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**Emerging “Voices of Syria”:
the Syrian Refugee Women in the Netherlands**

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Disclaimer:

This document represents part of the author's study programme while at the Institute of Social Studies. The views stated therein are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Institute.

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List of Acronyms

ISIS/ISIL	The Islamic State
ISS	Institute of Social Studies
JN	Jabhat al Nusra
UID	Unity in Diversity
UNHCR	The UN Refugee Agency

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Abstract

This study attempts to examine the lives of Syrian refugee women, in light of their conflict-induced displacement and settlement in The Netherlands. The main research question of this study is: “How has conflict-induced displacement from Syria and settlement in the Netherlands impacted the agency and empowerment of Syrian refugee women?” The purpose of this study is to explore the intersectional dynamics of empowerment and agency of the Syrian refugee women living in the Netherlands. The study uses concepts of gender, intersectionality, generational relations, agency and empowerment in order to answer the research question. The main research methods adopted are semi-structured interviews and ethnography. The study suggests that from the moment of leaving Syria till settling in the Netherlands, there has been significant changes in the lives of the Syrian women, with regard to their gender roles and agency. Being a Syrian woman and a refugee, they have experienced empowerment and disempowerment simultaneously. Given the complexities experienced as a refugee woman, participating in different NGO activities is important for some as it enables them to empower themselves as well as contribute towards the cause of Syrian refugees by crushing the stereotypes, and by sharing their stories. In this process, many of the women find themselves as becoming the “Voices of Syria”.

Relevance to Development Studies

The research paper contributes to the scarce literature on Syrian refugee women living in the Netherlands, who are from diverse backgrounds with regard to their age, ethnic and religious background, marital status, educational and professional background. Therefore, the study attempts to capture the diversity instead of homogenizing the experiences of Syrian refugee women.

The study also attempts to demonstrate the complex dynamics of agency and empowerment resulting from conflict-induced displacement from homeland and settlement into a culturally distinct country.

Keywords

Refugees, conflict-induced displacement, voices, Syrian, women, Netherlands, gender roles, empowerment, refugees

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Story of Amal

“I was daddy's little girl actually my whole life it was hard for me to live alone after this spoiling all these years...but at the same time you know this is what happened....you know...what happened, happened and I am glad . So I am glad I lived in Egypt, as I told you...that made (me) stronger....to be in Netherlands for the first time alone.” – Amal.¹

Amal looked emotional as she narrated her journey from Damascus, Syria to Egypt and then from Egypt to the Netherlands. Amal is one of the countless individuals who have had no choice but to flee from Syria and arrived in Europe with the aspirations for a safer shelter and rebuild their lives.

I met Amal² in a food café in Haarlem on 13th July 2018. She said I can have an amazing view of ‘her city’ from the café, which is why she preferred to meet me there. It has been almost 4 years that she arrived in the Netherlands. Amal was only 24 when she fled Syria in 2013, and being a young woman, she faced extremely vulnerable situations before and after coming to the Netherlands, but she learned the Dutch language well and is studying and contributing towards causes she is passionate about. She reflects on how arriving to Netherlands has been changed her life as a young woman who had to learn to live without a support system. Being a Palestinian, she was a stateless person in Syria. But at present, she has applied for Dutch citizenship and for the first time, she will be a citizen of a country.

Given the gendered nature of conflict-induced displacement and settlement into a new country, and diversity of the experiences based on intersection of different identities, in this research paper, I focus on how displacement from Syria has impacted the agency and empowerment of Syrian refugee women in the Netherlands. I conducted my research from an intersectional perspective, and focused on gender, age, socio-economic class, ethnicity as important lenses for the analysis. I look at how the lives of Syrian refugee women in the Netherlands have changed due to conflict-induced displacement and arrival into a culturally distinct host country, examining changes in gender relations with regards to these women’s status within their households and community. I looked specifically at the experiences of empowerment/disempowerment regarding access to the participation in the local refugee empowerment projects.

¹ Interview with Amal(13 July 2018).

² All the names have been changed to protect privacy.

1.2 Current State of Academic Field

1.2.1 *Conflict-induced displacement and gender*

Scholarly literature on conflict and gender indicate that conflict is a gendered phenomenon, with impacts on individuals on the basis of their gender. Dubravka Zarkov (2008) argued that the notions of masculinities and femininities in conflict settings are often not given the due attention that they deserve and that how NGOs/governments are failing to address the gender inequalities. In their attempt to address gender issues, they often end up alienating the women, as projects which tend to focus exclusively on women end up triggering hostility from local men.(See also Sjoberg 2014, El-Bushra 2003)

Given that conflict is a gendered phenomenon, conflict-induced displacement is also gendering, in a sense that it contributes to changing gender relations within the households and communities (see Grabska 2014). Developing a gendered perspective is important not only in academia, but also in policy making as displacement affects women differently from men and also, displacement affects different women differently, depending on a number of factors which is where an intersectional framework becomes relevant.

“Refugee woman” is not a homogeneous category and hence how they perceive their socio-economic positioning in the host country differs from individual to individual (see Hajdukowski-Ahmed, Khanlou and Moussa 2008). Kimeberle Crenshaw (1991) who coined the term ‘intersectionality’ demonstrated through her arguments on overlapping identities that a woman’s lived experiences are determined by intersection of their different identities- gender, class, race, ethnicity, nationality and so on. In the case of refugee women, to a large extent, their empowerment and other experiences depend on their socioeconomic status in country of origin as well as that in the host country. Hajdukowski-Ahmed, Khanlou and Moussa (2008) in their book referred to the interplay of gender with factors such as race, location, humanitarian aid, culture etc. which has profound impact on the individual refugee women’s lives differently based on how these factors or identities intersect.

Katarzyna Grabska (2014) in her book titled “Gender, Home and Identity: Nuer repatriation to Southern Sudan” explores the gendered dimensions of conflict-induced displacement, with regard to how gender relations, including gender identities, gender institution of marriage, and gender division of labour within households are negotiated in the process of displacement and repatriation. She shows how war and displacement affects gender relations in often contradictory ways, at times leading to opening up possibilities for more equal gender relations. Acknowledging the gendered dimensions is essential for the aid programs if they want to make real impact. Rita Manchanda (2004) demonstrated how aid programs contribute towards further marginalization of women. Often, in refugee camps the leaders of the displaced community, who are mostly male, emerge as stakeholders in the aid programs as a result of which women’s specific needs remain unaddressed. This phenomenon in Manchanda’s opinion is an outcome of the gender dynamics of the homeland, or society of origin. However, Hans (2012) in this regard argued that the gender relations of power in a refugee camp is also influenced by the socio-political positioning of women in the host country.

Much has been written on changing gender relations in refugee camps (see Hyndman 2000; Grabska 2015). Asha Hans (2012) deconstructed geography of the refugee camps by arguing that the geography of the camps further contributes towards insecurity experienced by the women refugees, in addition to what they already experience due to the gender dynamics operating in the camps.

Some studies examining the social transformations in the context of conflict-induced displacement and migration have also used intersectional approach. Tanja Bastia (2014) demonstrated in context of migration studies, how gender intersects with other identities possessed by individuals. She argued that intersectionality challenges the hegemony of gender while it seeks to explore the interplay of gender with class, race, and other identities.

Franz (2003) who researched on Bosnian refugee women in Vienna and New York argued how western discourses on gendered experiences of migration and displacement did not speak to the experiences of the women she studied. In their editorial on women refugees in Europe, Treacher et. al (2003) argued that instead of homogenizing refugees, it is important to incorporate the lens of gender, class, history and culture for a better understanding of lived experiences of refugees. Likewise, Eleonore Kofman (1999) emphasized on the heterogeneity and diversity of women's migratory experiences in Europe, in terms of employment, household relations and social structural changes.

1.2.2 Syrian Refugee Women

While the literature on the experiences of Syrian refugees in Europe is still scant, there are several new studies that are looking specifically into the situation of Syrian refugee women in particular. However, the historical context of gender relations before the war in Syria are an important factor in understanding how gender relations change as a result of conflict and displacement. Ghazzawi (2014) showed how Syrian women played a role in the liberation movement despite being systematically excluded. Her article helps the readers to get an insight into social and political rights of women in Syria, which is important for this proposed study as in order to study the lived experiences of women refugees, it is first important to understand the socio-cultural gender dynamics in their homeland.

At present, specific literature on Syrian refugee women is scarce, given that the war has started less than a decade ago. The main sources of information include media reports and organizational reports. While several research projects have been conducted on Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries such as Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, literature on Syrian refugees in Netherlands is still scarce. Hunt et.al (2017) for instance looked the challenges experienced by Syrian refugee women in accessing the Jordanian labour market. Apart from restricted access to job market, studies indicate that Syrian refugee women are highly vulnerable to different forms of abuse. According to reports by different organizations such as UNHCR, Amnesty International and other, Syrian refugee women residing in neighbouring countries are at high risk of sexual exploitation and many are tempted to resort to prostitution to make ends meet. To prevent sexual exploitation of their young daughters, many Syrian families are marrying off their underaged daughters, often with local men. As a result, child marriage is on rise. Mourtada et.al (2017) in their study demonstrated that apart from

safety concerns, disrupted livelihood due to displacement from homeland is another major reason why child marriages have increased amongst Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

There is a scarcity of literature available on Syrian refugees in Netherlands; even more with regard to women refugees (see Ameijde 2016). Ameijde (2016) in her MA thesis looked at the experiences of Syrian refugees under the Dutch asylum policy. With regard to Syrian refugee women in Netherlands in particular, Rajin Alqallih (2016), a former student of International Institute of Social Studies wrote her M.A. thesis titled “Gender in Crisis: Syrian Refugee Women in the Netherlands.”. Her area of focus was on changing gender identities and dynamics due to displacement from homeland. Alqallih (2016) suggests that some of her respondents felt disempowered due to the changes in their economic status and the fact that they no longer could afford the luxury of being at home and taking care of household chores only and in some cases they did not have to worry about household chores due to availability of domestic helpers, and participation in income generating activities made them feel disempowered.

My study is different from Alqallih (2016) in several aspects; she navigates the dynamics of gender identities due to conflict-induced displacement. On the other hand, my study focuses more on the issue of Syrian women’s empowerment and changes (if any) in self-perception due to the displacement and settlement into Netherlands, through participation in economic activities and refugee empowerment projects.

1.3 Research Question

The main research question for the study is:

How has conflict-induced displacement from Syria and settlement in the Netherlands impacted the agency and empowerment of Syrian refugee women?

