

Gender in Crisis: Syrian Refugee Women in the Netherlands

A Research Paper presented by:

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(Syria)

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for obtaining the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Major:

Social Justice Perspectives: Human Rights, Conflict, and Gender
Studies
(SJP)

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The Hague, The Netherlands
December 2016

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Acknowledgements

I wanted to do master studies since 2008 when I graduated with a bachelor degree from Damascus University. I did not get the chance to do so until 2015 and this paper is the result of these studies. I never expected that when I get the chance to write my masters' thesis it would be about a topic that explores aspects of war in my beloved Syria and displacement of my fellow Syrians. The research work I have put was loaded with bitter feelings about my country's current situation and the research process was extremely challenging at the emotional level. Therefore, the gratitude I have towards people who were by my side throughout the process is enormous and thanking them is never enough.

I would first like to thank God for giving me the strength and opening doors of opportunities necessary to complete my studies. Thanks to my family and particularly the two main pillars of support in my life; my parents: Samira Armoush and Hani Alqallih. Without their encouragements and care that were reaching to me all the way from Damascus, I would not have reached this stage. My sister, Amilin, was the first Syrian woman with whom I discussed the research topic and was a source of inspiration. The care and support I have got from all members of the Van der Zijde family, my Dutch family, were enormous. The valuable comments of Jasja and Jeroen Van der Zijde greatly helped me to present this paper in the best way I could. Casper Van der Zijde was the one who never failed to be a good listener and whose love, encouragements, and patience helped me to stay strong.

I gratefully acknowledge the advice and support of my thesis advisor Dr Nahda Shehada, who prepared me for this research process and was a great teacher. I would like also to thank Dr Karin Arts as the second reader of this paper. I am indebted to her for her valuable comments on this paper and her encouraging words from the beginning of my research process. Thanks to my friends and colleagues, especially Priya Mohan, with whom I struggled in this process. I wish also to express my sincere thanks to Mr. Wim Deetman and all the people working in the *Wim Deetman Studiefonds* Foundation (WDS) for their generous funding of my studies.

Last but not least, I would like to show my deep gratitude to all the research participants. They graciously opened their homes to me and thankfully shared parts of their lives with me. This paper is about them and for them.

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Appendix 1 List of Participants' Information

List of Acronyms

UNHCR

United Nations High commissioner for Refugees

Abstract

Gender in our lives is like the air. It surrounds us, we breathe it, but we do not necessarily think of it or visualize it. We construct and reconstruct gendered identities and views in our everyday social interactions which change as our circumstances change. Gender identities and roles of Syrians have been influenced in different ways by the current war in Syria. The current war, which commenced in 2011, has left a noticeable impact on the Syrian society and the life of every Syrian; whether women or men, children or adults, inside or outside of Syria. This impact has touched all aspects of life from politics to the bread we eat. Syrian women displaced outside of Syria have experienced in some way or another changes in their gender identities and roles. This paper will shed light on some of these changes through the experiences of Syrian women mainly living in The Netherlands, where the research in preparation for this paper took place. The research took a form of individual interviews, observation and group discussions. Theoretical concepts of gender, public/private, patriarchy, and intersectionality will be used as tools to analyse the experiences of female Syrian women refugees.

Relevance to Development Studies

We cannot talk about development as a paradigm that focuses on improving people's life without talking about gender as a crucial social element of it.

Exploring the experiences of women in relations to the influence of war and displacement on their gender identities is important in the realm of their human development and the development of their society especially given the exceptional circumstances that surround the lives of these women. This study also aims at contributing to the sociological work about the Syrian society which has not got much attention for the last four decades for reasons related to the governing system in the country.

Keywords

Syria, War, Gender, Gender Identity, Gender Roles, Women, Displacement, Refugees, Public/Private, Patriarchy.

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Um Mohammed

For three years, Um Mohammed¹ was a bridge for transporting medical supply, clothes, and food to areas of clashes in the countryside of Damascus. She lived alone in Damascus after her two sons and husband escaped to avoid taking part in the war. Dressed in a long dark coat and a black headscarf to avoid attention, Um Mohammed risked her life passing through security checkpoints to smuggle the little she could to those in need. This was an act that could have cost her life for the two or three packs of medicine in her handbag. This was an act that was considered by many as something men are not courageous enough to do.

I remember when Um Mohammed returned from an Arab Gulf country with her family to settle in Syria around ten years ago. She was that well-spoken, educated woman who set the bar high among her relatives with her sense of fashion. Um Mohammed stopped crossing checkpoints to reach besieged areas because it became near impossible to get there. However, she is still considered by many as *Ukht Rjal*, a term used to describe a strong woman, a term which literally means a sister of men. Linking the courage of Um Mohammed to men shows the cultural production of a ‘naturally’ privileged masculinity as a standard for what is ‘good’ and what women should aspire to, and (Budgeon 2014: 320) the degrading of femininity.

The war in Syria has changed Um Mohammed. She did not only lose her house in Damascus and became displaced inside the city, she also had to live alone and take up roles she would not think of prior to the war. It is not only Um Mohammed who changed. This war changed all of us Syrians in one way or another. This war, that has intensified since 2011, has not only caused the death of hundreds of thousands, the displacement of millions, and the destruction of millions of homes; it has also affected the nature and web of interactions and relationships between Syrians in their homeland and abroad in so many different ways.

As a single young Syrian woman who had to flee Syria in 2013, I often have moments of reflection when I realise that I am not the same woman I was before

¹ The story of Um Mohammed is written based on my personal relationship with her.

the war and my family (parents and siblings) does not view me the same way as when I was in Syria living with them. I have become stronger and weaker at the same time. My understanding of myself and my society has also changed.

Given that women might face additional pressure because of the unfamiliar and challenging circumstances of war and displacement, this paper focuses on analysing whether and how Syrian refugee women have experienced changes in their gender identities and roles following the war and following their displacement. Some of these women will take us in their journey starting from their time in Syria up to their situation in The Netherlands.

1.2 Women in the Syrian War

In 2011, peaceful demonstrations calling for different types of reforms erupted in some Syrian cities as a continuation of the so called Arab Spring. More protests followed almost in every Syrian city in 2011 and 2012. The situation got worse when the peaceful demonstrations and protests were partially replaced with armed confrontations. Gradually, many regional and international actors got involved directly or indirectly having their own interests, complicating the situation, causing more harm on the humanitarian level, and turning the situation into a war.

Syrian women have played a great role in the current war since the beginning of the protests in 2011. Women of different backgrounds organised protests and formed local coalition groups for that purpose. Among the first three of these groups, two were led by women (Kahf 2013: 11). They smuggled food and medicine to war affected areas, provided first-aid, took part in sustaining relief, and reported about the situation to the media (Ghazzawi 2014).

One of the main impacts of this war is the mass displacement internally and externally. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the number of Syrian refugees in September 2016 has reached around 4.8 million with the percentage of adult female refugees (24.2%) exceeding the adult males (23.1%) (UNHCR 2016). The number of Syrian refugees in The Netherlands has reached over 10,000 forming 32 per cent of the total number of refugees, according to the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) (COA 2016).

Syrian refugee women struggle in a new environment and different social relationships in the country of asylum, sometimes on their own, while in Syria they were used to a family and societal support system (Harvey et al. 2013).

This paper does not intend to analyse the complex situation in Syria. It takes it rather as a window to understand and analyse one of its repercussions, that is Syrian refugees and more specifically Syrian women refugees, and the influence of such a situation on their gender identities². Throughout this paper, I consider the current situation in Syria a ‘war’ based on the framework of Jackson and Dexter as the Syrian situation reflects the presence of relevant structures, agents, and practices that would amount to consider it a war (2014: 1-2).

1.3 Existing Literature On the Impact of War On Syrian Women and Research Objective

Plenty of media reports and news articles about the war in Syria and its impact on women are available. Unfortunately, many of these sources cannot be counted as neutral or dependable (O’Leary 2014: 95-6).

Available relevant academic social science studies are scarce. I came across three relevant reports written by three different organisations. One report was published by UNHCR and explored the struggles of female Syrian refugees who are heads of their households in Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt (UNHCR 2014). Another report was published by Oxfam (Harvey et al. 2013) and it focuses on changes in gender roles among Syrian refugees in Lebanon. The third report was published by Care International (Beecher and Aniyamuzaala 2016) and focuses on the change of roles among Syrians within Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, particularly from a livelihood perspective. These reports bring in detailed narratives of Syrian refugees and explore many aspects of their lives; especially from a humanitarian perspective. However, they are not academically oriented.

Other sources focus on gender-based violence. Alsaba and Kapilashrami, for example, analysed gender violence against Syrian women inside Syria from an economic perspective. They also refer to the limited knowledge about the gender dimension of the current situation in Syria (2016: 5). Freedman (2016) talked about

² For more information about the Syrian war, please see:
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/syria/report-syria/> or
<http://www.naa.mil.lv/~media/NAA/AZPC/SA-07p.ashx>

gender-based violence against refugee women in Europe and gave some examples about Syrian women. Some other literature focuses on the contribution of Syrian women in the start of the peaceful demonstrations at the beginning of the war (Sohlman 2013).

This is a common gap in social science studies of war. When it comes to analysing war, the focus of scholars is often around the politics of negotiation, post-war situations, and violence rationalization; while the social dimensions are less explored (Wood 2008: 540). This paper aims at contributing to the discourse around the social consequences of war and displacement on the gender identities of female Syrian refugees, an area insufficiently explored so far.

1.4 Research Questions

The main research question of this paper is:

How have the gender identities and roles of Syrian women, who fled Syria and settled in the Netherlands between 2011 and 2016, changed during the war?

