Focus groups were selected as the primary research method in order to collect the largest amount of data within the time available (approximately two weeks were spent in each country context).

Fieldwork for the study was conducted with support from the INGO and multilateral organisation and their local partners, who provided access to the refugees.  For the wider project, a total of 153 Syrian youth (97 in Jordan and 57 in Lebanon) were interviewed, including youth from rural, semi-urban and urban areas in Syria and an equal number of male (77) and female refugees (78) (although this paper specifically focuses on the experiences of female refugees). Participants were chosen to reflect the broad range of educational experiences amongst young Syrian refugees, including youth in urban (138), and camp (15) settings, youth in public (36) and private universities (46), technical and vocational education and training (TVET) (11), non-formal education (19), online education (5) and youth out of higher education (38).  Participants in the Jordan sample primarily came from the Syrian city of Dera’a and surrounding areas, while a few hailed from Damascus. In the Lebanon sample, participants came from Homs, Aleppo, Damascus and surrounding areas. Participants were also selected based on their interest and availability to participate in the study.  All of the participants in the study were Sunni Muslim, reflecting the religious affiliation of the vast majority of Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon. Moreover, all of the participants in the study were between 18-30 years old, reflecting the age range most likely to be enrolled in higher education. The vast majority of refugees interviewed for the study were non-elites hailing from the working classes back in Syria.

The lead researcher for the study was a Western, female academic based at a UK university with family ties and extensive experience living and working in the region. Focus group interviews were conducted in Amman, Zarqa, Mafraq (Jordan) and Beirut, Taanayel, Saida and Balamand (Lebanon). In each research context, the lead researcher was accompanied by a local and native Arabic-speaking research assistant. In order to be respectful of local cultural norms, single-sex focus groups were conducted with Syrian youth lasting approximately 2 hours each. In order to give participants ample opportunity to speak, focus groups were limited to approximately five youth each (although one focus group in Jordan was considerably larger). Focus group interviews were conducted using a mixture of Arabic and English (the lead researcher having some knowledge of Arabic and some participants being eager to practice their English). Where possible and when acceptable to participants, interviews were recorded.  All focus group data was transcribed and, if needed, translated into English. The data was analyzed through thematic coding using a feminist theoretical lens aligned with the framework discussed earlier.

The next section discusses the key themes through which Syrian gender norms are framed, the ways in which these norms have shifted within the context of exile in Jordan and Lebanon and how these norms have impacted refugees’ engagement with the higher education opportunities made available to them within displacement settings.

### Discussion

#### Traditional Syrian gender norms

As discussed above, gender identities are constructed and negotiated through available cultural discourses. In the Syrian context, dominant discourses include traditional Arabic culture and Sunni Islam[[3]](#footnote-3). Within these cultural constructs, female identities are negotiated with reference to narratives positioning women as biological reproducers, cultural transmitters, metaphors and gatekeepers of the nation (Yuval-Davis 1997, Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989). In contrast, Syrian male identities are negotiated with reference to narratives of men as protectors of and providers for the family and wider national collectivity (Yuval-Davis 1997, Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989). These discourses have important implications for how young Syrian refugees see themselves, how they are seen by others and the parameters around which they may exercise their choices and freedoms, including access to and participation in the higher education opportunities that are provided for refugees in Jordan and Lebanon (Dunne et al 2017).

Gender identities are relational. Within the Middle East, tribal affiliation and the family form ‘the bedrock of an individual’s identity’ (El Guindi 1999: 164). The power of the family means that Syrian women (and to a lesser extent men) cannot be seen as autonomous actors (Joseph 1999, Hopkins 2003, Dahlgren 2008, Hudson 2008, Rabo 2008). Rather, within Syrian culture, decisions are taken communally with reference to both patriarchal and age relations (i.e. males and elders having more authority within the family). It is within this context that the family exerts tremendous influence over young women’s behaviours and movements, including their access to and participation in higher education (Lokot 2018).