In order to be able to answer this question, the study aimed to answer the following sub-questions:

1. How has the gendered social position of the Syrian refugee women living in the Netherlands changed within the Syrian community and households?
2. How access to participation in NGO activities aimed at empowering refugees impacts the Syrian women’s perceptions of themselves?

1.4 Motivations for conducting this research

I had an interest in studying conflict-induced displacement since childhood, which later translated into academic aspirations. I grew up hearing about my family’s experiences of being refugees in India during the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh. While growing up, I read a lot about the Rohingya crisis of Myanmar. I have conducted research about Rohingya women while I lived in New Delhi, India. I like to research and acquire knowledge about different contexts and I have been reading about the “European Refugee Crisis” over the past few

years. Aside from these factors, as an aspiring feminist researcher specializing in peace and conflict, I have always sought to understand the gendered impacts of conflict and conflict-induced displacement. From a methodological perspective, I privilege studies based on my observations and interactions with people. These are the factors which motivated me to conduct this research.

1.5 Structure of the Paper

The research paper is divided into 7 chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the research: the chapter provides an overview of the research topic, explores the current state of academic literature in the field and highlights the limitations of the research.

The second chapter explores the theoretical frameworks employed in the study. These concepts include gender as social relations of power, agency and empowerment and intersectionality.

The third chapter discusses the fieldwork and research methodology employed in the study.

The fourth chapter provides a brief overview of the context- the lives of the Syrian refugees in the Netherlands.

The fifth chapter attempts to answer the first research sub-question: How has the gendered social position of the Syrian refugee women living in the Netherlands changed within the Syrian community and households?

In chapter six, I answer the second sub-question: How access to participation in NGO activities aimed at empowering refugees impacts the Syrian women's perceptions of themselves?

The concluding chapter reflects on the research findings, in consideration to the main research question of the study, and suggests possibilities for further research.

However, this paper only reflects on the experiences of some of the research participants and given the limited scope, it was not possible to capture the stories of all in this paper.

Chapter 2: Theorising the impact of conflict-induced displacement on Syrian women's empowerment and agency

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the theoretical frameworks that have guided the process of analysing the impact of conflict-induced displacement onto empowerment of Syrian refugee women in the Netherlands.

2.2 Gender as social relations of power

I situate my theoretical approach to the proposed research within gender and development literature of empowerment. Naila Kabeer (1994)'s book *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought* is a useful starting point of reference as she proposed that household should be the starting point of a gendered analysis of social relations of power and explores gender inequalities prevailing within families. In her article titled "*Gender, poverty and inequality: a brief history of feminist contributions in the field of international development*", Kabeer (2015) argued that it is the intersection of gender inequality with other forms of social inequalities that determines women's lived experiences. She also opined that while gender inequality may be manifested differently depending upon particular social context, this form of inequality is more widespread than other inequalities.

The study of gender is more than studying about women's issues, as argued by Joan Scott(1986) that studying gender implies studying about not only women, but also men. Likewise, Cornwall (2007) implored that one needs to be conscious in order to avoid the pitfalls of gender essentialism in order to develop an understanding of gender in terms of power relations. Ann Whitehead (1979) emphasized on the aspect of context, which influences the dynamics of gender subordination whereby women tend to be subordinated on the basis of gender and notes that some relations may be called as "*gender ascriptive*".

Therefore, I see gender defined as social relations of power dynamics between men and women, but also within groups of women and within groups of men.

2.3 Intersectionality

My study is also informed by the intersectional analysis. Kimberele Crenshaw (1991) who coined the term intersectionality argued that feminist analysis of women's lived experiences need to look at the multiple identities that the women possess, in addition to being 'women'. On the other hand, Davis (2008) probed that intersectionality is an important framework as it encourages researchers to be creative in "looking for new and often unorthodox ways of doing

feminist analysis" (2008:79). For the proposed study, from an intersectional approach, I see gender as located at the cross-roads of socio-economic class, ethnicity and religion. This approach will provide me with a lens to analyse the situation of the women refugees. The socio-economic status of the Syrian women while they were in Syria is particularly important while analysing the impact of displacement in their lives. Another important lens is to see their ethno-religious affiliation which influenced their social positioning. While Syria is a predominantly Muslim country, there are also followers of Christianity for instance, and even within Muslims there are sectarian divides. While the war has displaced all from homeland, how their lives are affected is still different from person to person, based on the multiple identities they possess. For women, their marital status is also an important factor and for the ones who are unmarried, whether they have arrived in Netherlands with family or unaccompanied also contributes to their lived experiences.

2.4 Generational Relations

In my study, I also aim to understand the impact of conflict-induced displacement and settlement into Netherlands in terms of generational relations within households. It is important to understand how the interplay of gender and age influence power relations within households and communities experiencing social transformation due to conflict-induced displacement (Grabska 2014). Therefore, examining generational relations within Syrian households in Netherlands is important for the proposed study as displacement and arrival into a culturally distinct country can influence generational relations between the parents and the children which also in turn impacts the Syrian women's agency. The proposed study aims to look at generational relations through the lens of gender to see how displacement in the case of Syrian refugees living in Netherlands has impacted generational relations and how it is perceived by the Syrian women who are mothers.

2.5 Agency and empowerment

As the proposed study aims to look at self-perception of the Syrian refugee women, "Agency" is an important theoretical framework. With regard to self-perception, it is particularly useful to draw insights from psychoanalytical perspectives of agency as conceptualized by Katherine Frank (2006), who argued that a "psychological base" is important to understanding agency. It is also important to draw insights from Mahmood's (2001) argument on human agency, who critiqued the liberal approaches to looking at agency as only challenging social norms or power relations and argued that such conceptualization "sharply limits our ability to understand and interrogate the lives of women whose desire, affect, and will have been shaped by nonliberal traditions." (Mahmood 2001) Mahmood's(2001)critique is particularly important with regard to context-specificity. As mentioned earlier, Franz(2003) argued that her respondents did not necessarily view themselves as empowered. Likewise, in my study, the responses

from my respondents may not necessarily fit into the how the notion of empowerment is perceived and as a researcher, it is essential to be open to surprising discoveries in terms of research findings.

A psychoanalytical approach to understanding the women's agency will help us to derive an understanding of how displacement impact women's agency in taking decisions for themselves with regard to different aspect of their lives- household, economic, educational and so on. It is also important to look at women's agency in the projects that are aiming to uplift the refugees in the host country, and to what extent they receive cooperation or resistance within their households. The proposed study shall aim to examine critically the refugee women's portrayal as vulnerable individuals due to displacement and being women in the light of refugee projects and initiatives that are enabling them to empower themselves socially and economically, and also in the light of gender relations in the households- to analyse to what extent their lives have changed after arriving in Netherlands and how they perceive the changes.

To understand the self-perception of the women, empowerment is another theoretical framework to understand how the women perceive the changes in their position within households and community due to their participation in public spheres, in terms of economic activities and NGO activities aimed to empower the refugees. However, it is also important to examine, in light of analysis of Franz (2003) to what extent the refugee women themselves perceive themselves as empowered due to participation in labour market; for some it may only be about survival. It is also important to understand the impact of specific contexts and social position which limits the experiences of individuals (Intemann 2010).

Chapter 3: Fieldwork and Research Methodology

In this chapter, I discuss the research process and methods I used in conducting my study, and the principles I adopted while conducting fieldwork, including ethnographic ‘immersion’ in the activities of Syrian refugee women in The Netherlands. I draw attention to certain limitations that influenced the study, including the issue of research fatigue within Syrian refugees, reflecting on my role as a researcher and how my positionality influenced the research process. I also discuss ethical consideration that guided my fieldwork process.

3.1 Research Methods

I adopted qualitative research methods in my study. The reason for selecting qualitative approach for study is that qualitative approach provides the scope for “formulating questions to be explored and developed in the research process, rather than hypotheses to be tested by or against empirical research” (Mason 2002:29). Given that I seek to understand how Syrian refugee women perceive their lives in the Netherlands, which factors are emancipatory and which aspects are disempowering according to them, I found qualitative approach suitable for my research. I have used two research methods: interviews and ethnography.

With regard to my first sub-question “How has the gendered social position of the Syrian refugee women living in the Netherlands changed within the Syrian community and households?”, I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews. As I seek to understand their experiences, emotions and perceptions, in my opinion, qualitative interviewing is the most suitable method to do. Conducting interviews is helpful to understand a better understanding of the respondents as it often enables a researcher to form a personal connection with them during the process, but also observe their body language and listen to the tone in their voice as they speak- all these invariably constitute to a richer understanding and analysis. I explain the reasons for selecting semi-structured format in section 3.1.1

With regard to the second sub-question “How access to participation in NGO activities aimed at empowering refugees impacts the Syrian women’s perceptions of themselves?”, apart from interviews, I found ethnographic approach useful as observing and journaling my observations enriched my understanding of the context, and the women whom I interviewed. In order to deepen my understanding of the context and understand some of the respondents better, I participated in some activities where some of the women I interviewed participated/played key roles. I will discuss about this in details in section 3.1.2.

3.1.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

For this study, I interviewed 15 Syrian women, 3 men and 3 NGO founders/activists who are working on refugee issues, however the interviews with 15

women are central to my analysis. Semi-structured interviews are more suitable than unstructured interviews in situations where the researcher meets the respondent only once and thus has to utilize the interview session to the maximum (Bernard 2011:157). Another aspect of semi-structured interviews is that they are efficient while dealing with respondents who may be particular about the time limit:

“...people who are accustomed to efficient use of their time”(Bernard 2011:158).

Bernard had in particular referred to people who refer to elite circles, but in case of my research project, even though the respondents are not necessarily from elite backgrounds, the aspect of time limitation was quite important. As I will discuss in section 3.3 and 3.4, it has been a challenge to gain access to respondents and gain their trust. In case of several respondents, when I approached them first, they asked me how long the interview would take and told me that if the interview would take about an hour, it would be okay for them given their schedule. As an outsider, I have noticed that in the Netherlands, people always talk about “schedules” and “agenda” and the respondents were no different. In case of many respondents, it took about 10-12 days before we could decide on a suitable time and place to meet. To ensure maximum utilization of the time I had with them, I found using semi-structured format suitable.

I attempted to interview respondents from as diverse background as possible, between the age of 22 to 51, from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Initially, I planned to interview only young women between ages 20 to 30, however, to use the intersectional framework more effectively, I decided to interview women from a wider age range. The minimum educational qualification of my respondents is high school diploma, and most them are graduates. The respondents are living in different cities across the Netherlands (See Appendix A for Participant’s information). However, given the small sample size, it does not reflect the diversity of Syrian society entirely.