In order to answer this question, this paper attempts to answer two research sub-questions. Given the strong link between the flight decision and the war circumstances, which all the research participants emphasised, the first research sub-question focuses on the gendered side of this decision through the experiences of the participants:

1- In relations to gender identities and roles, who takes the decision to flee Syria, why and how?

The second research sub-question goes a step further to look at the changes in gender identities and roles following arrival in The Netherlands:

2- How have the gender identities and roles of female Syrian refugees changed following their arrival in the Netherlands?

1.5 Ethical Considerations

Reflecting on my role, my identity, and my choices in this research has been crucial for me to dissolve some of the ethical tensions I have experienced while conducting this research (Guillemin and Gillam 2004: 274).

I am a Syrian 30 years old Single female who had to flee Syria in 2013 due to the current war there. Throughout this research work, I have had a challenging task of becoming fully aware of my own experience as a Syrian who, just like all the participants of this research, at some point decided to flee my country. I write these lines with a bitter feeling as I still find it difficult to realise that this is a decision that I took. I also share with the participants a sense of change and in my gender identity and social relations.

I realised my biases starting from the moment I decided on the topic of this paper given my personal experiences that have similarities with those of the participants. Becoming aware of my own position has made the process of this research more complex due to the process of self-realisation that I have gone through. However, that has helped me at the same time to understand the experiences of Syrian refugee women more and realise the uniqueness of each one of these experiences adopting subconsciously a vision informed with feminist ethics (Addelson 2001).

Having a conscious awareness was the first step for me in my attempt to manage the effects of my own position on the knowledge ‘produced’ in this paper. The next step was by acknowledging the power I exercise in writing about Syrian women and consequently developing a deeper sense of responsibility to challenge my personal assumptions about the topic and present the views of these women in the best way possible.

Conducting this research brought to my heart and mind the image of a peaceful Syria when our dreams, and hopes for a better society were entirely different than what we hope for now. I was confronted with at least the social consequences of the war in Syria. This research made me go through an emotional and intellectual process of realising what it means to reshape your identity in peace time and what it means in war time. I tried to take this effect of the research process as a tool to better understand and contextualize the experiences of the participants.

Taking into account the “ethical obligations” proposed by O’Leary (2014: 63) with regards to confidentiality and the ‘no-harm’ principle, the names of all participants in this research were replaced and the true identity of them would not be revealed.

1.6 Limitations of this Research

Scarcity of academic sociological research

The first limitation I faced with this research is the scarcity of academic sociological research done about the Syrian society. That is in addition to the lack of academic literature that talks about the impact of war on Syrian women as explained in Section 1.3.

The system of governing in Syria has for several decades limited the feasibility and the scope of such types of research and even when it is done in Syrian Universities, the results are censored and most likely available only internally within the university. Geros named the lack of social scholarly studies about Syria as one of the main obstacles of doing research about the country's social life (2008: 91). Eijk also mentioned that “empirical knowledge about the country's socio-political and religious make-up is limited” (2013: 8).

Focus on middle class and higher class Syrian refugees

The group of participants in this research does not include Syrians coming from a low-income background. They mostly come from a middle class or higher class. According to a report of the Polish Institute of International Affairs, Syrians who reach Europe are those educated, skilled and better off (Sasnal 2015: 5).

1.7 Fieldwork: Methodological Approach

Prior to fieldwork, I engaged with different relevant theoretical concepts to form a theoretical base for the data generating stage. A mix of data generating methods of a qualitative research approach has been used including informal conversations, observation, review of existing literature including on-line newspapers and social media pages. My main sources of data generating are unstructured interviews and group discussions. Group discussions have in general given space for the participants to create rich and ongoing conversations (O’Leary 2014: 218), although it was also the case that in one of the group discussions two women were reserved and barely took part in the conversation and I did not manage to make sense of what was the cause.

Despite the social and non-political characteristic of the topic of this research, some participants were initially reserved about sharing information. Coming from a highly securitized system in Syria, it is hard to trust where the information you give to someone goes. “During the last decades, access to Syria for researchers (and journalists, for that matter) has been difficult due to the political situation” (Eijk 2013: 8). Geros, who did ethnographical fieldwork in Syria for some years, said

that the Syrian government has limited or prevented for decades doing social research in the country which affected the topics and theoretical frameworks of researches. One of the obstacles that Geros faced was the fear and reservation that Syrians demonstrated if asked about almost any aspect of their life. When it comes to some sensitive topics, Geros noticed that Syrians do not discuss them even among themselves (2008: 93, 96).

This fear limited at the beginning my ability to find Syrians who are willing to talk about their experiences. Here, I learned to share more about myself when I explained about the research. I had also to constantly say: “We are not talking politics. We are just talking about ourselves as women”. Including myself as part of this research also helped to build trust with the participants.

1.7.1 Data Generation Methods and Sampling

I have had conversations with eighteen Syrian refugees in total, fifteen women and three men. Initially, I thought of interviewing 25 participants. However, after having conversations with 18 people, I stopped as I felt that I reached a saturation point, where “additional data no longer adds richness” to the analysis (O’Leary 2014: 132).

When it comes to identifying participants, it was not easy at the beginning to get in touch with the Syrian community in The Netherlands. Although, I am Syrian but the fact that I came to The Netherlands as a student kept me away from the asylum-seekers’ centres³ where most Syrians meet when they arrive. Having access to these centres was not feasible. I contacted two organisations that work with refugees in The Netherlands but they were not cooperative. I sent an email to one of them and I got a response saying that they will try to help in identifying possible participants. I then sent two reminding emails to that organisation and did not get concrete feedback. I met a staff member of the other organisation, who told me that they would not have time for this kind of assistance. Therefore, I used other techniques to get in touch with the Syrian community as will follow in the next paragraph.

³ Asylum-seekers who have not had their asylum applications assessed yet by the Dutch government live in asylum-seekers centres in The Netherlands for a period of time that range from two months to two years and sometimes more. Once their application is assessed and they have their stay permit, they can leave the centre and rent their own places.

I met some of the participants in The Netherlands during some public events concerned with issues related to Syrian refugees. Some others I met through a research project, where I worked as an Arabic-English translator. The researcher, who worked part-time at the Institute of Social Studies (ISS), was conducting a research about the use of technology by Syrian refugees in The Netherlands. In the ‘technology research’, the researcher tried to get in touch with Syrians who were staying in asylum-seekers’ centres and she could not have access to the centres that are managed by the Dutch government. Gradually through a church the researcher managed to get in touch with some Syrians, who put her in contact with others. For my own research, I also inquired about the possibilities of accessing the asylum-seekers’ centres from another academic staff at ISS and I got the same message of unfeasibility. Working as a translator in that research project prepared me for my research, and put me in touch with some Syrians. Using a snowballing sampling technique (O’Leary 2014: 190), I got to meet the rest of the participants of my research.

Departing from an ethnographic perspective of conducting research within natural settings (O’Leary 2014: 135), I followed the preferences of my participants in terms of how and where they would like to share their experiences and views on the research topic. For example, three female participants invited me to their morning *Isti’bal*, (reception), a gathering of women mostly living in the same neighbourhood in the house of one of them where they eat and talk about social matters. This kind of gatherings can be considered in Fraser’s view as “alternative publics” (as cited in Moors 2004: 32). I met with one woman in a park, another in a café, and the other participants I met them in their homes. In total, I had six group conversations each included two to three participants and they all were organised in groups based on their request. I had individual in-depth unstructured interviews with four women. All the discussions I had with the research participants were conducted in Arabic and were transcribed and translated to English by me.

The different techniques I have used to get in touch with potential participants of this research have served me –luckily- to have a diverse sample of Syrians coming from different cities and towns in Syria. Their age ranges between 20 and 60 years of age and their civil statuses also vary (please see Appendix 1 for more information).

I decided to include some men as participants in this research because gender roles we assume are assigned to us through a complex of relationships with each other, and within our cultures and social institutions. Scott said, “The information

about women is necessarily information about men" (1996: 156). To understand gendered views of women, we need to understand those of men as they inform and influence each other. The male participants were asked about how they observed the changes in gender identities and roles of Syrian women in the context of the current war and displacement.

1.8 Structure of the Paper

This research is presented in five chapters. Chapter 1 has provided an overview of the researched topic. It has explained the research objective, questions to be discussed in this research, background about the place of women in the Syrian war, existing literature about Syrian women in the current war, limitations of this research, ethical considerations, and the way data was generated.

The second chapter explores the theoretical concepts that provide the analytical structure of this paper. These concepts include gender, development of gender in different circumstances, public/private, patriarchy, and intersectionality. Changes of gender identities and roles will be used as the linking line of analysis between the different concepts.

In Chapters 3 and using the above mentioned theoretical tools, I will analyse the gendered side of the flight decision of Syrian refugees. That would answer the first research sub-question: In relations to gender identities and roles, who takes the decision to flee Syria, why and how?

In Chapter 4, I will analyse the second research sub-question: How have the gender identities and roles of female Syrian refugees changed following their arrival in the Netherlands? The social gendered aspects discussed in Chapter 4 were the ones raised mostly by the participants when discussing with them the changes of gender identities and roles during the war and following displacement. I will analyse these aspects using the theoretical framework mentioned in Chapter 2.

The last chapter revisits the experiences of the research participants and reviews conclusions drawn from the whole research. It also provides suggestions for further research.