For Syrian females, marriage and motherhood are powerful narratives through which gender identities are framed. They are also social positions from which Syrian women derive a great deal of respect (Yuval-Davis 1997, Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989, Removed for peer review 2013). Within the context of traditional Syrian culture, (heterosexual) marriage is considered a compulsory right of passage through which women’s sexual activity and sexual reproduction are regulated (Lokot 2018). On the other hand, spinsterhood often invites social ostracism. As one young Syrian female in higher education in Jordan stated,

We need to marry by our 30s.  People will insult a woman if she is not married, and she will be thought of as a prostitute. If she is not married by that time, she should marry whoever comes along (‘Salma’, Irbid, Jordan 03/06/2017)

An important way in which Syrian women remain ‘marriage marketable’ and negotiate a favourable marital arrangement is through performing their symbolic roles as metaphors and gatekeepers for the wider collectivity (Yuval-Davis 1997, Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989). As signifiers of national difference, women are called upon to bear the burden of representation for the collective identity (Nagel 1998, Mahmood 2012). Within this narrative, Syrian female honour is aligned with that of the family as well as the nation, and women become the embodiment of ideals such as tradition, culture and honour (Yuval-Davis 1997, Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989). In this way, women’s bodies become an important boundary marker for the collectivity, identifying individuals as members or non-members of a community through styles of dress and comportment (Mayer 2000). In the Syrian context, this includes compliance with the ‘honour and shame’ paradigm and regulation of female movements and behaviours through disciplinary regimes of surveillance. For women, non-capitulation with such norms could result in their inability to marry, marital discord and/or the potential for domestic violence (Removed for peer review 2020).

#### Gender norms and experiences of exile

While the cultural constructions discussed above apply to Syrian culture, and Arabic culture more generally, refugees in the research sample noted how the war in Syria had brought about social transformation and changed the way that families viewed gender relations. In some cases, shifting social norms had opened up spaces for women’s participation in the public sphere (e.g. increased access to travel, education and employment opportunities). However, in others, it had intensified restrictions on women’s movements, behaviours and choices.

Syrian women have been impacted by the perceived ‘emasculation’ of Syrian men in exile. Within the Syrian context, the contradictions between men’s lived experience as refugees in Jordan and Lebanon and narratives of ‘appropriate’ Syrian masculinity (men as ‘protectors’ and ‘providers’) mean that men’s ability to be appropriately gendered as ‘masculine’ has been seriously undermined (Removed for peer review 2013). It is within this context that ‘traditional’ hegemonic masculinities have been recalled, religious piety has been underscored (male and female roles being clearly delineated within Islam) and women’s modesty and sexual ‘purity’ have been reemphasized as key signifiers of Syrian national identity (Spivak 1998, Moghadam 1993, Afshar 1989). In order to preserve the ‘masculinity’ of their male kinfolk, Syrian refugee women have often voluntarily self-regulated their movements, bodies and behaviours to align with these norms (Removed for peer review 2013).

Within the context of exile, gender identities are constructed in relation to difference from ‘the other’. For Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon, this means that ‘Syrian-ness’ is understood in juxtaposition to being Jordanian or Lebanese (Said 1984). As signifiers of national difference (Nagel 1998, Mahmood 2012), Syrian women are called upon to embody ‘Syrian-ness’ and to mark out the symbolic boundaries between the Syrian, Jordanian and Lebanese communities. One way they do this is through the performance of religious piety. While most women in the three country contexts are Muslim, Syrian women’s visible devotion to Islam through wearing modest clothing and the hijab[[4]](#footnote-4) serves to differentiate Syrians from non-Muslims (e.g. Western humanitarian workers, Christian Lebanese) and non-observant Muslims (e.g. many urban/elite women in Jordan and Lebanon). Moreover, (Sunni) Syrian women often wear the hijab in a distinctive style that differentiates them from pious women belonging to other Muslim sects (e.g. Shi’a women in Lebanon). This serves to reproduce a sense of Syrian national distinctiveness and pride in exile. As one Syrian female youth in Lebanon commented,

Lebanese know we are Syrian by the way we dress.  We are more conservative than Lebanese.  Our fashions are more conservative than Lebanese fashions.  We keep our traditions more than Lebanese.  They dress like Western people.  We like to keep our Arab and Muslim identity. (‘Amal’, Beirut, Lebanon, 02/07/2017)

Within the context of exile, the importance of marriage for Syrian women has been re-emphasized. As a result of severe household financial hardship and Syrian men becoming incapacitated as primary ‘breadwinners’, many parents have encouraged their daughters to marry early.  This transfers the responsibility of women’s upkeep (both financial and in terms of *sharaf[[5]](#footnote-5)* to their husbands, discussed in detail by scholars, such as Yuval Davis (1997).  As one female youth in higher education in Lebanon explained,

If we are not in education our parents will encourage us to marry.  They think we will marry anyway, so marrying early is more likely to result in us finding a better husband and having children.  Parents care more about our marriage than our accomplishments.  There is an Arabic proverb that says, “If you have a girl, you have a burden for a lifetime”. (‘Arwa’, Beirut, Lebanon, 02/07/2017)

The experience of exile has also impacted Syrian women’s access to employment opportunities in the public sphere. With reference to other conflict scenarios (e.g. both World Wars), some scholars have noted how male absence from the labour market opened up new employment opportunities for women. As men went off to war and vacated their positions within the labour market, women who had, hitherto, been largely limited to homemaking roles or secretarial work, were now asked to step in and perform important civilian and military job roles in order to support the ‘war effort’ in service of King and country. In this way, women gained valuable knowledge and skills, a new level of respect within society and a new sense of independence (only to be later asked to retreat back to the kitchen once men returned home) (Greenwald 1990, Grayzel 2002, Braybon 2012, Summerfield 2013).