I also interviewed 3 individuals who work closely with refugees, who are not Syrians- to examine their perspectives on the context. To understand the gendered dynamics of the Syrian society and to explore how men perceive women’s issues and challenges, I interviewed 3 Syrian men from different ages.

I met some of the women through the different activities in which I volunteered, and I got some participants by posting about my research project on Facebook. I used snowball sampling, the process of recruiting more participants with the help of research participants themselves, to find respondents as often before or after interviews, the respondents shared contact details of their friends or acquaintance s(Lewis-Beck, Bryman and Liao 2004:3).Snowball sampling was useful for me in finding respondents.

I conducted semi-structured interview with 13 of the women, using the question guide I prepared in English. I used semi-structured interview based on an interview guide I prepared which covered a list of questions, as I had the chance to meet most of them only once. According to Bernard (2011), in situations where a researcher can meet respondents only once, conducting semi-structured interviews is the suitable method.

I interviewed most of the respondents in English, and sought interpretation assistance in case of 3 women. It was complex to seek interpretation assistance,

as in the process of translation, often narratives are influenced by the interpreter's choice of words and ways of explaining issues. One of the interpreter also happens to be one of the respondents who helped me in interviewing her friend, while for another respondent it was two of her daughters aged 16 and 14 and for the third respondent, it was her ex-husband who is also a research participant and thus, it was more of a group discussion while I tried to stick to my question guides as much as possible. For one of the respondents, I got the question guide translated to Dutch and sent her over email. Later, I translated her responses from Dutch to English, with the help of Google Translator.

In case of interviews where I sought help of interpreters, it is possible that sometimes narratives are influenced when they are translated. Often in the process of translation, the original message can be distorted. While transcribing my interviews, I noticed that in the interviews where I took help of a translator, in certain questions, the interpreter paused for a while, to phrase the answers in English so that I would understand what the respondent said in Arabic. It is due to this limitation that I tried to conduct most of the interviews by myself in English. Nonetheless, when I used the help of interpreters, I tried to make notes of my observations of the body language between the respondent and the interpreter, and fluctuations of their facial expressions.

I allowed the respondents to choose where I could meet them, so that none of them feel I was invading their private spaces. I met 7 of them in public places- cafes, libraries and educational institutes. 4 invited me to their homes and I interviewed 3 online, using WhatsApp and Facebook messengers. With 11 of the respondents, I had the opportunity to not only understand them better as I was sitting with them and listening to them, with 3 I only had to rely on the changes in their voice tones to understand the emotions they were expressing.

3.1.2 Ethnography

I maintained a journal throughout my fieldwork process. I adopted an ethnographic approach in my research, as it helps to “facilitate in-depth study” according to Atkinson and Hammersley (1986), as ethnography enables a researcher to provide richer, in-depth explanation of the actions and topic(s) being studied. For this purpose, I not only tried to immerse myself in different settings, but I also made extensive notes on every individual I interviewed and spoke to, keeping in consideration the fluctuation in their voice tones, facial expressions, body language and the interview location. I maintained accounts of my observations from different events that I attended. Maintaining the journal helped me develop a better understanding of the context gradually, and enabled me to conduct interviews more effectively next time. In section 3.3, I elaborate further on the events where I volunteered/participated.

3.2 The process of Thematic Data Analysis

Given that the study is qualitative and language sometimes switched from English to Dutch (some of the respondents in middle of interviews switched to

Dutch unconsciously, as this is the language now they are using in their daily lives), with pauses in between as for both my respondents and I, English is not our first language, I did not find using any software particularly useful as not everyone used the same set of words to describe their experiences and emotions.

Thus, after every interview, I transcribed my interviews using oTranscribe, and listened to my interviews even after transcriptions, to examine the fluctuations in voice tones and flow of conversations and revive my memory of the interview process, and coded them manually, to conduct thematic analysis. I also incorporated my notes from each interview into my analysis. I examined the responses of my respondents against the research questions that the study attempts to answer.

I analysed the responses of the respondents and my fieldnotes to trace the themes that were emerging in response to my research questions. I have referred back to the transcriptions and recordings back and forth to review and refine my analysis. I have followed the six phases of analysis framework suggested by Braun & Clarke(2006) which required:

- 1.Familiarizing myself with the data.
- 2.Generating codes
- 3.Searching for themes
- 4.Reviewing themes
- 5.Defining themes
- 6.Writing the paper.

However, it was not a linear process, as I followed the steps simultaneously and went back and forth to the notes and recordings during the process of writing the paper.

3.3 Pre-Fieldwork Stage: Addressing the access challenge.

Some of the potential challenges in conducting this research identified were that of accessibility, and language barriers. I do not know Dutch or Arabic, which meant that either I can only interview women who speak English fluently or take help of an interpreter. I managed to take help of interpreter in few of my interviews but I was more keen on conducting interviews all by myself.

Hence, in consultation with my supervisor Dr. Grabska, I started working on preparing myself to gaining access for fieldwork. This step could be termed as pre-fieldwork stage. Hence, from April 2018 onwards, I had been attending seminars/talks/events on refugee issues and volunteering in events, to observe the male to female participation ratio. I attended a diverse range of events which include talks, seminars, sports events, conversational evenings in Dutch for refugees, musical events and lunches/dinners. I have chosen not to disclose the particular details for maintaining confidentiality.

Attending these events enabled me to observe the gendered nature of participation and establish contacts with organizers and refugees, some of whom are pro-active in such activities.

3.4 The challenge of Research Fatigue

In the previous section, I explain how I overcame the challenge of access and lack of contacts. In this section, I discuss one major challenge I encountered from June 2018, when I actually started reaching out to potential respondents, explaining about my research project and requesting for appointments, many times my emails or messages were ignored, or some replied saying they will let me know in a day or two but when I followed up, I met with silence. I initially did not understand the reasons but later when I interviewed some respondents, they mentioned that they have been interviewed by several journalists and/or researchers, and been invited by too many NGOs or initiatives working with refugees in the Netherlands. It is during my fieldwork that I recognized some of the complexities surrounding the issue of research fatigue. Sometime, potential respondents may not be willing to engage with research as it costs them time and they are reluctant to waste their time in conversing with a researcher. In this regard, Clark(2008) discussed how a researcher may or may not be considered as important:

“Researchers are not always the priority of members of the research groups, who have competing interests and values.”(Clark 2008: 965)

Apart from apathy, emotional burden of engagement with research projects is another factor that may contribute to research fatigue, as argued by Hammersley(1995):

“People’s lives may be affected by being researched, and by being in a context that is affected by research findings. And these effects may be for good or for ill, and can run through the whole gamut of more complex combinations and possibilities that lies between these two extremes.”(Hammersley 1995:112)

Therefore, research fatigue posed the challenge of finding respondents who were willing to be interviewed. However, as I explained in the previous section, I had made an extensive list of potential access points and started volunteering from April 2018. Therefore, by the time I started my fieldwork, I had established contacts with several individuals, which enabled me to complete my fieldwork.

3.5 Positionality of the Researcher

According to O’Leary (2004), the way respondents perceive a researcher impacts the dynamics of the conversations. I am a 27 year old unmarried woman from Bangladesh, born from a Hindu mother and a Muslim father. However, I experienced that while in some ways, I was an outsider to the Syrian community, in some ways I was viewed as someone ‘who understands’, which testifies the argument of Kusow (2003), that a researcher can be both an insider and an outsider, depending on different identities he/she possesses. He also argued that communities that experienced conflict may be more open to a researcher who is an outsider rather than a researcher from the same community. During some of

the interviews, some of the respondents commented that I must understand how the fear of community's perception about oneself work.

Their assumptions were based on the fact that I am originally from Bangladesh, where community perceptions about oneself often influences an individual's choices and sense of self. Furthermore, some of the respondents had inter-ethnic marriages, and one had parents from different religious backgrounds. In those cases, they drew similarities on their experiences to my background, believing that I must be understanding how those circumstances were, to deal with family's objection or resistance. In terms discussing about their challenges of learning Dutch language or riding a bicycle, the conversation often turned into sharing of laughter as some of felt relieved in sharing their stories with me without discomfort. For example, one of the woman I interviewed asked me a couple of times, "You understand me, right?"

However, given that I have feminist activism experience, I attempted to be more careful in order avoid oversimplification of issues, as a researcher's worldview often can impact the research process: "How researchers 'see' the world can also influence the research process" (O'Leary 2004:55). I constantly reminded myself in the process of conducting interviews and noting down my observations that women are not a homogenous category and how I envision empowerment can be drastically different from how the notions are perceived by the respondents.

During the research process, I realized it was in some ways easier for me to interview the women, being a woman myself. Had I been a male researcher coming from a different cultural background, it may have been extremely difficult for me to carry out this study. Moreover, I realized during my interviews my previous experience of researching on Rohingya refugees made it easier for me to convey to the respondents that I was not just viewing them as 'numbers', but rather as individuals whose stories I cared about.

3.6 Ethical Choices

As the theme of the proposed study is sensitive, intimate and personal, as a researcher, I needed to ensure that I followed standard ethical procedures for social science research and do not put any of my respondents at risk. For this purpose, I followed the principle of **informed consent**. At the beginning of every conversation or interview, I declared the research objectives to my respondents and asked them for their consent regarding recording the interview or taking notes. I also asked them to inform me if they feel at any point that they have revealed any information that is too personal and sensitive in nature, which they would not prefer to be quoted.

Most of the respondents did not object to their names being mentioned in the paper, and most did not have objections with recording the conversation except for one- in case of the respondents I met in person. However, given the sensitive nature of my study- as I explored changes in their lives as women and the extent to which conflict induced displacement and settlement in a culturally distinct country has impacted their positioning in their households and community, and the fact that it will be made available online, I chose to change their names, in order to protect their privacy. I considered the future possibilities where they may not feel comfortable about having their stories mentioned in a

paper available online due to the information they shared with me. I have also been cautious in ensuring that no third party has access to the recordings, transcripts and journal notes.

3.7 Limitations of this research

Firstly, the study has geographical limitations as it is based on Syrian refugee women who are living in the Netherlands.

Secondly, most of the respondents have university level education, or are pursuing currently.

Thirdly, most of the women are from middle or higher class background.

Fourthly, as my study is largely based on my interviews with 15 women, which does not reflect the whole diversity of the Syrian society.

Lastly, as I aimed to analyse why women are less present in different refugee empowerment initiatives, the study is limited as my analysis is based on my observations and opinion of the respondents, most of whom are either active or participating at least, and I could not communicate with someone who is not at all active. Therefore, there is no first-hand account of why some women are experiencing marginalization.

Chapter 4: The Syrian war and the lives of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands

4.1 Introduction

This chapter briefly discusses the contextual background. The first section discusses the war in Syria and the refugee crisis resulting from the war, and second section discusses the situation of the Syrian refugees in the Netherlands.