In preparation for this research I met 18 participants; however, only the experiences of some of them will be presented and analysed in Chapters 3, 4 and 5. Given the limited space of this paper, I had to present the experiences that gave me more space and possibilities to generate rich and significant analyses. Nevertheless,

the rest of the experiences have enriched and deepened my understanding of the research topic and their contributions to the analysis of this paper are implicit in every section of it.

Chapter 2 Theorising the Constant Process of Gender Identity Change

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the theoretical tools which inform the analysis throughout this thesis. The next section provides a detailed outline of the theoretical concepts which includes Scott's definition of gender with the elements that construct its meaning, developing gender in different circumstances, public/private domains, intersectionality, and patriarchy. The third section explores how these concepts will be used in Chapters 3, 4 and 5. Finally, Section 4 will conclude this chapter.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

2.2.1 Defining Gender

Gender, as a social category, is the channel through which femininity and masculinity are given their normative definitions. It mirrors the expected social relationships between men and women. I adopt in this paper the definition of gender provided by Joan Scott given its richness and clarity.

Scott (1996: 167-69) defines gender using two main elements. One is “social relationships that are based on the perceived differences of the sexes” and the other is “relationships of power”. For me, Scott's definition presents gender as a river that lays between two banks (the two elements) which go in parallel and shape what gender means. The surrounding circumstances constantly reshape the banks and consequently change the riverbed giving never-ending meanings of gender. The first element constitutes according to Scott of four interrelated elements:

- Cultural symbolic representations: They are historically and socially invoked to shape the gendered perceptions in the society. Examples of these symbols may include what is considered pure or polluted, or Mary and Eve (Scott 1996: 167). This element will not be analysed in this paper given that the current war in Syria is recent and has not yet formed historic cultural symbols, especially that the process of embedding symbolic representations in society takes many years.

- Normative concepts: These concepts interpret the meanings of the symbols. They are presented and composed by different societal doctrines (religion, education, law, science, polity, etc.). They set fixed binary meanings of what femininity and masculinity are and set binary identities for men and women (Scott 1996: 167-8).
- Social institutions: These are the institutions where normative concepts or gendered perceptions of social relationships are politicized, constructed, and made embedded in the society. These social institutions can be household, labour market, or universities (Scott 1996: 168).
- Subjective identity: Gendered identities are constructed through “activities, social organisations, and historically specific cultural representations”. People construe their gendered identities as a result of the confluence of the three above elements together (Scott 1996: 168-9).

The second element of the definition of gender is the relationships of power where power is articulated within gender. It is about the distribution of power (accessing and controlling resources whether material or symbolic) and how this is affected by the gendered symbolic representations, normative statements, social institutions, and gendered identities. Gender can be used as a tool to legitimize certain social relations (Scott 1996: 170-71).

2.2.2 Changes of Gender Identity in Different Circumstances

An individual has multiple identities that are formed either as a consequence of an affiliation to a group or from attributions by others. Our relationships with others shape our identities and so do they with our gender identities. Therefore, gender identities are not static. They change as our relationships with others change. As we have multiple identities in general, we also have multiple gender identities which can be presented differently in different contexts and cultures. We may not be aware of the multiple identities that we have and they would only reveal themselves to us in specific events or experiences (Litosseliti and Sunderland 2002: 7-8).

West and Zimmerman (as cited in G. Davis and Risman 2013: 740) argue that gender is created through our socially accepted behaviours and through what we do. We give meanings to gender appropriately in the way the society tells us to do.

They said: “Gender is something we are held morally accountable to perform.” G. Davis and Risman see that the way we give meanings to gender changes when the circumstances change (2013: 741).

“The enculturation creates feminine women and masculine men, but not entirely, nor consistently, nor always”. The development of a gendered identity changes with the changes of time and place, for instance. The interactions between individuals create and affect stereotypes about men and women and cultural expectations attached to their male or female behaviours. Institutions are the other dimension through which gender gets embedded into society (G. Davis and Risman 2013: 747).

Scott (1999: 06) contends that gender identities are not only the production of the family institution; rather, they are socially organised and context-relative. Acker (as cited in G. Davis and Risman 2013: 741) explains that all social sectors are gendered through the different ways they produce gendered practices and power distribution. Households, for example, can be “gender factories” where women’s gender role is about bearing more of the household responsibilities (Berk as cited in G. Davis and Risman 2013: 741).

G. Davis and Risman (2013: 743-745) explain that social structures and individuals have a mutual impact on each other. Social structures affect our decisions and the way individuals give meanings to gender, and individuals are the ones that create and reshape social structures. Gender itself is a social structure that has this two-way influence with individuals. This structure impacts gender identities of individuals, who internalise social and cultural norms about male and female identities, gendered interactions between men and women which form their normative behavioural expectations in their everyday life, and gendered institutions which reshape gender in practices, processes, and power distribution causing gender inequalities. G. Davis and Risman’s explanation of gender as a social structure goes in line with the first main element of gender that is presented by Scott as explained previously.

2.2.3 Public/Private Spheres

The meaning of ‘public sphere’ as a concept has been contested regarding; for example, who does it include or exclude, or what forms of participation in public spheres people have and use (Moors 2004: 31-34). Habermas saw the public sphere

as a space where ‘equal’ participants rationally discuss issues of common interest. This conceptualization has received several critiques including the one of Fraser who extends the meaning of public spheres to include those unrepresented in regular or unified public spheres. According to Fraser, the unrepresented may form their own “alternative publics”, where they discuss their interests. For Fraser, public spheres are spaces where social identities are created, shaped, and presented (Habermas and Fraser are cited in Moors 2004: 32-33).

Adopting the terminology of Joseph (1997: 76, 88), I use the ‘private sphere’ to refer to domestic or household arrangements, while the ‘public sphere’ refers to the social arrangements within other non-governmental and governmental spaces. Just as the case with Lebanon presented by Joseph (1997: 89), these spheres are not autonomous in Syria and they influence each other.

Daily social interactions reflect how public and private spheres are divided through the ideologies behind such a division (Moors 2004: 39). Rabo adds that these spheres are historically developed concepts in society. Middle Eastern private sphere is generally associated with women and this idea is often explained in earlier literature by women’s role in childbearing and caring and the control over their sexuality (1996: 155-160).

Fraser, however, does not regard the public sphere as entirely a men’s sphere and the private as a women’s one as it is sometimes assumed. She, instead, suggests that what comes at stake when analysing public and private spheres is the gender and racial hierarchies. Drawing from this, other hierarchies such as class can also play a role in giving different meanings to these spheres. Fraser also underlines the importance of analysing the political and ideological characteristics of public and private spheres as a way to understand their meanings (1992: 609-610).

Gender is one of the power relations’ elements that contribute to the construction of public/private boundaries, especially in patriarchal societies (Joseph 1997: 88-89). Cultural dynamics of the private sphere are embedded in and conceptualized around the government and non-government spheres and is a tool to analyse gender relations (Joseph 1997: 88-89). Fraser also emphasises the importance of the state power in analysing the social relations between public and private spheres (Fraser 1992: 609).

The gendered connection between public and private spheres intersects with the connection between state and non-state institutions. State’s involvement in the

private life of citizens influences the cultural development of certain dichotomies like public and private, and male and female (Rabo 1996: 155-160).

Rabo explains how Syrian women found themselves squeezed between their duties within public and private spheres. They tried to comply with the expected image of being good women at home and good workers at work, especially as the Syrian government for many years tied the public servants to strict roles and women were considered as an important pillar in the economy (1996:162).

Speaking of the affect of displacement on public/private concepts, El-Nur et al. see that the imaginary lines separating the two spheres are not fixed and may change when a family moves to a new country; for instance, due to the “changing socio-political realities” (2004: 119).

El-Nur et al. (2004: 125-126) studied the changes of public/private spheres’ boundaries for displaced Arab families of Palestinians in the USA, Sudanese in Egypt, and Palestinians displaced within Palestine. Their study is relevant here given the cultural similarities between Arab families in general and Palestinian and Syrian families in particular. They argue that when Arab families are displaced whether within their country or to another country, their boundaries between public and private spheres get reshaped mainly through “the gendered division of labour and the negotiation of survival and copying strategies” within the family. El-Nur et al. contend that displacement imposes new realities where gender roles, division of labour, and public/private divide are reshaped (2004: 136).

Following displacement, women and men face different and possibly unfamiliar circumstances that may affect their gender roles and reshape their public/private boundaries. New forms of division of labour might be seen within or outside of the household, which may or may not empower women and that depends on how the patriarchy dynamics within the family work in the new environment (El-Nur et al. 2004: 126-127).

2.2.4 Intersectionality

Crenshaw (as cited in K. Davis 2008: 89) was the first to coin the term intersectionality which she used to explain the multiplied impact the intersect of the different identities of women of color have on their experiences of violence. Crenshaw filled the gap left by feminism and anti-racism as they could not address the vulnerabilities developed as a result of the linkage between race and gender.

Intersectionality explains the interconnected, constructive, and interacting relationship between the different identities of individuals which are developed within a net of dynamic power relations (K. Davis 2008: 68). K. Davis regards intersectionality as an ‘ambiguous and open-ended’ conceptual framework as it leaves the door open for more questions to be asked and more identity categories’ interactions to be explored and analysed. This characteristic of intersectionality is exactly what makes it a very useful framework to uncover endless secret roads which lead to new intersections, new linkages, new power relations’ sets of dynamics (2008: 77).