However, there is not a direct parallel with the Syrian context. First, within Syrian culture, women’s work outside of the home is associated with deprivation and the inability of menfolk to properly take care of their families. As discussed earlier, employment for women (other than high status professional employment) is viewed as an act of necessity/financial desperation, which comprises the honour of female refugees and undermines the masculinity of their male relatives (Buckner 2013). As one female youth in higher education in Lebanon explained,

Girls can’t work in just any job. For example, females can’t work in a restaurant in Syrian culture because boys can harass us. Females can’t work for many hours or come home late.  Our in-laws will not accept this. (‘Maha’, Saida, Lebanon, 02/08/2017)

Another difference between the conflict scenarios discussed above is that in the case of the World Wars, jobs were created for women as men went off to war. However, in the Syrian context, refugees in Jordan and Lebanon have entered local job markets which were already saturated (in 2020, unemployment rates in Jordan and Lebanon sat at 23% and 30% respectively) (World Bank 2021, CNBC 2020). Moreover, refugees do not have an automatic legal right to work in either country. It is within this context that, when Syrian men have become incapacitated as ‘breadwinners’, many Syrian women have found themselves obliged to take up low status, low paid, unregulated and often illegal employment to support their families (e.g. domestic workers). Rather than increasing Syrian women’s capability sets, enhancing their economic freedom and elevating their social status, these types of employment have increased their vulnerabilities and undermined their honour (as it is culturally defined within the Syrian context), as well as that of their families. Moreover, employment for women outside the home has not necessarily challenged traditional gender roles within Syrian society. For example, female refugees noted that if they were engaged in employment, cultural scripts of appropriate gendered behaviour prevented Syrian men from taking up domestic work and childcare responsibilities within the home.  As one Syrian female youth in Jordan explained, “Men are not respected if they cook.  People will gossip”. (‘Fatima’, Zarqa, Jordan, 01/10/2017). Thus, female employment outside the home typically led to a ‘double burden’ for Syrian women.

#### Gender norms and higher education for refugees

It is against the complex backdrop discussed above that higher education opportunities have been made available for Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon through partnerships between Western providers, governments and local organisations. These opportunities have included scholarships for refugees to attend local universities (both public and private), Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), and nonformal education, online learning opportunities and international scholarships bespoke for refugees.

Syrian refugees in both country contexts expressed tremendous interest in pursuing higher education. While refugees had various personal motivations for wanting to further their studies, including the instrumental, the intrinsic and the social (Buckner 2013), for many Syrians, the experience of exile had reinforced the value of higher education as an important form of capital which could not be taken away. As one female Syrian youth out of higher education in Jordan explained,

In Syria, we cared about money, but we saw that money is fleeting. So now in Jordan, we care more about education. (‘Khadija’, Amman, Jordan, 01/08/2017).

Although male and female refugees expressed an equally strong desire to pursue higher education, their reasons for wanting to continue their studies were often gendered. In their role as ‘financial providers’ for the family, most male refugees pragmatically sought higher education for its perceived socio-economic returns. As one Syrian male youth out of higher education in Lebanon explained,

Education is the only way to have a good life.  We need education to get a job, buy a house, buy a car and find a wife. (‘Ashraf’, Taanayel, Lebanon, 02/08/2017)

On the other hand, as Syrian females are not culturally responsible for providing for their families, when resources are available, they were freer to pursue higher education for a wider range of purposes than only employment outcomes, such as intrinsic satisfaction.  As one Syrian female youth out of higher education in Jordan explained,

I want to go to university to expand my mind.  I want to fulfil my dreams and move forward in my life. (‘Aisha’, Amman, Jordan, 01/08/2017)

In some ways, the experience of exile has impacted female Syrians’ access to higher education. Refugees noted that as a result of household financial hardship, men becoming incapacitated as ‘breadwinners’ and the increased pervasiveness of female-headed households in Syrian society due to male death, incarceration or combat-related disability, some Syrian families were permitting female relatives to pursue higher education. As one female youth out of higher education in Lebanon explained,