4.1 The Syrian war and the refugee crisis

In past several years, there has been an influx of Syrian refugees into Europe due to the ongoing civil war in Syria. Following the revolutions that sprang in North Africa and in the Middle East in 2011, nationwide protests took place in Syria against the regime of President Assad, demanding his resignation. The government attempted to violently suppress the protests, which eventually escalated into a civil war that had sectarian dimensions to it; with the Sunni majority population pitted against the Shia Alawite sect to which the president belongs. Around the same time, the rise of jihadist Islamic state added another dimension to the war and drew in other local, regional and international actors. The war, therefore, is multi-dimensional and complex in nature due to the involvement of several local, regional and international actors. Some of the key actors include: The Bashar al Assad government and his international allies; The Islamic State (also known as ISIS, ISIL or Daesh); the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG); the Islamic front comprising of Islamic groups including Jabhat al Nusra (JN) which is an affiliate of Al-Qaeda (Uludaag 2015). The ongoing conflict continues to cause exodus of Syrians towards neighbouring countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, as well as further to Europe and other northern countries. In 2018, UNHCR estimated that the total number of people who have fled from Syria since the war started in 2011 is over 5.6 million. It is estimated that over 3.3 million Syrian refugees are currently registered in Turkey, making it the country hosting the highest number of Syrian refugees (UNHCR 2018).

4.2 Syrian Refugees in the Netherlands

The Netherlands is amongst the EU countries hosting the highest number of Syrian refugees. Even though the influx of Syrian refugees in Europe began since the civil war erupted in Syria, in Netherlands, a large number of refugees, including Syrians arrived in 2015 (Lundberg 2016). In 2016, a migration agreement deal was signed between EU and Turkey according to which the Syrian refugees arriving in Greek shores were to be sent to Turkey and EU also pledged to provide financial assistance for hosting the refugees. Furthermore, in exchange of every Syrian refugee sent back from Greece, EU agreed to resettle Syrian refugees from Turkey (Boyle 2016). As part of the migration agreement deal, almost 2000 Syrian refugees arrived in the Netherlands until August 2017 (Dutch News 2017). Thus, Turkey is a country of transit for many Syrians, as in case of Mona who travelled from Syria to Turkey and then to Greece. From Greece, she travelled across Europe before she arrived in the Netherlands.

The total number of Syrian refugees residing in Netherlands as of 2016 is estimated to be over 64,000 (NLTIMES 2016). The three major cities where Syrian refugees are residing are Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Utrecht (Dutch News 2016). At present, the refugees receive assistance from the Dutch government and NGOs, for instance- unemployment benefits, language classes etc. However, there are a number of challenges that the Syrian refugees continue to experience, for example: separation from family, barriers to access in the Dutch labour market, language barrier, social alienation and so on.

In the Netherlands, like in many other countries, refugees find it challenging to find employment, due to employment policies, status of their asylum application, linguistic barriers, lack of adequate skills or lack of recognition of their qualifications. Many Syrian refugees find the prospect of working in jobs which require manual labour disappointing, especially those who had high skilled jobs in Syria. In certain professions, certification from Netherlands is required, along with proficiency in the Dutch language. Therefore, many of the refugees repeat the courses they did in Syria or enrol into new courses in order to meet the requirements of the labour market and upgrade their skills. Mona who had worked in administrative jobs in Syria is currently working with one of the municipalities as an intern. It is a part time job and the money she earns from this is deducted from the unemployment benefit she receives as a refugee. In another interview where she assisted me as a translator, she explained that they (she and her friend) had worked in Syria and they do not feel good about receiving the assistance. Therefore, they want to find better job as soon as they can.

4.3 Additional challenges experienced by refugee women

The women often experience additional challenges in daily lives. Displacement from home country and arriving in a culturally different country leads to a number of challenges which have distinct gendered dimensions. For example, a changed status within household when they arrive alone without their husbands who are still in Syria or living as a refugee elsewhere. Women have to take on different gender roles in the division of labour within the household assuming the position of heads of households. Moreover, different social norms and gender ideologies that operate in the Netherlands challenge refugee women's cultural background and their gender identities and status as women. Often, women are expected to preserve cultural norms and traditions even when they are in another country (Franz 2003), whereas men have comparatively more freedom. How displacement affects the women, however, depends on a number of factors: their class, economic and social status when they lived in Syria, their age and marital status, how they managed to arrive in the Netherlands, if they have arrived with family or unaccompanied. However, my research shows that the perception towards these changes are different for different women. For example, Mona, a 37 year old single woman hailing from an Orthodox Christian family talked about how difficult it was initially to live on her own:

“Actually, it was kind of hard. Because my whole life I have never been alone. I never lived alone. And especially with my parents, my family, my sisters, my brother, and suddenly I have to live all alone and do it all by myself ...ok, I am

kind of independent person...in Syria I used to do my things by myself...I used to work...to drive my car..to do everything, but it's not like you live with your family. You know, you have this environment with family that you do share ...you do lot of things together...So, when I came here it was, especially at the first period or the first time, it was a bit hard for me.”³

Mona for described her family as not too strict. However, as she is unmarried, she lived with her parents before she left Syria as she described that it is not socially acceptable for women to live on their own. However, in the household, she never made decisions all by herself and after arriving in the Netherlands, she had expected that she will be able to live with her elder brother. However, he is residing in North Holland and she was given a house in South Holland, so she was disappointed that she would have to live all alone with her only family member being placed far away from her, and the initial days of settling in and figuring out everything by herself was overwhelming for her.

According to Harvey et al. (2013), absence of a support network poses manifold challenges for the Syrian refugee women (as cited in Alqallih 2016:13). The challenges vary from person to person. Some of them had high paying jobs before they fled Syria and the job prospects in the host country might be depressing. However, for those who did not work in Syria and now have to participate in the labour market to make ends meet, how they and their families perceive their participation can again vary. It is often easier for women to find work than for men in the host country, as there is a demand for domestic work that women can perform easier than men.

Conflict-induced displacement but also gendered labour markets in the host countries thus lead to a change in gender roles within households. Furthermore, some of the women refugees arrive in host countries unaccompanied or have lost their husbands in the conflict. As a result, they no longer have a breadwinner in the household to provide for them or their children. Their changed circumstances make them to participate in income generating activities, however it is important to note that for them it may not necessarily be ‘empowerment.’ Franz (2003) in her research on Bosnian refugee women in Vienna and New York city demonstrated that the women she studied merely wanted to provide for their families and did not necessarily see themselves as financially independent or empowered women. Hence, the mainstream understanding of empowerment whereby empowerment is equated to earning money did not apply to the women she studied. However, the women I studied felt disempowered to a great extent by the lack of access to jobs, which I will discuss in Chapter 5.

4.4 Participation in Refugee Empowerment Programs

Another factor that influences changes in gender relations and the status of women within their households is the participation in activities organized NGOs for empowering refugees. At present in the Netherlands, there are several NGOs which are working on addressing the challenges experienced by refugees and migrants. *KOMPASS Mensenrechten Dichtbij* is working towards empowering refugees by ensuring their access to and understanding of civil rights. To address

³ Interview with Mona(5 July 2018).

the challenges experienced by the refugee youths, *Unity in Diversity*(UID), an NGO that works on socio-cultural integration of refugees in Netherlands has launched '*My University Cares Too*' (MUCT), a database project to disseminate information on initiatives taken by Dutch institutions to assist refugee students on a range of issues, such as helping them hone their soft skills to expanding professional network.

There are also organizations which are particularly focused on empowering women refugees. For instance, *She Matters*, a social enterprise has a program that aims to integrate refugee women into the Dutch labour market through their *Lotus Flower Programme* that provides women with skill based training and mentorship. Food enterprise has emerged as a vital source of economic empowerment especially of Syrian refugees. However, there are a number of challenges especially for the young women and men. Many who are enrolled into Dutch institutions in graduate or post-graduate studies find it difficult to find employment due to a number of challenges, including their refugee status and the lack of professional networking.

While there are women refugees who are struggling with regard to their changed gendered social positioning and access to job or other opportunities, there are also examples of Syrian refugee women in Netherlands who are setting examples for others, by successfully running their own businesses or raising awareness on the refugee situation. There are several refugee women who are working actively contributing towards raising awareness on refugee related issues and the ongoing Syrian crisis, through participating in conferences, advocating for the rights of the refugees and migrants etc. They are the emerging “voices” of their community and trying not only to empower themselves as individuals, but also draw attention to the challenges of Syrian refugees. In my research, I seek to understand the motivation of the women to be active in these activities, and the reasons why some voices remain unheard or why some women are not able to participate in activities which are organized for the purpose of helping the refugees, or to give them a platform to utilize their potential.

4.5 Conclusion

In a nutshell, conflict-induced displacement from homeland and arrival into a culturally distinct host country exposes the Syrian women to gendered challenges which impact their everyday lives and empowerment. The gendered challenges are manifold, from their social positioning as ‘women refugees’ to their agency to make choices for themselves. Thus, the paper attempts to understand how refugee women experience the settlement in the Netherlands and how conflict-induced displacement affects their position within households and their wider community.

Chapter 5: Impact of gendered refugee experience in the Syrian women's day-to-day lives and position within the Syrian community and households

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I attempt to answer the first research sub-question: "How has the gendered social position of the Syrian refugee women living in the Netherlands changed within the Syrian community and households?"

I answer the question in two parts. In 5.2, I will use gender as social relations of power and intersectionality to explore the impact of conflict-induced displacement in the women's lives through the experiences of Rania and Amal. In 5.3, I use the same framework to explore the changes in the day-to-day lives of women after settlement in the Netherlands through the experiences of Maya, and Tamam. In 5.4, I use the generational relations framework and intersectionality to highlight the diverse challenges or experiences of Syrian parents, more particularly mothers.

I would like to clarify what I imply by the term "community"- I refer to the Syrians living in the Netherlands in order to explore to what extent the community dynamics influence the Syrian women's lives in the Netherlands. According to Yazan⁴, a 27-year- old man I spoke to, there is nothing called a "Syrian community" in the Netherlands. Rather, there are small groups of individuals linked through different initiatives, in different cities. Yazan is an individual who is involved in advocating for refugee rights and has extensive knowledge about different initiatives in the Netherlands. However, given that Yazan is a young unmarried man; there are gendered social norms to consider while analysing his perspective. To some extent, my findings from interviewing the Syrian women support what Yazan said about "community". However, some of the women participants told me even though the sense of "community" is rather diluted, the practice of "gossiping and judging" still exists, which I refer to in the following sections, and attempt to contextualize it.