Power relations are the engine that makes the wheel of gender identities and roles move in different directions. Krekula (2007: 163) explains that in order to understand power relations, we need to understand the intersectionality between the different identities we have such as gender, age, and class, etc. Krekula notes that intersectionality helps us to understand the dynamic constructive interactions between these identities and the power relations are attached to them (*ibid.*). K. Davis sees that these different identities interact within the different social institutions and practices, cultural ideologies, and experiences of individuals producing different and dynamic power relations (2008: 68).

K. Davis discusses how intersectionality acknowledges that women experience power relations in their daily social interactions differently which could lead to different forms of exclusion. Intersectionality also addresses two important elements of the contemporary feminist theory. The first element is the interaction between the different socially constructed identities of women and the impact of that on their personal experiences of exclusion or marginalization. The second element is the challenge that intersectionality poses on the inherent and static binaries proposed by modern theories (2008: 70-71). Staunaes and Knudsen (as cited in K. Davis 2008: 71) stress that intersectionality corresponds to the Foucauldian ideas about power dynamics which influence the construction of hegemonic and normative concepts of identity.

2.2.5 Patriarchy

Giving priority to the rights of older people and males in the Arab society based on kinship relations and religion is what Joseph explains as patriarchy (1994: 196-7). In this paper, I use Joseph’s theoretical framework of patriarchy due to its relevance

to the Syrian context. Joseph's analysis of patriarchy covers Arab families or Lebanese society which shares many similarities with the Syrian society. Joseph lists different forms of patriarchy in the Arab world. Three of them will be used in this paper (1996: 15-17):

The first one is social patriarchy which she says that it is based on kinship relations which confirms one's identity and may spread patriarchy in all possible directions of social life (Joseph 1996: 15).

The second form is economic patriarchy which is used to explain "the privileging of males and elders in ownership and control over wealth and resources, including human resources". It also makes them "financially responsible for women and juniors relatives". Economic patriarchy may intertwine in many ways with social patriarchy when businesses are run by families or when kinship terms are used in small businesses to define work relations (Joseph 1996: 15-16).

The third form of patriarchy is political patriarchy where kinship relations are part of the political system in different ways. Constitutions, citizenship laws, and political, religious and social affiliations are examples of different platforms where political patriarchy is manifested in Arab countries (Joseph 1996: 16-17).

Following the above mentioned patriarchal rules within kinship relations, females and young people are expected to respect males and those older than them. While males and elders are expected to be responsible for females and those younger than them. consequently, elders and males are in a better position to exercise power and authority. Exceptions are always possible depending on social, political, or financial status of a female or a junior (Joseph 1994: 195-6).

2.3 Operationalising the Theoretical Framework

The theoretical concepts mentioned in the previous section will be used throughout this paper as tools to analyse and understand the experiences of the research participants. My focus is to see how the circumstances of war and displacement have affected the gender roles and identities of Syrian women.

The first step in doing so will be by analysing the flight decision. I will look at its gendered elements, particularly its link to the gender identities and roles of those making the decision. I will also explore their interconnectedness with the ways that public/private and patriarchy function in society. The aim is to understand how and why the decision is being made and by whom. The second step will cover the

changes of gender identities and roles following the flight. The root causes of these changes and their dynamics will be analysed using public/private and patriarchy theoretical concepts. Intersectionality will be used in both of the above mentioned steps to provide deeper analysis from a holistic point of view.

The selection of these particular concepts was a process that started prior to the research work. My research work confirmed their relevance and inspired me to add another relevant concept which is patriarchy that was not initially part of my analytical framework. Other theoretical concepts might also be relevant to analyse the experiences presented in this paper. A suggestion is made in Chapter 5.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has provided in Section 2 an overview of the theoretical concepts that will be used as analytical tools in this paper. Section 3 explored the ways by which these concepts will be unpacked throughout the following chapters. By discussing the gendered flight decision and answering the first research sub-question, the following chapter will take us a step further into a journey of analyses, reflections, observations and narratives.

Chapter 3

The Gendered Flight Decision

3.1 Introduction

Given their interconnectedness, I use this space to give an idea about how this chapter and Chapter 4 will flow. The main idea of this chapter focuses on the flight decision from Syria, while Chapter 4 goes a step further chronologically and focuses on some social aspects of the lives of some Syrian refugees following their flight. Some of the issues discussed in these two chapters came into focus for being emphasised by the research participants. When asked about experiencing changes in gender identities while in The Netherlands, it felt natural for the participants to go back in time, tell how their flight decision was taken, and reflect on their life in Syria in order to explain their current experiences as refugee women and men. Their response conforms with the unfixed continuously constructed meanings of gender (West and Zimmerman 1987: 140), which cannot be simply divided into 'before' and 'after' flight.

In this chapter, I will specifically explore some gendered social aspects around the decision of Syrian women and men to flee the country through the experiences of mainly three female participants of this research. I will do so by unpacking the meanings of public/private domains and patriarchy in the Syrian context. Although elements of these two concepts (patriarchy and public/private) are interrelated, I will explore them almost separately for the sake of clarity and also where they prevail and show more relevance. I will also use intersectionality to deepen the analysis of the experiences of these participants a little more and look at them from a holistic approach.

3.2 The Flight Decision and Meanings of Public/Private Spheres

During the war, her apartment was located in an area bordering a rebels-held area in Damascus, which meant that Alisar's⁴ building was under constant exchange of fire between government forces and the rebels. The glass of the windows of her apartment would break and scatter every few days and many incidents of neighbours getting killed or injured occurred. It was not safe for her children to go to

⁴ Individual meeting with Alisar (July 2016).

school because of the random mortar shelling hitting the neighbourhood almost daily. Her husband found his stress relief in the war by spending most of his time away from home drinking and having extramarital affairs, which was not a new behaviour but it became worse. He would leave Alisar and their three children for months without checking on them.

Alisar is a 33 years old woman who lived in Damascus but originates from a village in the suburbs of Damascus. She had had many problems with her husband since the beginning of their arranged marriage 16 years ago. His family always interfered in their life and she knew he was never faithful to her. Following her marriage, Alisar's father gifted her enough money to start her own business. In order to get her husband's permission and blessing to run her business, Alisar took his advice in all major decisions related to her work. In addition to being older than her and more experienced in the field of business, Alisar sought her husband's opinion for other reasons:

I mainly asked for his opinion to make him feel he is in control. He needs to feel that he is the owner of the business, then you (a woman) succeed. Although the money, efforts, and work were all mine.

During the war, Alisar and her children had to move to another area inside Damascus for security reasons. She took a full responsibility of the safety of her children and she managed their financial expenses on her own with the support of her parents. A combination of the security situation in Damascus and the marital problems Alisar had made her take the decision and leave with her children in 2014 to Lebanon. She said: "We (she and her husband) fought a lot till he agreed to give the children a formal permission to leave the country." Formal travel permission for the children is required by law as we will see later in this section. To get it, Alisar kept reminding him of the safety and stability of the life of their children.

While in Lebanon, Alisar and her husband, who refused to leave Syria, got divorced. The behaviour of her husband in the war, when she needed him the most by her side, made her make a firm decision to get divorced. A decision which she hesitated to take for years as being a divorced woman is not a socially desirable status. Given the lack of support in Lebanon, the limited perspectives for a stable future, and the difficulty of obtaining and maintaining stay permits, Alisar left with her children to Europe illegally and reached The Netherlands. Her husband did not want them to leave for Europe but she did not have other options and she felt that he was not able to give them any alternative solutions for their situation in Lebanon.

Rabo suggests that in order to understand the interconnectedness between public and private spheres in the Middle East, we need to understand how the state power is strongly connected to the construction of gender roles. The extent to which the state interferes in the daily life of people influences their understanding of public/private divides, whose functionality in the Middle East is based on gender identities, particularly of women (1996: 155-157).

Article 148 of the Syrian Personal Status Law says: “A mother cannot travel with her child without the permission of the child’s father as long as they are married” and the same does not apply for the father, who can travel with the child without a permission of the mother (Mousa 2004)⁵. Here we see an example of how the Syrian state has influenced private/private divides through this gendered legal article (Joseph 1997: 80).

Rabo wrote about the role of the Syrian government in gendering the life of Syrian men and women and drawing lines between public and private spheres. The currently ruling party, Ba’th party, has been in power since 1963. It has presented Syrian men and women as equal citizens and that comes through, for instance; the mandatory elementary education for boys and girls, the equal deployment chances in the public sector for women and men, and the presentation of men and women as equally important sources to the country’s development and economy (1996: 159-63).

What the Syrian government tried to do is to embed a state feminism through which women are treated as equal to men. Although superficially this seems like a progressive step, Rabo argued that this was directly or indirectly making the state more patriarchal. Syrian women had to work outside the house to be seen as productive citizens in the state’s view and had to still perform full duties of the good wife and mother inside the house. Moreover, feminism preached by a disfavoured state makes men confine women more to the private sphere as to oppose the state’s ideology (1996: 172-173).

Alisar -similar to many Syrian women- used to take her husband’s permission to go out of home even if that is to visit her parents. Such gendered ideas are culturally constructed within society using different attribution tools (Scott 1996: 167-8) and they contribute to creating and maintaining public/private imaginary divides. It is also patriarchy that influences gendered relationships within Syrian families

⁵ Translated by Rajin ALqallih.

giving broad authority to men to give or deny permission for some social actions within the family (Gallagher 2007: 229).

Gallagher proposes the term “gender dependency schemas” to explain the gendered social patterns that map the relational agency of women in Syrian families. These schemas form the spaces where patriarchy manifests its influence through gendered collective identities rather than individualized ones (2007: 228-9). To gain her husband’s permission to flee with her children, Alisar had to go through a process of “bending the narrative around gender” (Gallagher 2007: 244), where she had to negotiate exercising her agency within the limiting gender schemas she was part of. Alisar had used similar strategies when running her business back in Syria, where she used what Abu-Lughod and MacLoed described as women’s ability to “manoeuvre around paternal permission by obscuring, redefining, or redirecting their movements and activities in ways that maintain at least semblances of deference and obedience” (as cited in Gallagher 2007: 230).