The war has pushed people to rethink their views.  There are more widows.  This is pushing women to achieve more to take care of their families.  Education is a weapon for women to secure a living and to help us become independent and self-sufficient.  Wives of detainees can secure a job and be a role model for their kids. (‘Samira’, Taanayel, Lebanon, 02/08/2017)

On the one hand, this narrative alludes to the emancipatory impact that exile has had on some Syrian women in terms of increased access to educational opportunities (Freedman, Kivilcim and Baklacıoğlu 2017). However, the speaker notes that it is only within the context of the absence of male relatives that Syrian females take on the role of household heads. Moreover, she reinforces the notion that the role of higher education for females is to enable them to perform their maternal roles better.

The experiences of war, displacement and exile in Jordan and Lebanon have also challenged the influence of traditional gender discourses in young Syrians’ lives. For example, refugees noted how recent circumstances had compelled some Syrian families to rebalance concerns of ‘family honour’ with those of economic survival. In some cases, this led to a relaxation of cultural restrictions in relation to *sharaf* and resulted in women’s increased access to travel and higher education opportunities. As one female youth in higher education in Jordan noted,

When Syria was secure, my parents (father) wouldn’t allow me to travel to another city to study, but now my parents will allow me to take a scholarship in Germany.  The war has made our lives uncertain, and they want me to have the best opportunities for my future. (‘Muna’, Amman, Jordan, 01/09/2017)

However, the speaker notes that despite her newly found freedoms, she is still bound within a regime of male authority over her actions and movements. Moreover, she observes that the relaxation of traditional gender scripts is temporary and circumstantial. Thus, should circumstances change, restrictions could easily be reinstated.

Despite increased access to higher education opportunities for some Syrian women, traditional gender norms remain pervasive. For example, the perceived benefits of higher education (i.e. employment outcomes) must be weighed against the direct, indirect and opportunity costs of further studies (Watenpaugh, Fricke and Seigel 2013; Watenpaugh, Fricke and King 2014). As Syrian males remain responsible for financially providing for the family, when household resources are stretched, males (sons) are often prioritized for higher educational opportunities.  As one female Syrian youth currently in higher education in Jordan explained,

We need laptops to do our coursework.  We have a laptop at home, but my brother takes it, and I can only use it when he isn’t using it.  It is the priority for him to finish his studies first so he can support the family.  (‘Zainab’, Zarqa, Jordan, 01/10/2017)

Moreover, participation in higher education does not necessarily challenge entrenched gender relations in the home, nor is females’ cultural responsibility for all domestic work and childcare generally contested. As one female Syrian youth in higher education in Lebanon stated,

Studying is sometimes difficult because, as girls, we must serve our brothers and their (male) friends when they come to the house. (‘Heba’, Saida, Lebanon, 02/08/2017)

In addition, increased access to higher education does not necessarily enable Syrian women to increase their participation in the public sphere due to the nature of higher education opportunities available for refugees. In order to achieve ‘efficiency’ (educate the largest number of refugees at minimal cost), policymakers have increasingly turned to online learning as a cost-effective way of expanding educational access. For some groups of refugees (e.g. the housebound, people with disabilities and those in fulltime work), online learning has enabled them to continue their studies (Easton-Calabria and Omata 2018). However, for many female refugees, the picture is more complex. On the one hand, online learning enables Syrian females to perform their socially prescribed roles as homemakers and caregivers, comply with the ‘honour and shame’ paradigm and perform *sharaf*. However, while online learning is a culturally sanctioned access route to higher education for Syrian women, many female refugees had concerns about online learning being implemented in ways which exacerbated their social isolation (i.e. framed as sitting alone in front of a computer screen). Moreover, female camp residents in particular had serious concerns about online learning restricting their access to the public sphere and exacerbating their feelings of physical and psychological imprisonment. As one Syrian female student in Jordan said,

I prefer traditional education. Interactivity online is not like real ‘face-to-face’ interaction. It is not good, we need physical interaction. The professor can’t get to know all students’ needs and levels of achievement. We want to make friends. (‘Nahed’, Amman, Jordan, 01/08/2017)

In contrast, female refugees noted how physically attending classes at local universities and colleges enabled them to participate in public life, belong to a community, develop friendships and establish a social network. While face-to-face learning was the stated preference for the vast majority of refugees (both female and male), they noted that the limited number of scholarships on offer meant that this option was not available for most Syrians. As one Syrian male youth in higher education in Jordan stated,