5.2 "Why are you alone?": Gendered Dimensions of Displacement following flight from Syria

"I think the most challenges I faced, in the camp, was from my community, the Syrian community. Because when they knew that I came here alone and my husband still in Syria, they were like commenting

...in a sarcastic way..oh, you are a woman! you are a girl! How your husband let you go? How your family let you do that?"-Rania⁵

⁴ Interview with Yazan(25 June 2018).

⁵ Interview with Rania (13 July 2018).

Rania sounded angry as she described how she was judged in the camp due to the fact that she came to the Netherlands. Rania had gotten married shortly before she left Syria. Due to logistical challenges, it was not possible for Rania and her husband to travel together and it was decided that Rania would arrive first and then apply for family reunification. In the camp, she was exposed to comments and patriarchal judgements that she did not experience while she was living in Syria. She told me that her parents had given her the freedom to pursue her dreams- to study, to work and she chose her life partner herself. Therefore, these experiences during her initial months in the Netherlands were frustrating for her.

Rania's experience resonates with that of Amal, who had lived in Egypt for a year after fleeing Syria, before she left for the Netherlands. She experienced harassment in Egypt on a regular basis, and there were few married men who pursued to her to the extent that she no longer could take the pressure. Instead, she opted to travel by boat with some male friends of hers. Initially, a female friend was also supposed to join too but she changed her mind at the last moment, leaving Amal alone with her male friends to travel by boat.

Both of them experienced additional vulnerability due to being unaccompanied women. Alqalliah (2016) argued that the war has influenced the notions of normativity when it came to the decision to leave Syria, and women who chose to leave alone often confronted the social norms, while in cases of many, they conformed to it. Thus, Rania and Amal both confronted the social norms as Rania came to the Netherlands all by herself, while she conformed in the sense that it was a mutual decision by her and her husband. However, the remarks that she heard upon her arrival in the asylum center reflect the negative normative images assigned to her by some of the Syrian men (Scott 1996:167).

While Rania managed to reunite with her husband through the family reunification program, Amal could not reunite with her parents which made her feel devastated- a sentiment that is shared by several participants who felt the same when they realized they may never see their parents again. The asylum procedure in the Netherlands did not allow them to apply for family reunification for their parents given that they were not minors when they arrived in the Netherlands.⁶

Therefore, how the participants perceived their new life is different on the basis of their marital status and whether or not if they have children.

5.3 Life in a new country

5.3.1 *"I never lived Alone"*

After I walked into her apartment, Maya eagerly guided me through her apartment, showing me her kitchen, the small garden etc. She told me later in the

⁶ More information on family reunification can be found here: <https://ind.nl/en/asylum/Pages/Family-member-of-refugee.aspx>

interview that ever since she wanted to turn 30, she wanted a period of self-reflection which now living all alone allows her to do. Earlier, when she lived in Turkey as a refugee, she once wanted to live alone due to some differences with her family. However, even though after discussions her family agreed, she had to find a roommate for herself. In contrast, this is the first time she is living all by herself and her happiness was clearly reflected through the sudden change in her voice tone as she said “..this is different. I feel more like I am settling, you know. It has a different feeling. A distinct feeling.”⁷

Maya who is from a Kurdish family, had been quite active politically when she was in Syria but in certain ways her family was conservative, for instance Maya’s coming home late was something they always disapproved which is why she lived in a separate apartment for a year when they were in Turkey. Maya described herself as someone who has always been “a rebel” but while she was living in Syria or in Turkey, she could not live all by herself as she had to adhere to the societal norms and expectations and that it was not acceptable as a woman to live all alone, a fact that I have heard from at least 8 of the participants. Thus, the women’s gender becomes a social indicator of cultural power dynamics that define what is appropriate for men and women (Scott 1986:1056). Maya being a single woman was earlier expected to live with her family and conform to the family rules and expectations, which is “gender ascriptive” in context of the Syrian society (Whitehead 1979:25).

However, while Maya is happy to avail this freedom, some participants had found the prospect challenging or did not consider it as an empowering change in their lives.

5.3.2 Cycling- an integral part of the Dutch culture

Lifestyle in the Netherlands is very different than the lifestyle in Syria, and one of the aspects of the Dutch culture is cycling which is not very common in Syria. Many participants told me that the roads in Syria were not suitable for cycling and it was not a common sight to see people cycling and for women, it was rare. Maya said:

“I would be embarrassed to cycle in Syria.....in Syria it is more like you don't do whatever you want. You always think people will look at you....you feel extra pressure. You feel watched and especially as a woman.”

Maya has not yet learned to ride a cycle but plans to learn soon. For many of the participants, this was one challenge they were determined to overcome, for example Tamam, who told me that it was a big challenge which she was very happy to overcome this. It is not something that they just learned because it was a part of the Dutch culture.

Likewise, Tamam took great pride in describing how she overcame the challenging of learning cycling which appeared to be so difficult in the beginning. She fell down while she was trying to learn, but she did not let that demotivate her and asked a Syrian male friend to help her to learn. She glowed with pride as she narrated how she finally learned to ride a cycle and now can ride and take her daughter with her anywhere.

⁷ Interview with Maya.(21 August 2018)

The experiences of Maya and Tamam demonstrate how through small steps, the Syrian women are challenging the local patriarchy of their culture which they did not have the opportunity to do earlier. However, some of the participants differ in their opinion and told me that they are not very fond of riding a cycle and prefer other modes of transport because when they lived in Syria, they had a car to take them to places- some had their own cars which describes their socio-economic status before the war. Now being in the Netherlands where many of them no longer have a car and have to choose between public transport or learning to cycle is a disempowering experience. As I have mentioned earlier, most of the women I interviewed are either from middle class or upper class background. Here, it appears to be an intersection of age and gender (Krekula 2007), whereby the interplay of the age and gender power dynamics may lead to empowering and disempowering experience simultaneously, or double marginalization or empowering in both aspects.

5.3.3 “We are not used to taking money”: Obstacles towards entry in the labour market

This is one of the recurring responses I got from the respondents who told me that they are educated, and had well-paying job while they were in Syria. Therefore, while it is a source of comfort initially, they want to find ways to earn so that they do not have to depend on the welfare. Maha, a 31 year old married woman from Damascus worked as an accountant while she lived in Syria. She was not married back then; she got married to her fiancé after she fled to Lebanon. Maha is working as one of the municipalities as an intern, where the payment she is receives is deducted from the money she receives as a refugee. Even though she is not yet economically solvent, she enjoys working as an intern while learning the accountancy system in the Netherlands. Maha wants to find a job soon so that she no longer has to be dependent on welfare.

5.4 An intersectional approach to the aspect of motherhood

In this section, I explore generational relations within Syrian households, and show how intersectional the experience of motherhood is, depending on various identities.

5.4.1 A ray of hope for single mothers

Some of the participants are single mothers. And while even in the Netherlands they have experienced judgement from other fellow Syrians, they told me that they are grateful to be in the Netherlands as unlike Syria, here they can raise their children by themselves

Tamam was pregnant while she was traveling from Turkey by boat, and told me she derived mental strength from the hope of raising her child in a society where she will not have to be answerable to anyone for being a single mother. I asked her how it would have been if she had to raise her daughter in Syria, to

which she replied: "...you can't do that in Syria. I have problem with father of my daughter. Because he decided to stay in Dubai."⁸

Likewise, Noor who is a mother of two sons, she was delighted when she was finally able to gain her custody of her sons, who were living with her ex-husband in Jordan while she travelled back and forth from Netherlands to Jordan, fighting legal battles while also trying to cope with the challenges of being in a new country. But it was the hope of reuniting with her sons that kept her going.

From both of their experiences, it is clear that being in the Netherlands gave them the opportunity to raise their children without societal discrimination. Even though occasionally they have heard judgemental remarks, they do not have to worry about the remarks as the fear of "what others will say" does not dictate their lives any more. Some other participants who are divorced have shared similar experiences whereby they told me that even though some Syrians talk about them, they do not worry about it in the same manner they would have to do had they still lived in Syria. For both Noor and Tamam, settlement in the Netherlands represented a life where they can raise their children by themselves. Tamam had initially planned to go to Sweden, but while she was traveling by the boat she heard from another woman that the Netherlands is a "good place" for single mothers and after that she changed her mind. The narratives of Noor and Tamam reinforce the arguments of Joseph(1996) who in the context of Arab society classified patriarchy into 4 categories: Economic Patriarchy, Political Patriarchy, Social Patriarchy and Religious Patriarchy. He argued that in Arab societies, gender and age are power tools that privilege elderly men over others.(Joseph 1996: 15). Some of the women told me that marriage and children are very important in their society. Therefore, Tamam and Noor in this context are viewed as individuals who defied the social norms and being located in a country where the social norms are different, they are able to deviate from the patriarchal norms which earlier restricted their agency and did not enable them to lead their lives in their own terms.

5.4.2. Changing generational relations within households

Sarah is a mother of two who originally hails from Aleppo and is from an Orthodox Christian family. She told me that she understands her children, who are above 18, are now exposed to the culture and societal norms in the Netherlands. Sarah and her husband talk regularly with their children about these issues and expect that their children will respect their cultural values and lead a balanced life. When I asked her what is it that she expected by the term "balance", her responses were not entirely clear to me. However, what she told me was that she expects her children to respect their social values. I got similar responses from two other respondents, who are married and in their early 40's. However, it did appear a little 'ambiguous'; the notion of "balance". But what I certainly could derive from my conversation with these 3 women is that, settlement into culturally different Netherlands has led to significant changes in generational relations in many Syrian households whereby the parents and children are now negotiating over choices on different issues.

⁸ Interview with Tamam(24 July 2018)

However, some of the participants mentioned that not every household is the same. For example, Yousef, a 47-year-old Palestinian-Syrian man and ex-husband of Yasmin- another respondent, told me the story of a friend of his who left Netherlands and preferred to live elsewhere close to Syria because he did not want his daughters to grow up here as in the Netherlands, because the gendered social norms are different. Yousef however mentioned that it is different in the case of Yasmin and him, who are now divorced. In Syria, Yousef was involved in different cultural activities and does not identify himself as a religious person. He told me the only concern they have is that their son and daughter should learn to speak in Arabic because it is their own language and it has “sacred beauty”. He does not have any objections if his children choose to follow the local social norms. He said being a liberal person, he is not worried about the choices his children may make when they grow up. Yousef’s narrative about his friend demonstrate how the women are expected to preserve the culture when away from the homeland; a factor that is common among many migrant/refugee communities. Thus, the ideas of preserving culture and social norms are highly gendered, with women being expected to be the upholders of the native culture.