Alisar’s experience in war presents a set of intersecting and interacting identities that creates different dynamics of power relations (K. Davis 2008: 68). She is a young educated working woman running her own business, a mother of three children, a daughter of well-off parents, and a female socially expected to uphold certain behaviours. More identities could be added here as well. Alisar’s interconnected identities seem to advantage and disadvantage her at the same time. However, the end result has given her more space to exercise power and make certain decisions other Syrian women with a different set of identities may not be able to make.

The circumstances of the current war created different social relations for Alisar influencing her gender identity and revealing more of her multiple identities (Litosseliti and Sunderland 2002: 7-8). Alisar experienced changes in her gender roles, and challenged the normative expectations of women’s behaviour, and gendered practices of some institutions (G. Davis and Risman 2013: 743-5), and the imaginary boundaries between public and private spheres. She took full responsibility of her children in a completely insecure environment, fled with them to Lebanon and later to Europe, and got divorced⁶ after many years of hesitation.

⁶ More information and analysis about the link between divorce and gendered practices of some institutions in Syria will follow in Chapter 4.

Apparently, Alisar's reasons to leave Syria were not solely related to the war but also to the conflict that was going on inside her house. Seemingly, being in Lebanon away from her husband and her close social circles loosened the limitations of Alisar's "gender dependency schemas" (Gallagher 2007: 228) making her able to take decisions that normally are socially strained.

3.3 Challenging Patriarchy within the Flight Decision

Around 2012, Basma's⁷ husband was arrested by the military forces at his work place. He has been in detention since then and no one knows the reasons or any news about him. "The moment they took my husband, I thought of leaving the country", said Basma, who is 30 years old.

Her husband's arrest was a turning point in Basma's life from an emotional, social, financial, and security perspective. Basma had to approach some security services' offices and contact military officers to inquire about her husband, which were vain attempts at the end. Such kind of interactions, especially at the current war, would expose Basma to possible physical and emotional harm. On one occasion, Basma was told by someone in the security services that her husband died in detention but she did not believe it because around the same time she heard from a former detainee that her husband was alive in some detention centre. These two contradicting pieces of information were all what Basma has got about her husband since his arrest. Given that detainees in security services' detention facilities do not necessarily remain in the same place, her husband's fate remained unknown. She said her attempts to inquire about her husband were tough and tiring. She considered this experience as one of the main reasons for her flight decision, combined with the actual detention of her husband, her financial struggles, and the societal reaction towards her new situation.

Some months after the arrest of her husband, Basma's neighbourhood became over night very dangerous when military forces and some of the rebel groups started fighting there. In no time, she had to move out with her children to her parents' place in another area. Basma used to work in a travel agency even before the arrest of her husband. Without her husband's income, Basma's salary became insufficient to cover her and her children's living expenses, particularly with of the extremely high prices during the war. Her parents were not financially able to support her. She

⁷ Group meeting that Basma took part of (August 2016).

blamed her family-in-law for her financial struggle as they were not able to support her. Her expectation, which is not uncommon in Syria, was that her in-laws were responsible financially for her and her children in the absence of her husband.

“Everybody felt sorry for me and I was tired of that”, Basma said this about how people around her would react to the story of her husband’s arrest and that she was left without clear idea about his fate. She felt that people saw her as a vulnerable woman, which she did not appreciate or accept. Given this experience within her social circles, the lack of expected financial support through kinship networks, and losing hope in getting information about the fate of her husband, Basma finally decided to leave Syria to Europe in 2015 and she ended up reaching the Netherlands. She said: “None of my in-laws was able to afford the living expenses of me and my children, so they have no reason to blame me for leaving.”

Basma left the country without informing anyone except her parents and siblings. She did not inform friends or relatives because she thought people would not welcome her decision to travel alone (without a male relative). She particularly did not inform her family-in-law because they would not accept that:

My in-laws knew that I was leaving to Europe only after I had reached Aleppo⁸.

My mother-in-law was upset that I took my children whom my in-laws consider as theirs.

Basma’s in-laws’ ideas of considering her children as theirs demonstrate how patrilineality can be a source of identity (Delaney as cited in Gallagher 2007: 229). Basma herself internalised the notion of patriarchal kinship when acknowledging the paternal lineage of her children as “the primary source of economic security” (Joseph 1996: 15). Her decision to flee was very much related to the notion of patriarchy, especially as she linked this decision to the inability of her in-laws to support her financially. This was also manifested in the way she left without informing them, and manoeuvred around surrounding “gender dependency schemas” (Gallagher 2007: 228), because they would have possibly tried to prevent her from traveling with the children.

Following her husband’s arrest, Basma had to take up full responsibility of her own family. In addition to her work outside of home, she had to take care of her two children and move houses in very dangerous circumstances. She had to take up an unfamiliar gender role of being the main person interacting with the authorities

⁸ A city in the north of Syria bordering Turkey.

to inquire about her detained husband (Wood 2008: 552), which is a challenging role for a woman. When she left Syria, she had to go on a risky journey to Europe crossing the sea by boat, traveling for days, and dealing with smugglers. By doing all that, Basma's gender roles have changed noticeably and in different ways as a result of the war (Wood 2008: 552-3). The different social interactions that she had with the authorities, family-in-laws, and others around her had impacted the continuous processes of reshaping gender identity (Litosseliti and Sunderland 2002: 7-8).

Analysing Basma's experience from an intersectionality perspective, we can see she has got some common identities with Alisar. They both are young educated women, working outside of home, and mothers. They also headed their households at some point during the war and faced some social restraints when they decided to flee. In addition, Basma was perceived as a vulnerable woman because her husband is in detention. Although Alisar's financial background seemed stronger than Basma, Basma's fluency in English possibly helped her to have hope in finding a job in Europe and supported her flight decision. Different power relations play a role in making this crucial decision as we have seen. The interactions between the identity categories of Basma took part in influencing these power relations and consequently her flight decision (K. Davis 2008: 68).

The social gendered considerations that Basma and Alisar had to challenge or take into account when fleeing the country were not the same for the husband of Ghada⁹. In contrast to women, Syrian men find it easier to leave the country from a gender perspective, which can be explained by the notion of patriarchy. Joseph (1996: 14-15) sees patriarchy in the Arab countries as the rights' hierarchy which values those of males and elderlies over women and juniors.

Ghada, who is a 30 years old woman from Damascus, fled to Egypt with her husband, Ammar, and their three children in 2012 due to the war. The decision for their first flight from Syria to Egypt was a decision taken by both Ghada and Ammar after being displaced inside Damascus and Ammar had lost his job. The second flight decision was in 2014 when Ammar started thinking of leaving to Europe. It was difficult for him to find a fixed job in Egypt. Ghada, despite the financial struggles they had, did not want to leave Egypt as she got used to life and people there. Ammar disappeared one day and Ghada looked for him to learn later from some

⁹ Group meeting that Ghada took part of (August 2016).

acquaintances that he was on a boat to Europe. He later reached the Netherlands and applied for Ghada and the children to join him on a family reunification visa.

Ghada had no choice but to deal with the shock that her husband caused by leaving her with three children in a country where she has no relatives, no job, and no other sources of support. Generally, refugees in Egypt struggle with many socio-economic issues given the lack of sufficient support (UNHCR 2016). Consequently, Ghada had to work outside of home for the first time in her life and take a full responsibility of her household.

She waited for the family visa to The Netherlands for around one year, during which Ghada worked as a receptionist in a gym leaving two of her children unattended at home (both under the age of six). The father of her female employer was a well-off old man with a high rank in the military. In her social interactions with him, Ghada experienced at least three types of patriarchy especially in the absence of any type of support from another source.

In a mixed form of “social and economic patriarchy” (Joseph 1996: 15-16), Ghada acquainted her female employer and was a trusted hard-worker which made the father of the employer protect her and support her particularly in the absence of her husband. Joseph contended that social patriarchy might be based on kinship relations and economic patriarchy can be seen through the “familial responsibilities” of employers towards employees (1996: 15-16).

The father of the employer supported Ghada by protecting her from men who harassed her in the neighbourhood. He also sent his bodyguards with her to negotiate trip payments with smugglers who had smuggled her husband to Europe. By doing so, Ghada gained some sort of protection through the position of this man and her relationship to his daughter which put her in a circle of political patriarchy too (Joseph 1996: 16-17).

Ghada’s different identities (a refugee without formal forms of support, head of household, working woman, mother of three children) in Egypt intersected making her more dependable on different forms of patriarchy as we have seen. The different gender roles that Ghada took up in Egypt formed a process of gender identity change with the change in the circumstances (G. Davis and Risman 2013: 741).

Ghada had no option but to follow her husbands to The Netherlands despite that she did not want to leave Egypt. *‘Ilmara btelha’ zoujha’* (a woman follows her husband), this is a common say in Syria, which has become a literal “normative

concept" (Scott 1996: 167-8) defining where a Syrian woman is socially expected to be on the map of the current mass forced displacement of Syrians. However, experiences of other Syrian women might be different. Alisar and Basma, for example, challenged this notion of patriarchy in their own ways regarding their decision to flee the country. Although patriarchy is visible in Syria (Gallagher 2007: 244), certain social, political, or financial positions held by women may break the rules of patriarchy (Joseph 1994: 196).