You need to be the crème of the crop to get a scholarship.  The competition is very tough, and only one scholarship is given per family.  I had to wait for 3 years to get a scholarship.  (‘Mohamed’, Amman, Jordan, 01/09/2017)

Access to higher education for female refugees also did not automatically enable Syrian women to expand their capability sets or live lives that they valued (Sen 1999). For example, in an effort to comply with local cultural sensibilities, a number of international organisations in Jordan and Lebanon had designed education programmes for refugees with reference to traditional gender scripts – e.g. TVET or non-formal education programmes for women focused on the caregiving professions of education, healthcare and domestic science. While these programmes were culturally compliant, female refugees eager to develop new knowledge and skillsets were left with few options other than to conform to traditional gender norms (Removed for peer review 2020). Moreover, many of these programmes were unaccredited and did not enable refugees to advance into other education or employment opportunities. This often left refugees feeling unfulfilled through their education. As a female Syrian recent graduate from a TVET programme in Jordan lamented,

My studies didn’t help me to achieve my passion.  Dreams come from education, but in Jordan, they don’t care about the value of the person.  (‘Lina’, Amman, Jordan, 01/08/2017)

# Conclusions

As Syrian refugees work to rebuild their community and reaffirm the nation in exile in Jordan and Lebanon, they construct and negotiate their gender identities through the discursive spaces which are available to them, chiefly traditional Arabic culture and Sunni Islam. For Syrian women, cultural narratives position them as biological reproducers, cultural transmitters, metaphors and gatekeepers of the nation (Yuval-Davis 1997, Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989). On the other hand, Syrian men are positioned as protectors and providers for the family and wider national collectivity (Yuval-Davis 1997, Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989). These discourses have important implications for how young Syrian refugees see themselves, how they are seen by others and the parameters around which they may exercise their choices and freedoms (Dunne et al 2017).

For many refugees, the war in Syria has brought about social transformation and changed the way that families view gender relations. For some Syrian women, shifting social norms have opened up new spaces for their participation in the public sphere (e.g. increased access to travel, education and employment opportunities). However, for others, the experience of displacement has intensified restrictions on women’s movements, behaviours and choices. Syrian women have been impacted by Syrian men’s inability to perform ‘appropriate’ Syrian masculinities as refugees. Within the context of Syrian men’s incapacitation as ‘breadwinners’ and their symbolic ‘emasculation’ in exile, traditional hegemonic masculinities have been recalled, religious piety has been underscored and Syrian women’s modesty and sexual ‘purity’ have been reemphasized as key signifiers of Syrian national identity. Moreover, Syrian refugee women have often voluntarily self-regulated their movements, bodies and behaviours to align with these norms (Removed for peer review 2013).

The experience of displacement has also impacted Syrian females’ access to higher education. In some cases, increased access to higher education for women has resulted from severe household financial hardship, the inability of Syrian men to provide for their families and the increased pervasiveness of female-headed households in Syrian society due to the war. However, despite these gains, Syrian women are still largely bound within a regime of male authority over their actions and movements, and the relaxation of traditional gender scripts in exile is largely circumstantial and contingent on men’s absence and/or inability to perform appropriate Syrian masculinities. Moreover, increased access to higher education for Syrian females has not necessarily challenged gender relations within the home or expanded women’s access to the public sphere. It has also often failed to expand women’s capability sets and enable them to live lives that they value (Sen 1999).

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1. Although the Syrian population is multireligious, the vast majority of Syrians (and Syrian refugees) are Sunni Muslims. Within the context of the war in Syria and wider regional conflicts (e.g. between Saudi Arabia and Iran), the cultural distinction between Sunni and Shi’a Muslims has been emphasised. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Although Syria is officially a secular state, the Syrian constitution expressly stipulates in article 3/1 that Islam must be the religion of the president of the republic. While secular courts try civil and criminal cases, Islamic Courts (*Mahkama Shari’a*), try cases involving personal status, family and inheritance disputes among Syrian Muslims. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Although the Syrian population is multireligious, the vast majority of Syrians and Syrian refugees are Sunni Muslims. Within the context of the war in Syria and wider regional conflicts (e.g. between Saudi Arabia and Iran), the distinction between Sunni and Shi’a Muslims has been emphasised. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. head covering worn by observant Muslim women. Out of the 88 Syrian females interviewed for this research, 85 (97%) wore hijab4 indicating adherence to local cultural/religious traditions.    [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Female seclusion from non-closely related men [↑](#footnote-ref-5)