Talking about the impact of displacement on generational relations, I found out by conversing with the respondents that it is different for different families, depending on their ideologies but in general, many families are realizing that they need to negotiate the power dynamics given that they no longer live in Syria. These diverse responses resonate to the observation of Joseph(2012) regarding the diversity in Arab families, and to avoid the pitfall of equating culture with patriarchy:

“At times, as if some scholars equate Arab culture with Arab patriarchy.....what is often missed in the study of patriarchy is the study of family. Arab families are highly diverse, and varied systems and sets of relationships and dynamics that cannot be described or defined by monolithic models of gender relations.”(Joseph 2012:13)

From an intersectional perspective, how these women are perceiving their lives with regard to their children is influenced by their gender, marital status and moral values which may or may not conform to the gendered social norms they were/still expected to adhere to. It is also influenced by the gender of the children, whereas girls are more expected to adhere to the traditional values. For Noor and Tamam, both are single mothers in their 30’s and this country has enabled them to raise their children without societal pressure. However, Noor is mother of two young sons and Tamam’s daughter is only 3. Hence, they have not yet experienced the challenges of changed generational relations which is different for sons and daughters. However, some participants who are here with their parents have told me that their parents have been trying to adapt to the new culture and gave their daughters more freedom and permission to make their own choices. But they also cautioned me that this is rather subjective which reinforces the argument made by Joseph(ibid).

5.5 Conclusion:

This chapter aimed to answer the first research sub-question, in order to understand how the gendered social position of the Syrian women have changed

within their community and households. Some women are now able to make certain decisions for themselves, which they could not do earlier due to the fear of what people will think about them. While Rania faced judgements for arriving alone, Tamam does not feel obliged to answer anybody regarding her personal matters. On the other hand, some of the women expressed a sense of disempowerment over the fact the children now can choose for themselves and they wished that the children will try to find a balance between their culture and that of the host society. Therefore, the perception of the women towards the challenges and changes are intersectional, and influenced by the interplay of their age, gender, marital status and sense of individual agency. Apart from gender, age and marital poses additional challenges for the women who often find that they have lesser control over their children, and finding opportunities to economically empower themselves are restricted.

Chapter 6: Emerging “Voices of Syria”: How does access to participation impact different Syrian women differently

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I address the second research sub-question: “How access to participation in NGO activities aimed at empowering refugees impacts the Syrian women’s perceptions of themselves?”

I answer the question in three parts, but before that I begin with a brief overview of the women’s participation in NGO activities. In 6.3, I use intersectionality as the primary theoretical framework and highlight the experiences of two respondents - Marwa and Sarah. In 6.4, I discuss two of the major motivations that I derived at while conducting my research, and analyse it by using the framework of agency (Mamood 2001) and empowerment. In 6.5, I discuss how the women’s marital status influence their participation in the NGO activities. My discussion is based on the experiences of Mariam, Fatima and my observation from participation in different NGO activities. I then conclude.

6.2 A brief overview of women’s participation in NGO activities

In Section 4.4 of chapter 4, I briefly mentioned about the NGOs that are working on addressing the challenges experienced by the refugees. Here, I would like to discuss gendered dynamics that appear to influence women’s participation in certain NGO activities. When I started my pre-fieldwork phase, in different programs I noticed that whether Syrians or other refugee communities, the male to female ratio with regard to participation of refugees was visibly disproportionate with very few women being present. In order to understand why it was the case, I interviewed 3 individuals, two women and one man, from very different backgrounds working as founders of 3 different NGOs in the Netherlands (none of them were Syrians). The responses I got were similar: all of them believed that it is probably the household responsibilities that do not allow any time for the married women, especially those with children, to step out of their house and participate in NGO activities. When I asked them what they were doing or planning to do to increase participation of women refugees, they discussed different approaches they already adopted. For example, Maria⁹ whose organization works towards bringing refugees closer to the host (Dutch) community through a number of events, told me that in many events, they send out a call for babysitter. I can testify to Maria’s statement as I have once volunteered in one of her NGO

⁹ Interview with Maria (5 July 2018)

event as a babysitter and had witnessed first hand the participation of some married women refugees in sports. They left their children under the supervision of volunteer babysitters. In contrast, Amanat¹⁰ is working on empowering the women refugees in particular and told me that it is not only the household responsibilities, but also marital discord, and financial hardships that are affecting the lives of the refugee women . Daniel¹¹, a Dutch man who is heading an NGO, on the other hand told me that given that he has over the years felt that cultural differences could be contributing to the challenges his volunteers sometimes experienced and have since tried to pair women refugees with women volunteers to reduce chances of miscommunication.

6.3 How the “refugee experience” is intersectional in nature: story of Marwa and Sarah

Marwa¹² spent most of her childhood years in Saudi Arabia due to her father’s work. She told me that life as a woman was extremely restricted in Saudi Arabia and she always had to depend on her father to go anywhere. Her life revolved around school and friends while they were in Saudi Arabia. When the war broke out in Syria, Marwa’s father’s permit also got expired around the same time and as it could not be renewed, the family chose to apply for asylum in Europe. They flew to Greece and from Greece, they arrived by plane in the Netherlands. Marwa was a high school student at the time when they arrived first in Amsterdam, the Netherlands in 2014.

Marwa describes how initially it was very depressing to be a refugee in a country where they did not know the language, and the culture was very different. But at present, she is happy to be involved in different activities and opportunities she got. She in particular talked about one leadership training that she found transformational and made her more confident. She sounded happy and enthusiastic when she narrated about different roles in different organizations through which she is contributing towards the welfare of the Syrian refugees in the Netherlands, and how she feels empowered to represent her country in different events. She believes she is still discovering herself, and being a young unmarried woman made it easier for her to chase her dreams. When I asked her how it is different for her, she told me even though her parents rely on her due to the fact that she is the eldest child and has adapted to the life here very quickly, she has more time to participate as she does not need to cook on a daily basis, or worry about household chores. Her mother is the person in charge, and her parents are very supportive towards her.

In contrast, Sarah¹³, a mother of two, has a different perspective towards her life in the Netherlands. “You know, it is not easy”- she said a couple of times during the interview. According to Sarah, one of the biggest challenges that she experienced in the Netherlands is the lack of employment opportunities as a refugee. She was a medical doctor in Syria and had her own laboratory. I sensed grief in her voice when she said:

¹⁰ Interview with Amanat(9 July 2018)

¹¹ Interview with Daniel(9 August 2018)

¹² Interview with Marwa (22 July 2018)

¹³ Interview with Sarah (30 July 2018)

“People used to come to me for work. Now....I ask people for work.”

Sarah also mentioned few times that she chooses to be active. Two years after arriving in the Netherlands, she founded an initiative for refugee women which organizes a range of activities, including Dutch language practice sessions, workshops on trauma counselling, and cultural activities. In the initiative, there are Dutch women volunteers which enables the refugee women to make local friends. However, Sarah mentioned that her family is not particularly enthusiastic about her activities as the activities are not generating any income and they have to depend on welfare. She also talked about criticism she received from some “Dutch people” who undermined the capacities of refugees. Thus, it appears that she is trying to utilize her skills into helping other women who are in similar situation as her. However, Sarah does not feel her activities have impacted her position within the household- it remained the same, unlike Marwa.

From an intersectional perspective, age, marital status, having children (or not), place of residence in the Netherlands appears to be some of the factors that influence the lives of the Syrian women in terms of the challenges they experience in the Netherlands. Even though in the case of Marwa and Sarah, both are active, but their families attitude towards their participation is different. While Marwa is living with her parents and siblings, Sarah is married and a mother of two children. Therefore, Marwa deals with the expectations of her parents and siblings while when we look at Sarah’s life, it is about her relationship with her husband and the changes in generational relations within her household between the parents (Sarah and her husband) and the children. Given the age of both the women, being a refugee in the Netherlands has restricted Sarah’s scope to work as a medical doctor, Marwa being a young woman has enrolled into university and is simultaneously able to participate in activities. Furthermore, Marwa’s father has managed to start a business in the Netherlands which gives her more space to be able to focus on her education and participation in different events, and volunteer at NGOs. Therefore, even though both of them are women, their individual agency is impacted in different ways. Marwa feels empowered with regard to her her day-to-day life and her future prospects, and also feels her status within household has changed for the better.

6.4 “It is important to show them that we are civilized people”¹⁴: Contributing towards crushing stereotypes and community development

“Nobody knew who I was. But I am Mariam¹⁵”

I met Mariam and her daughters in their house in one small town in the Netherlands. I interviewed her with the help of her daughters, with Mariam occasionally talking to me directly. Mariam is 41 year old, married and a mother of 3 teenage daughters. She is originally from Aleppo. She has a degree in geography, and a she also has studied graphics designing. She gave private tuitions to children while she lived in Syria. She and her family left Syria in 2013 and moved

¹⁴ Interview with Fatima (7 August 2018)

¹⁵ Interview with Mariam (12 July 2018)

to Lebanon where they lived for almost one and a half year. Her husband arrived in the Netherlands first and then Mariam and their daughters arrived through family reunification. According to Mariam, one of the biggest changes in her life was the feeling that now she was a refugee. In her husband's case however, it was different given that he is a Palestinian and was already stateless and their children were also considered stateless. Her daughter Zeinab¹⁶ highlighted this fact while helping me with the process of translation. She told me that she and her sisters were stateless because they were born to a Palestinian father.

Coming back to Mariam, it was difficult to deal with the feeling of disempowerment and isolation. This is one of the trigger factors that motivated her to get involved with different organizations, raising awareness about the challenges of Syrian refugees and to be one of the "active voices." She believes that it is important to include more women in decision-making processes and listen to their stories. She enthusiastically showed me her certificate which states that she has a diploma in conflict management. She obtained her Diploma while she and her family lived in Lebanon after fleeing Syria. According to Mariam, it is important to be an active and to break the stereotypes. Mariam wears a Hijab and it is a part of her identity according to her. Mariam receives cooperation from her daughters which enables her to find time to volunteer and participate actively while also fulfilling her responsibilities as a mother and a wife. When I asked about her husband's perception about her participation, she said that initially he was uncomfortable at the prospect of his wife interacting with other men but now he is slowly adapting to these changes and she explained to him that these activities are important. Reflecting back on the initial days, Mariam believes the family has come a long way and established social networks. Her husband who was an Engineer assistant in Syria now has a job at a local company, her daughters are attending school and she is actively involved and this is how she said they have set an example of a "successful(refugee) family."