3.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen that in wartime different forms of social and power relations may arise or come to surface causing changes in gender roles and identities. The flight decision taken by Syrian women and men is surrounded by a web of social and power relations. Alisar and Basma deciding to flee with their children despite the gendered expected norms on this regard created new interactions which affect social expectations. Ghada conformed with social expectations when she followed her husband from Egypt to The Netherlands; however, she challenged other expectations by breaking her former public/private boundaries while in Egypt. Notions of patriarchy and public/private play a noticeable role in the social dynamics related to flight decision. Their normative meanings are being challenged within the new circumstances imposed by war.

Chapter 4

Gender Identity Changes of Female Syrian Refugees when settling in The Netherlands

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I attempt to answer the second research sub-question: How have the gender identities and roles of female Syrian refugees changed following their arrival in the Netherlands? I will do so in two parts. In Section 4.2, I will mainly use public/private framework to understand the changes in gender identities and roles of Syrian refugee women through the experiences of two female participants (Amal and Ikram). In Section 4.3, I will mainly use patriarchy as a tool to understand these changes specifically within divorce cases among Syrian refugees in The Netherlands and reflecting on the experiences of Haifa and Salma. Similar to Chapter 3, I will use public/private and patriarchy more where they show more relevance. Section 4.4 will finally provide some concluding remarks.

4.2 Meanings of Public/Private Following Displacement

Her eyes became brighter when she spoke about how her apartment in Damascus looked like and how she chose the colours of the painting, the floors, and every piece of furniture. Amal¹⁰ worked hard for several years to buy that apartment in the same street where her parents live. She decorated and organised it in the best ways she wished for. Amal is a 34 years old single woman originally from Hamah¹¹. She worked as an Arabic-English interpreter in Damascus.

When the work on the apartment was done, Amal could not move there and continued living with her parents. “In Syria, it is very difficult for a single woman to live on her own. People talk. How can you live alone? Something must be wrong”, she said. She explained that a single woman living alone is not perceived as a modest woman because unrelated men can visit her in her apartment away from the eyes of her parents. Amal’s parents allowed her to stay in her apartment during daytime only whenever she feels like it. She shared that it is not that her parents do

¹⁰ An individual meeting with Amal (July 2016)

¹¹ A city in west-central Syria.

not trust her, the issue is the negative way people perceive a single woman living alone.

Amal's brother, Morhaf, was single too and six years younger than her. Their parents let him live on his own in an apartment they owned in the same building. Amal's expressed her disappointment about this different treatment:

He was only twenty-one years old then. He had full freedom to move in and out of his place at any time. He could have his friends visiting him at any time and we did not know who they are. Although he was still young but he is a man; you get the idea.

During the war, Morhaf fled to Europe and resided in The Netherlands. Due to the security situation, Amal decided later to flee too. Despite the negative and discouraging comments of relatives and neighbours, her parents accepted that she travelled illegally alone to Europe. Her parents preferred that she went to The Netherlands where she has a brother who can support her if needed. Amal then arranged for her trip and left on her own to The Netherlands. There, she was assigned – through the social housing system- an apartment in a different city than her brother's.

“Here I live alone and there is no problem. I also get male friends visiting me at home. I am living the way I wished”, said Amal. In The Netherlands, she can stay out late with her friends but in Damascus that would not be acceptable. Her parents phone call and text her several times a day to check how she is doing. She stressed again that it is not that they do not trust her but “as a young single woman they want to check on you. When it comes to my brother, they phone call him maybe once every few days.”

The negative normative image that would have been assigned to Amal by the society (Scott 1996: 167-8) for living on her own in Damascus was not assigned to her single brother for the same action. This shows the dichotomy between the way society treats men and women when it comes to defining what can be acceptable as a private space for a woman or a man. This kind of societal views on the gendered division between public and private spheres is visible in the above mentioned social interactions (Moors 2004: 39) of Amal and her family.

Amal's household relations have formed a “gender factory” (Berk as cited in G. Davis and Risman 2013: 741). This factory is in a constant process of producing and reproducing gendered images about what kind of social activities and behaviour

Amal can or cannot have comparing to her brother. And this in turn impacts the process of reshaping her gender identity. The limitations she had regarding living in her own apartment on Damascus go in line with Rabo's explanation about assigning women in the Middle East to the private sphere as a way to control their sexuality (1996: 156).

The public/private imaginary boundaries may change with the displacement of individuals (El-Nur et al. 2004: 119). In Amal's case, we can see a clear but not a complete change in the boundaries dividing public and private spheres following her displacement. Although her parents do not mind that she lives on her own in The Netherlands given the changes in social circumstances (El-Nur et al. 2004: 119), their control over her public/private boundaries is visible in the several phone calls and text messages she gets daily from them. As far as gender contributes to the construction of public/private divides (Joseph 1997: 88-89), the change in the public/private boundaries leads to a change in gender ideologies and identities and vice versa. Individuals develop gender ideologies by internalizing the normative concepts about the acceptable behaviour of men and women (G. Davis and Risman 2013: 743-5). Thus, we can see how Amal's gender identity has been presented differently with the change of context and culture (Litosseliti and Sunderland 2002: 7-8) following her displacement. The changes in circumstances due to war did not only contribute to the change in the gender identity of Amal but also of her parents' starting from their approval that she takes a risky journey to Europe alone to their acceptance that she lives alone in The Netherlands.

While Amal perceives gender changes caused by war and displacement positive to some extent given her ability to have a life style she wished for, other female participants have different experiences. "I lived like a Queen in Syria." At least three female participants in this research said this sentence to me. Several female participants implicitly referred to a similar idea by considering their house in Syria as their kingdom, where the husband works and provides for them and they have the time to care for their children. Ikram:

I do not exaggerate if I say that I lived like a queen in Syria . . . I got everything I needed brought to me. Here, life has changed a lot and I cry sometimes, not because of pressure but because my life was not like this.

Ikram is a 38 years old married woman from the suburbs of Damascus. Before her marriage, she worked for a short period as an Arabic teacher. When she got

married around 15 years ago, her husband asked her to quit her job. He was a physician with a strict and busy work schedule and he wanted her to accustom her life to this schedule and that left no room for her to continue her work outside of home. While she was responsible for the household and the children, her husband made sure that she had a comfortable life and that she got everything she needed. When she had guests; for examples, she did not need to cook herself as her husband would make sure that the food would be delivered home. He would drive her anywhere she wanted and he would do all kinds of shopping for her. She did not have to go anywhere on her own. All this gave Ikram the feeling that she was a queen in her home.

In The Netherlands, her husband has not got the chance to work in his profession as he first needs to have a certain level of the Dutch language and needs to obtain recognition for his diplomas. Therefore, the family's expenses are covered by the Dutch unemployment benefits system¹² which covers only their basic needs. Ikram's family cannot any more afford the comfortable life they had in Syria. She realised that she needs to become more independent. Both Ikram and her husband go to a language school to learn Dutch and they have to organise their time in a way to share taking care of the children and doing the house chores. There was a time when Ikram had to do everything on her own which is something she did not do in Syria:

When my husband left to Greece to volunteer as an interpreter for one month, I had to do everything on my own for the house and the children. I had to take care of the house and do the shopping. I had to bike my children to school or other places for their different activities. I really struggled. Even my Dutch neighbour noticed that I was going around a lot.

Despite that her husband's type of job was the main reason why she did not continue working outside of home in Syria, Ikram considered that she did not actually need to work outside of home after getting married because her husband covered all her expenses. As we saw in Chapter 3, the fact that Syrian women's contribution to the national economy was praised by the state without any changes in the traditional roles of women as caring wives and mothers added an extra burden to those women who worked outside of their homes. The consequences of this practice

¹² For more information about this system, please see this link: <http://www.iamsterdam.com/en/local/work/employment-law-and-benefits/unemployment-benefits>

of the Syrian state explain why some female participants –like Ikram- see that not having a need to work outside of home was a privilege. By perceiving her role in the house in Syria as a ‘queen’ role, Ikram has internalised the social norms that assign women more to the private sphere. With this internalization, Ikram is taking part of the social structuring of gender (G. Davis and Risman 2013: 743-5) and unintentionally contributing to the devaluation of the inside of home work of women. Although, one might also argue that providing women with everything they need at home could be seen as an appreciation to their work at home.

It is not only the Syrian state’s above mentioned practice that contributed to normalizing that idea that the unemployed wife or mother is more privileged. This idea has been produced and reproduced through the practices of individuals (G. Davis and Risman 2013: 743-5). Foucault considers that culture, religion, and law are tools for creating and maintaining a hegemonic gender ideology whose alternatives cannot be thought of because this creation and maintenance process is made invisible and unnoticeable (as cited in Lorber 1994: 58).

I want you to be a queen and not to bother.

Our daughters do not work after graduation.

Our daughter gets spoiled and everything she needs, she gets.

The work you need to do is to give me love and care.

You do not have time for anything else.

It is enough for you to be the president of the republic of my heart.

The above is part of the lyrics of an Arabic song, titled as “The Republic of My Heart”, released in 2010 for the Lebanese singer, Mohamed Eskandar¹³. This song represents the of idea of ‘better be at home’, which serves as a clear representation of gendered divisions between public and private spheres and what some may think the role of women in society should be.

This kind of representations embed gender ideologies and construct gender identities in society through culture from a Foucauldian perspective (as mentioned above), which coincide with Scott’s ideas of constructing “subjective identities”

¹³ A Lebanese singer who has in recent years been known of singing songs with social themes.

