

Syrian refugees: thinking beyond gender stereotypes

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The dominant gender narratives among NGOs responding to Syrian refugees, and their subsequent interventions, are based on sometimes simplistic understandings of the 'traditional' Syrian household and power dynamics.

According to the narratives of many non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the displacement of Syrians is widely held to have disrupted 'traditional' family life. Large numbers of households are said now, for the first time, to be headed by women, and these female-headed households are considered as a new sub-category of the 'vulnerable'. This narrative fails to recognise, however, that women may have been heads of households before their displacement.

Historically, for many Syrian households, obtaining seasonal work in Gulf states was an important way of sustaining economic stability. We cannot therefore assume that all displaced Syrian women are suddenly

seeing seismic shifts in their household duties and roles due to displacement. Certainly, there is a difference between caring for the family alone for defined periods compared to indefinitely in some cases, and there are challenges associated with fulfilling these roles in an unfamiliar setting, or dealing with the death of a husband. Nonetheless, it is not as simple a case as displacement being the trigger that leads to family life and traditional gender relations being disrupted; some disruptions were already in process. As such, Syrians may already possess some of the coping strategies and abilities to adjust to different household structures.

In analysing the gender roles of Syrian refugees the term 'traditional' is inevitably used to refer to women who never worked, had little education and were primarily responsible for caring for their husbands and children. NGOs then tend to focus on deviations from the 'traditional' that refugees have experienced in displacement. This analysis lacks contextual analysis that would explain, for example, how class or the type of urban or rural environment in which they lived may have determined their experience. The label of 'traditional' is used indiscriminately and Syrian women are amorphously grouped as a homogenous collective whose life experiences are similar, and who therefore all need 'empowering' or their 'awareness' increased. In contrast, comments by some of the respondents I interviewed in my research¹ among Syrian refugees in Jordan, both men and women, rather debunk such views on the status of women and their access to education and work. One young man told how his mother's work outside the home – as a nurse in Syria – had made it possible for their family to pay for their house and car. One woman spoke of running her own medical practice and working in a government hospital in Syria, contrasting it with how she now has to stay at home all day with her children. The tone in which she described her frustration echoed how refugee men talk about their desire to work, yet this narrative – about women feeling a loss of purpose due to lack of work – is often missing from NGO analysis.

Looking beyond husband-wife relations

There is a tendency among NGOs to analyse gender solely through the lens of the husband-wife relationship. Interventions look to raise the awareness of the husband – who is seen as being prone to violence – in order to avoid any potential mistreatment of his family members, and to raise the wife's awareness of her rights in order to enable her to play a more assertive role within the family. Together, they are seen as the main decision-makers within a family unit, and as shaping the lives of their daughters in particular, often in negative ways, by

marrying them early, removing them from school and treating them as lesser than their brothers. The consequence of these narratives is NGO interventions that are focused on changing attitudes, providing services for female survivors of violence, engaging with girls to help them assert their views and, occasionally, working with women to help them negotiate with their husbands. These are all positive interventions that can and do help individuals but analysing gender based only on the husband-wife dynamic misses other complex power struggles within the family.

My research findings suggest that NGO interventions should also consider the role of sons. The experiences of Syrian refugees in Jordan demonstrate how (both before and during displacement) the role of a young man is critical to understanding power in Arab families. Syrian women respondents talked about how their teenage sons are asserting power over their sisters, urging them to dress more conservatively and to be wholly responsible for household chores that were previously shared with male siblings. Significantly, this is not necessarily only because they are living in Jordan. Women, for example, explained that in Syria their brothers made the decisions about when sisters would stop attending school and/or were involved in their marriage negotiations. In some cases, both in Syria and now in Jordan, brothers are involved in resolving disputes between a sister and her husband. In each of these examples, the son seems to have taken over from the older male patriarch. Many respondents said that they privately disagreed with the decisions of their sons but they did not stop them. These examples suggest that shifts in power occur in families over time as young men mature.

Limiting analysis to male-female dynamics may also neglect power struggles between older and younger women. Syrian refugee women spoke of relationships with their mothers-in-law in often very negative terms, including accounts of verbal and physical abuse. Some described their husbands as being passive in the face of the often overt actions of these mothers-in-law, explaining that these men respected

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and loved their mothers and did not want to cause problems. These interactions have somehow not been framed as 'gendered' by NGOs although they are about unequal power and reflect the actions of women within a patriarchal system. An NGO worker interviewed as part of this research thought that the focus on interactions between women and men was because NGOs believe "women are peaceful, men are violent". This "easy narrative", she suggested, has resulted in us being unable to understand how women negotiate power throughout their lives. In emphasising the need to address issues like gender-based violence, especially during displacement, many NGOs have unintentionally perpetuated the idea of women as always weak and always vulnerable – generalisations that can be problematic when we consider the often complex power relations, which can include violence, that women themselves engage in.

There is a need for more comprehensive, historicised gender analysis to inform NGO interventions. While recognising the pressure to implement programmes quickly and report to donors, NGOs must do the necessary groundwork in order to thoroughly understand the realities of gender norms for refugee communities. Analysing power in more complex ways may offer new opportunities for engaging with strategic actors like sons or mothers-in-law. NGOs should invest in robust qualitative research on gender that draws on people's lived experiences, and takes into account how Syrians lived before the war.

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1. This research took place in Jordan from September 2016 to May 2017 among Syrian women and men living outside camps in the areas of Zarqa, Amman and Irbid. The research was funded in part by the Lionel Murphy Foundation.