In this section, I analyse the motivations and importance as discussed by the respondents with regard to their participation in different NGO activities. Based on my interviews with the respondents, one of my findings is that not all the women I have interviewed were activists while they were in Syria, but they were studying or working in different places. Therefore, participating in different activities and talking about political issues is new for many of them and it is important to understand the driving factors behind their participation and what it really means for them. For example, Rania and Maya whose stories are told before in this paper, were activists already, and so were a few more who wish not to have their activist background mentioned in this paper. In contrast, women like Mariam, Fatima or Sarah were not involved in activism while they lived in Syria. Therefore, forming one's own initiative, or participating in NGO activities or being invited to talk about refugee problems or the Syrian crisis are new experiences for them and many of the women are keen to utilize the opportunities because it is giving some of them the opportunity to regain their identity which has been impacted by their refugee status. The desire to restore the agency appears stronger among women who are older, whereas in the case of younger women, these opportunities are ways to evolve into activists who are contributing towards the cause of empowering the Syrian refugees in the Netherlands.

¹⁶ Helped as an interpreter.

One of the main factors that is cross-cutting across age, ethnic and religious background of the respondents is that they have encountered comments that are stereotypical about the Middle-Eastern culture, whereby people assumed that since these women are from Middle East, they must have had no choice over decisions in their lives- they must be individuals devoid of agency. However, my research findings demonstrate that even though the women often looked up to their parents' approval and did care about how others will perceive them while they were still in Syria, they made certain choices for themselves while they were in Syria. Some talked about their marriages, or the choice of wearing a hijab, as an example of that. Four women told me that they had a love marriage and that their family had to agree, even if they did not do it initially as in the case of Mariam, who is a Syrian and married to a Palestinian-Syrian man. Mariam said that even when the Syrians are all refugees in the Netherlands, often there are divisions between "Syrians" and "Palestinian Syrians", whereby the "Palestinian Syrians" are discriminated by the "native Syrians" because the Palestinians were refugees in Syria and not citizens. Mariam also talked about how her Hijab is a part of her identity, and her choice to wear a Hijab does not lessen her agency as an individual. Marwa shared similar sentiments when she mentioned that she wears Hijab which sometimes expose her to the stereotypes surrounding the discourse of Muslim women in veil, where veil is viewed as a symbol of oppression. Mahmood (2001) reflected on the importance to explore women's agency in order to understand the realities of the Middle Eastern women and not be limited by the portrayal of them as passive individuals which dominated scholarship on Middle East for decades:

"...This scholarship performed the worthy task of restoring the absent voice of women to analyses of Middle Eastern societies, showing women as active agents who live in existence far more complex and richer than past narratives had suggested" (Mahmood 2001:205).

The sense of individual agency appeared quite recurring across my interviews, whereby the women talked about their lives in Syria and how some of them defied socio-cultural norms in different ways while living in Syria. Thus many of them during the interviews described themselves as women who are assertive of their right to choose when it came to career, and personal matters such as choosing their own partner. When the war broke out, many of them had to live on their own in their transit countries while their husbands arrived in the Netherlands, or they arrived first and brought their husbands through family reunification. Either way, they were exposed to different gendered dynamics of displacement as refugees. After arriving in the Netherlands, initially many of them felt disempowered as individuals as they left behind everything they had achieved so far, even though certain forms of freedom was new for them and they did enjoy it. But still, their dependence on unemployment benefits and the feeling of "being nobody" caused distress for many of the respondents. Thus, being active in different initiatives is an opportunity to show who they really are, and how "rich" the Syrian culture is.

The enthusiasm to promote the richness of the Syrian culture, is well evident in many initiatives founded and led by the Syrians living the Netherlands.

For example, Dreaming of Syria¹⁷ is an initiative that regularly organizes “Dabke Night” events where people participate in the Arab folk dance native of the Levant region the Middle East. Likewise, there are many musical and dance events being organized by Syrian organizations. Apart from music and dance, food is another instrument to promoting the Syrian culture. Fatima for instance, shared her plan to open a restaurant with her husband where they will sell Syrian cuisine.

In case of the respondents who are quite active in different NGO activities, they said they are happy that they are giving back to their community. For example, Noor, a single mother of two and who is quite active in different organizations had a short presentation to show me when I met her. She talked about the protests against Assad’s regime, showed vibrant images representing the Syrian culture, and images of University of Aleppo which she described as a vibrant place of student activism. Likewise, Rania whose story has been highlighted in Chapter 2, described herself as “a social activist.” Maya, who was involved in Kurdish movements in Syria has been actively campaigning for the refugee rights. Some showed me photographs, some showed me Facebook pages of the initiatives they were involved in. The enthusiasm was well reflected in their words, body language and actions. After interviewing, I have been invited to some events where the respondents said I could see for myself who the Syrians are really are. Through attending some of the events, what I noticed in common is that they are trying to crush the cultural stereotypes about the Middle East, and the image of an “Arab woman” while also trying to find ways to economically empower themselves. In many cases, the NGO activities are providing a space for the women to exercise their agency and empower themselves. However, as the narratives demonstrate, the notion of empowerment is different for different women.

6.5 How gendered roles within households influence participation in NGO activities

Fatima (43) is originally from Daraa, which shares border with Jordan. She has done Bachelor of English from Damascus University, and was an English teacher in Syria at a public school. They have been living in the Netherlands for more than 3 and a half years. She has completed the Dutch language course and along with her husband has passed the citizenship exam. At present, they are planning to start something on their own, maybe open a restaurant where they will sell Syrian cuisine. In her spare time, she participates in one NGO that predominantly works towards empowering Syrian refugee women. When I asked her what it means for her to take part in NGO activities, she said it is a good opportunity for them (the Syrian women) to highlight their culture and crush the stereotypes about Syrian refugees among many people:

“We are trying to show them that we are civilized people”.¹⁸

Fatima’s statement about her motivation points out several factors which will be addressed in the next section. While Fatima finds it important to take

¹⁷ More information about Dreaming of Syria can be accessed here: <https://www.facebook.com/dreamingofsyria/>

¹⁸ Interview with Fatima (7 August 2018)

part in such activities, she also told me she does not have a lot of time to participate and she tries to manage time for participating in the activities as she has 5 children to look after, which is not easy- she mentioned. She told me it is her husband who helps her when I asked her while she goes out to participate, who keeps an eye on the younger children.

I got similar responses from some other participants who informed that the women who have children are expected to prioritize taking care of their children and if they have any spare time after they have efficiently handled the children and other household chores, then they may be able to participate in activities outside their homes.

I witnessed the struggle between trying to participate in different events and taking care of children while I participated in different NGO activities. For example, in one church where I participated in conversational evenings, I met 2 Syrian women (one of them is Yasmin, whom I interviewed for my research) on multiple occasions who always came with their little children, as there is nobody to keep an eye on them at home - I was told this by a volunteer. The women occasionally also came with their husbands, but I never saw them without their children. The children often sat on separate tables and try to speak to each other in Dutch or just play games at times. Yasmin, whom I interviewed and met on several occasions, is a 40 year old Palestinian-Syrian woman and a single mother of two children. Even though during her interview, she did not specifically talk about the significance of participation, when I met her in the conversational evenings, I noticed a change in her mood. She looked happier while trying to improve her Dutch, while she sang an Arabic song which also met some other Arabic speaking refugees clap enthusiastically.¹⁹ The difference in Yasmin's perception towards the activities and her actual action be explained in many ways. When I spoke to her in her residence, she did mention about singing and drawing but did not think it was something special. For her, she did these things while she did them in Syria too, so there is nothing different according to her.

The gendered obligation on women to effectively perform their household responsibilities before they can engage in outside activities demonstrate 'passive' forms of agency where they have very little choice (Kabeer 2005). According to Kabeer, agency, resources and achievements is interrelated. In context of the Syrian women, the initiatives and NGOs working towards empowering the refugees or giving them a platform to share their stories are resources which are enabling them to exercise their agency. However, the household responsibilities are often acting as barriers in the case of many women who may want to access the resources or more effectively.

However, it is problematic to assume that all the women who are not active is constrained by the household responsibilities. Through my conversation with the respondents, I learned that many may not be comfortable to participate in activities due to trauma, shyness or other factors which vary across individuals. Rania, for example shared her concern about the lack of female participation:

"I see less less...much less women in these activities....in all these activities. We found all the time men, especially with the Syrian community. And we don't

¹⁹ Not sure about their nationalities.

know why the Syrians....the Syrian women ..they don't participate..... Usually in Syria, they like to participate in these activities. But here we don't see them that much."²⁰

Mona explained to me the cultural norms which might be preventing participation of some Syrian women:

"It is not preferable to go by yourself... unless, it is "only women" activity. But in general activity, if the husband is not joining, she won't be able to join. Most of the people, not everyone, for sure....the cultural thing...that's the barrier I think....that the woman won't be able to join all activities."²¹

Some other women also shared the same thoughts, that it is culturally not appropriate and that they needed support and consent of their husband to be able to participate.

6.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, we see how apart from gender, the women's age largely influences their self-perception in terms of participating in different activities. As the narratives tell us, one of the major factors that motivated some of them is the sense of disempowerment caused by exposure to cultural stereotypes and in this context, participation in NGO activities, or delivering speeches are interpreted as resources through which they can restore their self-esteem- a sentiment that appears much stronger among women who are above 35. For instance, Sarah does not have the opportunity to practice here as a medical doctor and through her initiative, she is able to help others in similar situation which is important for her. In contrast, Marwa holds the opinion that she is discovering herself and it means a lot for her to be emerging as one of the "Voices of Syria" while Sarah described arrival in the Netherlands and applying for asylum as a moment of disempowerment where she and her family had to begin their lives from "zero". However, household responsibilities and power dynamics in their marital relationship continue to prevent participation of many women who are either shying away from sharing their stories or build new connections or they are being forced to stay indoors. The diversity of the women's experiences is best understood through an intersectional framework.

²⁰ Interview with Rania(13 July 2018)

²¹ Interview with Mona(5 July 2018)

Chapter 7: Conclusion

In this paper, I attempted to answer the research question: How has conflict-induced displacement from Syria and settlement in the Netherlands impacted the agency and empowerment of the Syrian refugee women? By answering this question, I sought to analyse the linkages between the changes in gendered positioning of the Syrian women within their households and the Syrian community in the Netherlands, and their participation in different NGO activities, in order to understand their perceptions towards the challenges and new opportunities.

In order to do so, I used semi-structured interviews and ethnography as research methods. I participated in different activities organized for refugees and conducted interviews with 21 individuals: 15 Syrian women, 3 Syrian men and 3 Non-Syrian NGO founders. After conducting my fieldwork, I analysed the experiences of the women, perspectives of the men and the NGO founders, and my own observations through the theoretical frameworks of gender, intersectionality, agency, empowerment and generational relations.