(1996: 168-9). The song has become very popular in Lebanon, Syria, and other Arab countries. I had to learn the lyrics by heart because of the tens of times the song was broadcasted on radios when I was in Damascus. The video-clip¹⁴ of this song, which has got over 25 million views on YouTube, depicts mostly men doing the ‘hard work’ in a farm, and parents convincing their newly graduated pretty daughter that working outside of home is not good for her. It would cause her troubles such as harassments by employers and neglect for her future children. Her role is to be a housewife and a caring and loving wife and mother, which equals a ‘queen’ in this song.

According to Lorber, society enforces gendered norms through formal or informal punishments for those who do not choose to behave in a gender-appropriate way. Individuals then either behave according to these norms or they rebel replicating or changing them (1994: 60). The song video-clip story ends with the daughter being rewarded with a new shiny car and a credit-card for her ‘obedience’ by giving up on the idea of outside of home work. Care and love were presented as the justification of men –through the male singer- to discourage women from taking up work outside of home.

Ikram seemingly does not perceive herself as a ‘queen’ anymore. Her gender roles within her family changed with the changes in circumstances following the displacement of her family and the gendered boundaries between public and private spheres also changed. This reshaping of public/private boundaries came through changes in “the gendered division of labour and the negotiation of survival and coping strategies” (El-Nur et al. 2004: 136). Power relations have changed within Ikram’s family through the changes in accessing and controlling material recourses as we have seen. Changes in the dynamics of power relations correlates with changes in the dynamics of social relations and vice versa; and both form Scott’s two main elements to explain gender (1986: 1067).

4.3 Challenging Patriarchy Within a New Context

Many Syrian couples are getting divorced upon arrival in Europe or other places and this has become a noticeable phenomenon. Divorce cases are mostly initiated by women. It is difficult to support this observation with quantitative data, especially that civil records in some parts of the country are not all up to date at the

¹⁴ Video-clip of the song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZ9NgJQD1uo>

moment given the security situation. Some Syrian websites; however, discussed the phenomenon as I will present later in this section. Despite the lack of national quantitative data, all participants in this research have observed this trend and some of them have experienced it in a way or another. One of the participants of this research, Alisar, got divorced after leaving to Lebanon as you have read in Chapter 3. Two other participants are thinking of getting divorced in The Netherlands. You will learn more about their stories later in this chapter.

Apparently divorce cases have increased inside Syria too following the war comparing to previous years. Talking from her professional experience as a judge in a civil court in Damascus, Haifa¹⁵ said: “Divorce cases (registered in Damascus courts) reached around 8000 cases in 2015 which is four times the rate of this kind of cases prior to the war.” In a news article, the First Sharia Court Judge in Damascus, Mahmoud Maarawi “confirmed that despite not having statistics yet, all indications show a rise in divorce rates for this year”¹⁶ (Albosleh Newsletter 2016). The displacement of many Syrians from other cities to Damascus could be a reason to show a higher divorce rate in Damascus but would not necessarily justify it all.

Despite that in some cases problems between spouses had existed before the war, the war itself seemingly has created extra pressure which contributes to more separations in families. *I'faf* (chastity), a Syrian NGO which among other social activities focuses on supporting and preparing youth for marriage, reported in an article several reasons for the rise of divorce cases in Syria. Some of the reasons are related to the different political opinions that spouses hold about the current war, and the higher prices and economic pressure which left many men unable to afford their families’ living expenses (I'faf 2015). Other reasons which participants in this research have shared include the higher unemployment rate caused by the destruction of many work sites and insecurity in many parts of the country, the different opinions of spouses about remaining in Syria or fleeing, disappearances of men, the additional financial burdens on families caused by displacement, and the psychological effects of war.

Reasons behind the rise of divorce cases among Syrian couples inside Syria may overlap with those of cases outside. However, the different circumstances for Syrian refugees warrant a closer look at the social and power relations, which call

¹⁵ Individual meeting with Haifa (July 2016).

¹⁶ Translated from Arabic by Rajin Alqallih.

for a transformation of gendered ideologies about family and divorce outside of Syria.

Both Jamal and Ayham¹⁷ believe that the problems causing divorce between some Syrian couples in The Netherlands had started in Syria. Ayham and Jamal are Syrian single men in their early thirties. “They (a divorcing couple) already did not match”, said Jamal. In my conversation with them, Jamal and Ayham discussed how marriages take place in Syria. They both see that arranged marriages, and the strong influence of the couple’s parents on their relationship affect negatively the bases of it. Jamal:

When men and women have full freedom to choose their life partner, they make their decision completely aware of all the related details. But in our society when two get married in an arranged or semi-arranged way, they keep compromising to save their relationship.

Talking about the social constraints that prevent women from getting divorced while in Syria, Jamal said:

Some couples wanted to get divorced already while in Syria but the social circumstances do not allow. When a couple gets divorced, others start talking badly about both of them. But people criticize a divorced woman more than a man making her look like a bad woman. When the couple comes here, they find a better environment to separate. A woman often initiates it (the separation) because she is the one that suffers more.

One of the reasons that would socially make divorce an undesirable solution for family conflicts in Syria is the societal image of marriage as the bases of societal harmony (Eijk 2012: 154-5) and of family as the central component of society (Joseph 1996: 16). The social perception of divorce as an undesirable and sometimes a non-existing option within the Syrian society comes also through the practices of both religion and law. Eijk gives an overview of the mostly lengthy divorce procedures in both Islamic and Christian courts in Damascus emphasizing on the importance of reconciliation in law and practice. The amount of efforts put into the reconciliation process differs between courts and judges and in both types of courts it has religious bases (2012: 154-163).

Jamal shared a story of a Syrian couple who left Syria first to Egypt, where the lack of job opportunities, lack of support, and financial difficulties created tension

¹⁷ Group meeting with Jamal and Ayham (July 2016).

between the couple. The couple then left to The Netherlands with the hope of a better life and more stability. After arriving in The Netherlands, their problems became of a different type. Their struggle with learning a new language, adopting to a new culture, and waiting for months without a job added to the tension they already had and they consequently got divorced.

Ayham and Jamal agree that Syrian women initiate the divorce process in The Netherlands as they realise that their rights are protected. “Our society has given men the authority to oppress women. Here women know they have rights. They start to sing the *Mawal*¹⁸ of rights”, said Jamal. Several participants mentioned that Syrian women avoid getting divorced in Syria due to the societal pressure. Another reason that was brought up is financial support. During my meeting with them, Ayham said: “The concern of some women in Syria could be about the financial support”, and Jamal commented: “In The Netherlands women can get a salary and be financially independent.”

“When I spoke to my mother about getting divorced, she started to discourage her from visiting neighbours or going out with friends”, said Haifa. Haifa is a 49 years old married woman from the centre of Damascus. She worked as a judge in a civil court in Damascus. Haifa had a talk with her mother about divorce when she was in Damascus. Her mother wanted her to stop socializing because if she gets divorced, people might talk badly about her thinking that she was having an extra-marital affair and that is why she initiated the divorce.

Haifa has had problems with her husband almost throughout their marriage time. Many issues in life they do not agree on and she considers him as a disrespectful and bossy husband. In Damascus, her husband worked as a musician in bars and nightclubs. She said he lived his life the way he wanted completely free from any obligations. Aside from sharing financial responsibilities, she was the one fully responsible for all issues related to the house and their two children. He never appreciated her work inside or outside of home.

When her husband decided to flee to Europe during the war, Haifa refused. She did not want to leave Syria despite the war. Given her professional background and her age, she had concerns about finding a job and living in dignity elsewhere. Her husband then left the house one day to start his journey to Europe without telling her:

¹⁸ Traditional Arabic type of singing.

He chose a ten-day risk (of the journey to Europe) for himself and did not leave me any choice. I was left at risk on my own in this war while struggling to protect my two teenage children . . . our neighbourhood was sometimes hit by tens of mortar shells a day, many kidnapping incidents happened. . . I had to drive my children everywhere, and back and forth to their schools.

Haifa's husband settled in The Netherlands and applied for a family reunification visa for her and the children. For the sake of her children, she joined her husband in The Netherlands. Now she thinks more seriously about getting divorced. She considered that the lack of financial support and the societal pressure on divorced women in Syria prevent women from getting divorced and make them tolerate abusive husbands for years:

I should have taken this decision (divorce) 20 years ago. Why do I keep struggling, for the society, or for my children? My children are close to the age of 18 and will soon be completely independent. In the Netherlands, the government financially supports a woman and her children . . . no societal pressure. . . many women take the decision to divorce once they come here. . . I do not care if my relatives in Syria talk badly about me. I have no financial concerns here.

Salma ¹⁹, who is 34 years old married woman from Tartous and a mother of one child, is also thinking of getting divorced following her arrival in The Netherlands. Salma's husband works in Emirates and he refused to join her in The Netherlands because he did not want to lose her job. Salma feels that he is not a caring father or husband and he left her to struggle alone:

Women here can get divorced but in Syria they cannot because of the familial and societal pressure. . . A woman here is independent. . . She is a human being . . . I am grateful that here I have a home and money coming to my bank account every month. I feel secured. I do not need him to join us any longer. Why does he come now? To visit us like a stranger and leave back to his work?

Salma here refers to the unemployment benefits that she gets in The Netherlands as an unemployed refugee. Having own bank account and bank card seems to resemble financial independency to some Syria women in The Netherlands. Discussions about separating bank accounts, unemployment benefits, and housing

¹⁹ Individual meeting with Salma (July 2016).

among refugees in The Netherlands seem to take an increasing space on Facebook pages. An example of that is the the Facebook page of Alieman Organisation, that is a social club for Arab women in The Netherlands²⁰, where some Syrian refugee women have posted questions, queries, and concerns about divorce procedures in The Netherlands and financial and residential separation procedures for refugee couples.