Chapter 1 provides an outline of the entire research paper, and explains the research questions, research motivations and how the paper is organized. In Chapter 2, I discuss the theoretical concepts I used in the paper. Chapter 3 summarizes the research journey, and discusses the strategies and principles adopted throughout the fieldwork process and in tackling challenges. Chapter 3 also explains how I conducted the analysis. Chapter 4 sets the contextual scenario of the research paper.

Chapter 5 focused on the first research sub-question: “How has the gendered social position of the Syrian refugee women living in the Netherlands changed within the Syrian community and households?” The narratives of the respondents indicate that the gendered dimensions of displacement and settlement are intertwined with factors such as age, marital status and having children, therefore reinforcing the necessity to analyse their experiences by using an intersectional framework. Paying close attention to their struggles and experiences of day-to-day life serves as a building block towards understanding gendered power dynamics(Cornwall 2007:77) and understand how their agency and empowerment is influenced in the process of becoming refugee women in a culturally different setting.

Chapter 6 focused on the second research sub-question: “How access to participation in NGO activities aimed at empowering refugees impacts the Syrian women’s perceptions of themselves?” This chapter analyses the experiences of the respondents and my fieldwork observations from participating in events by primarily using the concepts of intersectionality, agency and empowerment. It looked at the motivation of the women in participating in NGO activities, and how it impacts their ‘sense of self’. Narratives of the research participants indicate that marital status, having children, cooperation of family members, influence their engagement, reinforcing the need to look at their experiences from an intersectional framework. For those women who are able to be active, these activities enable them to exercise their agency and recover their sense of empowerment which is influenced by being the challenges as a refugee. It also provides them with the scope to break the cultural stereotypes of the host (the Dutch)

community and contribute towards empowering refugees in the Netherlands; the Syrians in particular. Therefore, access to participation can be termed as resources that provide them with the opportunity to empower themselves at some levels (Kabeer 2005).

From the moment of leaving Syria to settling in the Netherlands, the extent to which Syrian women negotiate boundaries with gendered social norms is rather subjective and much more diverse than I initially imagined it to be. Given the diversity of the Syrian society, it is almost impossible to reach to a homogenized narrative about the way displacement and settlement in the Netherlands impacted the agency and empowerment of the Syrian women. However, applying an intersectional framework has allowed me to trace some emerging themes (Crenshaw 1991), by analysing their experiences through the lens of gender, age, socio-economic background, religious ideologies, marital status, motherhood. Instead of looking at their religious identity prescribed at birth, I argue that it is important to see how they choose to follow their respective religions. Settlement in the Netherlands has led to simultaneous empowering and disempowering experiences for the Syrian women, whereby single/divorced women often described their new life as liberating whereas married women with children have highlighted challenges such as changing generational relations within the households due to exposure to a different culture. However, irrespective of their backgrounds, many participants shared the need to dispel the cultural stereotypes they have experienced, which motivates many of them to participate actively in the NGO activities or share their stories, emerging as voices of Syria.

Based on my experiences during the fieldwork, I would recommend further research on changing generational relations within Syrian households in the Netherlands in near future, as following wars and conflicts, diaspora communities often emerge in host countries where people displaced by conflict seek refuge. Given the current scenario, it is difficult to predict when most Syrians will feel safe to return to their homeland and thus I believe the Syrian refugees in the Netherlands are going to become part of the diaspora communities not only in the Netherlands, but also elsewhere in Europe and it will be also be interesting to conduct research on how gendered social norms will be affected within the Syrian refugees in the Netherlands in near future.

Lastly, I would like to thank all the research participants; the Syrian women in particular for sharing their stories with me. Despite their differences, one thing that is common among all is their resilience and determination. It may sound very emotional, but I must conclude by saying the determination and passion some of the participants expressed in turning their pains into powerful stories of resilience and inspiration is indeed motivational. I wish all of them luck in continuing their journeys with the same level of resilience and determination.

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Appendix A: List of Participants' Information

No	Name	Sex	Age	Education	City of Origin	Religion	Civil Status	Work Experience
1	Yazan	M	27	BA (pursuing)	Damascus	Muslim	Unmarried	Activist
2	Mariam	F	41	Uni. ²²	Aleppo	Muslim	Married, Has 3 daughters	Gave private tuitions to children
3	Mona	F	37	Uni.	Damascus	Orthodox Christian	Unmarried	Administrative job
4	Maha	F	31	Uni.	Damascus	Muslim	Married	Accountant
5	Marwa	F	22	Uni.		Muslim	Unmarried	Active with different organization in the Netherlands
6	Noor	F	31	Uni.	Aleppo	Muslim	Divorced, mother of two	Telecommunications
7	Sarah	F	51	Uni	Aleppo	Orthodox Christian	Married, mother of two	Medical doctor
8	Wasim	F	35	Uni	Idlib	Muslim	Unmarried	Business
9	Fatima	F	43	Uni	Daraa	Muslim	Married, mother of 5	English teacher
10	Yasmin	F	40	Uni	Damascus	Muslim	Divorced, mother of two	Editor
11	Safa	F	27	Uni	Homs	Muslim-Sunni	Unmarried	Humanitarian Organizations
12	Farah	F	29	Uni	Damascus	Muslim-Sunni	Divorced	Student
13	Maya	F	31	Uni	Afrin	Muslim, Sunni	Unmarried	Career Guidance

²² The term “Uni” is used in short to imply university level education

14	Youssef	M	47	Uni	Damascus	Muslim	Di-vorced	Script writing
15	Tamam	F	35	Uni	Tartous	Orthodox Christian	Unmarried, mother of 1 child	Media
16	Rania	F	33	Un	Aleppo	Muslim	Married	Facilitator
17	Amal	F	29	Un	Damascus	Muslim	Unmar-rried	Social Activist
18	Azra	F	30	Uni	Damascus	Muslim	Married, mother of two	Sports
19	Zeinab ²³	F	14	High Scho ol	Aleppo	Muslim	Single	Student

²³ Zeinab is Mariam's daughter who assisted in the translation process.

Appendix B: Details of NGO founders interviewed

1. Daniel is Dutch, and runs an NGO in the Hague that works with vulnerable populations including refugees.
2. Amanat, a non-Syrian refugee currently living in the Netherlands, advocates for refugee rights, particularly the women.
3. Mariana, is from Nigeria and is the founder of an NGO that organizes a wide range of activities for refugees on a regular basis.

Appendix C: Question Guide used for interviewing Syrian women

1. Can you please tell me your name and age?
2. Can you please tell me your ethnic and religious background?
3. Where did you live in Syria before you left?
4. Were you studying/working? (if yes), which program were you pursuing/where were you working?
5. How was it as a woman in Syria for you?
6. When did you arrive in the Netherlands?
7. Did you come alone? How did you come? (Meaning the route)
8. Where in Netherlands do you live now?
9. Do you have a job now? What are you doing at present?
10. Are you learning Dutch? How do you find the language?
11. Do you know how to ride a bike? (if so) Did you learn after coming here? Or did you learn while you were in Syria? *How do you feel about this? (If applicable)*
12. Are you enrolled somewhere? (if so) where are you studying? Which program are you pursuing? (if not) Do you plan to resume studies soon? Which course you want to pursue? How and what made you choose this course? (If applicable)
13. Are you participating in any refugee empowerment program/initiative? (If so) Can you tell a little more about it? Are you a volunteer/organizer? How do you feel about participating in these programs? What does it mean for you? Do you feel it is helping you to cope with challenges or overcome the obstacles? Were you involved in youth-led movements or empowerment activities when you were in Syria? (If not) How do you feel about participating in these activities as they are new to you?
14. (*If not participating in any program*) Is there any specific reason for so? Are you looking for any initiative that matches your interest?
15. How do you feel that coming to Netherlands has changed you relations with your family? (Parents, spouse, in-laws- if applicable) (*Will also ask about marital status, and children at this stage*)
16. (*If married, has children and working here, or participating actively in programs*) Do you receive help from your family members in taking care of your children? Who looks after them when you are out for your work?
17. How do you feel, being a woman, coming to Netherlands has changed your life? What was the moment of change? Is there anything in specifically that you can recall at this moment? *What are the positives and negatives* (If the question is not clear)

Note:

The order of questions and exact words varied depending upon the situation and time constraints.

Appendix D: Question Guide for Interviewing Syrian men

1. Can you please tell me your name and age?
2. Can you please tell me your ethnic and religious background?
3. Where did you live in Syria before you left?
4. Were you studying/working? (if yes), which program were you pursuing/where were you working?
5. How did things change during the war in Syria, in terms of gender relations in the society and families?
6. When did you arrive in the Netherlands, and how? Did you come alone or with family?
7. How long did it take to receive the permit/permission to live here? Which asylum center did you live in initially? Where in Netherlands do you live now?
8. Are you in contact with other Syrians who have come to the Netherlands after 2011?
9. What are you doing at present? Are you studying/working?
10. Are you volunteering with any organization that aims to promote welfare of refugees? (If so) can you please tell me about the organization and your work/role?
11. In the events organized for refugees, there is less participation of women. Why do you think it is the case? Do you think the gender ratio in terms of participation is balanced?
12. How do you perceive the women who are active in these programs? Do you think they are contributing to the cause effectively? (If not) Can you please elaborate?
13. What are the changes do you see in the lives of Syrian women here? (Maybe in general, or maybe within own family)?
14. Do you see the Syrian women are having more freedom to make their own choices in the Netherlands, as compared to Syria? Do you think in terms of freedom of choice, it is different for different women? How do men perceive this/see it?
15. How do you feel about these changes? Is it a positive or a negative development? Why do you think so? (Why do you think it is positive/negative)?
16. There have been many divorces within Syrian couples after coming to the Netherlands. Why do you think it is happening? Is there a social pressure on men and women who are choosing to separate? (If so) Do you think the social pressure is different for the men and women?

Appendix E: Question Guide for NGO founders

1. When you founded your organization, and what motivated you to do so?
2. What is the primary objective of your organization, and how you are trying to achieve this goal? (In forms of what kind of activities)
3. Can you please tell me a little about how many projects are ongoing?
4. What is the gender ratio/ male to female ratio in terms of refugee' participation? Are there more men than women, or the other way round? From your experience, why do you think is the case (if the ratio he/she says is disproportionate)
5. Tentatively, how many Syrian refugees are participating/volunteering in your organization? Are the refugees men only, or there are women as well?
6. Have you noticed any general trends in terms of gender ratio when it comes to volunteering, or participating in refugee empowerment programs? Do you think in past few years, there has been any noticeable trend? If so, what are they?