It seems that some female Syrian refugees are trying to move out of the circles of “social and economic patriarchy” (Joseph 1996: 15-16) when they have access to ‘secured’ financial recourses in The Netherlands. The privileges and authority that men have in Syria through cultural notions of their kinship relations to women and control of financial recourses (ibid.) are being challenged for some Syrian refugee women, which is giving them the autonomy to decide to get divorced if they feel the need for it. These changes in power distribution dynamics related to accessing financial recourses contribute to the process of changing gender elements (G. Davis and Risman 2013: 743-5).

One might argue that many Syrian women used to work in Syria including Salma and Haifa, and they had their own income so if it was all about financial recourses, why did not they decide to divorce in Syria? An answer to that would come through a social dimension. Growing up in Damascus, I have seen how both men and women in Syria are often encouraged by people around them to overlook their divorce decision. However, women normally get most of the societal pressure to disregard such a decision. It is the woman’s role to save her family and especially her children from the separation caused by divorce. A common say in Syria is ‘*Il’im bitlim*’, which means a mother is the one that unites the family. This say reflects what Scott refers to as the normative concepts which among other elements form the meanings of gender and the development of gender identities in society (Scott 1996: 167-8). In that same line, Haifa shared that when she discussed divorce with her brother-in-law after arriving in The Netherlands, he constantly reminded her of her duty as a mother to sacrifice for the sake of her children and do her best to maintain her marriage. According to Joseph, individuals within Arab families are encouraged to link their identities to others, especially women who are expected more than men to put others’ interests before theirs (1994: 200), a practice that enhances patriarchy.

²⁰ [الطلاق](https://www.facebook.com/groups/stichtingaliemanv/search/?query=الطلاق)= <https://www.facebook.com/groups/stichtingaliemanv/search/?query=الطلاق>

Unlike Alisar got divorced after her flight from Syria, Haifa has been in the Netherlands for over one year and she has not taken any practical steps to end her marriage despite her strong will to do so. The pressure she has from those around her to maintain her marriage is not the only reason that prevents her from getting divorced. Different factors play a role in keeping her in a circle of patriarchy. When I met her in The Hague, we walked towards a public park (Zuiderpark) right opposite to her apartment. As we walked, I realised that Haifa does not know the entrance to the park, which is considered one of the city's attractions. I asked her how often she goes out on her own and she responded that she rarely does as she does not speak Dutch nor English and she is afraid of getting lost. She mainly depends on her husband or her 17 years old son to take her around, which "enhances the power" of her son or husband (Joseph 1994: 196). The intersectionality between the different identity categories of Haifa in The Netherlands does not seem to develop power dynamics (Krekula 2007: 163) that support her to become more independent. Her age (49 years old), her profession, and the fact that she speaks only Arabic do not help her to find a suitable job in a reasonable time and become independent completely. What confirmed that to me is her advice before we apart at the end of our meeting: "Make sure that you finish your studies and you have a good job. This is the best thing a woman should have. Don't count on anyone."

4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen how some female Syrian refugees face a new crisis following their flight. Gender identities and roles get reshaped and changed in reflection to the new circumstances and social and power relations. I have analysed the changes in gender identity and roles in some experiences of female Syrian refugees living in The Netherlands. I did so by using once public/private theoretical concept and once patriarchy as my lens to explore the dynamics of change in social and power relations. Public/private divides formed a different social frame for Amal who could live on her own in The Netherlands unlike in Syria. Ikram cannot any more live up to the 'Queen' role she had in Syria. When it comes to divorce decisions, patriarchy and the new social circumstances play an important role. The way patriarchy and public/private divides operationalise in The Netherlands among Syrian refugees differs in some ways and remains the same in other ways. This has a strong connection to changes in societal norms and recourses distribution, which

enable some women to take up certain roles or make certain decisions they would not make in Syria.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Re-Visiting the Theoretical Concepts Through the Experiences of the Participants: The Syrian Mosaic

This paper attempted to answer the main research question of: How have the gender identities and roles of Syrian women, who fled Syria and settled in the Netherlands between 2011 and 2016, changed during the war?

To do so it explored several aspects of gendered social relations in the context of the current Syrian war by analyzing the experiences of some female Syrian refugees living in The Netherlands. Unstructured interviews with 18 participants (15 females and 3 males) were conducted, some of which were in the form of small group meetings based on the preference of the participants.

Throughout Chapters 3 and 4, the participants took us on a journey of reflections that covered some aspects of their lives in Syria, moving to their decision to flee to Europe, and finally sharing about some social dynamics of their lives after arriving in The Netherlands in relation to their gender identities and roles. These reflections revealed step by step answers to the sub-questions of this research. In chapters 3 and 4, I used public/private, patriarchy, and intersectionality as analytical tools, which prevailed to be relevant in the context of the current Syrian war and in analyzing the gendered aspect of the flight decision and the social relations following flight and settlement in a new place. The normative meanings of these theoretical concepts are being challenged within the new circumstances imposed by war and displacement.

Chapter 3 focused on the first research sub-question: In relations to gender identities and roles, who takes the decision to flee Syria, why and how? Flight decision was presented by the research participants as a crucial and turning point. Reflecting on it, they went back in time to what was before that decision and they disclosed different social and power dynamics that surrounds it. The process of making the flight decision showed connection to gender relations, identities, and roles of the participants, which have changed in the context of war and consequently

made an impact on the process of making the flight decision. Elements of patriarchy, public/private and intersectionality theories were evident in the narratives of the three stories presented in Chapter 3.

Chapter 4 attempted to answer the second research question: How have the gender identities and roles of female Syrian refugees changed following their arrival in the Netherlands? It looked at the changes of gender identities and roles of female Syrian refugees following their arrival in The Netherlands. Being in a new set of social and power relations imposed changes on gender identities and roles and challenged the normative image of patriarchal relations and public/private spheres. Accessing certain recourses and being out of close social circles contributed to the changes in gender identities and roles, and to breaking the social expectations of women's behaviour and decisions, such as living alone or getting divorced.

The process of constructing, reconstructing and maintaining social gendered ideologies is constant and goes throughout the life of an individual (Lorber 1994: 60). In this paper, we saw that in the context of war and crisis this process of changing gender identities and roles comes more clearly to surface and there seem to be more opportunities to impact and change gender roles and identities.

The diversity among Syrians, in terms of class background or urban-rural habitation for example (Rabo 2008: 129), reflects a diversity in their social interactions whether in Syria or within new circumstances or places, which in turn means different ways of reshaping their gender roles and identities. When speaking of diversity, many Syrians see themselves as a mosaic. The experiences of Syrian refugees explored in this paper form a piece of mosaic too. Taking a general look, you would think that every stone in a mosaic piece has a similar size or function and they together form one picture. However, by paying a closer look, you realise that they have different colours and each one has its own uniqueness. This leads to suggesting further studies that would look at the experiences of other Syrian refugees as this research analysed and reflected on the experiences of 18 participants only. Another suggestion would be to use other theoretical frameworks in analysing the gendered experiences of Syrian refugees such as Foucault's theories of the body, the self, gender, and power (McNay 1992).

Departing from the idea of Scott "the information about women is necessarily information about men" (1996: 156), I would say that to have a deeper understanding of gender dynamics in the current Syrian war, further research and social inquiry that focuses more on male Syrian refugees is suggested. One of the issues that this

paper did not directly cover is the trip itself outside of Syria. Further gender and social related studies are suggested to analyse the social interactions of this trip, especially given all the risks it entails and the raise of possible unfamiliar and unexpected social dynamics.

My overall impression about the participants of this research is that they all have one thing in common. They all did not give up when facing harsh circumstances. Their strength and resilience in the current war are inspiring and would also open the door for further studies on this regard. This impression might sound bias so I leave it to you, dear reader, to build your own.

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Annexes

Appendix 1 List of Participants' Information

No.	Name	Sex	Age	Education level	City of Origin	Civil Status	Work Experience
1	Alisar	Female	33	University	Damascus Suburb	Divorced	Business-woman
2	Alma	Female	17	High school	Idleb	Single	Student
3	Amal	Female	34	University	Hamah	Single	English-Arabic Translator
4	Ayham	Male	30s	University	Salamyah	Single	Engineer
5	Basma	Female	30	University	Damascus	Married with two children (Husband is in detention in Syria)	Clerk at a travel agency
6	Ghada	Female	30	University	Damascus centre	Married with three children	Receptionist

7	Haifa	Female	49	University	Damas-cus- centre	Married with two children	Judge
8	Hala	Female	40s	University	Damascus	Married with three children	None
9	Ikram	Female	38	University	Damas-cus- Suburb	Married with three children	Arabic teacher
10	Jamal	Male	30s	University	Salamyah	Single	Engineer
11	Lara	Female	25	University	Qunaitirah	Married	Engineer
12	Majid	Male	30s	University	Damascus	married	Engineer
13	Marwa	Female	40	University	Damas-cus- centre	Married with two children	None
14	Rania	Female	26	University	Damascus centre	Married with two children	Kindergarten teacher
15	Salma	Female	34	University	Tartous	Married with one child	TV host
16	Suad	Female	38	University	Aleppo-Suburb	Married with two children	English teacher
17	Suhair	Female	30s	University	Hasakeh	Married with two children	None
18	Um Yousef	Female	50s	University	Idleb	Married with four children	Nurse